



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS OF PANDARIA

HORLEY

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

The Blank Scroll

by Gavin Jurgens-Fyhrie

"Let me get this straight," Ziya said, sharpening her daggers. "You want me to tell you a *story*?"

She sat with Arko against a cliff wall on the northern coast of Pandaria, sheltered from the worst of the wind. They couldn't risk a fire; the ten goblin plundersquads scattered across the continent had been raiding treasuries, temples, and armories for weeks now and were, for some reason, not popular with the locals.

Ziya's squad had seen better days. Luki was in the infirmary with a spineclaw wound in a... sensitive area. Zuzak's expertise with bombs hadn't extended to fuses. Strax had, against Ziya's orders, tried to rob a lone pandaren wanderer who turned out to be a Shado-pan monk with absolutely no sense of humor.

Arko, who kept lighting his robes on fire with his own spells, was the last survivor. Ziya had no idea how.

"Yeah!" the little mage said. "It's gonna be a long night. You've seen a lot, right? How about a war story?"

"Which war?" Ziya snorted. A chill wind swept off the ocean and hit her full in the face. With streaming eyes, Ziya glared at the distant, glowing, *warm* bulk of Trade Prince Gallywix's uberzeppelin above the dark waves.

Gallywix, to the surprise and outright horror of his goblins in Pandaria, had decided to personally oversee the Plundersquad Initiative and "inspire" his troops. The only thing he had inspired so far, as usual, was contempt. Even from here, you could occasionally hear the party music drifting over the water.

Shivering, Arko scooted closer to her along the wall, seeking warmth. Ziya casually sank a dagger into the sand between them.

"What do you mean, *which war*?" Arko said, staring mournfully at the dagger.

Ziya sighed. Even for a goblin, he was green.

"Let's see," she said, sheathing her dagger and counting on her fingers. "I've fought the Alliance. Twilight Cultists. Elementals. Undead. Mantid. The sha. A dragon, once. Oh, and Gallywix back when he tried to enslave us all—whoops, I ran out of fingers."

"It's gonna be a long night," Arko repeated. "Come *on*, Sarge."

Ziya rolled her eyes.

"Fine, but no war stories," she said.

"Why?"

"Because," she said, reaching up to twist the ring hanging around her neck, "those are personal. How about... You know the story of Rakalaz?"

"No."

"Surface kid, huh? I grew up in Pyrix, one of those Undermine sluicetowns no one's ever heard of—"

"I've heard of it!" Arko said helpfully.

"Great," Ziya said. "Stop talking and listen."

"A hundred years ago, Trade Prince Leeko was sending kaja'miners deeper than anyone had been before. You had to find a cart's worth of ore before your overseers would let you go home. Late one night, down in the dark, a miner named Miz broke through what he thought was a rock wall and found—"

Ziya paused. Arko hadn't spoken. Even the wind had fallen silent. But she thought she'd heard the whispered echo of her words a half-heartbeat behind.

"A hole. N-no," Ziya said, only now remembering that she had *hated* this story when she was a kid. "A void. And at the bottom, two moons, pale and round. The eyes of Rakalaz, watching him."

Surf clawed at the shore. Arko swallowed. Licking her lips, Ziya said, "It roared and started climbing up at—"

Ziya had leapt to her feet, both daggers curled against her forearms, before she even fully registered why.

The stars had vanished.

"What? What is it?!" Arko shrieked.

Despite herself, Ziya smiled. Arko probably thought that Rakalaz was attacking.

Cold crept up her spine.

The shore was gone, the waves muffled. The air was stale, oily, and familiar.

It was the smell of the Undermine.

On cue, a gigantic, pale, eight-fingered hand exploded out of the ground twenty feet away and gripped the sand. Rakalaz rose, its reptilian, lantern-light eyes tracking the two of them separately.

Ziya's mind screamed. Her body, however, hauled Arko up by the robes.

"Signal the zeppelin," she hissed in his ear. Struggling to get its leg free, Rakalaz swiped at them, missed, and howled, blasting them with breath like a thousand Undermine garbage dumps.

Arko whimpered but did not move.

"Arko!" Ziya shouted. "Tell the uberzeppelin we're here! Maybe someone there is sober enough to send reinforcements. Look out!"

She seized tiny Arko, whirled, and used his weight to haul both of them out of the way. Talons plunged into the solid rock where they had been and tore out a chunk of the cliff.

Wobbling, Arko was the first to rise. Planting his feet, he began chanting, calling an arcane beacon, calling salvation, into his cupped palms.

Then he made the mistake of looking at Rakalaz. It was reaching for him, thick black cords of drool running from its hanging jaw.

Arko squealed, flung the unfinished beacon into the air, and sprinted off down the beach.

Ziya watched him go. Then she looked up at the beacon's tiny speck of light just in time to see it wink out.

"Great," she said.

Rakalaz's hand closed almost gently around her and lifted her, struggling, toward its dripping maw.

A rock whirled out of the dark and struck one of the moon eyes. The hand holding Ziya spasmed, and she fell...

... into furry arms.

"Hello," said the pandaren, setting her down with casual strength. She nodded at Rakalaz. "I don't think I know this one."

"What?"

"This character," her savior said, paws on her hips, surveying a nightmare from Ziya's youth with a professional eye. Growling, Rakalaz shifted its good eye between them, perhaps trying to figure out how to eat them both at once. "You were telling a story and it popped up, right? Out of curiosity, how does the story end?"

