

That night, visions mocked Vol'jin. He found himself in the midst of fighters, each of whom he recognized. He'd gathered them for that final assault on Zalazane, to end his madness and free the Echo Isles for the Darkspears. Each of the combatants took on aspects of a jihui cube, faced to be at their maximum power. Not a fireship among them, but this did not surprise Vol'jin.

He was the fireship, but not yet turned to display his maximum power. This was not a fight, though desperate, in which he would destroy himself. Aided by Bwonsamdi, they would slay Zalazane and reclaim the Echo Isles.

Who be you, this troll, who be having memories of a heroic effort?

Vol'jin turned, hearing the click of a cube snapping to a new facing. He felt trapped inside that cube, translucent though it was, and shocked that it had no values on any face. "I be Vol'jin."

Bwonsamdi materialized in a gray world of swirling mists. "And who be this Vol'jin?"

The question shook him. The Vol'jin of the vision had been the leader of the Darkspears, but was no longer. Reports of his death would just now be reaching the Horde. Perhaps they had not yet gotten there. In his heart, Vol'jin hoped his allies had been delayed, just so Garrosh could dwell one more day wondering if his plan had succeeded.

That did not answer the question. He was no longer the leader of the Darkspears, not in any real sense. They might still acknowledge him, but he could give them no orders. They would resist Garrosh and any Horde attempt to conquer them; but in his absence, they might listen to envoys who offered them protection. They could be lost to him.

Who do I be?

Vol'jin shivered. Though he thought himself superior to Tyrathan Khort, at least the man was mobile and not wearing sick-ropes. The man hadn't been betrayed by a rival and assassinated. The man had clearly embraced some of the pandaren way.

And yet, Tyrathan hesitated when he should not have. Some of it was a game to make the pandaren underestimate him, but Vol'jin had seen through that. The other bits, though, such as when he'd hesitated after Vol'jin complimented a move, those were genuine. *And not something a man be allowing in himself.*

Vol'jin looked up at Bwonsamdi. "I be Vol'jin. I know who I was. Who I gonna be? That answer only Vol'jin could be finding. And for now, Bwonsamdi, that be enough."

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VOL'JIN
SHADOWS OF
THE HORDE

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*To all the World of Warcraft players, who have taken a
fascinating world and made it that much more fun.*

*(Especially those who, through random acts of buffery,
have saved me more than once.)*

PANDARIA





Brewmaster Chen Stormstout couldn't think of anything he didn't like. There certainly were some things he liked less than others. For example, he wasn't terribly fond of waiting for his latest brew to ferment and mature to the point where he could sample it. That wasn't because he was anxious to know how it tasted. He had that figured out already—it would be fantastic. What he liked less about waiting was that it gave him all sorts of time to think of new brews, with new ingredients, and he wanted to dive right in and work on them.

But brewing took time and care. With the equipment at the brewery fully involved in the last batch, waiting to develop a new batch was his only option. That meant he had to find something to do by way of distraction, otherwise waiting and planning and brewing things up in his mind would drive him crazy.

Out in the world, in the lands of Azeroth, finding distraction had been easy. There was always someone who didn't like you, or a hungry creature that wanted to eat you—and discouraging both did wonders to occupy an idle mind. And then there were places that had once been, or were becoming, something else that might be again

what they were. On his travels he'd seen many of those places and more, and had even helped make some into something.

Chen sighed and looked toward the center of the sleepy fishing village. There his niece, Li Li, was entertaining a dozen of Binan Village's cubs—most of them residents, some of them refugees. Chen was pretty sure she had intended to tell them stories of her travels on Shen-zin Su, the Great Turtle, but this plan had gone awry. Or maybe she was still telling a story but had enlisted their aid in acting out a scene. Clearly the story of a fight, and one that apparently involved her being swarmed over by a pack of young pandaren.

"Is everything going well, Li Li?"

The slender girl somehow surfaced from amid a boiling sea of black and white fur. "Perfectly well, Uncle Chen!" The frustration in her eyes belied her words. She reached down, plucked one scrawny boy from the pack, and tossed him aside, then disappeared beneath a wave of shrieking cubs.

Chen thought to step in but hesitated. Li Li was in no real danger and she was a strong-willed girl. If she needed help, she'd ask for it eventually. To intervene before that would make her think he doubted she could take care of herself. She'd sulk for a bit, and he just hated when she did that. She'd also be outraged and then would go do something to prove she could take care of herself, and that might land her in even greater trouble.

Though that was his primary line of reasoning, the whispers and tutting from the two Chiang sisters gave him further cause to hold back. The two of them were old enough to remember when Liu Lang had first departed Pandaria—or so they said. Though their fur ran much

more to white than black, save where they darkened it around their eyes, Chen assumed they weren't quite that old. They'd spent all their lives in Pandaria, and very little of them in the company of those who had lived on the Wandering Isle. They'd developed opinions of those who "chased the turtle," and Chen had taken a delight in confounding them by acting against type.

