



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS of PANDARIA

HORLEY

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Death from Above

by Robert Brooks

I

He floated alone. Time meant nothing. Finally, the sound of her music rippled through the stillness.

Swarm the Wall, the empress sang. The strong will return. The weak will not.

Kil'ruk opened his eyes for the first time.

* * *

Smoke and dust shrouded the eastern horizon. Only the faint outline of the Wall, the Serpent's Spine, was visible through the brume. Echoes of war hung in the air, the joyous cries of the young mantid and the screams of the dying blending into the distinctive harmony of clashing blades and rending flesh.

The new cycle had truly and gloriously begun.

A group of elder mantid watched from a hill to the west.

"The swarmborn seem healthy, vibrant. The empress nurtured them well," said one. None disagreed. They had all observed the young mantid stampeding toward the Wall mere minutes after entering the world, unable to think of anything but slaughtering the lesser creatures. "Their enthusiasm will prove useful should the mogu continue to provoke us. Nothing tempers ambition more than the fear of oblivion."

The other elders wordlessly clicked and chattered. It was the sound of agreement but not of commitment. There was no need to make a decision just yet.

For now, the Klaxxi would simply watch. Events were progressing as expected.

* * *

A lone mogu, clothed in ornate, precisely tailored robes, stepped into the large tent and coldly eyed the slaves scurrying around the odd collection of polished, hollow white tubes. With a loud, scornful voice, he pronounced, "You told Warlord Gurthan your weapons would be ready by now. He is disappointed in your failure."

The sixteen slaves—mostly pandaren, though there were a few jinyu—went still with fear. Far in the back of the tent, a bulky figure slowly stood up, face shrouded in shadow. He leaned forward. The edge of his jaw caught the glow of a flickering brazier. Despite the hostile words from the visitor, the larger mogu's expression was forbiddingly calm.

"If Warlord Gurthan were disappointed in me, he would have told me himself, Hixin," said Taskmaster Xuexing.

"Perhaps you are unaware of recent events. The mantid are attacking," Hixin said blandly, as though it were possible to miss the horrific sound of the fighting to the west. "Warlord Gurthan has more important matters to attend to than a delinquent arcanist and the misuse of a few slaves."

Delinquent? Xuexing kept a firm grasp on his temper. Hixin was by far the slipperiest of Warlord Gurthan's advisors. He never provoked someone without a reason. No doubt he wished to carry tales of Xuexing's rage back to the warlord. *If he can't respond calmly even to simple criticism, Warlord, Hixin would undoubtedly say, can he really be trusted with critical duties?*

It was no secret that Xuexing had the warlord's confidence in almost all areas of the arcane. Even the Zandalari sought his counsel and advice. Hixin would need to discredit him before supplanting him. *He seeks to ascend by stepping on my head.*

"The *huatang* will be ready when it is ready," Xuexing said. "And when it's ready, I'll tell Warlord Gurthan myself."

"Should I tell him to expect a working weapon in days? Weeks? Months? The insects will not wait," Hixin said in the same bland, political voice. He ran his finger absently along the rim of a strange, ornate urn sitting on a table next to him.

"Tell him whatever you like," Xuexing said.

"I suppose I have to inform the warlord you don't have an answer."

"Do not test me, advisor."

* * *

Go together. Swarm the Wall. The empress's words filled their minds. She gave them purpose. Her desires were their desires, and they did not hesitate to obey.

Without her, the mantid were nothing.

The strong will return. The weak will not, she said.

Kil'ruk and dozens of other flyers rose into the air and went east again. It was their third trip to the Wall, or perhaps their fourth. Kil'ruk hadn't really kept count. All he cared about was her voice, urging him onward. He had craved battle from his first moment of life. His instincts took care of the rest. His antennae twitched restlessly. His forelegs remained tucked up beneath his abdomen, settling easily against his carapace. Even the act of keeping his four transparent wings buzzing together behind his back was as natural as breathing.

The lesser creatures must die, she sang to them all. Sweep them away.

From so high in the air, the ground itself seemed to writhe with her wrath. Thousands upon thousands of mantid pushed east without thought toward the lesser creatures and their pathetic obstacle. Even though their Wall jutted into the sky, the empress had ordered it to fall. So it would.

They call it the Serpent's Spine, the empress had sneered. Break it.

On the ground, the swarmborn charged the Wall, attempting to climb its sheer face. Already piles of broken carapaces were growing at the base of the Spine. The climb was exhausting and dangerous, and the few mantid who managed to reach the top found themselves alone against scores of defenders. They did not survive long.

Kil'ruk and the other flyers hovered high above the Wall's battlements, far out of range of any archers. Each of the mantid carried a net filled to bursting with strange nuggets that leaked wisps of vile smoke. An ambersmith with a missing eye had called them *rounds*. "Decorate their heads with these," he had hissed while shoving nets into his forelegs' grasp.

The flyers plucked the rounds from their nets and let them fall. They burst open in sprays of poison and acid, showering nearby defenders. The lesser creatures scurried around for a few moments, shouting in pain and confusion, but the poison soon dispersed in the wind. The defenders retook their positions at the Wall's edge and sent more arrows and rocks against the mantid climbers.

Kil'ruk continued to drop rounds. It was oddly unsatisfying. He wanted to see the lesser creatures' agony up close. He wanted to paint the battlements with their blood. Dropping bombs from so high felt too clean, too detached, and not terribly useful.

When the flock ran out of rounds, they flew back to the ambersmith. The other flyers chattered happily along the way. Kil'ruk brooded in silence. The ambersmith had more nets waiting in the shade of a kypari tree sapling.

For two days and nights, they repeated the same actions: fly to the Wall, drop rounds from the sky, go back for more nets, over and over.

By the second night of the cycle, most of Kil'ruk's flock had curled up from exhaustion underneath some of the larger kypari trees. Kil'ruk merely took another net of rounds and flew on without them.

The Wall still stood. The empress's enemies still lived. How could he rest?

He didn't succumb to fatigue until the sun rose on the fourth day.

II

A hawk rode the afternoon breeze high above the ground, hunting in solitude. Nearly every other beast in mantid lands had fled the moment the cycle had begun. Only a few baby virmen, too young to keep up with the mass exodus, remained in their warrens, shivering at the sounds of battle in the distance. One of the tiny creatures poked its head above the ground, sniffing at the air, hoping for the scent of food.

The hawk spotted it. It folded its wings close to its body and arced downward. Only an instant before hitting the ground, the hawk spread its wings wide, slashing at the air. There was a great flurry of motion, and then it swooped upward, a wriggling baby virmen caught in its talons. With a firm squeeze, the hawk stilled the virmen for good.

The hawk wheeled back toward its nest high in a kypari tree. Suddenly, it changed course, angling wide around a lone mantid flyer hovering nearby.

The hawk regarded it with wary eyes, but when it became clear the flyer wasn't preparing to attack, the bird screeched angrily at the delay and winged off. The absence of easy prey had left it hungry.

That lone mantid, Kil'ruk, simply watched it go with an astonished look.

* * *

"A hawk?"

"A hawk," said the elder mantid known as Klaxxi'va Pok. "This mantid is fascinated with it. Obsessed, perhaps. He constantly attempts to imitate it."

"Diving from the sky is impossible for us," the other objected. He had wings. Klaxxi'va Pok did not. "Those of us blessed with flight can hover. We dart nimbly from place to place. That is our advantage. This swarmborn is suicidal. The strain of halting a dive from so high will rip his wings straight off his back."

"As I said, he practices constantly," said Klaxxi'va Pok. "Yesterday, he could manage a drop of ten strides. This morning, fifteen."

"That is hardly useful, only—"

"This afternoon, twenty-five strides," Klaxxi'va Pok finished.

The other elder mantid went silent. His forelegs rubbed together in contemplation. Recovering from an uncontrolled fall of twenty-five strides was the limit of even highly skilled mantid flyers. "So he's becoming stronger?"

"Yes."

"Much stronger?"

"It appears so," Klaxxi'va Pok said.

"Interesting."

"In more ways than you may realize," Pok added. "It has barely been a week. The swarmborn are still fragile and terribly immature. They are totally dependent on the empress's voice, and she has said nothing about such strange tactics."

The other mantid slowly clacked his mandibles together in understanding. "He is acting on his own initiative. He is putting aside her desires. Promising, from one so young." His antennae twitched lightly, and a rasping chuckle escaped his mouth. "It has been three cycles since a paragon has emerged from the swarmborn. Perhaps this one will earn a second name soon."

"Perhaps," Klaxxi'va Pok said. "Or perhaps he will simply be another who dies before reaching his potential."

"Indeed. That is how the cycle works, after all."

* * *

Yong comforted himself with a simple thought. *It will all be over soon.*

The savage beatings of the last few hours had left the pandaren slave almost completely blind, only able to make out vague shapes and shadows. Two mogu guards dragged him into bright sunlight and chained him to a tall post. He couldn't tell if they were the same ones he had attacked yesterday.

