



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS of PANDARIA

The Trial of the Red Blossoms

by Cameron Dayton

Ten had been following the strangers all afternoon and was sure that they had money. He could read it in their posture, their clothing, and the confident way they moved through the market. Discerning the wealth of potential marks was a habit that had kept Ten alive, even in these hard times.

There were four of them—four travelers from the north, if their heavy cloaks were any indication. And if the unseasonal garb weren't enough proof of the newcomers' foreignness, then their choice of a guide certainly was: Jogu, the old jinyu drunk who spent most of his time napping by the small, stagnant pond near the market. Jogu was thin for a jinyu, prone to slurred rambling, and he was missing scales. Why these gentlemen had chosen *him* as their guide was a mystery to Ten. Regardless, their coin must have been good, because Jogu was showing more energy than he had in years, gesturing and pointing to the mediocre sights and scenery of Halfhill Market as though they were monuments in the Jade Temple.

For their part, the four travelers were quiet, not responding to the fish-man's antics. It was obvious that these pandaren had hoped for a more direct and *silent* guide to their destination, and were already regretting their decision.

Ten leaned back against the alley wall and tried to think. Thinking was hard when his stomach hurt like this, but that would not change unless he put his mind to work. Harvest had been poor this season, even here in the Valley of the Four Winds. Farmers were more careful with their wares, and more guards were stationed around the trade routes than ever before. It had been a day since he had eaten—a peach that had rolled off of the fruit seller's cart as he had wheeled it from the market. Or... it had seemed to roll off, just as the cart had rumbled past where Ten had been sitting in the

shadows. Ten had benefited from Kim Won Gi's "carelessness" in the past; he wanted to thank the generous trader... but was not prepared to stop stealing from him. How else was a thief to survive?

Thief. Ten was not proud of what he did, of what he had to do. If his father were alive, he would wring his paws in sorrow.

One cannot change the seasons.

The group was moving now. Jogu had finished a long soliloquy about the Shrine of the Honest Trader in what appeared to have been an epic, emotional presentation accompanied with twirling motions. When Jogu's clients had failed to respond to his act—or to tip him as he stood there, arms raised as if he were a mighty taolun tree—he had shrugged his shoulders and kept walking. The strangers followed, one of them shaking his head.

At this point, Ten was positive that they were headed to the Tiller's Council. It was the only building of note in that direction. He smiled. Of course these wealthy strangers were here to see the powerful farmers' union, possibly to discuss trade or contracts. Merchants, perhaps? That would explain the voluminous cloaks worn across broad, well-fed bellies—and, if Ten was not mistaken, covering deep pockets and purses heavy with gold. Watching closely, he could see the way the dark cloth pulled across the travelers' waists. Yes. There was coin tucked underneath. His fingers twitched.

The group was crossing Fo Bridge when it happened. Nam Ironpaw the stockmaster had just arrived at the high point of the bridge with a cart stacked high with salmon. The wheel on one side had come loose, and as Nam waved to the approaching travelers, it suddenly bent under the heavy load. The burly grocer turned in shock, helpless as the overloaded cart tipped over and spilled the contents of a night's bounteous catch onto the bridge.

"No! No!" he shouted, whiskers shaking in a visual echo of his frustration.

A silvery, wet avalanche poured across the planks of the bridge, the raised balustrades funneling it directly toward a terrified Jogu and his charges. The poor jinyu, obviously still drunk, echoed Nam's shouts at the oncoming fish—"No! No!"—and tried to wave them off with desperate, imploring gestures. The dead salmon paid no heed.

With a moist smack, the group was buried. Ten grimaced at the thought—and smell—of being bathed in clammy fish. In another second the wave passed, the remaining salmon sliding off the sides of the bridge and into the stream below. The four pandaren merchants had crouched and grasped onto the planks to keep their footing, and were now helping each other back up. Jogu had been swept along with the fish into the water, where he failed to resurface. This was funnier than it was alarming—as a jinyu, the drunk was more at home there than on land. Shouts and laughter rang from the market as Nam's family and other villagers came running.

Ten knew that there would be no better time to strike.

Slipping from the shadows, he joined the crowd moving toward the tipped cart. Slight and thin for his fourteen years, with patches of gray fur where most pandaren were white, Ten found it easy to remain unnoticed in the chaos. He usually did. Being unnoticed was something of a specialty for the youngest son of a poor turnip farmer, a son named merely for the order of his birth.

His five oldest brothers had divided up the property when Father had died, but soon learned that five pieces of a struggling farm would barely sustain them; what was the point of dividing it further if it meant they all would starve? So the remaining five, the youngest, had been given the option of staying as farmhands... or leaving. Ten had left, much to his siblings' relief. There was nothing on that farm for a young pandaren anyway. He doubted that they noticed his absence.

Just ahead, he could see members of the Ironpaw family attempting to right the cart while others gathered up what fish they could into baskets, pots, and the fronts of their aprons. Nam had approached the four strangers, head bowed, and was apologizing profusely. Ten had expected these wealthy merchants to be furious at their slimy welcome to Halfhill, but was surprised to find that they were laughing—soft, rumbling laughter that practically shook the bridge as they wiped scales from their hats, clapping each other on the shoulders. One of the travelers pulled a large fish from his collar and handed it to Nam with a nod. The stockmaster was relieved by their good humor, and he stepped away to supervise the retrieval effort. The price for salmon was high, and it had been months since his cart had been so full.

Ten moved forward, quietly collecting fish with the rest of the Ironpaw family. As he neared the travelers, he pretended to slip and stumble against the largest of them. The merchant turned, and Ten gasped. His target had only one eye. A long scar stretched across the traveler's face from brow to chin, and a black patch covered where his eye would have been. The merchant was obviously accustomed to this sort of reaction, and he smiled and steadied Ten, warning him to be careful on the wet planks. His voice was strong but kind, and the young thief felt a twinge of guilt about stealing from this gentle soul.

But warm thoughts do not quiet a rumbling stomach.

Ten bowed shyly, just as a simple village cub would, and walked away. The leather purse he had lifted from the merchant's cloak was tucked underneath Ten's grubby tunic, and he was excited to see what riches he had stolen. Gold? Not heavy enough. Jewelry? Possibly. Enough to buy some hot meals and another blanket, he hoped. Winter would soon be here, and Ten worried about the cold. The small pandaren had made sure to pocket a few of the smaller fish as well, but didn't want to press his luck. His stomach grumbled again.