Li Li, in their eyes, was purely one of the turtle's wild dogs. Impulsive and practical, quick to action and a bit prone to overestimation of her own abilities, Li Li was a fine example of a pandaren accepting the philosophy of Huojin. It was people of such an adventurous spirit who had departed on the turtle or adventured in Outland. Such conduct, in the minds of the Chiang sisters, simply was not to be condoned or given any credit.

Nor were those who did such things.

Chen, were he of a nature to dislike things, certainly would dislike the Chiang sisters. He'd actually taken a liking to them. In addition to fixing up the Stormstout Brewery and concocting fantastic beverages, he'd wandered Pandaria to learn more about the place he'd determined would be his home. He'd seen them, two maiden sisters, struggling with a small garden patch that had gone untended during the youngol siege, and had offered to help.

They'd not so much as replied to him, but he'd pitched in anyway. He repaired fences and weeded. He laid down new stones for the path to their door. He entertained their great-grandcubs by breathing fire. He swept, hauled water, and piled up firewood. He did that under their disapproving stares and only because, beneath it all, he read disbelief in their eyes.

He'd worked long and hard without their speaking a word to him before he first heard their voices. They didn't

speak to him or with him or even really at him. They spoke toward him while speaking to each other. The elder had said, "It is the sort of day that tiger gourami would be nice." The younger merely nodded.

Chen knew it was a command, and he complied. He did so carefully. He fished three gourami out of the ocean. The first fish he threw back. The last one he kept for the sisters, and the largest he gave to a refugee fishwife and her five cubs because her husband was still one of the missing.

He'd known that giving the sisters the first fish would have been seen as a sign of his being hasty. To give them all three would show he was prone to proud displays of excess. To give them the biggest, which was more than they could eat, would show a lack of discretion and calculation. But in doing what he did, he demonstrated reason, consideration, and charity.

Chen did understand that his exercise of dealing with the sisters wasn't likely to win him friends or patronage. Many others he'd known in his travels would have considered them ungrateful and ignored them. For Chen, however, they were a means through which he could learn about Pandaria and the people who would become his neighbors.

Maybe even my family.

If Li Li was an exemplar of the Huojin philosophy, then the Chiang sisters represented believers in the Tushui. They were given to far more contemplation. They measured acts against the ideals of justice and morality—though both could easily be a narrow, parochial, small-village version of those grander notions. In fact, grand notions of justice and morality might seem far too ostentatious for the likes of the Chiang sisters.

Chen liked to think of himself as being firmly in the middle. He mixed and matched both Huojin and Tushui, or so he told himself. More realistically, he tended toward Huojin when adventuring in the wider world. Here, in Pandaria, with the verdant valleys and tall mountains, with most people enjoying a simple lifestyle, Tushui seemed just the thing.

Deep down, that was what Chen needed distraction from. It wasn't about new brewing projects but the knowledge that someday, at some point, he would have to choose one philosophy or the other. If he did make Pandaria his home, if he found a wife and started a family, the days of adventuring would vanish. He'd just become a roly-poly brewmaster, armored with an apron, haggling with farmers over the price of grain and with customers over the price of a mug.

That wouldn't be a bad life. Not bad at all. Chen neatly stacked firewood for the sisters. But would it be enough?

Cub shrieks again attracted his attention. Li Li was down and wasn't getting up. Something sparked inside him—that ancient call to battle. He had so many stories of great conflicts. He'd fought alongside Rexxar and Vol'jin and Thrall. Rescuing his niece would be nothing compared to those battles (and recounting those tales would make his brewery very popular), but taking action fed something within him.

Something that defied Tushui.

Chen jogged over and waded into the roiling pile of bodies. He grabbed cubs by the scruff of their necks and tossed them to one side and the other. Being mostly muscle and fur, they bounced and rolled and twisted around. A few bumped against one another, with parts pointing up that should have pointed down. They untangled

themselves and scrambled to their feet, ready to dive back in.

Chen growled with just that right mix of gentle warning and true menace.

The cubs froze.

The elder pandaren straightened up, and by instinct, so did most of the cubs. "What exactly was going on here?"

One of the bolder cubs, Keng-na, pointed toward a recumbent Li Li. "Mistress Li Li was teaching us to fight."

"What I witnessed wasn't fighting. It was brawling!" Chen shook his head, exaggerating the action. "That will not do, not at all, not if the youngol return. You are to have proper training. Now, look smart!" Chen snapped to attention as he gave the command, and the cubs mimicked him perfectly.