I hope I hurt them, he thought tiredly. It had been a pitiful gesture, one he knew would mean his death, and yet he didn't regret it even for an instant. *They cannot have my obedience anymore. They do not deserve it.*

"We're going to try something new on you," one of the mogu said. "Xuexing, you may fire when ready."

Yong was too exhausted to be truly fearful, but he was certainly curious. He blinked hard and tried to make sense of the shape in front of him.

Odd. It looked as if the mogu were going to execute him with a big white honeycomb.

The last thing Yong heard before he died was the sound of crackling arcane energy.

* * *

Sunset on the ninth day came and went. By sunrise, Kil'ruk could manage a drop of fifty strides. He wasn't satisfied; the hawk had dived at least a hundred. Still, he could feel his wings growing stronger, the sinews along his back toughening.

The ambersmith had changed locations in the night, placing his nets on the slopes outside of Klaxxi'vess, the home of the mantid's cultural council. When Kil'ruk returned from the Wall, he lingered, mesmerized by the sight of the amber architecture at the top of

the hill. He was forbidden to enter, of course. To enter the Klaxxi's realm without an invitation was death.

Not for the first time Kil'ruk wondered why the Klaxxi were so rarely seen. The mantid treated the council with respect, but few of the swarmborn had spotted its members outside of the boundaries of their home. None of the Klaxxi had ever been seen joining the fight. In the midst of a glorious, ongoing battle, the council seemed useless.

The ambersmith broke Kil'ruk's reverie. "Is something troubling you, swarmborn?"

Many things. Kil'ruk asked the question that had weighed heavily on his mind for a full day. "What of the lesser creatures?"

"What do you mean?"

How can a hawk possibly fly better than I? I am one of the empress's chosen, Kil'ruk didn't say. He felt shame over his own inability; he had no desire to reveal it to anyone else. He asked another question. "I see different creatures fighting against us on the Wall. Different shapes. Different sizes. Different beings. Why are they working together?"

The ambersmith chattered with amusement. "Together? The saurok and the pandaren are both enslaved by the mogu. They have no choice but to fight us."

Saurok? Pandaren? Kil'ruk did not know these names. He had never bothered to think of the defenders as anything other than lesser creatures. The ambersmith was happy to explain. "The skilled, scaled fighters are called saurok. The creatures with the fur and the thick bellies are called pandaren."

The ambersmith spoke at length about the mogu and how they had harnessed the usurpers' power to establish their empire in millennia past, empowering themselves and subjugating others. Much of the mogu's greatest work would not have been completed but for the strength of their conquered slaves.

When Kil'ruk asked how the slaves learned to fight, the ambersmith laughed again. "The saurok were born to kill. They have not yet found any other purpose. The pandaren, well," he said, "they are forbidden to hold weapons at all until they find themselves on their Wall, facing us."

Kil'ruk's forelegs twitched with disbelief. "The mogu send untrained creatures to battle? They could not possibly be so foolish."

"It is truth, swarmborn," the ambersmith said. "The mogu starve rebellion in its infancy. Any pandaren who show signs of dissent are sent to the Wall as punishment. Thus the strongest among them are here to face us. But they are here only to die."

Kil'ruk hadn't known the mogu had such a rich sense of humor. He laughed until his antennae hurt.

* * *

A young pandaren boy poured a fresh cup of tea. A few errant drops splashed to the floor, and he squeaked in fear. Xuexing ignored him and sipped the tea politely.

"I was pleased to see the successful demonstration of the *huatang*. Warlord Gurthan wishes you to use it in battle immediately," Hixin said.

"Tell Warlord Gurthan," Xuexing said, his words rumbling through the tent, "that I wish to personally and privately discuss how he would like to use the *huatang*."

"There is no need," Hixin said. The advisor handed over a tightly rolled parchment—an official Clan Gurthan order, sealed by magic. Xuexing took it and examined it, suspicious.

"What is this?"

Hixin took a small sip of tea. "The will of Warlord Gurthan."

Xuexing carefully eyed the other mogu. It was inconceivable that Warlord Gurthan would use this political creature as an intermediary, yet the seal felt genuine. He conjured up a small amount of magic and unsealed the parchment. It contained a short message.

Display your potential by nightfall. Do not disappoint me again.

Xuexing said nothing. Only the distant sound of battle and the shallow, frightened breaths of the pandaren slave kneeling in one of the tent's corners could be heard.

The *huatang* had been tested only once. On a slave. It was untested in battle. The slightest imbalance in the flow of energy could disrupt it. A large imbalance could be catastrophic.

Battle has a way of introducing imbalances, Xuexing thought grimly.

Not that he would admit that to the bottom-feeder sitting across from him. Xuexing drained his cup. "So be it. Tell the warlord the skies will belong to him soon." He stood up to leave. "Thanks for the tea."

He didn't bother to take the parchment with him. Hixin watched him go, not allowing himself to smile until Xuexing had disappeared from view.

"Dispose of this," Hixin told the slave, handing him the parchment.

* * *

"I want a blade," Kil'ruk said.

The ambersmith looked puzzled. "Why?"

"I need talons."

"What?"

"I have seen how the mantid fight on the ground with blades," Kil'ruk said. "I wish to join them."

"You are a flyer," the ambersmith said. "You are not meant for that."

"The wingless cannot reach the battlements," Kil'ruk said. "The climb is too dangerous. There are piles of mantid dead all along the base of the Wall. I have wings. I can drop onto their battlements from above."

"You are not meant for that," the ambersmith repeated, more confused than ever. "You can still sense the empress's will, can you not? She tells you to remain in the air."

"I will be her talons," Kil'ruk mumbled.

"I don't understand."

"Then we are done talking."

By sundown on the tenth night, Kil'ruk could survive a dive of seventy-five strides.

III

On the fourteenth day of his life, Kil'ruk earned the empress's favor.

Kil'ruk and the rest of the flock were dropping rounds over the battlements, hovering safely out of range of any attackers. The gnawing feeling of uselessness continued to eat away at Kil'ruk's mind, yet he obeyed the empress's command and rained poison on the lesser creatures.

His net was only partially empty when strange sounds rang out—crackling, then a deep, stuttering rattle, like a giant tree trunk snapping in half in a storm's gale.

Kil'ruk's first reaction was confusion. He had never heard such an odd sound before. An instant later, startled cries of pain and surprise filled the air. Five flyers to the north tumbled from the sky, chunks of flesh and wing falling beside them. The other mantid clicked and chattered, alarmed. Archers? Perhaps with improved bows? There had been little threat from them in previous raids.

After a moment of searching the ground, Kil'ruk spotted an odd shape on the edge of the mogu encampment behind the Wall. From his perspective, it first looked like a honeycomb, but as he looked closer, Kil'ruk realized it was a collection of tubes, stacked together in a round bundle as tall as a mogu. White smoke drifted from its openings.

They had placed the bundle of tubes on wheels and aimed it directly at the mantid flock.

Slaves scurried around the front of the honeycomb, shoving handfuls of pebbles into the tubes.

More crackling filled the air.

Kil'ruk understood just in time.

* * *

Xuexing fed arcane power into the back of the weapon in one violent burst.

BOOM.

The sound of the blast drowned out all other noises, the concussive force a hammer's blow to his chest. White smoke clouded his vision. He could dimly see several pandaren slaves lying still on the ground in front of the *huatang*. Dead, most likely. Xuexing hadn't waited for them to move out of the way.

It would teach the others to move faster.

As the smoke wafted away, the effects of the weapon became clear. The first shot had been slightly wide, killing only a few of the flyers on the north edge of the flock, but the second shot had hit dead center. Dozens of mantid flyers fell toward the ground. Some fell in pieces. Xuexing even spotted one still clinging to its net, its wings motionless. Maybe three or four flyers in the entire flock had escaped unharmed, and they had the sense to turn and flee back to their lands, out of Xuexing's reach.

"Reload!" Xuexing bellowed. The slaves shoveled more pebbles and small rocks into the tubes, tightly packing them in. Xuexing carefully began gathering more energy to fire again. A third shot was probably unnecessary, but why take chances? This weapon worked better than he had dreamed.

The skies above this section of the Serpent's Spine had been cleared in two volleys. Just two. *I will have to thank the Zandalari for this*, he thought. The trolls' command of the arcane was primitive compared to the mogu's, but observing their techniques had driven Xuexing's own thoughts in unexpected directions.

Who else among the mogu would have imagined that tiny rocks, even propelled to incredible speeds with arcane energy, could cause such damage?

* * *

The screams of the wounded came from all sides. Nearly the entire flock had been shredded. Rocks and pebbles had torn through dozens and dozens of flyers, punching holes through their carapaces. They fell, out of control.

Kil'ruk fell with them, but he was not out of control. He was not dying.

He was diving. Like the hawk.