He reached the edge of the market and pretended to brush scales off his sleeves as he surveyed the scene behind him. Ten's departure had gone unnoticed, and everyone was still engaged in recovering the fish before they were all swept away by the slow-moving stream. Pulling the purse from his tunic, he quickly undid the leather cord binding it together and emptied the contents into his paw.

It was not gold, not jewelry. It was a scroll. Ten's heart sank. A stupid scroll wound around a simple rod of brass with ivory ends. He lifted the delicate thing, breaking the wax seal to see if he could pull it apart. Maybe he could sell the ivory.

His eyes flashed across the page, reading the words without meaning to. Years ago, Seven had taught his younger brother to read so that he might at least help with the tallying after harvest. Ten had learned quickly, and he found the skill useful when selecting which bag to lift from an unattended grocer's stall. The message was written in strong, urgent strokes, and as he read, Ten felt a panic begin to grow in his empty belly.

Honorable Haohan Mudclaw, Leader of the Tillers in the Valley of the Four Winds,

This message comes with a greeting, a blessing upon your fields, and a warning. Our sources report that several yaungol tribes are now moving east from the Townlong Steppes in a manner that may indicate coming aggression. In centuries past, this has taken place when the mantid were surging, their hives growing to such numbers that even the mighty hooved ones flee before them. Our own forces are spread thin, Haohan, and we need to begin storing supplies for the potential conflict. Well we know of your poor harvest this year, and of your duty to feed the people of the valley and beyond. But our need is urgent. Please send what you can with these esteemed guardians. They will assure that whatever your generosity allows you to part with arrives safely.

These were not the words of a merchant.

Esteemed guardians. These travelers had not come to trade. The mark at the bottom of the scroll caused Ten to catch his breath. It was a simple mark, a circle with curving stripes coming down the sides, the snarling face of a white tiger.

Shado-pan!

Suddenly there was a commotion back by the bridge. Ten spun around, swiftly tucking the scroll into his tunic. Jogu had emerged from the water and was shouting and pointing... pointing at Ten.

"Thief! My good masters have been robbed! Thief! Thief!"

At first, nobody knew what the hysterical jinyu was talking about. Some looked at Ten with suspicion, and a few laughed at Jogu, rolling their eyes at his drunken rambling. But the large pandaren that Ten had bumped felt into his pocket and then

made a quick gesture to his fellows. Their cloaks fell away to reveal weapons—swords, spears, blades that glinted dangerously in the sunlight. Yes, they had been hiding something after all. Ten had been half right.

It was time to run.

Cursing under his breath, Ten turned and sprinted through the market.

A market crowded with farmers, fishermen, and fruit sellers, and who do I decide to rob? The squad of armed killers.

His mind whirled, tried to remember what little he knew about the Shado-pan. He had never really had much time for history. They were an elite military force, something rarely seen in this gentle valley. Ten knew that the Shado-pan guarded the wall to the west, that they protected the pandaren lands from evil creatures like the mantid. He had heard stories from other thieves and lowlifes who lived alongside him in the alleyways. Stories about the Shado-pan and their ability to walk along the edge of a sword, to snatch an arrow from flight, and to strike an enemy so that his heart burst inside his chest. He had heard that the Shado-pan did not forgive those who crossed them, or forget when they were wronged.

Ten reached up as he was running, could feel his heart—still intact—hammering away. The scroll bounced with each step, ivory knobs clicking against his bony chest. Almost as though it were calling to Ten's pursuers.

He could already hear heavy footsteps pounding behind him. These warriors were fast. There was a whistling sound, and Ten ducked just as a spear thudded into the post supporting a merchant's stall in front of him. The merchant screamed and threw a pot of soup into the air. The hot broth splashed into the face of an irritable hozen who sold cooking supplies in the next stall over. Jumping up and down in anger, the monkey hurled a ladle at Ten, who dodged the spinning utensil and cast around for some avenue of escape.

He could see himself in the reflection of another pot hanging from the soup merchant's stall. Two of the Shado-pan were coming up quickly on either side... and there was nowhere to turn.

So he didn't. Ten leaped, landing with one foot on the haft of the Shado-pan spear embedded in the post ahead of him. Praying that the strong bamboo would hold his weight, Ten crouched as the haft bent and then sprang back upward, catapulting him over the stall and leaving the two Shado-pan blinking their eyes in the late-afternoon sun.

Good craftsmanship in that weapon. At least I was right about one thing: the travelers are wealthy.

He landed and rolled onto the grass behind the market. Shouts echoed from all sides; he wasn't clear of his pursuers yet. The two Shado-pan came from around the stalls, obviously unimpressed by his acrobatics. The thief knew he would have no chance of escaping the stronger, quicker pandaren in the open countryside. He would have to try to lose them in town. Cursing again, he set off around the edge of the market and toward the village. Overhead, a hawk called out.

The village was just up the hill, and the Shado-pan were almost upon him by the time he reached the Lazy Turnip inn. Innkeeper Lei Lan yelped as Ten burst through the door, knocking her tray of drinks to the ground. Ten winced at the thought of good Stormstout brew put to waste by his hurry, but there was nothing to be done. The first Shado-pan behind him slipped on the sudsy mess and tripped over the innkeeper, who had barely regained her footing. The second pursuer leaped over his companion and chased after Ten toward the kitchen, audibly growling. Apparently this hayseed pickpocket had already caused the Shado-pan more trouble than they had bargained for.

Ten sprinted into the kitchen, scaring spicemaster Jin Jao so much that he threw his deliveries into the air and swore. Ten kept running, sliding under Jin Jao's legs and then continuing up the stairs. He could hear the Shado-pan pursuer's feet tramping through the kitchen behind him, heard the spicemaster's angry protestations about his ruined goods and further outrage at being pushed aside by these "uncouth thugs." Ten reached the top of the stairs and then ran down the hallway, trying each of the doors. This was where the inn's staff lived, and of course they had locked their rooms. Ten cursed, knowing that he had no time to pick the locks.