"Are you serious?" Ziya looked for the uberzeppelin. Surprisingly, it was slowly turning their way.

"Almost always," she said. "Quickly now."

"Miz throws his last stick of dynamite down its throat."

The pandaren's gentle smile froze.

"Oh, a goblin story," she said. "Of course it ends with explosions. Don't drop it."

Ziya flinched. Her right hand was suddenly heavier. And sizzling.

A calm certainty, of all things, fell over her. She had grown up with this story. She had *seen* herself in Miz's place, had imagined this moment with a child's vivid terror.

Without further thought, she hauled back and hurled the story's dynamite down Rakalaz's cavernous throat.

Rakalaz stared at her, puzzled, and swallowed. Ziya's eyes flickered between the creature and the emptiness of her outflung palm.

"Muh?" she said intelligently.

The pandaren's paw shot up from somewhere near Ziya's feet and yanked her onto the sand.

After a brief, interesting period of noise and splattering, Ziya raised her head. The burning remains were fading as she watched. The hole in the ground was filling with sand. Soon it would be as if nothing had happened at all.

Pieces clicked together.

"I did that," she said.

"You did," the pandaren said, rising and brushing herself off with precise grace. Gallywix's uberzeppelin was close enough that they could see the rum slides and pudding jacuzzis in the airship's lower levels. "You started a story. You finished it. That's storytelling. All the rest is decoration."

"But we lived."

"Yes?" the pandaren said, frowning up at the uberzeppelin.

"Miz didn't survive the explosion. In the story."

The pandaren smiled. Her teeth were sharp and dazzling white.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't say that before."

Something was wrong.

The uberzeppelin hovered over the breakers. Spotlights roved between Ziya, the pandaren Shuchun, and the hole Rakalaz had made in the cliff.

Shuchun was a Lorewalker, a trade that Ziya barely understood. Lorewalkers told stories. They searched for artifacts from Pandaria's long past. And, if Shuchun was any example, they talked with their mouths full and smiled a lot.

Framed in the blazing circle of light, the Lorewalker looked up, took another bite of her cold wildfowl roll, and chewed thoughtfully.

"You really should get out of here," Ziya said. "Gallywix is up there. He might start chucking megabombs at us for fun."

"Oh?" said Shuchun, swallowing. "I've heard of him. But I think I'll stay."

"Why?"

"Let's hope you don't find out."

They sat in uncomfortable silence. Finally, Ziya said, "Thanks for the rescue. Look, I should probably tell you—"

"That you're here to steal treasures and artifacts?" Shuchun said. "I know. I came to stop you."

"But you saved me!"

"I said *stop*, not *kill*," Shuchun said mildly.

"Oh. And how did I make Rakalaz appear?"

"Magic," Shuchun said.

"Magic."

"Yes, magic," the Lorewalker agreed. "I'm glad we have that settled."

"That doesn't explain anything!"

"Do you remember," Shuchun said, "when I told you that I hoped you wouldn't find out why I was still here?"

"Yeah. You said it about ten seconds ago."

"Well, I really, *really* meant it."

A rope uncoiled from the distant deck in a lazy spiral and snapped to full length several feet away. High above, a dark figure leapt over the railing and descended at a gut-clenching speed, one-handed.

At the halfway point, Ziya swore. This wasn't an assassin or a thug or some other hired killer. This was someone worse.

Druz, Gallywix's chief enforcer, landed in the sand. His leather armor was as tailored as any suit. A flat case was under his muscled arm.

He, the stories went, had grown up with Gallywix in Kezan. He wasn't infamous because he'd never been caught doing anything truly horrible. But sometimes, great and terrible things *happened* to Gallywix's enemies, and Druz would be one of the first goblins to extend his condolences.

"Sergeant," he said, nodding at Ziya. "Lorewalker Shuchun. One moment, please."

He knelt in the sand and opened the back of the case toward them. Smooth clicks sounded behind the leather wall.

Ziya groaned quietly. That was another scary little detail. Druz always seemed to know too much about everyone he met. Names. Ranks. Strengths. Weaknesses. She wasn't sure if it was research, spies, or magic.

She wasn't surprised that the enforcer had called the Lorewalker by name. He probably knew the names, boot sizes, and favorite drinks of everyone in Pandaria.

"I saw Rakalaz from the bridge," Druz said as he worked. "That was a thing. Hated that story as a kid."

Click. Clack-click.

"All right," he said finally. "Thanks for rescuin' our employee, Lorewalker. Have a good night."

He waited. Shuchun's smile grew larger. Druz nodded and then reached into the case. Instinctively, Ziya gripped her daggers...

Druz tossed a huge bag of gold, Ziya judged by the delicious clink, at the Lorewalker's feet.

"Obviously, there's a reward. Give my regards to little Fen. I hear it's almost her birthday."

"Is that a threat?" Shuchun said quietly. She stood up slowly.

Druz sighed.

"No. That was me bein' polite. I offer you a reward. I send you on your way with well wishes for your loved ones. It was the furthest thing from a threat."

In a blur, Druz lifted a huge rifle from the case, leveled it at Shuchun, and cocked it. Gun parts spun against each other like oiled continents.

"Now," he said, "this is a threat. So I'll say again: take the reward. Go home."

"You've seen it, haven't you?" Shuchun said.