Chen fought to hide a smile as he dispatched the cubs, singly and in groups, to fetch more wood, to haul water, and to get sand for the sisters' pathway and brooms to smooth it down. He clapped his paws sharply, and they sprung to their tasks like arrows loosed from taut bows. He waited until they'd all disappeared before he offered Li Li a paw.

She looked at it, her nose wrinkled with disgust. "I would have won."

"Of course, but that wasn't the point, was it?"

"It wasn't?"

"No, you were teaching them a sense of camaraderie. They're a little squad now." Chen smiled. "A bit of discipline, some division of labor, and they might be useful."

He added volume to the last phrase for the sisters, since they'd seen that initial benefit.

Li Li looked at his paw suspiciously, then took it and used it to steady herself as she stood. She tugged her robe

into place and reknotted the sash. "Worse than swarming kobolds."

"Of course. They are pandaren." This, too, he said loudly so the Chiang sisters could take it in. He lowered his voice again. "I admire your restraint."

"You aren't kidding." She rubbed her left forearm. "Someone was biting in there."

"As well you know, someone is *always* biting in a fight."

Li Li thought for a moment, then smiled. "No escaping that. And thank you."

"For?"

"Unburying me."

"Oh, that was me being selfish. I was done hauling for the day. No grummle here to help, so that's a detail for your little army."

Li Li cocked an eyebrow. "You're not fooling me."

Chen pulled his head high and looked down at her. "You can't imagine that I might think a niece of mine, who is a well-trained martial artist in her own right, would need my help with cubs. I mean, if I thought that, I'd simply not help you. You'd be no niece of mine."

She paused, her face scrunching up. Chen could see in the quick movement of her eyes the way she was working through that logic. "Okay, yes, Uncle Chen. Thank you."

Chen laughed and draped an arm over her shoulder. "It is tiring work, dealing with cubs."

"True."

"In my case, of course, I had only one to deal with, but she was a pawful."

Li Li dug an elbow into his ribs. "Still am."

"And I could not be prouder."

"I think you could." She spun from beneath his arm.

“Are you disappointed that I haven’t asked if I can work with you at the brewery?”

“Whatever would have given you that idea?”

She shrugged uneasily and glanced off toward the Valley of the Four Winds, where the Stormstout Brewery was. “When you’re there, you are happy. I see that. You love it so.”

Chen smiled wryly. “I do. And do you want to know why I haven’t asked you to cease wandering and join me there?”

Her face brightened. “Yes, I want to know.”

“It is because, my dearest niece, I need a partner who will still adventure. If I need Durotarian mosses from deep inside caves, who will fetch them? And at a good price? The brewery means I have responsibilities. I can’t be gone for months or years at a time. So I need someone I can trust, and someone who, someday, can come back and take over for me.”

“But I’m not cut out to be that sort of brewmaster.”

Chen waved away that objection. “Sedentary brewmasters I can hire. Only a Stormstout can run the brewery. Maybe I will hire a cute brewmaster, though, and you can marry him and . . .”

“. . . and my cubs will inherit?” Li Li shook her head. “You’ll have a brood of cubs next time I see you, I’m sure.”

“But I’ll always be happy to see you, Li Li. Always.”

Chen suspected Li Li would have given him a hug, and he’d have gladly returned it, save for two things. First, the sisters were watching, and displays of emotion would make them uncomfortable. More important, however, was that Keng-na came dashing through their vegetable garden, howling, eyes wide.

“Master Chen, Master Chen, there’s a monster in the

river! A big monster! He's blue and has red hair and he's awful cut up. He's clinging to the bank. He has claws!"

"Li Li, gather the cubs. Keep them away from the water. Don't follow me."

She stared at him. "But what if . . .?"

"If I need your help, I'll shout. Go, quickly." He glanced at the sisters. "It looks as if it might storm. You might consider going inside. And locking the door."

They stared defiantly at him for a moment but uttered not a word. He sprinted off, cutting around the garden, and oriented himself on the wooden bucket Keng-na had abandoned. Tracing the boy's path through flattened weeds to the riverbank wasn't hard, and Chen was half-way down the embankment when he saw the monster.

And recognized it immediately. *A troll!*

Keng-na had been right. The troll had been hacked badly. His clothing hung in tatters, and the flesh beneath was not in much better shape. The troll had half-pulled himself out of the river; clawed hands and a tusk thrust into the clay bank were the only things that anchored him.

Chen dropped to a knee and turned the troll onto his back.

"Vol'jin!"

Chen stared at him and the ruin of his throat. If not for the rasp of breath through the hole in his neck, and the bloody red seepage from the wounds, the pandaren would have imagined his old friend to be dead. *And he might still die.*

Chen grabbed Vol'jin's arms and pulled him from the river. It wasn't easy. Scrabbling came from higher up the bank, and then Li Li was at Vol'jin's left shoulder, helping her uncle.