The final door was unlocked, and from the smell, Ten could tell that this was where Den Den lived. Den Den was the inn's hozen bartender. He was not a bad fellow

as monkey folk went, and certainly a good deal more affable than his ladle-throwing cousin. Den Den had once traded a mug of Stormstout brew to Ten for a pomegranate—obviously stolen from Gi's cart—and Ten had always appreciated the generosity. But the room was a stinking den that looked more like a garbage heap than a domicile. Unwashed bedding, piles of seeds, a barrel filled with fruit rinds, and... what appeared to be a girl hozen dummy made from matted hair. Ten wrinkled his nose and started digging through the trash against the wall at the far side of the room, looking for the window. At last, a ray of light shone through his fingers; he'd made it!

"Step away from the wall, thief!"

The voice was angry but firm. Ten could almost *feel* the spear aimed at his back. Slowly turning, paws raised, he tried to force a smile. Two Shado-pan stood in the doorway and were joined by a third, dripping with beer.

"Hello, gentlemen. Welcome to Halfhill. I have been up here looking for medicine for my sick mother, and—"

"Quiet, runt!" roared the moist warrior, brandishing a sword. He was out of sorts, both for the beer and having bumped into the lovely innkeeper in a manner most unchivalrous. Ten decided to keep his mouth shut.

Another Shado-pan, the one who had donated his spear to Ten's escape down in the market, put a paw on his angry companion's shoulder. He wore a red scarf around his neck, and the other two parted to let him pass. Although he had retrieved his spear from the stall, Ten could tell that this warrior did not need a weapon to kill. It was clear in his sure movements, the scars on his paws, and the intensity of his golden eyes.

"You are on dangerous ground, little thief. My friend here thinks you are a spy come to intercept our missive and deliver it to our enemies. I choose to believe that you are merely a fool and that your simple criminal act has put you in greater peril than you intended."

The Shado-pan stepped forward and extended a paw.

"Quickly—my master is waiting below. Give me the scroll that you have stolen. Make no sudden moves, or Tao-Long here will likely skewer you from nose to tail. Do

this now, and I will guarantee you a speedy trip to the Tiller's Council for judgment and likely a sentence of hard labor in the granary."

Ten took a breath. He slowly reached into his tunic and pulled out the scroll. He began to hand it to the nodding Shado-pan, and then stopped.

"So... any other options?"

The red-scarved warrior frowned, his demeanor turning cold.

"Of course, you can refuse the mercy I have extended and confirm Tao-Long's suspicions. And then we will *take* the scroll from you, as well as your life. But don't think that this means we will simply kill you, thief. When the Shado-pan take your life, it means that your life comes into our possession. We will bind you, take your eyes, your feet, and all but two of your fingers so that you can feed yourself. Then you will be strapped to a mount and carried to our monastery high in Kun-Lai Summit. Upon your arrival, you will be placed on an ice-rimmed ledge to wait for our Truthseekers."

Here, the beer-dipped Shado-pan—Tao-Long—smirked and twisted his sword ever so slightly. It was obvious which option he preferred.

"The Shado-pan Truthseekers will teach you that the previous removal of your eyes was only the first and most gentle of our gifts. They will find out how you have been corrupted by the sha, what you know of their designs, and whether we should toss you to the canyon winds for judgment."

Ten's eyes had grown wide, and he lifted the scroll to his face as though to cover his fear.

"I... I don't like that option either."

Red Scarf smiled sternly and again extended his paw. Ten brought the scroll to his mouth and returned the smile.

"I think I'd prefer a third option."

And then he blew into the scroll. The cindergut powder he had lifted from Jin Jao billowed out in a red cloud around the faces of the pandaren crowded in the doorway,

and cries of surprise and pain filled the little room. There was a thump, then a crash and a sudden blaze of sunlight. Ten was gone.

The Shado-pan were not prone to panic, and after a few seconds of cursing and stumbling through the stinging fog, they quickly reorganized in the hallway just outside of the room. Red Scarf had received the brunt of the powder, and his eyes were swollen shut behind angry red lids. He asked Tao-Long to bring him to the broken window, to describe what he saw.

Tao-Long, now feeling chagrin over his earlier anger, led his comrade to the window. Blinking his own tear-filled eyes in the afternoon light, he described the cracked bamboo poles trailing down the roof ledge below the opening. The bent branches of the taolun tree at the edge, a hasty pathway smashing through the bushes beneath. And then... then a lazy river winding past the village and into the wetlands beyond. Countless places to disappear into. The thief was gone.

"For now," grumbled Red Scarf, wiping at his streaming nose. "He is only gone until we find him. And then this arrogant thief will know the limits of Shado-pan mercy."

He stepped back and addressed his companions.

"Our quarry has fled into the soft lands beyond this incomplete excuse for a hill. There is an agent of the sha who has evaded our grasp, brethren. Who are we?"

"We are the sword in the shadows."

"And will we rest?"

"We shall not falter!"

The mantra was whispered with a cold passion, an undeniable surety. And then, without another word, the Shado-pan were down the stairs, out of the inn, and lost in the market crowds below.

On the rooftop above the window, Ten watched them go. He leaned back against the thatch and shivered. They had been deceived by the barrel he had pushed through the window, and had not thought to check the ledge above them. Why would they? What kind of fool would trap himself on a rooftop when escape lay in every direction?

A fool too small to run very far.

He had escaped, yes, but now he was hunted by hard-bitten warriors who would never rest. The conviction in their voices had been frightening. The *intensity*. Ten had never heard such confidence. Behind his fear, there was something else.

Admiration?

Another hawk called out in the sky above. Ten shook his head and responded with a whisper.

"Count yourself lucky, my friend. To be a hunter such as these, to *choose* where your path lies and to know that you will follow it to the end..."

He left the sentence hanging, full of longing. That sort of life would be forever beyond a thief like him.

"Her name is Whitefeather," said a deep, oddly familiar voice. "And better to be a hunter than prey, little thief. But the hunter who knows how to be prey will catch quicker game."