"Seen what?" Ziya said.

"There's a golden door behind that hole in the wall," Druz said, pointing to where Rakalaz had hit the cliff. The weight of the gun held in one hand did not seem to trouble him. "And we're takin' it and whatever's inside."

"I don't care what weapon you choose to aim at me," Shuchun said, shifting a foot behind her with slow elegance. "I won't let you into the lorevault."

"Look," Druz said reasonably. "Cards on the table. It sounds like there's a weapon in there that can make monsters out of thin air. We want it, and it ain't worth your life."

"I will stop you if I must," Shuchun said.

"Right. Let's assume you take me down." A spotlight from the ship bracketed him, and he shaded his eyes. "The uberzep is gonna hammer the area with cannon fire until they breach the vault anyway. You still lose."

A dagger appeared at his throat.

"I'm getting this strange feeling," Ziya said behind him, "that you're going to shoot her when she turns her back."

"Probably not," said Druz. He didn't lower his gun.

"*Probably* still bothers me. I kind of like her. Also, I get this *other* strange feeling that you're planning on going into the vault alone."

"Yeah. So?"

"There's the small matter of my finder's fee."

"Your squad ain't found anything yet."

"Exactly."

Shuchun watched the two goblins bicker about contractual obligations and high-risk pay with curiosity. She sat down again, ate a few curry balls from her pack, and waited, ignoring the unwavering eye of the gun.

Finally, she said, "It's not a vault."

Her voice, firm and rich, cut through the argument like a molten blade. Both goblins looked back at her.

Druz studied her with unmasked suspicion. "You said—"

"I said it's a lorevault. It uses pandaren stories as traps to protect dangerous artifacts. I'd hate to think what would happen to anyone who went in there without a knowledgeable guide. Curry ball?" she said, holding one up.

"You offerin' your services?" Druz said.

"For pay? Absolutely not," Shuchun said. "But without me, you'll both be eaten. Or worse. So, I will take you inside and endeavor to convince you that this is a mistake."

She stared at the gun, then the dagger, until they were put away. Then, she smiled, stood, and called out with a storyteller's voice that rose above the rumble of the waves.

"The Lorewalker had made her decision," she said. "She turned her attention to the lorevault. Recognizing her for what she was, it opened."

With a thunderous CRACK, the cliff unfolded, spilling sand and chunks of rock.

In the darkness within was a round golden door large enough for a dragon to fly through. Etched figures covered every inch of its surface, thousands of characters in thousands of stories, one after another. The delirious spotlights swarming over the door made it seem as though the carvings were moving...

The door spun and opened to reveal a staircase leading down.

Lorewalker Shuchun walked ahead of the two goblins down the gentle curve of the stone passageway. Once it was clear that no one was immediately going to betray anyone, the goblins relaxed. The air was cool, quiet. Expectant.

Ziya broke the silence. "I don't get it."

"What?" Druz said.

"You. You're reserved, competent. How did you end up working for 'I've got my face on a mountain' Gallywix?"

"*Mr.* Gallywix," Druz corrected. "Or Trade Prince Gallywix. Never just Gallywix. And maybe you don't know him like I do."

"There's nothing to know," Ziya said. "He's a monster. I've stepped in deeper puddles."

"Right," said Druz. "And somehow, he's still in charge when most of the other trade princes and goblins want him dead. Hell, his own mother tried to kill him twice. Makes you think."

The path suddenly curved to the right. Gradually, the smooth walls were replaced with ancient, jagged bricks. Stinking sludge leaked through the cracks. Neither goblin noticed. Shuchun grinned at the ceiling.

"No, it doesn't," Ziya snapped. "He enslaved us when we left Kezan! His own people!"

"Not his fault you didn't have your own boat," Druz said. "But, hey, you fought your way free. Good for you. And I bet you're more careful who you trust now."

The gentle curve became a four-way intersection. Shuchun went left without pause, and the goblins followed.

"*That aside,*" Ziya growled (because he was right), "you really want to turn over this weapon—whatever it is—to Gallywix? Knowing how he sucks up to our lunatic warchief?"

"Mr. Gallywix," Druz said reprovably. "And between you, me, and our guide, we are seekin' leverage, not power. Originally, we were after peace between the Horde and Alliance, but after Theramore..."

"Peace," Ziya said. "Gallywix wants the Horde to make *peace*. With the *Alliance*."

"Yeah," said Druz, eyebrows raised at the anger in her voice.

"But they're worse than *him*! If we go back now, then it's all been for—"

"Hold on," Druz said. They had passed a few more intersections without stopping. "Lorewalker, where are we?"

"In a story," Shuchun said. She was focused on the ground.

"Which?"

"Not a happy one, if I'm right," she said, slowing to allow the goblins to catch up. "But I want to be sure before I—never mind." She pointed. "I'm sure."

Their footsteps stretched before them. Somehow, they had gone in a circle, but there was something strange.

There were other footsteps racing along behind theirs, lopsided and horrible. And if they had gone in a circle—

"Don't turn around," Shuchun said.

"But—" Ziya said, horror scrambling up her spine. Eager feet slapped the stone behind them, getting closer.

"Don't turn around," she repeated. "Because this is 'The Maze of Mad Emperor Ku.'