The pandaren's eyes met. "I thought I heard you yell."

"Maybe I did." Chen bent low to the ground, then lifted the troll in his arms. "My friend Vol'jin is badly hurt. Maybe poisoned. I don't know what he's doing here. I don't know if he will live."

"That's Vol'jin, from all your stories." Li Li stared wide-eyed at the mangled creature. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll do what we can for him here." Chen looked up toward Kun-Lai Summit and the Shado-pan Monastery built high upon it. "Then I guess I'll take him there and see if the monks have room for another of my foundlings."



Vol'jin, shadow hunter of the Darkspear tribe, could not imagine a worse nightmare. He could not move. Not a muscle, not even to open his eyes. His limbs remained stiff. Whatever bound them felt as heavy as ship's cable and stouter than steel chain. It hurt to breathe, and he could not do so deeply. He would have abandoned the effort, but the pain and weary fear that he might stop kept him going. As long as he could dread not breathing, he was alive.

But do I be so?

For now, my son, for now.

Vol'jin recognized his father's voice in an instant yet knew he'd not actually heard it with his ears. He tried to turn his head in the direction from which the words seemed to come. He couldn't, but his awareness did shift. He saw his father, Sen'jin, keeping pace with him, but not walking. They both moved, but Vol'jin knew not how or toward where.

If I not be dead, then I must be alive.

A voice, strong and low, came from the other side, from his left. *That decision be still hanging in the balance, Vol'jin.*

The troll dragged his consciousness around to look toward that voice. A fearsome figure, troll in general aspect, with a face that looked to Vol'jin like a rush'kah mask, studied him with pitiless eyes. Bwonsamdi, the loa who served the trolls as the guardian of the dead, slowly shook his head.

What be I making of you, Vol'jin? You Darkspears be not offering me the sacrifices you should, yet I help you free your home from Zalazane. And now, you be clinging to life when you should be giving yourself to my care. Have I treated you badly? Be I unworthy of your worship?

Vol'jin desperately wished his hands would curl into fists, but they remained weak and limp at the ends of dead arms. *There be things I must do.*

The loa laughed, the sound scourging Vol'jin's soul. *Listen to your son, Sen'jin. Were I telling him it be his time, he would be telling me his needs are paramount. How be it you raised such a rebellious son?*

Sen'jin's laughter fell as a soothing, cool mist to bathe Vol'jin's tortured flesh. *I taught him that the loa respect strength. You be complaining he did not offer sufficient sacrifices. Now you be complaining that he wishes more time to offer greater sacrifices. Be I boring you so that you need my son to entertain you?*

Think you, Sen'jin, that his clinging to life is so he can be serving me?

Vol'jin could feel his father smile. *My son may have many reasons, Bwonsamdi; but that one be serving your purposes should suffice for you.*

You would be telling me my business, Sen'jin?

I be reminding you, great spirit, only of what you have long taught us to do in your service.

Other laughter, distant laughter, rippled gently through

Vol'jin. Other loa. The high keening tones of one laugh and the low rumble of another suggested Hir'EEK and Shirvallah were enjoying the exchange. Vol'jin took some pleasure in this yet knew he would pay for that liberty.

A growl rolled from Bwonsamdi's throat. *Were you so easily convinced to surrender, Vol'jin, I should be rejecting you. You be no true child of mine. But, Shadow Hunter, know this: the battle you face be more terrible than any you have known before. You gonna be wishing you had surrendered, for the burden your victory earns gonna be one that will grind you into dust.*

In a heartbeat Bwonsamdi's presence evaporated. Vol'jin sought his father's spirit. He found it close by, yet fading. *Be I losing you again, Father?*

You cannot lose me, Vol'jin, for I be part of you. As long as you be true to yourself, I gonna be with you always. Vol'jin sensed his father's smile again. *And a father being as proud of his son as I be of you gonna never let that son get away.*

His father's words, though demanding contemplation, provided enough comfort that Vol'jin did not fear for his life. He would live. He would continue to make his father proud.

He would march straight into the terrible fate Bwonsamdi foresaw and deal with it in defiance of all predictions. With that conviction held firmly in mind, his breathing eased, his pain dulled, and he dropped into a black well of peace.

When awareness came to him again, Vol'jin found himself whole and hale, strong of limb and standing tall. A fierce sun beat down on him as he stood in a courtyard with thousands of other trolls. They had nearly a head's

height on him, yet none of them made an issue of it. In fact, none of them seemed to notice him at all.

Another dream. A vision.