Ten spun around, almost losing his footing on the thatch. The one-eyed merchant—no, the one-eyed *Shado-pan*—sat on the rooftop above him, a large spear across his knees. The hawk called again and then fluttered down to perch on the large pandaren's shoulder. Ten tried to speak, but breath would not rise from his lungs. That spear... it was big enough to slice him in two. Wielded by a grizzled warrior who could alight on the roof of an inn with the speed and stealth of an evening wind; had Red Scarf not mentioned a *master*?

I am going to die.

The Shado-pan master frowned.

"You have something of mine. I would like it back."

Mouth agape, Ten fumbled into his tunic and brought out the scroll. He shook it, trying to dislodge any of the powder that might remain. A pinch of red dust sprinkled out and was caught in a breeze that, unfortunately, drifted into Ten's face. He let out a pathetic little yelp and began coughing, eyes blurry with tears.

The stranger leaned forward and took the scroll, returning it to his voluminous robes.

"What is your name, little thief?"

Blinking until his eyes cleared, Ten coughed again.

"My name is Ten, sir."

"Ten, as in the number ten?"

"Yes, sir. My father ran out of interesting names after the fifth son."

"Well, Ten. The penalty for stealing from a Shado-pan messenger has already been outlined to you in some detail by my lieutenant. He offered you a merciful alternative, which you quite literally blew back in his face."

Ten was not sure if his eyes were seeing correctly, but he thought he saw the hint of a smile at the corner of the Shado-pan master's mouth.

"I am not as softhearted as Feng, but perhaps that is because I have been on the wall for so many years. Fighting against the sha, just being near them... has a way of hardening one to the gentler aspects of life. Even if those aspects are what you are fighting to preserve."

Ten was unclear on what this large, spear-wielding warrior was talking about—or what these *sha* were—but he thought it best to sit quietly and nod his head. He felt that his life hung very much in the balance.

The Shado-pan master looked down at Ten with his one eye and seemed to consider. Ten quailed under the unblinking gaze. He glanced over at the spear. The heavy, wide-bladed spear that the Shado-pan held so lightly. Ten trembled as the warrior's paw tightened around the haft. He closed his eyes, head bowed.

"I present to you a third option, Ten of the Peppered Scroll. And a fourth."

Ten looked up, not quite sure what was happening. The Shado-pan stood and placed a finger against Ten's chest.

"I can kill you right now as a merciful alternative to the punishment described by loyal Feng. It would be quick and painless; my blade would be through your neck before you could blink."

And suddenly, like a thought, an arm's length of metal gleamed cold and silver under Ten's chin. Moments later, a rush of wind followed the spear's motion. Ten shivered, and his tiny movement against the blade drew a warm trickle of blood. It slowly crawled along the length of the weapon, which held motionless at his throat. The Shado-pan continued.

"The other option, the crueler one, would be for you to submit yourself to the Trial of the Red Blossoms."

Ten's brows went up in question, and the Shado-pan lowered his spear with a sigh.

"Do not be fooled by the name. Every seven seasons, the sacred trees of our monastery grow blossoms of a fiery red. That is our sign to begin the trials. It is the gauntlet of pain and rigor required for all of those wishing to enter into our order. The test kills most who submit to it. It certainly tortures *all* who would be Shado-pan."

The warrior removed his spear, hiding it behind his cloak in one swift motion.

"But," he said, looking out across the valley, "if you pass the trials and become an acolyte of the Shado-pan, then the punishment for taking our missive will no longer apply."

Ten could not believe what he was hearing. *Me, a Shado-pan?* He was a nothing. A thief. A runt. The tenth son of a dead farmer. He struggled to find the words.

"But how could you think *I* could somehow be like Feng? Like... like *you*?"

The warrior regarded him quietly.

"You are quick, Ten. Quick with your feet, your paws, and your wits. A Shado-pan needs strength, yes, but that can be built. Our enemy is quick, and while we need warriors who can match the sha in their ferocity, we also need warriors who can dodge

their attacks, blow pepper into their faces, and send them running in the wrong direction."

Ten nodded, speechless. Something akin to hope stirred in the thief's narrow chest.

Could I...?

The large pandaren reached into his belt and pulled out a ring. It had a simple design, skillfully carved from an ivory that reminded Ten of the scroll ends. The snarling tiger symbol of the order was inlaid into the top of the ring with a silver that sparkled like northern ice.

"I see that you have made your decision. Take this ring. In three months' time you will present yourself at the front gates of Shado-pan Monastery. The ring is cut from a white tiger's fang. It will guarantee your safe entrance through our gates; only your wits will guarantee your arrival. Kun-Lai Summit can be treacherous, especially during the cold season.

"You shall come alone. Bring no weapons, no armor; they will not aid you." He grasped the thin fabric of Ten's grubby tunic and frowned. "Although I suggest you procure some warmer clothing."

Ten nodded dumbly, and the Shado-pan released the cloth. Then his voice went hard.

"If the trials begin and you have not appeared, I will assume that you refuse my final option. At that point, the Shado-pan will take your life. And I assure you, Feng showed restraint in his description of our methods. Do you understand all that I have said, Ten?"

Ten was not sure that he had, and did not think he could nod anymore. His muscles felt numb and frozen. The warrior took his silence for affirmation.

"I am Nurong, master of the Wu Kao. I will see you in three months' time, little thief."

Master Nurong whispered to Whitefeather, then sent the bird flapping into the evening sky. Ten turned to watch the hawk soar over the marshlands to the northeast, following after the other warriors. The thief finally found his voice.

"Three months. How am I supposed to reach the tallest mountain in the world—let alone climb it—in three months?"

There was no answer. Ten looked over his shoulder and saw that he was alone on the rooftop. The Shado-pan was gone.

Another gong sounded throughout the courtyard. Ten tried to stand straight on the swaying planks of the bridge, tried to look as imposing as he could next to the rest of the applicants. It wasn't working.

He was, of course, the smallest of the dozen young hopefuls who had gathered under the red blossoms, which blazed vibrantly against the winter snows. Even the homely boy—Crooked Wu from Binan Village, who was easily three years his junior—stood a head and shoulders taller and wore an armored chest piece *like an actual warrior*. Ten glanced up at Wu, who shot him a glare. None of the applicants was happy to be competing against a scruffy runt like Ten, as though his mere presence in the trials was an affront.