"Emperor Ku," said Lorewalker Shuchun, "was ruled by his fears. He believed that the mogu would return. Through the haze of his paranoia, he saw treachery behind every smile, a scheme behind every vow of devotion, and cunning traps in the calm prophecies of the jinyu waterspeakers.

"And so, he had a maze built beneath his palace, with a safe room at the center. The next time his fear gripped him, Ku fled for it, shut the door, and waited for the terror to subside. It never did. The maze had been so cleverly constructed that the emperor had forgotten the way out."

Teeth biting his lip, Druz inched his gaze around, reaching for his—

Without taking her eyes from the tunnel ahead, Shuchun flicked his ear.

"Ow. Don't do that again."

"What do you care?" Shuchun said calmly above the low, crackling groans of the approaching thing. "You clearly aren't using it for listening. Do. Not. Look."

"Why?"

"I think she's trying to tell us," Ziya said, eyes closed in either fear or prayer.

"Search parties sometimes heard him calling," continued Shuchun. "But years passed. Occasionally, an explorer went into the maze and ran out screaming, wild with terror, for Ku's time in the dark had twisted him into something appalling to behold..."

"What do we do?" Ziya whispered. Claws scraped the walls behind them. Druz's mouth was a firm line, and his hand hovered over the holstered rifle.

"We mimic the story," the Lorewalker said. "A cub named Li Tao chased his bandicoot kit into the maze. He soon realized he was being followed."

A massive head hung beyond the corners of their vision. Long, sobbing breaths painted the sides of their faces, sour and hot.

"Even though he was too frightened to look, little Li Tao still understood that here was someone even more frightened than he was. So he reached back..."

She reached back. A huge, misshapen paw closed gently over her own.

"... and led poor Emperor Ku out of the maze."

Sunlight, white and blinding, appeared ahead. Ziya and Druz, both striving for nonchalance, strolled briskly for it.

They entered the light. The two goblins looked back and flinched simultaneously.

The emperor was gone. So was the maze. Lorewalker Shuchun stared sadly at her empty paw.

"Fear and paranoia make monsters of our enemies," she said softly. "Someone has to reach out first."

They continued to walk through the light, following the Lorewalker.

"Where are we?" Druz said.

"In the lorevault," Shuchun said.

"Very helpful," Ziya said. "Which story? 'The Light of Eternal Boring'?"

"I like boring," Druz said. "It rarely tries to kill you."

"Yeah, I'm sure you live a dangerous life," Ziya said.

Druz raised an eyebrow. "You have something to get off your chest?"

"Since you asked, yes," said Ziya, turning on him. "It's easy for *you* to talk about peace. You've been living in luxury with Gallywix for years while I've been on battlefields. *Everyone* I joined up with is dead. Peace isn't possible, Druz. If you fought on the front lines at all, you'd know that!"

The light gently pulsed once. Lorewalker Shuchun stopped walking and sniffed the air.

Gripping the ring around her neck until it hurt, Ziya expected Druz to shout at her. She *wanted* him to. Instead, he sighed.

"You remember the Trade Wars, Sergeant?" he said.

"B-barely," Ziya said. "I was too young."

"I wasn't. Cartel fighting cartel. Brother fighting sister. I was workin' for Mr. Gallywix back then, too, as you know.

"And you're right. I never saw a front line because the Trade Wars didn't have one. We fought for tunnels and storerooms throughout the Undermine. Ambushes weren't fancy pincher maneuvers in open fields, but some bastard kickin' through a wall you thought was solid. Of course, the Peace War was worse."

The light was pulsing faster now. Druz glanced around, then drew his rifle as he spoke.

"You can't stop war, Sergeant. Not for long. It keeps comin'. Mr. Gallywix keeps winnin' 'em, too. Sometimes by the right bomb at the right time. Sometimes it's an alliance with a powerful idiot. And sometimes it's a scary weapon he can use as a deterrent."

"And now your master strategist thinks peace is the best move," Ziya said, rolling her eyes.

"That's right," Druz said calmly.

"Impossible," Ziya said. "If the Alliance doesn't wipe out the Horde piece by piece, they'll enslave us like they did with the orcs."

"As it happens," Druz said, "I agree with you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I ain't ever known Mr. Gallywix to be wrong, but I wouldn't give him more than one in a hundred for pulling off peace. He can turn the other trade princes and princesses against each other and come out smellin' like sugared daisies, but against the pinkskins and their allies? I think we have to keep on fightin'."

"Stop," Lorewalker Shuchun said. As gently as she had said it, the word still had the raw force of an order. The light around them flared like wildfire now, bleeding white. Heat fell on them like a dry, scratchy blanket. The white resolved into dunes curving away in all directions. An infinite desert.

A gauntlet carved from sand burst through the nearest dune. Another gauntlet followed. Then seven.

"I thought so," Lorewalker Shuchun said, pleased. "This is one of my favorites. 'Di Chen and the Desert.'"

"Proud Di Chen was the finest fighter of his time," she said. "No monk could best him. He slapped arrows out of the air with ease. Mountains were slight inconveniences that could be leapt over or kicked through.

"He was bored out of his mind. In desperation, Di Chen asked the desert witch Lui Ka for a true challenge.

"Amused by his arrogance, the witch gave him his wish: he would fight the desert itself. Each grain of sand became a fierce warrior intent on Di Chen's death."

The warriors closed in. They looked like mogu in plate armor, gauntleted hands flexing.

"So these guys are intent on our deaths?" Druz said, wrinkling his nose.