He did not immediately recognize the place, though he had a sense that he'd been there before. Or, rather, *later*, for this city had not surrendered to the surrounding jungle's invasion. The stone carvings on walls remained crisp and clear. Arches had not been shattered. Cobbles had not been broken or scavenged. And the stepped pyramid, before which they all stood, had not been humbled by time's ravages.

He stood amid a crowd of Zandalari, members of the troll tribe from which all other tribes had descended. They had become, over the years, taller than most and exalted. In the vision they seemed less a tribe than a caste of priests, powerful and educated, quite apt for leading.

But in Vol'jin's time, their ability to lead had degraded. *It is because their dreams all be trapped here.*

This was the Zandalari empire at the height of its power. It dominated Azeroth but would fall victim to its own might. Greed and avarice would spark intrigues. Factions would split. New empires would rise, like the Gurubashi empire, which would drive Vol'jin's Darkspear trolls into exile. Then it would fall too.

The Zandalari hungered for a return to the time when they were ascendant. It was a time when trolls were a most noble race. The trolls, united, had risen to heights which someone like Garrosh Hellscream could not possibly dream existed.

A sense of magic ancient and powerful flooded through Vol'jin, providing him the key to why he was seeing the Zandalari. Titan magic predated even the Zandalari. It was more powerful than they were. As high as the Zandalari

had been above things that slithered and stung, so were the titans above them—likewise their magic.

Vol'jin moved through the crowd as might a specter. The Zandalari faces glowed with fearsome smiles—the sort he'd seen on trolls when trumpets blared and drums pounded, inviting them to battle. Trolls were built to rend and slay—Azeroth was their world, and all in it were subject to their dominion. Though Vol'jin might differ with other trolls as to the identity of their enemies, he was no less fierce in battle, and vastly proud of how the Darkspears had conquered their foes and liberated the Echo Isles.

So Bwonsamdi be mocking me with this vision. The Zandalari dreamed of empire, and Vol'jin wished the best for his people. Vol'jin knew the difference. It was simple enough to plan for slaughter and far more complex to create a future. For a loa who liked his sacrifices bloody and battle-torn, Vol'jin's vision held little appeal.

Vol'jin ascended the pyramid. As he moved up, things became more substantial. Whereas before he had been in a silent world, he could now feel drums thrumming up through the stone. The breeze brushed over his light fur, tousled his hair. It brought with it the sweet scent of flowers—a scent just slightly sharper than that of spilled blood.

The drumming pounded into him. His heart beat in time. Voices came to him. Shouts from below. Commands from above. He refused to retreat but stopped climbing higher. It seemed he might be rising through time as he would be rising through lake water. If he reached the top, he would be there with the Zandalari and feel what they felt. He would know their pride. He would breathe in their dreams.

He would become one with them.

He would not allow himself that luxury.

His dream for the Darkspear tribe might not have excited Bwonsamdi, but it provided life for the Darkspears. The Azeroth the Zandalari had known had been utterly and irrevocably changed. Portals had been opened. New peoples had come through. Lands had been shattered, races warped, and more power released than the Zandalari knew existed. The disparate races—elves, humans, trolls, orcs, and even goblins, among others—had united to defeat Deathwing, creating a power structure that revolted and offended the Zandalari. The Zandalari hungered to reestablish rule over a world that had so changed that their dreams could never come true.

Vol'jin caught himself. *“Never” be a powerful word.*

In an eyeblink the vision shifted. He now stood at the pyramid's apex, looking down into the faces of the Darkspears. His Darkspears. They trusted his knowledge of the world. If he told them they could recapture the glory that was once theirs, they would follow him. If he commanded them to take Stranglethorn or Durotar, they would. The Darkspears would boil out of the islands, subjugating all in their path, simply because he wished it done.

He could do it. He could see a way. He'd had Thrall's ear, and the orc had trusted him in military matters. He could spend the months of recuperation plotting out the campaigns and organizing strategies. Within a year or two of his return from Pandaria—if that was still where he was—the Darkspear banner would be anointed with blood and more feared than it already was.

And what be that gaining me?

I would be pleased.

Vol'jin spun. Bwonsamdi stood above him, a titanic figure, ears forward and straining to gather the pulsed

shouts from below. *It would gain you peace, Vol'jin, for you be doing what your troll nature demands.*

Is that all we be meant for?

The loa do not require you to be more. What purpose be there in your bein' more?

Vol'jin looked for an answer to that question. His search left him staring at a void. Its darkness reached and engulfed him, leaving him with no answer and certainly no peace.

Vol'jin finally awakened. His eyes opened, so he knew it was not a dream. Faint light came to them, filtered through gauze. He wished to see, but that would require removing the bandages. In turn, that would require him to lift a hand. He found this task impossible. He had so little connection with his body that he didn't know if it was because his hand was tied down or had simply been struck off at the wrist.