The moment before the honeycomb fired, Kil'ruk had hugged the net close to his chest and tucked his wings behind his body. The rounds in his net had shielded him from the worst of the weapon's blast. The rest of the pebbles had whistled through the air around him.

The wind rushed by wonderfully fast. As Kil'ruk descended, his heart soared. The mogu hadn't fired a third shot. They must have thought the flyers were all dead.

It was time to show them their error. "Can you see me, Empress?" Kil'ruk whispered. The shock of the attack had made him forget her song, but now he could hear her again, singing softly and commanding the swarmborn onward. Was there a note of sorrow in her melody? Had she seen what the mogu's new weapon had done?

Kil'ruk let go of the net. It seemed to float away slowly. He slightly spread his wings, catching just a bit of the rushing air. It hurt. It threatened to tear his wings clean off. This would be a far, far longer dive than any he had previously attempted. Perhaps he would fall two hundred paces. Perhaps two hundred and fifty.

"Empress, watch me."

* * *

"They're all dead!" Xuexing called. With a careful twist of his wrist and a relaxation of his will, the arcane energy he had gathered safely fizzled away. "We're moving north!"

North meant the Gate of the Setting Sun and the biggest concentration of mantid. First he would wipe out any flyers still aloft there, and then he would—

A shadow fell over Xuexing. He barely had time to look up before an ear-shattering screech of mantid fury descended upon him.

* * *

Kil'ruk landed with his feet in the mogu's stomach. He tried to stab the creature through its chest with his forelegs, but the impact was extraordinarily violent; the mogu went sprawling and Kil'ruk was thrown off, skidding through the mud and rolling to a stop against the flimsy cloth walls of a slave's tent.

A calm thought swam into Kil'ruk's head. *I need to practice landing.*

Kil'ruk fought off his daze and leaped to his feet. He was surrounded by lesser creatures, but his dramatic arrival had unnerved them. The pandaren and even the saurok instinctively shrunk back in surprise.

A dead pandaren lay at Kil'ruk's feet. Strange wounds—perhaps killed by the honeycomb. Friendly fire. A chipped sword lay next to the creature. Foul, cheap steel. *Pathetic.* Kil'ruk scooped it up anyway. For a moment, the weight was unfamiliar and ungainly in his hand.

Then Kil'ruk remembered the hawk, its talons, how naturally it had snatched its prey. *Now I have a talon.*

Suddenly the sword was like an extension of his body. It felt no stranger in his hand than his wings did on his back.

Kil'ruk heard a deafening explosion on the battlements. He and the lesser creatures flinched. *Oh yes. My net.* It had still carried plenty of rounds when Kil'ruk had released it while falling. Upon hitting the top of the battlements, they had burst all at once. A cloud of

poison and acid expanded rapidly. At least it would keep the Wall's defenders occupied for a time.

Kil'ruk let his wings propel him into the mass of lesser creatures near the honeycomb. His new talon drew blood almost immediately.

* * *

It was madness. Mantid flyers *never* fought hand to hand on the ground. Nysis bellowed an order to his fellow saurok: encircle and attack. Even the best mantid fighters would fall eventually to that tactic. If the pandaren slaves were smart, they would get out of the way. If not—

The crazed flyer leaped onto a fleeing pandaren and tore into his midsection with its forelegs. Nysis charged in, swinging his steel blade, but the mantid's wings buzzed and the creature lifted out of reach.

Nysis hesitated.

It dropped down and eviscerated another saurok with a swipe that almost looked casual. Then it rose back into the air. Encircling wasn't going to work. *It has wings.* The thought was ice in Nysis's mind. If they couldn't encircle it, what *could* they do? The mantid bent over a dying saurok, and Nysis lunged with a strike against its unarmed side.

To his surprise, his sword thrust was blocked by steel. The mantid had picked up a second blade, the dying saurok's sword.

The flyer whirled and slashed with both swords. Nysis managed to parry only one. A deep fang of mortal injury blazed in his chest. The mantid spun away and leaped toward new opponents, shouting something odd, something about an "empress."

Nysis toppled to the ground and felt his life's warmth joining the cold mud.

Madness.

* * *

This isn't happening. Xuexing flung another molten blast, missing again. *This can't be happening.* The other mogu in the vicinity staggered away, his thigh opened to the bone. *It's only one mantid!* The flyer lifted into the air as Xuexing set the ground beneath it on fire.

This was no time for finesse. Xuexing crouched and cupped his hands, gathering every ounce of power he dared, heedless of his proximity to the new *huatang*. It was sensitive. It could react badly to excess energy, but that was a problem for later. For now—

Shunk.

Xuexing stared in surprise at the steel protruding from his chest. The mantid had thrown one of its swords. *This isn't happening,* his mind wailed. He collapsed on all fours.

No. He would not let this mantid survive. Xuexing continued to gather power even as darkness crept around the edges of his vision. Crackling energy seemed to infuse the very air around him.

He lifted a shaky, weakening hand toward the flyer.

* * *

Crackling sounds rose from everywhere, uncontrolled and untempered. The expression on the dying mogu's face told Kil'ruk everything he needed to know. The flyer strained into the air without a second thought.

The mogu lifted its hand toward Kil'ruk with its last breath, but just before it could unleash the spell, the final bit of life left its body. The creature went limp. The energy it had gathered suddenly rushed out in all directions.

The honeycomb quivered and shook, then disappeared amid a shimmering shockwave of pure light. Kil'ruk kept climbing into the sky until the echoes of the explosion faded away.

Far below, he could see the edge of the mogu encampment burning. Nearby tents and defenders alike had been torn apart by the blast. Even the rear face of the Serpent's Spine seemed singed. Whatever that foul weapon had been, it was unstable. Prone to utter disaster for those who tried to use it. Kil'ruk would remember that if he saw another.

As he flew back to the ambersmith, he realized that something had changed. The empress was singing a new song.

Behold our might, the empress was saying. Behold our strong. See the smoke rise from the lesser creatures' camp. Their new weapon is gone, destroyed by a single one of my favored.

"Empress?" Kil'ruk breathed. "Empress, were you watching?" His antennae curled in ecstasy. The empress was singing of him. *My favored.*

The swarmborn on the ground stared up as he flew past. Flocks of flyers surrounded him and followed him home. *Behold my wrath, striking from on high, the empress sang. Behold my death, descending from above. Behold the Wind-Reaver.*

The flock repeated her words in awe. "Wind-Reaver."

"Empress," Kil'ruk said. She *had* seen him.

Wind-Reaver.

As Kil'ruk approached Klaxxi'vess, he spotted a hawk circling near one of the kypari trees.

It was the same hawk he had seen days earlier.

Kil'ruk flew toward it. The bird saw him coming and dove.

* * *

Hawk, Kil'ruk thought a few minutes later, tastes delicious.

IV

"We have much to discuss, Wind-Reaver," said Klaxxi'va Pok.

Kil'ruk hefted his two new blades, forged from the purest kyparite available at the empress's order. They gleamed in the daylight. *Only her favored could claim such an honor.* "We can talk once the lesser creatures are destroyed."

"We will not delay you long."

"The empress has ordered the deaths of all the lesser creatures," Kil'ruk said. The look in the elder mantid's eyes was strange. It was almost as if he was disappointed that Kil'ruk would not put aside the empress's commands. "Any delay is unacceptable."

"Very well," Klaxxi'va Pok said quietly. "Be careful. I believe the lesser creatures will do everything they can to prevent you from achieving your potential. They may yet have more vile weapons like the honeycomb. They will use them against you."

"Good. I will destroy those as well."

* * *

Warlord Gurthan gently kneaded the forehead of the young quilen sitting patiently at his side as he watched the lone mantid dive toward the distant battlements. Thin, dark arrows leaped up to meet it but missed. The mantid disappeared behind the edge of the wall, and Gurthan could no longer see the fighting. Judging by the screams drifting across the camp, his defenders weren't faring well.

"Tell me again, Hixin," Gurthan said, keeping his eyes on the Serpent's Spine, "why did Xuexing fling himself into battle without my permission?"

"He seems to have been overconfident in his own skills, Warlord," Hixin said. "I, of course, begged him for weeks to notify you the moment the *huatang* was ready so you and he could formulate a proper strategy—"

Gurthan didn't say a word. He simply reached into his pocket and withdrew a small scrap of parchment, holding it at arm's length. Hixin instantly went quiet.

One of the junior advisors, Fulmin, took the scrap and looked at it. His expression grew puzzled. "This has your seal on it, Warlord."

"Indeed it does," Gurthan said.

Hixin shifted uneasily behind him.

* * *

The ambersmith had done well. The twin amber blades felt balanced and deft in Kil'ruk's hands, and the armor fit perfectly without restricting his ability to fly or kill.

Kil'ruk cleaved a path into the defenders' midst. They had sent their best today. That was good. Today he would prove their best couldn't stop him.