"Oh yes," Shuchun said.

"Good," Druz said, and he fired. Three sandy heads exploded. "I was startin' to think I'd brought the gun for nothin'. Sergeant?"

"Already on it," Ziya said. Druz dropped to a knee to reload, and Ziya vaulted over his broad back and buried both daggers in the nearest warrior's chest. It stumbled and collapsed in a mountain of sand. She threw one blade into the snarling face behind it, dove through the disintegrating enemy to catch her weapon, crouched, and pounced into the middle of the remaining three. Steel flashed in a spiral, and the soldiers fell apart joint by joint.

A hot breeze coiled over the empty desert. Grinning, Ziya returned, sheathing her daggers...

Thirty more warriors burst from the dunes, shrieking in rage and hate.

"Get back to me, Sergeant," Druz said, flicking the rifle's chamber shut. Ziya, setting her jaw, stalked to his side and waited, daggers poised.

"I never did tell you the rest of the story," Lorewalker Shuchun said.

"With all respect, Lorewalker," Druz said as he fired another shot. Two warriors fell. Another three rose. "Does this look like the time?"

Shuchun shrugged and went to sit on a nearby dune. Humming, she reached into her pack, selected an apple, took an enthusiastic bite, and watched the fight with interest. A single warrior lurched in her direction, snarling, and she displayed her mostly empty paws. It froze and crumpled into the sand. No more of the creatures troubled her.

Eventually she dropped the apple core and frowned.

"Something's wrong," she called.

"Oh, do you think so?" Ziya's daggers punched sand in quick succession. "Fall down, you ugly *lakratz!* Fall down!"

Shuchun scratched her cheek, puzzled, then snapped her fingers.

"That's right," she said with satisfaction. "In the story, the desert warriors had weapons."

"What? Druz! Down!" Ziya shouted. A warrior's heavy iron hummed through the air and crunched into the sand.

"That's more like it," Shuchun said. Now all of the warriors had an exciting variety of swords, maces, and polearms. She settled her chin into her paws and watched.

"Did you do that?!" Druz roared at her between gunshots.

"No," Shuchun said. "The story did."

"And you! And you!"

"That's probably fair," Shuchun said. "But I could have mentioned that their weapons were also on fire—"

FWOOSH!

"Aah!"

"All right, that was careless," Shuchun admitted, firelight glowing orange on the fur of her upraised palms. "I'll keep quiet. Carry on."

Minutes passed, punctuated by grunts, growls, and daring acrobatics. Finally, Shuchun rose and walked down the dune and into the battle.

"Each grain of sand became a fierce warrior intent on Di Chen's death," she repeated, absently pushing aside the soldiers. They paused, confused, as if they couldn't see her. "The battle would end only when Di Chen admitted that there were some challenges too difficult even for him."

She reached the center of the hundreds of soldiers. Druz and Ziya stood back to back, utterly surrounded. Flaming weapons blotted out the sky.

"Are you saying," Ziya panted, "that we have to surrender?"

"That's one option," Shuchun said.

"Good enough for me," Druz said, and he dropped his weapon. Ziya hastily did the same.

Wind howled down from above, rich with the desert witch's laughter, and carried the soldiers away grain by grain. The goblins watched them go.

"You could have said," Ziya growled.

"She tried to tell the rest of the story," Druz said, grinning and bending to pick up his gun. "We wanted to fight..."

He paused and shot Shuchun a suspicious look. "Hold on. Before all this, we were talking about having to go on fighting. We ended up in an impossible battle."

Ziya's jaw dropped. "We were talking about monsters and how there's no way back, and we ended up being followed by a monster in a maze!"

"Lorewalker," Druz said in a tight voice. "When we argue, are we makin' traps?"

"Of course," said Shuchun, her face a mask. "I thought you knew."

"How would we know?"

"When my people are embroiled in a divisive argument, they call for a Lorewalker," Shuchun said. "I'll listen to both sides and then tell a story that challenges their opinions. That's not what you were doing?"

"No!"

"Oh," Shuchun said.

"We could have died!"

"Never," the Lorewalker said. "After all, Di Chen wasn't even scratched. In the story."

"What happened to him, anyway?" Ziya said. "Did he surrender too?"

The wind rose again, and the high circle of the sun expanded over them, a spreading blanket of white light. Shuchun shook her head and pointed at a figure atop a faraway dune. As they watched, it swung a weary fist, blasting a warrior into dust.

"He battles on to this day," she said. "There are always reasons to fight. The trick is knowing when to stop."

The goblins stood quietly, shoulder to shoulder, at the center of a small white room.

"What's happenin'?" Druz said out of the corner of his mouth.

"The lorevault is waiting for you to speak so it can create the final challenge," Shuchun said, leaning back against the wall.

Druz nodded.

"That's what I thought," he said, then fell silent again. Time passed.

Eventually, Shuchun took pity.

"You could talk about your mutual love of sunsets," she said.

"Any stories that could turn into?"

Shuchun thought.

"Several," she admitted.

Silence.

"I don't understand," Ziya said. Druz nudged her, and she ignored him. "Why do the pandaren use their stories to solve problems?"

"It's not just us," Shuchun said. "Every race has stories that are told and retold. We enjoy them because they have simple answers that help us find the hard ones. But stories are dangerous."

"You don't say," said Druz. The Lorewalker smiled.