Ten looked down at his toes, scowling. *Just getting here* had been a trial in and of itself, and he doubted that any of these oversized rich cubs could have survived the journey he had made. Climbing the Path of a Hundred Steps, skulking past hungry saurok in the Ancient Passage, and finally, scaling the viciously steep and winding trail up the slopes of Kun-Lai. Fearing that every wind would knock you from the narrow road and dash you against the rocks miles below. That was if you didn't freeze to death first.

His cloak fluttered in the wind, and Ten pulled it more tightly around his shoulders. In the Valley of the Four Winds, a cold day meant a little rain and enough of a

breeze to keep you out of the open fields. Here, the cold was lethal. Ten had tried to follow Master Nurong's advice, trading in his ratty blanket and a few coins he had procured for a traveler's cloak. The sorry length of patched cloth had saved his life, providing shelter, warmth, and even camouflage in the shadowy folds of the mountains as enormous yetis stomped past. His hat, wide-brimmed and smelling of spoiled fruit, had been a gift from Den Den as thanks for not mentioning the state of his room (or the hair dummy) to anybody before Ten had been chased from Halfhill. It kept rain and snow from his shoulders, acted as a dish when he could find food, and—according to Heavy Chan—made Ten look like a wizened mushroom.

Heavy Chan was the applicant from the trading town of One Keg. He was the son of a wealthy alchemist, as vain as a peacock, and as large as ten Tens. He had arrived with an entourage of grummle attendants, none of whom had been allowed inside the monastery walls. Ten could remember walking past the little encampment of silken tents as he had reached the summit. How the scent of sizzling meat had made his mouth water.

Had I a bit more energy and a bit less frostbite, I would have relieved the camp of some of their excess food. Chan certainly doesn't need it.

A hushed silence fell over the applicants, and Ten turned to see that the masters had appeared. They stood across from the bridge, where the meditation grove met the edge of the frozen lake. As still as statues, the three masters stood regarding the dozen hopeful initiates. The morning sun was bright against the mists wreathing the monastery grounds, and he couldn't tell if Master Nurong was among the three. Ten wanted to make sure that his presence was noted and his life would not be taken. He had arrived on the last day of his three-month parole, panting as he jogged past the silent Shado-pan gatewatcher, who nodded when Ten flashed him his ring.

A hawk cried overhead, and Ten looked up, squinting.

"Get on with it," mumbled Crooked Wu under his breath. "The blossoms are not going to turn any more red." Ten understood Wu's grumbling as nervousness. All of the applicants showed signs of unease: shuffling feet, wringing paws, biting lips. Even Heavy Chan was absently twirling the golden bracelet around his thick wrist, a gaudy affair large enough to be a necklace on any normal-sized pandaren.

Nice bit of jewelry there.

One of the masters stepped forward, and Ten frowned. It was not Master Nurong but a dour-faced pandaren woman who wore her gray hair pulled back behind her ears. The Shado-pan master raised one paw and spoke, her stern voice carrying across the icy water.

"Initiates, I welcome you to the Trial of the Red Blossoms. You have come from across the land, each of you selected by our agents as a worthy candidate. So it has been for years without number. So it shall always be.

"I am Master Yalia Sagewhisper of the Omnia discipline, the Shado-pan charged with maintaining the wisdom, knowledge, and sacred traditions of our order. It is my honor to welcome you here and to commend your courage for appearing upon the appointed day. The Trial of the Red Blossoms consists of three tests: the Test of Resolve, the Test of Strength, and the Test of Spirit. Each of these tests holds death for those unfit to stand beneath the banner of the Shado-pan."

These last words were accompanied by a stiff breeze that grew into a gust, a cold wind that roared down from the surrounding peaks and into the monastery like a predatory cat. Red petals spun through the air like drops of blood as the bridge swayed, and Ten tightened his grip on the chain balustrade. Crooked Wu saw his panic and chuckled as Master Sagewhisper continued.

"This will be your last chance to turn away from the course that has brought you here. If there are any among you who doubt their place in the trials, any with misgivings, I invite you to step from the Bridge of Initiation and return to your homes. There is no dishonor in this decision, but you will never again be allowed within these walls."

There was a moment of silence, and then the sound of someone clearing his throat. Some whispered pardons, followed by a slow shuffling as one—no, two—pandaren excused themselves from the bridge. They were the tall woodcutter from the Southern Isles and a studious-looking girl from Stoneplow. Both held their heads down as they left. Ten wished that he had the luxury of following.

No. No, I don't wish that at all.

He was surprised by the thought, which had blazed out unbidden from his mind. Was he actually glad to be here in the biting cold, swaying above a half-frozen lake?

Well, not glad. But... but at least this feels like a chance to do something. To be something. One cannot change the seasons, certainly, but I won't turn away from a fortunate wind.

The cold breeze pressed against his cloak, and Ten shivered.

In a manner of speaking.

Master Sagewhisper waited until the two pandaren had been escorted from the courtyard, and then continued.

"Now begins the Trial of the Red Blossoms. There are Shado-pan among you, initiates. At least, we hope so. Our numbers have grown few over the centuries, and our enemies grow bold. From the Temple of the White Tiger come dire omens as the mists that surround Pandaria are drawn apart. Recent months have brought savage new threats to our shores, and our most sacred sites have been seized, corrupted, and destroyed. The sages sing of dark days ahead."

Ten wondered what Master Sagewhisper meant by "savage new threats." Apparently something important—and frightening—had happened since he had left the Valley of the Four Winds. He remembered overhearing half-whispered conversations on the road, rumors of strange beasts and visitors from foreign lands, but had been so focused on surviving his journey north that he had passed them off as the silly prattle of nervous travelers. Now Ten wished that he had listened more carefully.

Master Sagewhisper took a step forward and raised a clenched paw.

"Regardless, we are not some rough-hewn army scabbled together from the unready common folk. We are the Shado-pan. Our numbers have ever been fewer than those of our enemies, but every Shado-pan blade is the equal to a dozen ordinary soldiers. Thus we cast down the mantid. Thus we spurn the yaungol. Thus we keep the sha at bay. And so shall it ever be."

She pointed across the lake, toward the other side of the monastery. There a small tiger-shaped brazier was being placed by a pair of Shado-pan acolytes wearing white scarves.

