



## World of Warcraft: Beyond the Dark Portal

*By Aaron Rosenberg, Christie Golden*

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Even so, disturbing questions arise. Khadgar learns of orcish incursions farther abroad: small groups of orcs who seem to pursue a goal other than simple conquest. Worse yet, black dragons have been sighted as well, and they appear to be aiding the orcs. To counter Ner'zhul's dark schemes, the Alliance must now invade the orcs' ruined homeland of Draenor. Can Khadgar and his companions stop the nefarious shaman in time to stave off the destruction of two worlds?

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

Aaron Rosenberg writes novels, roleplaying games, and educational books. He lives in New York with his wife and daughter, and runs his own game company, Clockworks, in his spare time.

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### PROLOGUE

Throw down!"

"Shut up!"

"Throw *down*, damn you!"

"Fine!" Gratar growled, half-rising, his powerful shoulder muscles bunching. One arm whipped forward and down, fist descending in a blur -- and his fingers opened, the small bone cubes spilling from them to clatter upon the ground.

"Hah!" Brodog laughed, tusks jutting up as his lips pulled back in a grin. "Only one!"

"Damn!" Gratar sank back down onto his stone, sulking as he watched Brodog again gather the cubes and shake them vigorously. He didn't know why he kept throwing against Brodog -- the other orc practically always won. It was almost unnatural.

*Unnatural.* A word that had nearly stopped having any meaning for Gratar. He glanced up at the stark red sky that filled the horizon, the sun a burning globe of the same shade. The world had not always been thus. Gratar was old enough to remember blue skies, a warm yellow sun, and thick green fields and valleys. He'd swum in deep, cool lakes and rivers, blissfully ignorant of how precious a thing water would one day become. One of the most basic needs of life, uncontaminated water was now brought in in casks and stingily parceled out.

Rising, Gratar kicked idly at the ground before him, watching the red dust puff upward, parching his mouth, and he reached for the waterskin and drank sparingly. The dust covered his skin, dulling the green hue, lightening his black hair. Red everywhere, as if the world had been drenched in blood.

Unnatural.

But the most unnatural thing of all was the reason he and Brodog were stationed here, whiling away the dusk-clogged day with idle games of chance. Gratar looked past Brodog at the towering archway just beyond them and the shimmering curtain of energy that filled it. The Dark Portal. Gratar knew that the strange mystic doorway led to another world, though he had not passed through it himself -- none of his clan had. But he had watched as proud Horde warriors had entered the portal to win glory over the humans and their allies. Since then, a few orcs had returned to report the Horde's progress. But lately there had been nothing. No word, no scouts; nothing.

Gratar frowned, ignoring the clattering sound of Brodog's tossing of the bones. Something about the portal

seemed...different. Gratar stepped closer to the towering gateway, the hairs along his arms and chest tingling as he approached.

"Gratar? It's your turn. What are you doing?"

Gratar ignored Brodog. Squinting, he stared at the rippling veil of energy. What was going on beyond it, on that strange other world?

As he watched the curtain's undulating shimmer grew and became more translucent, allowing Gratar to see through it as if through murky water. He squinted his eyes, peered intently -- and gasped, staggering back.

Playing out before his eyes, as if he were watching a ritual enactment, was a fierce and violent battle.

"What?" Brodog was beside him in an instant, the game forgotten, and then he was gaping as well. They both stared for a second before Gratar regained his wits.

"Go!" he shouted at Brodog. "Tell them what's happening!"

"Right -- the commander." Brodog's eyes were still glued to the scene before them.

"No," Gratar replied sharply. He had a gut feeling that what was about to happen would be more than his commander was prepared to handle. But one orc he knew might be. "Ner'zhul. Get Ner'zhul -- he'll know what to do!"

Brodog nodded and took off at a run, though not without glancing back a few times. Gratar heard him leave, but still his gaze was riveted to the battle that was so violent but so oddly veiled. He could see orcs, some of whom he thought he recognized, but they were fighting strange figures, shorter and more narrowly built but more heavily armored. The strangers -- they were called "humans," Gratar remembered -- were quick and as numerous as gnats, swarming over the beleaguered orcs and overpowering them one by one. How could his people be suffering such a defeat? Where was Doomhammer? Gratar saw no sign of the massive, powerful warchief. What had happened on that other world?

He was still watching, sickly enraptured, when he heard the sound of approaching feet. He tore his gaze away to see that Brodog had returned with two others. One was a massive figure, larger by far than any orc and much stronger, with pale milky skin and heavy features. An ogre, and a mage, by the cunning Gratar saw glinting in his small, piggy eyes. More important than this towering figure was the orc who accompanied him, pushing his way forward right up to the portal itself.