"Sometimes, we forget that stories break rules," Shuchun said. "Simple answers don't care about consequences, and there are plenty."

"I get it," Druz said. "Your artifact is a *simple answer*. But you're neutral, Lorewalker. We don't have the luxury of... We have to make hard deci—oh, *hell*."

Far beneath their feet, under the previously opaque white of the floor, something dark and terrible stirred.

"You knew this was going to happen," he said.

Shuchun shrugged.

"I didn't force you to enter the lorevault," she said.

"Which one is it?"

Shuchun peered at the uncoiling horror below.

"If I had to guess? 'The Spiders of Te Zhuo,'" she said.

Druz and Ziya closed their eyes. The black cloud beneath them expanded as a thousand tiny—but not tiny enough—bodies scurried toward the light above.

"How are you with spiders?" Ziya said.

"Not great. Lorewalker? Any chance of us skippin' ahead to the moral of this story? Something about actions and consequences? We get it."

"Do you?" Shuchun said politely. "They're still coming."

The white walls whirled away like gray clouds in a high wind. The goblins and the Lorewalker stood on dull stone, a platform in the center of a vast room filled with noise. Thousands of legs skittered up from below, and massive, heavy shadows circled through the darkness around the platform with crushing speed.

"Well, tell the end of the story," Druz said through gritted teeth. "Make this stop."

"That's going to be a problem," Shuchun admitted. "No explorer who entered the lost temple of Te Zhuo was ever seen again, so it's more a cautionary tale than a story."

"A cautionary tale about not entering the temple we're already in?" Ziya said wearily.

Shuchun beamed.

"Wait, hang on," Druz said. "No one ever came back, yeah? So no bodies were ever found."

Shuchun cocked her head. "Yes?"

"So, how do we know it's a bad place?" Druz said. "Could be it's so wonderful inside that no one wanted to come out."

"That's certainly possible," Shuchun allowed as Ziya buried her face in her hands. "Except the story is named after the spiders for a reason."

"Oh?" Druz said. He and Ziya moved together, shoulder to shoulder, by unspoken arrangement.

"Well," Shuchun said, "I never said that the explorers were never *heard* from again. They scream."

"Let me guess. They scream about spiders," Ziya said.

"Oh yes."

A wave of black death on a multitude of hairy legs exploded from the pit below. And froze. Clusters of glittering eyes burned with hunger.

"So, if we enter this Te Zhuo place," Druz said after a deliberately calm breath, "we might find anything. Traps. Very impressive spiders."

"Servants of the Old Gods, maybe," Ziya said. "They get *everywhere*."

"One action," Druz said slowly. "One outcome: viz, we never get out."

"We don't have a way out of this, do we?" said Ziya. "Our actions brought us here. We have to deal with the consequences."

"Yes," said Shuchun, smiling. "Well done."

Darkness flooded over the platform, washing the goblins away.

Ziya opened her eyes. The cold against her cheek was a marble floor, long and pale, stretching toward...

... a scroll hanging on the far wall of a narrow, doorless chamber. The ghosts of words raced over the scroll's surface as fleetingly as thought. It was the blazing white of a pupilless eye, staring at her, waiting.

Shuchun stepped over her head and blocked her view of the scroll with a footfall as measured and precise as if it had been foretold.

Groaning, Ziya pushed herself off the ground.

"This is it?" Druz grunted. He was easing himself up against the wall, looking worse than she felt.

"Yes," Shuchun said.

"What is it?"

"A weapon, some say," Shuchun said. "Others, a lesson or a punishment. All I know is that the Lorewalkers made it long ago and must bear the burden of keeping the world safe from the consequences."

"What's so dangerous about it?" Ziya said.

"A blank scroll—*any* blank scroll—contains possibilities. It could become the tale of Rakalaz," Shuchun said, and Ziya looked up. There was a crack in the ceiling, trickling sand. Somewhere above, she had told a story. Had the scroll listened?

"Or, perhaps, it could record the legend of an infinite army made of sand, a legion of spiders," said Shuchun, "or worse."

"So, you're sayin' that it brings characters to life, like Lorewalkers do?" Druz said.

"No," Shuchun said. "You do not understand. I can call on Di Chen to argue with his desert witch and battle his legendary army. I could not turn him on my enemies."

Druz raised an eyebrow. "It can do that?"

Ziya heard the hunger in his voice. Could Shuchun?

"Perhaps," Shuchun said quietly. "Our legends say it can change words into flesh. Hopes into reality."

"Sorry, but that just sounds like summoning to me," Druz said. "Warlocks do it all the time. Nothing wrong with that, minus a few demonic invasions."

"No?" Shuchun said.

A gun cocked.

"No. I ain't denying it's dangerous," said Druz apologetically, his rifle leveled at Shuchun. "But a weapon's a weapon. It won't shoot unless you pull the trigger. So to speak. Ziya, get the scroll."

Shuchun gave Druz a look of such sorrow that Ziya wondered how he could bear it.

"I told you," Shuchun said, "I won't let you take it."

"This ain't a discussion," Druz said. "Ziya. Scroll."

"You think you can control it when we failed?"

"Me?" Druz said. "No. Mr. Gallywix wanted whatever was in here. He's gonna get it."

"And so, the goblins decided to take the scroll," Shuchun said softly.

Her words raced across the scroll, and it pulsed like a single ivory flame. The walls of the room cracked, and white light spilled through the gaps.