"The fiery tiger will test your resolve. Within her belly, buried beneath the coals, are six silver coins marked with the symbol of our order. You will plunge your paw into the tiger's mouth, retrieve a white-hot coin, and return it to me in the grove."

The ten remaining applicants looked at each other nervously. The rangy girl from Krasarang started edging her way back up the bridge, trying to get a head start. In seconds, she was caught in a tangle of arms as several others pushed to get to the shore past her. The bridge swayed wildly, and Ten tightened his grasp on the chain.

A footrace to show resolve? There is something she's not telling us.

Master Sagewhisper turned to go, the other two masters already walking back to the grove. She called over her shoulder.

"There are only six coins, and ten of you. I suggest that you swim quickly."

Swim?

With a clank, the chain holding one half of the bridge dropped from its mooring, and the applicants fell into the lake below, breaking jagged holes into the ice. They came up sputtering, shouting, bellowing, one voice screaming that he could not swim. There were a few seconds of terrifying chaos as some panicked and grabbed onto others, who responded violently with blows and curses to avoid being dragged down into the frigid depths. Those who had been dressed in fancy armor did not surface. The quick ones shucked their heavy gear and struck out across the lake with rapid strokes. They knew that more time in this icy water meant death.

Ten swung from the remaining bridge chain above their heads. His nervous grip had kept him from getting dunked with the rest of the initiates. Now, he was being left behind. He pulled himself up to straddle the chain, wondering whether he might be able to crawl across it to the mooring and simply run around the lake to the brazier.

I don't think they'll let me get off that easily.

His fears were soon confirmed as another white-scarved acolyte walked over to the second mooring and began to disconnect the chain. Apparently a dip in the lake was prerequisite to becoming a Shado-pan, but he knew that if the water didn't kill him, the wind against his meager wet cloak soon would, even if he passed the stupid test. He did not have the size and resources of the other initiates. He had to stay dry.

Hand over hand, he moved to where the chain dipped lowest, and he began to lower himself down the planks that hung beneath it. The bridge was built to drop away on one side and then be easily reconnected after the trials were finished. *Clever, thought Ten. It saves them from having to build another bridge every seven seasons.*

Luckily, or unluckily, this seventh season happened to fall in the middle of winter. It meant that the ice stretching across good portions of the lake was thick. *Maybe thick enough to support a runt.* The acolyte was almost finished with the chain, and Ten felt the tension begin to loosen. He spied a stretch of ice just beyond where he hung, and he began kicking his legs, swinging the entire bridge back and forth in order to give himself enough momentum to—

The second chain clanked loose, and Ten let go at the apex of his swing. He spun through the air, arms wide, and then landed with both feet on the ice with a solid—and dry—thunk. For a moment he stood there, ears perked for the slightest sound of cracking ice. Silence.

He cast around for another piece of ice and saw a slab floating a few feet away. Leaping across the gap, Ten landed and almost slid off. His momentum pushed the ice a little farther toward his goal, but he had to wave his arms wildly to keep his balance. There was ice scattered all the way across the lake, but going at this lumbering speed—and at this unsteadiness—would result in a loss, a swim, and a shallow mountain grave. He knew what he had to do.

Jumping from the ice slab, he alighted onto the next, a smaller piece, and without stopping to regain his balance, he simply leaned into the skid and propelled himself into the air and toward the next chunk of ice. And the next. Skipping across the lake like a stone, Ten soon passed the swimmers and neared the far bank.

Six chains rose from the water at the edge, twenty feet of frost-rimmed metal that climbed straight up to the rocky shelf where the brazier was perched. It would be a difficult haul for anyone, harder still for a wet pandaren with paws numb from the cold. This truly was a test of resolve.

Unfortunately, the pieces of ice were getting smaller and farther apart. Ten's feet were wet from all the splashing, and he could no longer feel his toes. To make matters worse, the water surrounding the chains was completely clear of ice. In two more leaps, he would be in the lake, no way around it.

Not around. Just like in the market. Over.

Reaching up, he quickly untied the chin straps on his broad hat. As he leaped from the final piece of ice, he pulled the hat from his head, bent at the waist, and spun it toward the icy water that waited below. The hat twirled down onto the lake's surface just as Ten's foot landed on top of it. Carried by the momentum of his leap, he skated across the water with one foot balanced on the hat. It was large enough to keep him above the lake for a few seconds before he leaped again, this time onto the chain rising from the water in front of him.

One of the advantages of being a shriveled mushroom.

Ten climbed the chain as fast as he could. The small pandaren was energized by his sprint across the lake and did not have much weight to carry. He crawled over the ledge and trotted toward his smoldering goal.

The brazier was cleverly built, a snarling tiger constructed from slanting iron bars that became black stripes against the yellow-orange glow of the coals. Clenching his teeth, Ten plunged his paw into the tiger's wide mouth, quickly pulling a white-hot coin from the heat with an audible hiss. As a thief, he had mastered the art of speedy coin grabs, and the maneuver cost him nothing more than a blistered palm, some smoking fur, and scalded fingertips as he juggled the glowing metal toward a nearby snowbank. With a sigh, he sank his paw into the crusty whiteness.

The first time I have ever been grateful for snow!

He spun as the chain rattled behind him; the next initiate had arrived. The girl from Krasarang pulled herself up and collapsed at the base of the brazier, shivering violently. She looked up at Ten with confusion on her face and then curled into a trembling ball.

"S-s-so c-c-cold!" she moaned, her voice raspy and low.

Ten looked past her. Three more chains were shaking as other initiates arrived. It was time to go. The more direct route would be a swim back across the lake, but Ten quailed at the thought. His hat was gone; his toes were frozen; and he had already taunted the ice spirits enough for one day. Around the lake he went.

Ten reached the grove without incident and found Master Sagewhisper sitting serenely under a gazebo at the center. If she was surprised to see the small initiate appearing first—and dry—then she did not show it. Master Sagewhisper simply held out her paw, nodding as Ten dropped the coin into her palm. She then motioned for the initiate to wait at one side of the pavilion, not saying a word.

The next to arrive was not the Krasarang girl but a burly, long-haired lad who Ten had not noticed before. The boy was still dripping wet, and his right arm steamed from its encounter with the tiger's mouth. Ten could tell that the boy had been slow in digging around for his coin; patches of fur had been singed off completely around his wrist, and there were some painful-looking burns on his paws.