* * *

Even from such a distance, Warlord Gurthan could see dark crimson dripping off the mantid's blades. The sight of a single mantid cleaving a swath through the defenders was infuriating. Humiliating. *This is what the huatang was meant to stop.*

"Do you know where that parchment was found, Hixin?" Gurthan asked.

"I do not, Warlord."

"A pandaren boy turned it in. One of your slaves, I hear. He said you told him to dispose of it after you showed it to Xuexing. He seemed to think he might find a less cruel master if he exposed your treason," Gurthan said.

The reaction was instantaneous and vehement. "Lies," Hixin spat. "Bring him to me. We will see what he has to say when—"

"The child is dead." Warlord Gurthan's words froze Hixin's tongue. "Any slave that touches an official Clan Gurthan seal must of course be executed, but I assure you, Hixin, he was... encouraged... to speak the truth before he died."

Hixin's eyes darted nervously. "Warlord, you cannot trust the dying words of a slave—of a child! I have served you faithfully for years."

"I remember this parchment," Warlord Gurthan said. "'Display your potential by nightfall.' I enchanted those words more than three years ago. I believe I was addressing one of my junior beastmasters, asking for a demonstration of his skills in training battle quilen. Circumstances made the document redundant and it was never delivered, so the seal wasn't broken and it was sent to my archives. I have made inquiries since Xuexing's demise. It seems the parchment was stolen recently."

"Warlord, I—"

"You served me as my chief archivist for years, did you not, Hixin?"

Hixin dropped to his knees, sputtering out an apology he would never have a chance to finish. Warlord Gurthan pursed his lips and whistled twice: one long tone, one short. The quilen at his feet leaped for Hixin's throat. The advisor—the former advisor—let out a strangled cry of fear.

The unpleasant noises lasted only a short time, and the quilen trotted back to the warlord's side, licking blood off its chops. The other advisors seemed unable to take their eyes off the mess.

"I should not," Warlord Gurthan said to them all, "have to learn the truth from the wails of a dying slave."

He turned back toward the wall. "Every hundred years, the mantid attack. Every hundred years, we fight them to a standstill, and they retreat into their lands as though they never intended to fight us in the first place. Nobody has ever known why."

Gurthan let his voice drop to barely above a whisper. "I did not seek command of the Serpent's Spine to settle for another stalemate. Xuexing's weapon was a chance to change that, to *finally* establish control of the land beyond the Spine and *finally* launch an attack against the mantid. That opportunity has been sabotaged. It will take time to build more *huatang*. What else can we do?"

The advisors remained silent. Most still stared at what was left of Hixin. Finally, Fulmin cleared his throat. "Warlord, the relic."

Warlord Gurthan gave him a flat look. The relic was a project Xuexing had studied years before the mantid swarm; it was a fascinating object of arcane origin, but no experiment had managed to produce anything more useful than an irritating hum. "The relic is not a weapon, Fulmin."

"And yet it may serve as one."

"How? I understand it was once meant for communication." Gurthan paused. An interesting idea occurred to him. "Are you suggesting we could negotiate with the mantid?" *Perhaps if they could be convinced to join Clan Gurthan...*

"No, Warlord. The relic uses sounds we do not have the ability to hear. Xuexing experimented with it long ago but found no use for it. When he tested the relic with an abundance of arcane energy, he described the effect as a 'wall of sound' beyond our hearing," Fulmin said. "He didn't see a purpose for it, given the dangers of using the relic at all."

"What is your point?" Gurthan asked.

"Xuexing's experiments took place in the vale. We are much closer to the wall now. I suggest we continuously overload this relic with all the energy we dare. I want to try out the 'wall of sound.' If I am correct, the arcane energy won't facilitate mantid communication; it will prevent it altogether."

It took several moments before Warlord Gurthan understood. "You're speaking of an unproven theory."

"Yes, Warlord."

"That the mantid empress gives orders and direction to her swarm from a distance. That she can speak into their minds."

"Yes, Warlord."

Gurthan let the implications play out in his head. "You believe there is a connection, that the relic and the empress communicate in the same way. What exactly would the relic do if overloaded? Overwhelm her words?"

"Essentially, Warlord. Perhaps we can drown her out. At the very least, the relic might make the mantid confused. At best..." Fulmin shrugged. "I'm not certain. The effect could be dramatic. I suspect that it will provoke a tremendous reaction."

Warlord Gurthan scratched the quilen on the forehead again. "If you're wrong, we gain nothing."

"If I'm wrong, we lose nothing," Fulmin said.

Warlord Gurthan smiled. "Except you. I've been told the relic is unstable. It once magnified a small amount of energy by a hundredfold and sent it back into an arcanist. Very unpleasant. Very messy." He glanced down at the remains of Hixin.

Fulmin inclined his head. "I'm willing to take the risk."

"Find the relic. Bring it here."

"Yes, Warlord."

* * *

Kil'ruk left the Wall in his wake. His arms and forelegs ached with the pleasant glow of a productive day. A tiny cut on his right leg pained him slightly, but he had otherwise slaughtered the lesser creatures without receiving a single significant injury.

"Empress, were you watching?" he muttered. Kil'ruk let the empress's song fill his mind, and—

There was a terrible noise. A horrible, awful, overwhelming noise. And then it was gone.

She was gone.

Just like that.

Kil'ruk blinked and fell from the sky. "Empress?" he said. His wings stayed still. The ground rushed to meet him. "Empress?"

She's gone. Panic surfaced. Where the voice of the empress had once sung, only a dead hum remained. Total silence. "Empress!"

Kil'ruk remembered to fly before hitting the ground. He hovered numbly, straining to hear her voice.

She is gone. Why is she gone? What happened to her? Is she...?

* * *

The sudden silence from the west hung in the air. For a few moments, all mantid sounds ceased. Then shrieks of agony, terror, and grief rippled across the land.

A smile spread across Warlord Gurthan's face.

V

"Six days. It has been six days," said Klaxxi'va Pok. "Do any of you still cling to hope that the swarmborn will suddenly emerge from their fugue and return to the fight?"

"No," said another council member. "Unless we wish to try to bring the empress into the open again."

It was not a serious suggestion. Three days ago, the Klaxxi had convinced the empress to greet the swarmborn in the open, face to face, to prove she had not been killed but merely silenced by the mogu's strange relic. Thousands and thousands of swarmborn had gathered at Klaxxi'vess, but when she appeared, they had not recognized her. Unable to speak into their heads as she once could, she had no influence on them. They simply stared at her.

The only good news was that the swarmborn had not left. A solid mass of mantid still milled aimlessly around Klaxxi'vess. They would at least serve as living shields against the mogu's inevitable attack. None of the Klaxxi had any hope they would attempt to fight.

Klaxxi'va Pok limped to the center of the chamber. A wound he had suffered three days earlier pained him deeply. He came to a stop next to the large, smooth chunk of round amber that had been found and relocated to Klaxxi'vess only an hour ago. Inside lay a legend, a hero of the mantid preserved in case of a great crisis. A paragon.

"Then this is our only chance," Klaxxi'va Pok said flatly.

"The Wind-Reaver should take the role of Waker," another council member said. All turned to look at him. "You know as well as I do that he is distracted. He's not useless, not like the others, but his mind still cries out for the empress's voice. The presence of a paragon may draw him out of his depression."

"Bring him here."

* * *

A sound rippled through the silence.

The paragon opened his eyes for the first time in centuries.

The vessel of his preservation, the amber egg, crumbled around him. Air flooded into his lungs. It hurt. The mantid toppled to the ground, retching uncontrollably. The amber had kept him alive, and his body rebelled against its absence.

It took some time before he regained control of himself. There was a healthy supply of kypari sap laid out before him, and he feasted upon it. He sensed there were a number of mantid watching him, yet they did not interrupt. It was a sign of respect. They would pretend not to notice his weakness.

For now, anyway.

Soon his strength trickled back. His limbs trembled, yet he forced himself to stand. "I hear the Klaxxi's call," Nihil'ko rasped. "I have returned."

One of the other mantid in the room spoke. "Nihil'ko the Bloodcaller, are you well?" he asked.

"Yes," Nihil'ko said with pleasure. If they knew his name, they knew his reputation. "Tell me what crisis has led you to awaken me. I await your—"

He blinked. There were three mantid standing before him, two of whom wore the traditional garb of a Klaxxi'va. Neither of them was his Wakener. Nihil'ko could tell. He sensed that the third mantid, the one with the interesting armor and weapons...

"You are not a member of the Klaxxi. What is your name?"

"I am Kil'ruk. Some call me Wind-Reaver."

Some? He is not a paragon? Ninil'ko thought. *Interesting. Why did the Klaxxi choose him as my Wakener?*

"Bloodcaller," one of the Klaxxi'va said, "we require your aid. The cycle is in danger."

Ninil'ko pushed aside his curiosity over the third mantid. "Tell me what you need."

"The lesser creatures have invaded. The empress stands on the brink of annihilation," the other Klaxxi'va said.