Out of instinct, Druz pulled the trigger.

"Out of instinct, Druz pulled the trigger, and—"

—*the bullet flew.*

Bearing the scroll, the goblins left the lorevault and entered the private quarters of Trade Prince Gallywix.

Ziya stumbled, fighting nausea. Druz swayed into her and steadied himself on her shoulder.

How had they gotten here? The last memory she had was of the rifle firing at Lorewalker Shuchun's solemn face, which seemed only seconds ago.

They were somewhere else now. The muted roar of the uberzeppelin's engines throbbed behind the walls. Ziya and Druz stood in a dark, narrow space. A tinker's workroom with a simple wooden stool. A workbench. Carefully organized tools.

Jastor Gallywix sat at the workbench, drawing a schematic freehand, and Ziya's disorientation fled. It had just been a long day.

Gallywix was thinner than she remembered, but not by much. His gut spilled through a plain, open vest. Back then, he'd also had an outrageously oversized top hat, glittering rings, and a megawatt horror of a grin.

This Gallywix wore no riches and wasn't smiling at all. *"Maybe you don't know him like I do,"* Druz had said...

Druz straightened beside her.

"This is it, boss," he said thickly, and he tossed the scroll onto the workbench. Gallywix didn't touch it.

"The Lorewalker?" he said.

Guilt washed over Ziya. She had seen the bullet fly. Shuchun was gone. She had to be.

"Dead," Druz said, but he sounded unsure.

"Too bad," Gallywix said, and he nodded at the scroll. "What is it?"

"Apparently it's a kind of portal that makes stories real," Druz said. "Things got out of control before the Lorewalker could explain more."

The trade prince considered the scroll. Ziya braced herself for whatever terrible thing—

"Sounds like bad news," Gallywix said. "I'll put it in the lower vault when we get back to Azshara."

Ziya's jaw dropped.

"Boss," Druz said, almost pleading. "If you don't use it, someone else will."

"You know what I'm gonna say," Gallywix said, glancing at him.

"Yeah," Druz said, sighing.

"Good. The last thing we need is another big gun floating around," Gallywix said. "Get it outta here."

"And that's *it*?" The words were in the air before Ziya realized she had spoken them.

Gallywix regarded her. She could *see* the gears turning in his head.

"What did you expect, Sergeant?" he said.

"I expected you to use it!" Ziya growled. "It's what you do. You use things. You're a monster!"

To her surprise, Gallywix nodded.

"Yeah, I am," he said. "But not that kind."

"You're *exactly* that kind!"

"No," Gallywix said. "We ain't ever met face to face, Sergeant, so let me explain. I don't mind selling you if you get careless. I'll send you to die if it'll help the cartel's bottom line. But I won't get you killed by stupidity or a big dumb weapon for *nothing*. That ain't me."

He glanced at the ring hanging around her neck. Her hands closed protectively around it. An unreadable expression crossed his face.

"For what it's worth," he said, "I'm sorry about what happened to your husband in Hyjal. But I ain't sorry about anything I've done. So, yeah, I'm a monster. But I watch out for what's mine. When I can.

"And right now, that means hiding this big gun before anyone finds out about it."

But, of course, someone did, whispered Lorewalker Shuchun's voice, and the room crystallized, slowed around Ziya. *The rumors rippled across the world: Gallywix had found a powerful weapon in Pandaria and kept it for himself.*

In the mind of Garrosh Hellscream, warchief of the Horde, there could be only one explanation for such treachery: rebellion. Garrosh led the fractured Horde against Bilgewater Harbor.

The uberzeppelin melted away. Solid ground rose beneath Ziya's feet.

From the cold heights of Gallywix's palace, she watched her home burn. Druz swayed beside her, exhaustion lining his eyes.

"Get your armor on," an enforcer said behind them. "They'll be here soon."

Garrosh's forces descended upon the palace. The goblins fell back along the subterranean corridors, protecting the vault and the secrets it held, Lorewalker Shuchun said.

Her daggers slick in her hands, Ziya retreated. A blood elf raised a crossbow, and Druz thrust Ziya to one side, catching the bolt in his shoulder. He reeled against her with a grunt, and she hauled him along with her.

Soon, the few goblin survivors had nowhere to go, said Lorewalker Shuchun, calm and relentless.

An arrow slammed into Ziya, and she sat down, faintly surprised. Druz leaned on her, struggling for air. The vault antechamber was a large steel room, littered with fallen goblins. The Horde, the invaders, closed in, reluctant now that slaughter was near. She recognized some of them from Hyjal and other battles. If she could just catch her breath, she knew she could convince them they were making a mistake...

The vault door opened behind her.

A spider-tank leg stepped over the goblins. Another. And Trade Prince Gallywix charged at the massed invaders, roaring laughter. Garrosh shoved through his troops, axe hanging in one gigantic red fist.

"Stand down," the warchief growled. "The traitor is *mine*."

The duel was not a long one, but neither did it go as expected, Shuchun said.

"Help me," Druz wheezed, fumbling with his rifle. Reaching from the ground, Ziya propped up the gun barrel, aiming it at...

The duel. The mechano-tank stumbled sideways from another axe blow, sparks hissing from its ruined joints. Gallywix was losing. Of course he was losing.

Why was he still laughing?