Finding himself alive gave him impetus to remember how he had been hurt. Until he'd been certain he would live, the effort had seemed a waste.

Unbidden by anyone, and in gleeful defiance of what Garrosh's wishes would have been, Vol'jin had chosen to travel to the new land of Pandaria to see what Garrosh had the Horde doing. Vol'jin had known of the pandaren because of Chen Stormstout and wished to see their home before the Horde and Alliance war laid waste to it. He'd not arrived with any plan to stop Garrosh, but Vol'jin had once threatened to shoot an arrow through him, and he packed a bow just in case.

Garrosh, though in his usual foul mood, offered Vol'jin a chance to contribute to the Horde's effort. He

agreed, less for the Horde's benefit than to be a brake on Garrosh's ambition. Along with one of Garrosh's trusted orcs, Rak'gor Bloodrazor, and a number of other adventurers assembled for the mission to Pandaria's heart, Vol'jin set off.

The shadow hunter enjoyed the journey, comparing this land to those he had visited previously. He'd seen rounded mountains that were weathered and defeated, but in Pandaria they merely seemed gentled. Or jagged, angry mountains that here, though no less sharp, just appeared eager. Jungles and groves abounded with life yet never seemed to hide lethal menaces as they did, say, in Stranglethorn. Ruins existed, but only because they were abandoned, not broken and buried. While the rest of the world had been scourged by hatred and violence, Pandaria had not felt their lash.

Yet.

All too quickly for Vol'jin, the troop reached its objective. Rak'gor and two aides had taken to wing on wyverns to scout ahead, but Vol'jin saw no sign of them when the group reached the mouth of a cave. Large, vaguely humanoid lizard-beasts warded the entrance. The adventurers cut through them and prepared to plunge into the cave's darkened depths.

Black bats shrieked and exploded from the cave's hidden recesses. Vol'jin only faintly caught their cries—he doubted the others heard anything other than the flapping of leathery wings. One of the loa, Hir'eeek, wore a bat's shape. *Be this a warning from the gods that no good gonna come going farther?*

The loa gave him no answer, so the Darkspear led the way. A cold sense of corruption strengthened as they pressed forward. Vol'jin stopped and squatted, removing

a glove. He scooped up a handful of moist earth and raised it to his nose. The faintly sweet rot of vegetation mixed with the sour stink of bat guano, but he caught hints of something else. Saurok, certainly, but undeniably containing something else.

He closed off his nose and shut his eyes. His hand closed halfway; then his thumb sifted the earth through his fingers. When it was gone, he opened his hand again and extended it. As light as a spiderweb, with the wayward, twisting aspect of a snuffed candle's smoke, residual magic brushed over his palm.

And raked it with nettles.

This be a truly fel place.

Vol'jin opened his eyes again and headed along the ancient passage deeper into the caves. As they came to forks, the adventurers secured both. The troll, his right hand open and naked, didn't even need to sweep through air to find clues. What had been spider silk had become a thread, then yarn, and threatened to grow to cord and rope. Each bit came with tiny needles. The pain grew no worse, but the stripe of it across his palm became wider.

By the time the magic grew to the width of a stout ship's cable, they found a large chamber overseen by the most massive saurok they'd yet encountered. A steaming subterranean lake dominated the chamber's heart. Hundreds of saurok eggs—perhaps even thousands—lay nestled about, warming as they gestated.

Vol'jin held up a hand to stop the others. *A rookery at the heart of the magic.*

Before Vol'jin had a chance to take in the full import of that realization, the saurok discovered them and attacked. The troll and his allies fought back hard. The saurok fought hard as well, and though Vol'jin's company

prevailed, everyone ended up cut and bloodied. Yet while his companions saw after their own wounds, Vol'jin felt compelled to investigate.

Silently he waded into the shallow lake and flung his arms wide. Closing his eyes, the troll slowly turned a circle. The invisible magic cables caught like jungle vines over his arms and twisted around his body. Wrapped in them, feeling their burning caress, he understood the place as only a shadow hunter could.

Spirits screamed in agonies ages old. The saurok essence blasted into him, slithering through his belly like the adder that had once writhed across the cold, stone floor aeons before. That snake was true to itself in nature and spirit.

Then magic had hit it. Fearsome magic. Magic that was a volcano to the ember that most magi could command. It flooded through the snake, piercing its golden spirit with a thousand black thorns. Those thorns then pulled apart, this way and that, up from down, inside from outside, even past from future and truth from lie.