Then replace her with another, Ninil'ko didn't say aloud. If the Klaxxi'va hadn't already prepared for that, there were mitigating factors and the option wasn't worth mentioning. "I must see the enemy's movements before I can form a plan."

Kil'ruk tilted his head slightly. He looked oddly distracted, but his voice was strong. "I can carry you, Bloodcaller. I will show you the enemy."

Ninil'ko glanced at the two Klaxxi'va. They both nodded.

"Let's go, Wakener."

* * *

Only one building on the Terrace of Gurthan had been completed in the six days since the mantid had been broken, though slaves had worked night and day to lay the foundations and construct walls for a dozen more. For now, the completed building would serve as a war room, Warlord Gurthan decided. When the mantid were utterly defeated, it would be a fitting place to receive ambassadors from the other mogu clans. They would undoubtedly seek his favor when all that land west of the Serpent's Spine suddenly became unoccupied.

Fulmin led Warlord Gurthan inside. "I would like to show you something," the advisor said.

At the south end of the war room sat an unfamiliar object. "I've had this prepared for you over the past few days," Fulmin said. "It is finally ready."

Warlord Gurthan inspected the offering closely. It was a large urn, gilded in bronze. It seemed to shimmer, and he sensed residues of arcane energy drifting about like wafts of smoke near a stick of incense. "What is its purpose?"

"It occurred to me, Warlord, that when we finally kill the mantid queen, we will need a proper place to display her remains," Fulmin said.

The warlord's low laugh rumbled through the room. "I admire your foresight."

"Furthermore," the advisor added, "we may not even need to kill the empress to render her helpless."

"Explain."

"With a simple arcane spell, we can suspend the empress's spirit in this urn. Her physical form will vanish, but her mind will be trapped. It will be like a heavy sleep with troubled dreams," Fulmin said. "And if any of the other mogu doubt that you have truly conquered the mantid, you merely need to summon her spirit. Her very essence will be at your command. Her mind will be your trophy."

The warlord grimaced. "No. If the mantid know she is still alive, they might fight to save her. I won't give them a chance to bring her back."

"Ah," Fulmin said with a smile, "that is why I crafted the spell to be immutable to the mantid. They will not be able to damage the urn, much less free the spirit inside."

"It's too much of a risk."

"I will stake my life on it," Fulmin said. "Capture the mantid queen. Suspend her spirit. Then, to test it, throw the urn to the rest of the insects. If any of them are even able to scratch it, take my head as punishment."

Warlord Gurthan regarded him for a moment. Rare was the mogu willing to wager his life on success, and Gurthan had to admit that the notion of keeping the mantid empress's spirit as a memento of victory greatly appealed to him.

"Fulmin, I think you'll have earned more responsibilities once we settle the mantid," Warlord Gurthan said. "Can you teach me this spell?"

"Yes."

"Then do so. Right now." Warlord Gurthan let a wide grin split his face. "I intend to end the mantid today."

* * *

The view from the air was incredible. Ninil'ko crouched on the Wind-Reaver's back, letting the flyer carry him ever higher, finally cresting at almost a thousand paces in the sky.

The paragon said nothing, and Kil'ruk didn't make any conversation. Ninil'ko simply studied the movement of the mogu's army. The situation was certainly dire. The Klaxxi'va hadn't exaggerated. Unless the lesser creatures moved cautiously, the army would likely attack Klaxxi'vess before sunset, and even though thousands of swarmborn were packed together, encircling the site, they wouldn't provide much resistance.

Ninil'ko could sense the absence of the empress's voice, but it meant little. He didn't know her. And even if he did, he served a new purpose now. *Empresses come and go.* Ninil'ko tapped Kil'ruk on the shoulder, and the flyer jerked in surprise as though he'd woken from a doze. *Odd*, the paragon thought.

"Wakener, who among the swarmborn is most skilled at attacking that wall?"

"I am," the flyer said.

It was the first good news Ninil'ko had heard since awakening. Glimmers of a plan danced in his head, yet there were still serious challenges to deal with. "That wall did not exist in my time."

"Can you defeat it?"

"I do not know."

"So the empress is doomed." Kil'ruk's voice was despondent.

"I did not say that," Ninil'ko said. "The cycle will be preserved at all costs."

"But the empress is doomed."

Ninil'ko said nothing for a moment. *The Wind-Reaver's mind is still immature. He is a creature of the empress, not the Klaxxi.* That was a troubling thought, but it illuminated something interesting. He let his mind chase it, worrying away at its secrets.

The pieces fell into place. Ninil'ko understood why the Klaxxi had allowed—forced, probably—the Wind-Reaver to awaken him. An ambersmith had speculated long ago that the process of reviving a paragon from his amber slumber was akin to an empress bringing her swarmborn into the world. There was a certain logic to the idea. Being preserved was painful. It felt like dying. Who was to say that being awakened wasn't simply being reborn? Young mantid were hopelessly dependent on the empress; perhaps a paragon would feel a similar bond to his Wakener, even if it was only a pale shade of such blind loyalty.

The theory wasn't entirely wrong, Ninil'ko realized. Even now—

He shook his head sharply. The plan stood out clearly in his mind. He knew how to stop the mogu. But he would need Kil'ruk the Wind-Reaver fully focused on the task at hand, not distracted by the empress's absence.

He will die no matter what, but he needs to do as much damage as possible before then, Ninil'ko thought. "Wakener, how long have you served the empress?"

"Since I arrived in this world," came the irritated reply.

"How long have you served the Klaxxi?" Ninil'ko asked. Kil'ruk did not answer, so the paragon pressed onward. "To serve the Klaxxi is to preserve the cycle. Preserving the cycle means the empress survives. Do you not serve them?"

"I serve the empress," Kil'ruk said.

"Do you know what the cycle is?"

"Of course."

"Explain it to me."

Kil'ruk's head turned, and the paragon could see the flyer's eye staring back at him. This was dangerous territory, Ninil'ko knew. If the Wind-Reaver decided he was being treasonous, well, it would be a long way to fall to the ground.

After a few moments, Ninil'ko broke the silence. "You were born knowing about the cycle. You can feel it. You know its importance. It is an instinct that simply has not been explained to you. There is no shame in that."

"Tell me."

Ninil'ko very carefully described the hundred-year process. How the empress nurtured the swarmborn. How they all rushed against the lesser creatures at once, to prove themselves in combat. "Only through battle do we grow. It is an efficient mentor," he said. Ninil'ko did *not* mention how often empresses died and were replaced. When Kil'ruk asked him what the empress was like long ago, the paragon changed the subject.

"But one cruel truth about the cycle is that this empress will die one day. She knows this. She accepts this," Ninil'ko said. "It is nothing to fear."

Kil'ruk began shaking. Ninil'ko waited patiently for the tremors to subside before he continued. "That is why the Klaxxi are here, to make sure the cycle lives on. To make sure her good work never dies."

"What use is the cycle without the empress?" Kil'ruk whispered. His wings seemed to falter, and the two mantid dropped a few strides before he regained control.

"Battle is an efficient mentor," Ninil'ko repeated. "There is much to learn from the lesser creatures." And *why* did Kil'ruk suddenly go rigid at that statement? Ninil'ko pushed on, sensing that he had finally reached the flyer. "With every cycle, we learn more about battle, about them, about ourselves. We grow stronger. We change. The lesser creatures learn nothing except fear."

Ninil'ko could feel Kil'ruk's breathing slow. He was calming down. He was listening. "How long will the cycle last?" Kil'ruk asked. "Forever?"

"No. The day will come when we need swarm no more," Ninil'ko said. "Until then, the Klaxxi preserve the cycle. They make sure this empress—*and all other empresses who will ever live*—will live as long as she can. Do you understand?"

Kil'ruk didn't answer, but Ninil'ko knew the seed had been planted. It was time to let it grow.

"Please return me to the Klaxxi," Ninil'ko said. "I must tell them my plan."

"Can we win?" Kil'ruk asked.

"Of course."

"How?"

Ninil'ko let out a rasping laugh. "By doing what the enemy does not expect. That is how you win any battle."

VI

"The centuries you spent in amber have rotted your brain, Bloodcaller."

"Listen to me, Klaxxi'va," said Ninil'ko, turning from one Klaxxi'va to the next. Each faced him with an equally disapproving expression. "The empress will die by sunset no matter what we do. Am I wrong?"

"You are not. And yet you propose insanity. We do not have another to take the empress's place. We cannot put her at risk. If she dies, the cycle ends."

"The only solution to the mogu invasion is the swarmborn. If we cannot revive the minds of our young, we will not have the numbers to repel them," Ninil'ko said softly. "The swarmborn will not be of use until the relic is destroyed. I cannot destroy the relic while it is surrounded by an army. Our only chance to reach the relic is to tempt the army with a prize they cannot resist. The empress is that prize. She is the only possible prize! This is my logic. This is my plan. This is why you awakened me. Heed my words."

There was a very long silence.