Regardless, the boy had made it, and he took his place next to Ten without a sound. The little thief thought that his competitor's face certainly showed signs of resolve. That was how a true warrior dealt with pain, and Ten felt admiration for the boy.

He passed the test. I merely snuck around it.

Ten's earlier sense of victory was hollow now. He was still just a thief.

The girl from Krasarang came next, teeth chattering from the cold. Ten could only imagine how foreign and painful the icy water must have seemed to somebody accustomed to the steamy heat of the southern jungles. At least her arm was in better shape than the other cub's. Ten guessed that survival in the jungle required quick paws.

There was a growl, an explosive sneeze, and Heavy Chan stomped into the grove. The large pandaren was more than merely soaking wet. He had managed to discard his luxurious cloak in the lake, but the rest of his clothing splashed and squelched and ran with thick rivulets of icy water. It dripped from his nose, his chin, his belly, and pooled around his broad feet when he reached Master Sagewhisper. He was so wet Ten could not help but wonder if Heavy Chan had swum *back* from the brazier rather than running around the lake like the rest of them. Again, Master Sagewhisper held out her paw.

Heavy Chan lifted his own paw, and that was when Ten noticed something he hadn't seen from where he stood at the side: Chan's paw was encased in metal. Strips of metal that had been formed into the shape of a tiger.

The large pandaren shivered and then bowed before the Shado-pan.

"I could not remove my paw from the tiger while holding the coin, Master. The tiger's mouth was too small and quite hot..." Heavy Chan looked up at Master Sagewhisper, eyes steady. "... So I took the brazier and jumped back into the lake."

He sneezed again, a powerful sound that shook the grove. More red blossoms floated to the ground, and Ten saw that the other initiates were looking at Chan with wide eyes.

He really did swim both ways. And carrying an iron tiger for half of the journey.

Heavy Chan lifted his arm and then smashed the brazier against one of the paving stones near his feet. Already weakened by the cold water, the brazier broke apart. Chan dropped three coins into Master Sagewhisper's paw.

"There are no others behind me."

Ten was curious how many had drowned, or frozen, or simply given up when Chan took the brazier.

Master Sagewhisper stood and motioned for the initiates to follow her. Everyone gave Heavy Chan a wide berth as he splashed after her, trying to squeeze the excess water out of his clothes. He sneezed again, then saw Ten following behind him, hopping to avoid the puddles.

"Well done, runt. Let us see if standing on your hat will help you pass the Test of Strength."

The long-haired boy laughed, and Ten just shrugged. He strode past Heavy Chan and gave him a friendly punch on the arm.

"It is too bad there is no test for sogginess. You carry half of the lake in your enormous pants."

Heavy Chan growled and swung at the smaller pandaren, who was expecting the response and dodged out of the way easily. Now the girl from Krasarang was laughing as well, and Ten made a show of daintily shaking water off of his fist. The big pandaren frowned and sneezed again. Even his rolls of insulating fat were not impervious to such a thorough and frigid soaking.

Master Sagewhisper led the four initiates through a pair of heavy doors and into a training dojo. Inside was a simple arena ringed with stone pillars. Ten could sense the *history* of this place, the centuries of training and discipline that seemed to be woven through the very air. The Shado-pan master nodded farewell and quietly returned to the grove, leaving the initiates to glance nervously about the dojo and wonder what the next test would entail.

Ten noticed something curious. Placed at the very center of the arena were three massive bells. Tall as a grown pandaren and as wide around as a Heavy Chan, the ancient bells were marked with words of power. Ten approached, hoping that this test would not require him to actually *carry* one of these things.

A low voice came from behind the initiates.

"You have all shown true resolve worthy of the Shado-pan. Now I would have you show me your true strength."

Ten turned and caught his breath. Standing at the doors was the largest pandaren warrior he had ever seen. Easily three heads taller than Heavy Chan and far broader at the shoulders, this Shado-pan rippled with muscle. His fur was almost pure white, and his eyes scanned the initiates with predatory speed, marking strengths and weaknesses.

Ten shivered, feeling as though he stood before a barely contained avalanche of deadly martial power.

"I am Master Wan Snowdrift of the Blackguard discipline. The warriors of the Shado-pan must answer to me, just as I answer to Lord Taran Zhu. I know every warrior who stands upon our walls, and have tested my blade against each of them. If you live through the trials and become Shado-pan, someday you will cross swords with me, for you cannot truly know someone until you fight them."

Here, Master Snowdrift clenched one mighty fist, and the sound of cracking knuckles echoed through the dojo like boulders. Ten grimaced.

"But today is not that day. You are young and untrained. An initiate is not yet a weapon but a raw bar of iron still waiting for the forge. This is where iron shows strength before it is given an edge."

He walked over to the three bells, and the master's quiet strides reminded Ten of a prowling tiger.

"You stand before sacred artifacts, relics from centuries past that have been crafted with magic and metallurgy to withstand the depredations of time. Each has been tuned to sound one perfect note when it is rung."

He rapped a knuckle against the bell nearest him, and it made a dull clank.

"Lovely, is it not?" Master Snowdrift smiled. "The bells will not sing until they are lifted from the ground and struck with some ferocity. It is a part of their magic."

Ten frowned. Giant-bell lifting was definitely not in his repertoire... and had he heard a muffled sound from inside the bell? A hiss?

Master Snowdrift continued, "Underneath each of these bells lies a different type of death, initiates. The death that steals, the death that hides, and the death that saves. I shall wait in the grove until I hear all three bells ring, and then return. Any who have been strong enough to survive shall move on to the next test."

Heavy Chan sneezed, and the Shado-pan master gestured toward the dripping initiate.

"This seventh season has been especially cold, and I know that you are all weary. Let me get you started."

In one smooth motion, Master Snowdrift spun and kicked the bell behind him. It flew through the air to crash against a pillar on the other side of the arena. The pillar cracked, and small pieces of stone rained to the ground. The bell rolled across the floor unharmed.

Master Snowdrift walked back toward the doors. The initiates watched him leave in quiet awe.

"I do not expect you to fight well," he called. "But I do expect you to fight."