In his mind's eye, Vol'jin watched as the thorns pulled and pulled, stretching the gold into taut bowstrings. All at once the thorns shot back toward the center. The thorns dragged the golden lines with them, weaving them through an arcane tangle. Threads twisted and knotted. Some snapped. Others were spliced back with new ends. All the while the adder shrieked. What it once was had been transformed into a new creature, a creature half-mad from the experience, yet malleable and pliant in the hands of its creators.

It was far from alone.

The name "saurok" came to him—it had not existed before that first savage act of creation. Names had power, and

that name defined the new creatures. It also defined their masters and pulled aside the veil on the magic used. The mogu had created the saurok. The mogu Vol'jin knew as faint shadows in dim legends. They were dead and gone.

The magic, however, was not. Magic that could remake a thing so completely came from the dawn of time, from the beginning of everything. The titans, the shapers of Azeroth, had used such magic in their acts of creation. The incredible power of such sorceries could not be understood by a sound mind, let alone mastered. Yet dreams of it fueled insane flights of fancy.

In experiencing the making of the saurok, Vol'jin grasped a core truth of the magic. He could see a way—just the glimmer of a path—he could pursue its study. The same magic that had made a saurok could unmake the murlocs that had killed his father, or cause men to regress back to the vrykul they clearly had been crafted from. Doing either of those would be a worthy use of such power and would justify the decades of study its mastery would require.

The shadow hunter caught himself. There, in thinking just that, he was falling prey to the trap that had doubtlessly ensnared the mogu. Immortal magic would corrupt a mortal. There was no escaping it. That corruption would destroy the wielder. And, likely, his people.

Vol'jin reopened his eyes and found Rak'gor standing there with the group's survivors. "Be about time you caught up."

"The warchief says there is a connection between these creatures and the mogu."

"Dese mogu, dey be da creators. Dey workin' wicked, dark magic here." Vol'jin's flesh crawled as the orc sauntered forward. "Dis be the blackest of magics."

The orc offered a quick, feral grin. “Yes, the power to shape flesh and build incredible warriors. This is what the warchief wants.”

Vol’jin’s guts knotted. “Garrosh playing god? Dis ain’t what the Horde be about.”

“He didn’t think you’d approve.”

The orc struck viciously and without mercy. The dagger caught Vol’jin in the throat, spinning him away and to the ground. All around him his companions leaped into battle. Rak’gor and his allies fought with a reckless abandon, heedless of their own safety and dying for their efforts. *Perhaps Garrosh be convincing them that his new magic gonna bring them back and make them better.*

Vol’jin rose to a knee and waved his companions back. He pressed a hand to his throat, closing the wound. “Garrosh betrays himself. He gotta believe we be dead. It be the only way to get time to stop him. Go. Watch him. Find others like me. Swear a blood oath. For the Horde. Be ready when I return.”

He’d honestly thought, as they abandoned him there, that what he’d told them was true. But as he tried to stand, black agonies shot through him. Garrosh had planned in depth. Rak’gor’s blade had been steeped in some noxious poison. Vol’jin wasn’t healing as he should be, and he could feel his strength ebbing. He fought against it, against the fog that drifted through his mind.

And he might have made it had more saurok not found him. He dimly recalled fighting them, blades flashing in the darkness. Pain from cuts that refused to close. Cold seeping into his limbs. He ran blindly, smashing into walls, tumbling down passages, but always forced himself up and to keep moving.

How he’d gotten out of the cave, and how he’d gotten

to wherever he was now, he couldn't say. It certainly didn't smell like a cave. He did catch something hauntingly familiar in the air, but it hid beneath the scent of poultices and unguents. He wouldn't go so far as to assume he was among friends. His being cared for suggested it. Or his enemies could be treating him well in hopes of ransoming him back to the Horde.

They gonna be disappointed with Garrosh's offer.

That thought almost made him laugh. He couldn't quite muster one, though. His stomach muscles tightened but relented from fatigue and pain. Still, that his body could react involuntarily reassured him. Laughter was something for the living, not the dying.

Just like remembering.

Not to be dying, that was enough for the moment. Vol'jin drew in as deep a breath as he could manage, then slowly exhaled. And was asleep before he finished.



Chen Stormstout, overlooking a courtyard of the Shado-pan Monastery, felt the cold but didn't dare give any sign of it. Below where he'd been sweeping a light dusting of snow off steps, a dozen of the monks, all barefooted and some stripped to the waist, exercised. In unison, with a discipline he'd not seen in even the world's finest troops, they went through a series of forms. Punches flashed by, blurry, and crisp kicks cracked through chilly mountain air. The monks moved both fluidly and strongly, with the power of rivers raging through canyons.

Except they didn't rage.

Through these most martial of exercises, the monks somehow drew peace. It made them content. Though he'd watched them often, and hadn't heard too many laughs among them, Chen had not detected anger. That certainly wasn't what he expected from troops finishing training, but then he'd never seen anyone quite like the Shado-pan before.