Though his hair was gray and his face heavily lined, Ner'zhul, chieftain of the Shadowmoon clan and once the most skilled shaman the orcs had ever known, was still powerfully built and his brown eyes were as sharp as ever. He stared at the portal and the vaguely glimpsed disaster unfolding behind its

shimmer.

"A battle, then," Ner'zhul said as if to himself.

*And one the Horde is losing,* Gratar thought.

"How long has -- " Ner'zhul began. Suddenly the space framed by the Dark Portal shifted, its energies swirling violently. A hand thrust from the curtain as if it were rising from water, gleams of light and shadow clinging to green skin as it breached the barrier. A head followed, then the torso, and then the orc was through. His war axe was still in his hand but his eyes were wild as he stumbled, then caught himself, racing

past Ner'zhul and the others without even looking.

Behind him came another orc, then another and another and another, until there was a flood of them, all racing to pass through the portal as fast as their feet would carry them. And not just orcs -- Gratar saw several ogres emerge, and a group of smaller, slighter figures with heavy hooded cloaks bridged the gap as well. One warrior caught Gratar's attention. Too tall and bulky to be a full orc, his features brutish enough to have some ogre blood in him, this one did not run with the air of panic the others did, but with purpose, as if he was running to something rather than from it. At his heels loped a massive jet-black wolf.

An orc shoved past this warrior as they stepped from the portal, snarling at the obstruction. "Out of the way, half-breed!" the orc snapped, but the warrior merely shook his head, refusing to be baited at such a time. The wolf, however, snarled at the orc before the warrior silenced it with a sharp hand gesture. The wolf fell silent, utterly obedient, and the warrior dropped a huge hand on the black head with affection.

"What has happened here?" Ner'zhul demanded loudly. "You!" The shaman pointed toward one of the unfamiliar creatures. "What manner of orc are you? Why cover your face so? Come here!"

The figure paused, then suddenly shrugged and stepped closer to Ner'zhul. "As you wish," he said in a cold voice that had a slightly mocking tone to it. Despite the heat of the land's baked, lifeless soil, Gratar shivered.

A mailed hand slid the hood back, and Gratar could not help crying out in horror. Perhaps the being's features had once been fine and regular, but no longer. The skin was a pale grayish green, and had burst open at the juncture where ear met jaw. A thin trickle of ooze glimmered. Swollen, cracked, purple lips drew back in a smile as the eyes glowed with malevolent humor and a fierce intelligence.

The thing was obviously dead.

Even Ner'zhul shrank back, though he rallied quickly. "Who -- what are you?" Ner'zhul demanded in a voice that shook only a little. "And what do you want here?"

"Don't you recognize me? I am Teron Gorefiend," the figure replied, chuckling at the shaman's obvious discomfiture.

"Impossible! He is dead and gone, slaughtered by Doomhammer along with the rest of the Shadow Council!"

"Dead I am indeed," the creature agreed, "but not gone. Your old apprentice Gul'dan found a way to bring us back, and into these rotting carcasses." He shrugged, and Gratar could hear the lifeless flesh creak in slight protest. "It suffices."

"Gul'dan?" The old shaman seemed more shocked by that revelation than by the sight of the walking corpse in front of him. "Your master still lives? Then you should return to him. You forsook me and the shaman tradition to follow his lead and become a warlock when you lived, abomination. Serve him now that you are dead."

But Gorefiend was shaking his head. "Gul'dan is dead. And good riddance. He betrayed us, halving the Horde at a crucial moment and forcing Doomhammer to pursue him instead of conquering a human city. That treachery cost us the war."

"We...have *lost*?" Ner'zhul stammered. "But...how is that possible? The Horde covered the very plains, and Doomhammer would not go down without a fight!"

"Oh, he fought," Gorefiend agreed. "Yet all his might was not enough. He killed the humans' leader but was

overpowered in turn."

Ner'zhul seemed stunned, turning to look at the panting, bloodied orcs and ogres who had rushed through the gates moments earlier. He took a deep breath and straightened, turning to the ogre who had accompanied him. "Dentarg -- summon the other chieftains. Tell them to gather here at once, bringing only weapons and armor. We -- "

The wave washed out of the portal with no warning, a massive energy burst that slammed all of them to the ground. Gratar gasped for breath, the wind knocked out of him. He stumbled to his feet, only to be greeted by a second explosion, more violent than the first. This time hunks of stone had been snatched up by the energy that powered the portal and came flying past them, chips and slabs and slivers and sheets. The curtain wavered, becoming opaque.

"No!" Ner'zhul raced toward the portal. He was still several feet away when the shimmering curtain of light flickered, contracted, froze -- and then exploded. Stones and dust erupted from the archway. Ner'zhul was tossed into the air like an old bone, and struck the earth hard. Dentarg let out an angry bellow and rushed to his master's side, scooping him up as if he weighed noth...

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