* * *

"Warlord!" The junior mogu scrambled into the building. Seven senior military leaders looked up from the collection of maps and scouting reports scattered across a long table. Gurthan sat at its head. "The mantid are moving!"

"Against us?" asked one of the commanders.

"No!" the younger mogu said, gasping. "Away... away from us."

"Explain," said Warlord Gurthan.

The junior mogu took a few deep breaths. "Our scouts say a few mantid left their stronghold by air, carrying another."

"Why?" Gurthan asked.

"Not sure... The one being carried, it looked..." The messenger suddenly appeared nervous. He cleared his throat and carefully chose his words. News of Hixin's demise had spread quickly. "This particular mantid looked different. Very different. The other insects seemed to treat it with care and respect."

The commanders exchanged glances.

"Was it the mantid empress?" Gurthan asked quietly.

"The scouts think so, Warlord, yes," the junior mogu said.

Warlord Gurthan slowly stood, his eyes resting on the ornate urn on the corner of the table. His armies had moved cautiously beyond the wall thus far. Gurthan knew time was on his side; sooner or later, the mantid would only have reckless, desperate options. This was the moment he had waited for. "They've seen our preparations. They know we're attacking today. They hope to delay their destruction and keep their empress out of our hands, even if only for a few minutes longer. And now they've removed her from the one place they could have mounted a proper defense."

One of the mogu commanders looked uneasy. "They may be attempting to draw us out—"

"Of course they are," Gurthan said. *It's precisely what I would do*, he thought. "It changes nothing. We have enough warriors to overrun any defense they have."

"Your orders, Warlord?"

All of the commanders fixed their eyes upon him. The warlord quickly analyzed his options, searching for flaws and unseen dangers. *The relic will be vulnerable while the army pursues the empress*, Gurthan thought. *That dangerous mantid flyer still lives. Is this a trap?*

A smile spread over the warlord's face. "Send everything. Chase the empress. Bring her here. Preferably alive. I want her in this urn by sunset." *I hope the flyer does attack*, Gurthan thought. "And make sure the *huatang* crews are ready. Tell them to expect a strike from the sky."

* * *

Kil'ruk watched the mogu warriors and their slaves leave behind their tents, their cookfires, their belongings, taking only a single weapon each before rushing to the west. Clearly, the warlord had told them to waste no time.

They will kill this empress and every empress who might have ever lived. The thought spun crazily in his head like a spring sapfly near a kypari tree. Strangely, despite his anger, the mind-numbing effects of the mogu relic seemed dim compared to even an hour ago. He still couldn't hear the empress, but her absence no longer muddled his thinking.

In truth, he had never felt clearer in purpose. The lesser creatures wanted to end the cycle. Kil'ruk would stop them.

Only through battle do we grow, Ninil'ko had said. *It is an efficient mentor.*

It seemed even the hunger for battle could sharpen a mantid mind.

Kil'ruk waited until the last stragglers of the mogu's vast army disappeared over the nearby hills. He lifted into the air. Six other mantid flyers rose with him. Only six. They were the only surviving winged mantid mature enough to fight without the empress's voice guiding them.

The Terrace of Gurthan was laid out before him. The Wall towered above it.

Kil'ruk flew toward the Wall. Six hundred strides away, on the battlements, the white outlines of six honeycombs turned to face him.

* * *

"There it is, Warlord."

Warlord Gurthan squinted and shaded his eyes against the afternoon sun. Indeed, that distinctive mantid flyer was approaching from the west. Several other flyers, perhaps five or six, followed closely.

To the warlord's surprise, they didn't descend toward the terrace.

"Are they attacking the Serpent's Spine?" Fulmin said. "I suppose they don't know we moved the relic here."

"Perhaps," Gurthan said, doubtful. The mantid weren't known for such oversights. *What am I not seeing?* Gurthan glanced around the terrace. His guards held their positions but kept their attention on the mantid. Even the trained battle quilen at their heels tracked the flyers across the sky.

The first *huatang* shot rang out just as the winged mantid crossed the west edge of the terrace. Two flyers dropped in an instant. The dangerous one was not among them.

* * *

Two hundred strides to go. The flock stayed level with the battlements. The mogu guards on the ground watched closely.

The mantid saw the puff of white smoke a heartbeat before the honeycomb's payload of pebbles whistled past. Kil'ruk heard impacts on a carapace to his left—fatal impacts. He didn't know who had been hit. Nor did he care. There were five more loaded honeycombs to worry about. It was time to see whether the Bloodcaller lived up to his legend as a tactician.

"Disperse," Kil'ruk said.

The remaining flyers—four, Kil'ruk saw in a quick glance—scattered left, right, and up, but didn't descend. The paragon had expressly forbidden it.

The lesser creatures will expect you to dive for the terrace, Ninil'ko had told them, so don't.

Another honeycomb fired. It missed, low. Two more fired in tandem. Low again. The paragon had been right; they expected the flyers to make a play for the relic. Slaves scrambled over the four empty honeycombs, reloading.

Wind-Reaver, most of their shots will be fired at you. They fear you too much to do otherwise, Ninil'ko had said.

They drew close to the Wall. Fifty strides to go. The final two loaded honeycombs were aimed true. They would not miss, not at this range.

Twenty strides. Time for the next part of the paragon's plan.

They can't imagine that you wouldn't be the first to strike them, Ninil'ko had said.

Neither can I, Kil'ruk had responded.

Surprise them. Surprise yourself, the Bloodcaller said.

Kil'ruk's wings suddenly buzzed into a translucent blur. He ascended fast, incredibly fast, almost as fast as he could dive. The final two honeycombs tried to track him and cranked off hasty shots in a panic. They missed.

None of the honeycombs had been reloaded yet. The other four flyers fell upon the battlements in a berserker whirlwind of amber and blood.

Kil'ruk let his wings go still. His momentum carried him higher and higher, arcing above the Serpent's Spine. He reached his zenith about four hundred strides above the battlements.

It was strangely quiet up here. The sounds of battle were far below. The empress was silent. For the first time in his life, Kil'ruk was flying into battle truly alone.

It didn't disturb him at all.

He began to dive.

* * *

"Clever," Warlord Gurthan said, smiling. The flyer had exploited their assumptions and neatly threaded through their defenses. Now it had a clear dive to the Serpent's Spine. "Very clever indeed."

"Should we send reinforcements?" Fulmin asked.

"No. Even if we were to lose everyone on the battlements, it would mean little if the relic—"

A shrill cry interrupted the warlord. "Mantid! Mantid from the west!"

Warlord Gurthan spun. A dozen mantid on foot charged toward the Terrace of Gurthan, already within a hundred paces of the mogu. All of the guards had been so focused on the flyers...

Clever, he thought, no longer smiling.

* * *

Ninil'ko the Bloodcaller charged into battle with the rest. He hissed and clicked his mandibles—*kss kss tk-tk-tk-tk*—and the other mantid arrayed themselves in a wedge formation. He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction; his time in the amber hadn't quelled his talent a bit.

Most paragons received their second name from the Klaxxi. Ninil'ko was the only paragon, to his knowledge, who had chosen his own second name. Who else should have? The Klaxxi had lauded him for his sense of broad strategy, and his empress, weak and

pathetic though she might have been, had marveled at his cunning in defeating a mantid rebellion.

But which of them would have named him Bloodcaller?

Ninil'ko raised his spear as his fellow mantid sprinted over the last few strides to the mogu. He pointed the curved blade at the left flank and clicked his mandibles together twice. The entire mantid force targeted two particular mogu. The enemies died in a cyclone of sharpened amber.

Ninil'ko slowly swept his spear across the defenders' skirmish line, picking targets. *Click click click.* Three more mogu died, leaving a giant hole in their defenses. The left flank collapsed. *Click click.* Two quilen died. *Click click click.* A mage, a beastmaster, and a wounded quilen fell next.

It was a gift. Ninil'ko had learned even as an immature swarmborn that he could communicate and influence other mantid without words. When he projected his will, nearby mantid knew where to attack; when he hissed or clicked his mandibles, they knew when. He could send his soldiers in and out of combat at will, directing the flow of battle on an imperceptibly precise level.

He had never explained the gift to anyone, not even to the Klaxxi. Ninil'ko didn't truly understand it himself. Was it the sound they responded to? Could he influence them like the empress? He wasn't sure. Perhaps he was tapping into some ancient part of the mantid mind, some primal instinct left over after the Old One had bestowed them with clarity of thought and a higher purpose. Perhaps this was how the mantid had communicated long ago.

In the end, it mattered little. When Ninil'ko called, blood flowed. Soon the terrace ran red.

* * *

And Kil'ruk continued to dive.

VII

"Keep reloading!" the battlement taskmaster roared.

A pandaren slave dropped to his knees, desperately sweeping tiny stones into his paws. The sounds of other slaves dying threatened to drive him mad. He wanted to run, but he would be whipped again if—

A hideous screech filled the slave's ears and wiped away his thoughts with pure horror. He looked up just in time to see a blur of amber and violet descending upon him.