"If I might, Brewmaster, have a word?"

Chen turned and went to lean the broom against the wall but then stopped. That wasn't really the place for it,

but Lord Taran Zhu's request wasn't really a question, so he couldn't go to put the broom where it should go. Instead, he just pulled it behind himself and bowed to the monastery's lord.

Taran Zhu's face remained impassive. Chen couldn't tell how old the monk was, but he'd believe the pandaren had been born well before the Chiang sisters. That wasn't because he looked old. He didn't, not really. He had the powerful vitality of someone Chen's age, or even Li Li's. It was something else about him, and something he shared with the monastery.

Something he shares with all Pandaria.

Pandaria had an elusive sense of antiquity. The Great Turtle had been old, and the structures on him were old, but none of them felt as venerable as the monastery. Chen had grown up among buildings that harkened back to Pandaria's architecture but were to the original what a cub's sand castle might be to its inspiration. Not that they weren't wonderful; they just weren't the same.

Chen, having held the bow a respectfully long time, straightened up again. "What can I do for you?"

"A missive has arrived from your niece. She has, as you requested, visited the brewery and made sure they know you will be away for a short while. She is proceeding to the Temple of the White Tiger." The monk inclined his head slightly. "For this latter thing I am grateful. Your niece's strong spirit is . . . irrepressible. Her last visit . . ."

Chen nodded quickly. "Will be her last. It's good to see that Brother Huon-kai is no longer limping."

"He has recovered, both in body and spirit." Taran Zhu's eyes tightened. "Half as much can be said of your latest refugee. There are signs that the troll has regained his senses, though he still heals slowly."

“Oh, that’s wonderful. I mean, not that he is healing slowly, but that he is awake.” Chen made to transfer the broom to Taran Zhu, then hesitated. “I’ll just put this away on my way to the infirmary.”

The elder monk raised a paw. “He sleeps at the moment. It is concerning him, and the man you brought previously, that prompts my desire to speak with you.”

“Yes, Lord.”

Taran Zhu turned and, in an eyeblink, had progressed along a windswept walkway that Chen had not gotten around to clearing. The monk moved so gracefully that his silken robes didn’t even whisper. Chen couldn’t see the least little sign of his spoor in the snow. Hurrying after him made Chen feel like a stone-footed thunder lizard.

The monk led him downstairs through dark, heavy doors, into dim corridors paved with carved stone. The stones had been fitted together in interesting patterns that united both each block and the designs carved on them. The few times Chen had volunteered to sweep them, he had spent far more time being lost inside the lines and their weavings than actually using his broom.

Their journey ended in a large room lit by four lamps. The center of the floor had been given over to a circular construction, fitted with a reed mat. At its heart sat a small table with a terra-cotta teapot, three cups, a whisk, a bamboo ladle, a tea caddy, and a tiny cast-iron pot.

And beside it knelt Yalia Sagewhisper, her eyes closed, her paws in her lap.

Chen couldn’t hold back a smile when he saw her, and had a sneaking suspicion Taran Zhu knew he was smiling and how broadly. Yalia had caught his eye immediately upon his first visit to the monastery, and not just because she was beautiful. The pandaren monk had

a hint of the outsider to her that Chen noticed, then noticed her doing her best to suppress. They'd had a few brief conversations, of which he could remember every word. He wondered if she remembered them too.

Yalia stood and bowed first to Taran Zhu, then Chen. Her first bow lasted a long time. The second, not as much, but Chen marked it and matched it when he bowed to her. Taran Zhu pointed him to the narrow end of the rectangular table, nearest the cast-iron pot. Chen and Yalia knelt and sat back, and then Taran Zhu did likewise.

"You will forgive me, Master Stormstout, for two things. First, I would ask that you make us tea."

"Deeply honored, Lord Taran Zhu." Chen looked up. "Now?"

"If it will not disturb you to work and listen at the same time."

"No, Lord."

"And, second, you will forgive my inviting Sister Yalia here. I felt her perspective would be most illuminative."

Yalia bowed her head—and Chen felt a little thrill at seeing the exposed nape of her neck—but she said nothing, so Chen remained silent as well. He started to make tea and immediately noticed something to which he'd not quite become accustomed, despite having spent a great deal of time at the monastery during his stay in Pandaria.

The cast-iron pot's lid had an ocean wave motif worked onto it. The terra-cotta teapot had been shaped like a ship. The handle had been formed out of an anchor. Those choices had not been randomly made, though what sort of message they foreshadowed, Chen couldn't begin to guess.

"Sister Yalia, there is a ship in the bay. It is stable. What is it that makes it so?"