Gallywix ejected himself from the wreckage of the mechano-tank and clung to the muscular orc's tusks, ramming his forehead into the warchief's face like the street fighter he had once been. Garrosh dropped to a knee.

Head hanging, delirious with pain, Druz fired the rifle. His aim was off.

Gallywix shuddered and fell.

And Garrosh claimed the treasures of the vault, Lorewalker Shuchun said.

Ziya lay in a spreading pool of blood, unsure if it was her own, watching Garrosh kneel to take the scroll.

Months passed, Lorewalker Shuchun whispered over her. And the world changed.

Ziya surrendered to the story, closed her eyes, and...

... struggled to open them. Blood was running into her good eye. The helmet had deflected most of the orc's blow. Ziya growled, pushing the disorientation away, and rolled to the left.

The orc's sword crunched into the ground where she'd been. She lunged into the air and brought both daggers down in a wicked arc.

The orc stared dully at her, daggers protruding from his throat, and fell.

He would rise again soon.

Garrosh believed in a world ruled by the orcs. The scroll had made that reality. The orcs flowed over Kalimdor, enslaved by a different master than the demonic blood that had once dominated them. Nothing could kill them, and the pale void of the artifact that drove them blazed in their empty eyes.

Teldrassil had toppled, burning, into the sea. A charred pit was all that remained of the *Exodar*. The tauren and trolls, appalled by the devastation, had fled across the Great Sea, hoping that Garrosh would be content with his victories.

He was not.

Ziya stood near Stormwind Harbor. A last stand alongside her allies and former enemies. A fight they couldn't win.

The sound of footsteps jerked her around, daggers ready.

"You," she said.

"Me," said Druz, winding a frayed bandage around a long gash on his arm. "Good to see you, Sergeant."

He carried no weapon. Maybe it had been lost. Maybe he had given up and dropped it. She couldn't blame him either way.

They stood shoulder to shoulder. The orc fleet poured into the crowded bay, spilling hundreds of howling warriors onto the dock. Tauren died alongside humans, dwarves, and blood elves, but too late, too late.

The orc at Ziya's feet stirred, his hideous wounds closing.

"Good intentions, huh?" Druz said.

"All of this is our fault," Ziya said quietly.

Druz chuckled. "At least we won't live to regret it."

Ziya charged into the battle, and Druz followed.

Stormwind fell. The orcs reigned supreme. For a time.

The Dark Portal, left unguarded, was reclaimed by the Burning Legion. Horrors rose from the sea and found no champions left to stop them.

Azeroth's mountains burned and melted. Its oceans boiled until nothing remained. And all was dark.

All was light.

Dimming now, the blank scroll still cast a long, standing shadow before Lorewalker Shuchun and turned the beaded tracks of water on the lorevault's walls into a net strung with shining pearls.

The bullet hung frozen just in front of Shuchun, the last link between the two goblins and their terrible future.

Lorewalker Shuchun reached out, plucked the bullet from the air, and laid it carefully on the ground.

"Lorewalker Shuchun turned to the scroll," she said. "In a way, Druz was correct. The scroll was as simple as a gun. But guns can be fired accidentally. Bullets can hit the wrong targets. So, Lorewalker Shuchun aimed carefully and said...

""The images the two goblins saw weren't true.""

The room twisted, knocking the goblins to the ground. Shuchun didn't move an inch.

"None of the horrors they witnessed had actually happened."

Ziya bent her head beneath the sickening, ebbing waves of memory, of the losses and old wounds she no longer had.

She heard, "And everything was as it was."

Ziya looked up in the sudden calm. Shuchun tucked the tightly wrapped scroll behind her shoulder.

"Was that real?" Ziya said. "Any of it?"

Shuchun considered the question.

"You will sleep better," she said, "if I do not answer that."

She held out her paws to help them up. Ziya took one. Druz did not.

"You could have used the scroll like that whenever?" he said. It sounded like an accusation.

"Yes."

"Made me do the things I—"

"Made you?" Shuchun said, and there was no gentleness in her tone anymore. "You believe peace is impossible because you haven't tried it. You think war will continue because it has never ended, and you make *hard decisions* with no fear of the consequences.

"You chose your path," Lorewalker Shuchun said, and she took a breath. "I saved you from it."

Druz's jaw flexed. "Why did you take us through the lorevault at all, then? Why not make us forget we found anything?" Ziya realized he was pleading.

Shuchun's smile was both kind and unnervingly sharp.

"Maybe you needed to find out what simple answers cost," she said.

They said their farewells on the beach in the fresh, salty air.

"You have a safe place for that thing?" Druz said, nodding at the scroll. Something had broken in him; that much was clear. But it had been reforged into something different. Something stronger.

"Yes," Shuchun said.

"Good. Sergeant, take some time off. Paid, of course," he added when Ziya's mouth opened. "Make sure the Lorewalker gets where she needs to go."

And he climbed back up the rope to the uberzeppelin without another word, hand over hand.

Ziya and Shuchun walked away from the coast along a rising path. The uberzeppelin lurched into the distance as if the pilot were drunk. He probably was.

"Where to?" said Ziya.

"This way," Shuchun said, pointing. "We have a bit of a journey before us."

Ziya twisted the ring hanging from her neck. To her surprise, she was smiling. It would be nice, for a change, to protect rather than attack. To believe that war and all of the horrors it brought could end.

They traveled in silence.

"Want to hear a story?" Shuchun said.