* * *

The kneeling pandaren absorbed most of the impact. Kil'ruk regained his balance quickly and then swept a blade down into the slave. He felt resistance for a brief moment—his first kill of the battle.

There would be many more.

Two of the other flyers still lived, brawling wildly among the lesser creatures. They were eager, excited to battle at the Wind-Reaver's side, but inexperienced. They wouldn't survive long in a fight like this. The battlements were packed. Six honeycombs and nearly two hundred defenders filled the space between the two watch towers overseeing the Terrace of Gurthan.

Kil'ruk rushed into the lesser creatures' midst and let his amber blades dance.

* * *

Ninil'ko leaped back with a hiss. *Ksss-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk*. It was the only command he needed; the others leaped back with him. Two of the mogu, blinded with battle rage, rushed toward them. *Click click*. Seven mantid blades filleted them. In less than a minute, Ninil'ko had halved the number of mogu defenders while losing a handful of his own.

A decent start. Now they were only outnumbered two to one, but the mogu had recovered from the shock of the ambush and regained their discipline. They formed a loose skirmish line between the mantid and the building with the relic. Their tactics would be sound in most battles, Ninil'ko knew.

But not sound enough today. Ninil'ko darted forward and pointed toward a mogu in the center of the line. It looked the most frightened, and the most senior. That made it the most valuable kill of the moment.

Click.

* * *

The warlord watched, impassive, only the clench of his jaw betraying his feelings as the last of his commanders died. Finally, he turned toward Fulmin.

"Take the relic and go," Warlord Gurthan said softly.

"*What?!*" Fulmin hissed. "We outnumber them!"

Gurthan's eyes blazed. "Take the relic and go back through the gate. Quietly. Unseen. Keep the relic active at all costs. No lapses. We need the mantid to remain docile."

"Warlord—"

"I will not let them win. *I. Will. Not.* Do you understand? Our army will end this in an hour. It won't matter what battlefield miracles the mantid can unveil if their empress is dead."

Fulmin hesitated. "They'll kill you, Warlord."

"I have no doubt they'll try. Go. But hurry back when it's over," Gurthan added with a twisted smile. "I may need you to wake me up. I can be a heavy sleeper."

Understanding dawned on Fulmin. "Yes, Warlord."

Gurthan watched him go, waiting until he was out of sight before issuing his next command.

"Fall back! Fall back into the building!"

* * *

Kil'ruk painted the battlements with the lesser creatures' blood. And yet they kept coming.

What did the mogu threaten to do if the slaves ran? Kil'ruk wondered as he cut down another pandaren. *Could it possibly have been worse than this?* The heads of two saurok tumbled away from the lizard-like creatures' shoulders. *What useless beings.*

Kil'ruk rose into the air and skimmed above the defenders' reach. He set down near the honeycomb closest to the northern watch tower and gutted the nearest mogu.

A furious pack of saurok sprung out of the mass of defenders, tackling him. Kil'ruk buried his blades in two of them but was pinned flat on his back an instant later. The weight of dozens of bodies held him immobile. A grinning saurok's face in the pile hovered only inches from his.

And then crackling filled the air. The saurok looked up. The grin turned to terror.

A deafening, overwhelming blast numbed everything. Much of the weight lifted away from Kil'ruk's chest. Kil'ruk refused to blink. He wanted to die with his eyes open. He saw the saurok leap upright, only to die as a second blast shook the Wall. Before the lesser creature could collapse, it vanished in a third explosion.

The noise hung in the air, paralyzing all other senses. Finally, Kil'ruk blinked. He was still alive.

The same couldn't be said for most of the saurok. Coughing, Kil'ruk pushed away what was left of them and climbed to his feet. The ringing pain in his ears slowly gave way to screams and wailing.

The sight left Kil'ruk stunned.

The mogu had turned their reloaded honeycombs north, firing directly along the battlements. Firing *into* the battlements. Three times. They had shredded their own slaves in an attempt to annihilate a single mantid flyer. Only the bodies of the slaves that had tackled him had kept him from injury.

Kil'ruk's respect for the mogu increased substantially. *A bold tactic*, he mused.

Lingering smoke from the blasts shielded him from the mogu's sight. It wouldn't last. *Let them think I'm dead with the slaves*, he thought. Kil'ruk stepped off the battlements and descended smoothly to the ground.

The sounds of fighting still raged on the Terrace of Gurthan. They seemed to have moved into the building where the relic was housed. Kil'ruk raced toward it on foot.

* * *

The tight quarters of the building had greatly hampered the attackers' movement. The only other mantid still in fighting shape died as two mogu spears cleaved him into thirds before he could respond to Ninil'ko's hissed warning.

The Bloodcaller was alone on the battlefield. Ninil'ko put his back to a wall and waited for the inevitable, final attack. There were only three mogu left—no, four, including a strange one wearing ornate, regal garments. This last mogu was standing back from the fight, arms folded across its chest, its two remaining quilen crouched at its heels.

That must be Warlord Gurthan, guessed Ninil'ko.

"Halt," the fourth mogu said. The others stopped advancing. "Mantid, do you have a name?"

* * *

The lone insect didn't seem to hear him. "Creature, do you understand me?" Gurthan asked.

A sharp, ugly noise rippled through the room. The mantid's mandibles clicked open and shut in a strange, raspy rhythm. *Is it laughing at me?* Gurthan thought. "I am Warlord Gurthan, mantid. I am—"

"I don't care, mogu."

Gurthan's jaw clenched. "Do you have a name, mantid?"

"None I wish to share with you," the creature hissed.

* * *

Kil'ruk crept to the doorway. He heard Ninil'ko's voice, and another.

"Where is the relic?" Ninil'ko asked.

"I have put your species a single step from extinction, mantid," the other voice said. "If you are capable of reason—"

"Far more capable than you, Gurthan. Where is the relic?"

"You won't find the relic before your empress is dead," said Gurthan. "But perhaps there is no need for all of the mantid to die with her. Some of you are skilled fighters; perhaps—"

"Are you negotiating?" Nihil'ko chattered with amusement. "Then here is my offer, mogu: kneel before me, beg my forgiveness, hand me the relic, and I will allow you to leave this room alive. What happens to you between here and your Wall, I cannot say."

"Kneel?" Gurthan's voice turned quietly furious. "The slaves of the empire kneel before me. Beasts lay at my feet, awaiting my command. And in your arrogance—"

Kil'ruk had no interest in hearing any more. He stepped through the doorway. "Your words waste our time," he said loudly. "Face me."

The three mogu warriors shifted uneasily at the sight of the second mantid.

Gurthan simply pursed his lips and whistled twice, sharply. The two quilen at his heels leaped toward Kil'ruk's throat.

Kil'ruk swept both of his amber blades up in the air, and both quilen flopped back to the ground. One of them was still barely alive, a pitiful whine escaping its muzzle. It weakly tried to crawl back to Warlord Gurthan. Kil'ruk drove one of his forelegs through its torso and ended its feeble cries.

"Bloodcaller. I am ready. Are you?" Kil'ruk asked.

Nihil'ko hefted his spear. "Yes, Wind-Reaver."

They stepped forward together.

* * *

"Kill them," said Warlord Gurthan.

The three remaining guards rushed forward to meet the two mantid. Blades clashed and sparked.

Gurthan had no illusions about their chances. His eyes fell on the gilded urn, the one meant for the mantid empress.

It would have to do.

I will not let them win.

As his guards died, Gurthan crouched and cupped his hands, gathering arcane energy. He would only have time for one spell.

* * *

The last guard fought bravely, but with its two comrades dying on the floor, it was only a matter of time before one of the mantid's attacks found flesh. Both of the Wind-Reaver's blades punctured its torso. It collapsed and grunted and lay still.

Kil'ruk turned slowly. Toward the last mogu standing. "Gurthan," he hissed. "You would have killed the empress. This empress and every empress to come. You would have ended the cycle."

The mogu warlord was moving his hands in small circles. Conjuring power. For what purpose, Kil'ruk didn't know.

Or care.

Ninil'ko took a step back. "Wind-Reaver, I leave this honor to you," the paragon said.

Kil'ruk raised his blades and slowly advanced. If Gurthan planned on unleashing a final attack, some final cowardly gesture, the Wind-Reaver would be ready. "You will die, Warlord. It will not be quick."

"Will you enjoy it, insect?" Gurthan spat.

Only five more strides to satisfaction. "More than you know."

Gurthan's hands suddenly stilled. The air felt alive with power. The mogu's eyes met Kil'ruk's. "Good. This I vow: you and your kind will never have the pleasure of ending my life."

The warlord's hands splayed out. A blinding flash of light enveloped the room. Kil'ruk shaded his eyes with his blades.

When his vision cleared, the light had faded.

Warlord Gurthan was gone. The urn seemed to vibrate as if imbued with power, energy, life.

"No," Kil'ruk said.

* * *

Ninil'ko allowed Kil'ruk to rage for several minutes.

"Coward! Coward! Face me!"

The Wind-Reaver struck the urn with his blades over and over. He couldn't scratch it. Couldn't budge it. The enchantment Gurthan had used to consign his spirit to the urn apparently protected it from all physical attacks.

The warlord was, in short, out of the mantid's reach. Kil'ruk swung again and again, blind with fury.

Finally, Ninil'ko had seen enough. "Wind-Reaver," he said softly. Kil'ruk didn't slow or stop. "Wind-Reaver, the empress is still silent."

Kil'ruk swung at the urn one final time, his blade crashing into it with a strangely muted thump. He faced the paragon, panting. "The relic isn't here."

"It's moving away from us. You can feel it too, yes?" Ninil'ko asked. It was an odd sensation. He could only compare it to clouds moving in the sky: from the ground it seemed to happen so slowly that they appeared almost motionless.

"Yes." Kil'ruk angrily kicked the urn in disgust. "Lead on, Bloodcaller. Let's be done with this."

* * *

Fulmin walked carefully along the base of the Serpent's Spine, clutching the relic to his chest, concentrating on maintaining the spell. Without constant maintenance, the delicate balance of energy would spin out of control. The consequences would be unpredictable, but likely fatal to whoever held the relic.

The Gate of the Setting Sun was just up ahead. Once Fulmin was through, he could hand off the relic to another arcanist and rally a fresh force of mogu to take back the terrace.

The awful noise and flash of light meant Warlord Gurthan had suspended his spirit to avoid death at the mantid's hands. Well, Fulmin had taught him the technique, and it would be a simple matter to reverse once the mantid threat was gone.

Leaves crunched behind him.

Fulmin turned around and nearly lost his balance. A mantid, clothed in bizarre armor and carrying a large spear, stood perhaps fifteen paces away. It had no wings; it wasn't the flyer.

The mantid raised its spear and pointed it at Fulmin. The mogu watched with curiosity. He sensed no empowerment. This wasn't a spell. It was too far away for a quick attack.

The mantid made a strange sound. *Click.*

A shadow fell over Fulmin. He didn't even have time to scream.

The relic tumbled free of his grasp.

* * *

"A strange object," Kil'ruk said.

The relic still dripped with the mogu's blood. Nihil'ko examined it carefully, turning it over in his hands. "I cannot hear the empress, Wind-Reaver. Can you?"

"No."

"Arcane energy is beyond my talents," Nihil'ko mused. The relic emitted pale light, and with each passing moment, the light grew brighter. "The mogu employ magic in such unusual ways. I do not know how to silence this foul thing."

The paragon glanced down at the butchered mogu mage. The lesser creature had maintained the spell until its death. Why bother? The relic didn't seem to need a constant supply of new power to keep the empress suppressed.

Nihil'ko held the relic at arm's length. "Wind-Reaver, perhaps you could see if any—"

The light from the relic suddenly flared and vanished. Kil'ruk saw a dim flash and heard a brief, soft crackling sound.

Nihil'ko felt—only for the smallest moment—most of the remaining arcane energy in the relic shoot up his arm like lightning. There was an instant of pure agony as the energy passed through his brain, burning through every bit of consciousness.

The last thing the paragon heard was a single faint click.

* * *

Kil'ruk knew instantly that Ninil'ko was dead. The paragon tumbled into the dirt next to the mogu mage and lay unmoving, eyes wide and staring.

That relic, that cursed, vile relic, still blocked the empress's voice. But not completely. Kil'ruk could hear quick hiccups of her sweet song. It was as if the fabric of the mogu spell was fraying, pulling apart thread by thread, allowing brief glimpses of what lay beyond it.

How long would it take for the relic finally to go quiet? Would it take hours? That would mean the death of the empress. Kil'ruk bent down over Ninil'ko's body and studied the relic, unwilling to touch it. The light had faded, but he could still hear crackling and hissing.

Just like the honeycomb—

Kil'ruk picked it up. A trembling energy made his hand shiver. It felt as if the relic might unleash its remaining arcane charge at any moment.

He remembered the first day he had dived from the sky into battle, when a honeycomb and a little spare arcane energy had reacted in a destructive way.

Kil'ruk let his wings carry him above the battlements. He clutched the relic in his hands as he flew south, searching. Defenders all along the Wall pointed and shouted at him in surprise.

There.

The remaining honeycombs still stood amid the dead, desiccated slaves on the battlements overlooking the Terrace of Gurthan. The few living slaves and mogu spotted him almost immediately, but they needed time to line up their shot. Kil'ruk only needed time to hurl the relic at them. It was nearly the same size and weight as one of his rounds. His aim hadn't faded a bit.

The foul thing arced toward the Wall and bounced once between two honeycombs. The relic broke apart with a shimmering wave of light and a stuttering crescendo of crackling.

There was a terrible noise, and the light enveloped the honeycombs. Their combined arcane energy swelled into a tremendously bright display, and the lesser creatures were consumed.

Then there was a wonderful sound, heard only by the mantid.

I'm still here. I'm still here, the empress sang. Elation surged through Kil'ruk with every word. *The lesser creatures are here. Kill them, kill them all.*

Far away from Kil'ruk, far to the west, a great noise of joy and fury rose into the air. The swarmborn came awake, and their rage burst forth.

It was a matter of hours, not minutes, but by sunset, the empress's song had changed.

Dead, so dead, they are all dead. Well done. Well done. I am safe. I am safe.

Well done.

VIII

I was made a paragon. My deeds became legend among my cycle and all cycles to come. The Klaxxi granted me the second name I desired, Wind-Reaver, and it was whispered among the swarmborn.

The army of Clan Gurthan had been annihilated. Both sides had suffered greatly, but the Klaxxi wished to send a simple message: invading our lands is death. They unleashed me as punishment. I slaughtered thousands of defenders on the Wall. Many thousands. After only a few months, they would run at the mere sight of me, Wakener. I have such fond memories of that time.

Then the Klaxxi allowed me to fly beyond the Serpent's Spine. They instructed me to raid mogu encampments and supply lines. It had never occurred to me to do so until they gave the order. Strange, yes? It would be such a simple thing for every flyer to soar past the lesser creatures' defenses and lay waste to unprepared villages. They would have no way to counter the tactic. It would be tremendously effective.

If the death of the lesser creatures were the goal, that is. Truly, Wakener, it is not. If the Klaxxi had wished it, the whole of this continent would be ours by now.

As a paragon, I earned the right to ask questions and expect answers. The Klaxxi told me much.

They told me about preservation. They explained how an ambersmith of my choice would shape kyparite into the empowered amber shell that would serve as my resting place until there was need of my help as a paragon. I, of course, chose the ambersmith who created my blades. He was honored to accept. He and I went alone to the Terrace of Gurthan, and he worked the flow of amber until sleep claimed me for thousands and thousands of years. Of course, that ambersmith was immediately killed. The Klaxxi believe it is important to keep the location of a paragon secret. It requires the power of the entire council to locate our amber

eggs; such secrecy prevents outsiders or lone Klaxxi'va from finding and destroying us. Though it does happen, as you've seen.

They told me so much about the cycle... I suspect you still don't understand, Wakener. The cycle was old when I was young. It predates you and me. I was preserved for thousands and thousands of years, and much has changed.

But do you know what hasn't changed?

The will of the Klaxxi.

The will of the Klaxxi is eternal.

You fought many battles, toppled many foes, yet not a single action in your life mattered until you crossed the Serpent's Spine and entered our lands. You obeyed the Klaxxi. You released me from my long sleep in the amber. In doing so, you finally became useful.

I mean no insult, Wakener. Rejoice. You have earned our trust. All of your earlier, meaningless struggles have raised you above the other lesser creatures. Few of them could ever be of service as you have been.

I've heard plenty about your war. The Alliance. The Horde. Two equally useless sides fighting over insignificant goals. I suspect you don't see it that way. Your war could last a thousand years and it would be but a small river feeding into the ocean of the Klaxxi's plans. Their will is to preserve the cycle.

The purpose of the cycle is not death. Indeed, it is knowledge.

Knowledge of you. Knowledge of us. Battle is an efficient mentor. All creatures can achieve their potential only when the alternative is death. The Klaxxi ensure that battle lasts as long as possible. It is in their interest to prolong each cycle, pressuring the lesser creatures as much as they can without breaking them. Thus the defenders will fight with all their skill, fearing that everyone they know and love stands on the brink of oblivion if they fail.

The strongest among the mantid return alive. The weak are culled. Our kind grows stronger. And with each cycle, we learn about the lesser creatures' tactics and weapons, and we learn how to counter them.

There is so much to learn from creatures like you, Wakener.

Did I mention that I learned to dive from the sky by watching a hawk? I was utterly fascinated with its ability. I conquered its skills.

You fascinate me too, Wakener.