The doors swung shut. The lock clicked into place.

"Look!" cried the long-haired boy, horror in his voice.

Ten turned around and gasped. Where the bell had been, an enormous snake was coiled. It rose up on a muscular neck, towering over the initiates.

"A bamboo python!" shouted the girl. "Back away! It is going to str—"

Like a bolt of green lightning, it struck. Knocking the long-haired boy to the ground, the serpent sunk its fangs deep into his shoulder. The boy cried out, tried to beat at the snake's scaly head, but it held on tenaciously and looped powerful coils around him. The three other initiates backed away from the creature's striking range, looking for somewhere to hide. How were four unarmed and untrained youths supposed to defeat such a deadly beast?

The Krasarang girl was cursing to herself, and Ten heard her angry whisper at his side.

"I know how to kill these things. If only I had my spear. Why didn't they let me bring my spear? I could save him!"

The death that saves.

"Heavy Chan!" shouted Ten. "I think that one of the bells may hold weapons! Quickly, look underneath!"

The big pandaren looked at Ten as though he were crazy.

"Nice try, runt. You think I'm going over *there*?"

He pointed at the remaining two bells, which stood just behind the serpent and its prey. Well within striking distance.

"Besides," yelled Heavy Chan, "how do *you* know there are weapons there?! It might be more snakes!"

The long-haired boy had stopped struggling, and the serpent gave him one more shake before uncoiling and rising back up to its full height. It was covered in emerald scales and had cold black eyes. Long fangs dripped with blood and vile slaver, pooling onto the stone floor. Ten looked at the dead boy on the ground, two tear-shaped red marks on his shoulder. He was surprised by their size.

The death that steals—venom, or some noxious fluid from the swamps. It sneaks into the body through tiny little doors and leaves with your soul.

A thief.

The serpent was now slithering toward the Krasarang girl. She had reached the back wall of the arena and had nowhere else to go.

Ten knew that he would not be able to pass this test once the others were dead. He could not lift a bell by himself. It was an odd realization: he *needed* them.

"Chan, you have to trust me or we are all going to die. The python is the *death that steals*. One of those bells holds the *death that saves*. I think that means weapons—tools of death that we can use to save our lives."

Ten clenched his fists and ran toward the beast, waving his arms. The creature hissed and turned away from the girl.

"I will distract the snake and draw it away from the bells!" he shouted. "Knock on them; listen for any sound coming from inside."

The python was now slithering after Ten, and he had to turn and run. Perhaps he could dodge between the pillars? Glancing back, he saw that Heavy Chan and the girl were already moving toward the bells as the creature chased him.

It was faster than he had imagined, and Ten did not think that he would be able to reach the pillars in time. The bell that Master Snowdrift had kicked was lying on its side just ahead, and the little thief dove behind its bronze bulk as jaws snapped at his heels.

Ten scurried around to face the python. It towered over him, and the cover provided by the bell seemed very meager from his point of view. The snake struck again, and Ten barely ducked under the blur of scales and fangs. Behind the slithering beast, he could see Heavy Chan tapping one side of a bell, the jungle girl pressing her ear against it with an intense expression on her face.

And then Ten realized the major flaw in his plan: he was arming his two rivals so that they could wait for the python to kill him, and then finish it off with one less competitor.

Heavy Chan looked over and smiled at Ten, then waved goodbye. He put his arms around one of the bells and began to tip it over.

Ten ground his teeth, but he couldn't really blame the other initiates; this test was about survival, not making friends. But he was damned if he was going to let them join the Shado-pan over his little dead body.

He ran around to the mouth of the bell, placing himself directly in front of the giant snake. It reared back in surprise at this audacious move, hissing angrily.

As a thief, Ten had learned to watch his marks for a *tell*, a signature expression, or gesture, or movement that indicated his target was going to attack. This lesson had saved his life countless times on the street.

The python had a tell. Ten had watched as the beast had struck at the long-haired boy, and again at himself. It would flick out its tongue right before striking, extending the sensory organ to taste its victim's fear just before the kill. Ten watched the snake's hypnotic sway with legs bent, waiting for the tongue to flick—there!

Ten leapt straight up into the air as the python struck into the space where he had just been. Unfortunately for the beast, the place where Ten had just been was the open mouth of an ancient bell, and the python's skull rang against the heavy bronze with a clear and lovely sound.

That's one.

Ten landed on the creature's back and then rolled off, dodging the thrashing coils as the snake tried to dislodge its head from the bell.

He joined the other two initiates just as the Krasarang girl was pulling a spear from under the bell with a raspy laugh. Ten crouched down to see what else had been hidden beneath—*the death that saves* indeed! A pile of sharp, simple weapons was stacked neatly on the floor: a sword, a club, an axe, and a dagger. Ten hurried and swept them out from under the tipping bell, snatching the dagger for himself. He reached up and used the weapon's heavy pommel to strike against the side of the bell with all his might. A pure note rang through the dojo.

That's two.

Heavy Chan was cursing at them to grab a weapon for him, and that he couldn't hold on much longer.

"Here you go," said Ten, sliding the axe across the ground.

"Bout time," gasped Chan, panting under the effort. "Look out!"

With that, he released the bell. It landed with a heavy clang and a whoosh of air.

Heavy Chan lifted the axe with a smile. The Krasarang girl smiled back, hefting her spear.

"Now *this* is what I have been waiting for," said Heavy Chan. "Let us show the serpent some death of our own making."

A muffled voice came from inside the bell.

"Best of luck, you two!"

Heavy Chan stood unmoving, and the smile dropped from his face.

"Where is the runt?"

The Krasarang girl shrugged.

"Only one place he could be," she said.

Heavy Chan pounded against the smooth, impervious, and very protective surface of the bell.

"A thousand curses upon your family, despicable runt! Have you no shame? What sort of coward are you?"

"I am the sort of coward who is still alive, Heavy Chan. Now listen: the python will be free from that bell in no time. It is faster than you think. Watch for its tongue—it will flicker out before the snake strikes."

Ten leaned back against the cool side of the bell and listened as the two initiates argued about what to do about the thief. In the end, the serpent decided for them. He heard shouts, taunts, and angry hissing. A scream, a roar.

Boy, am I glad I'm not out there.

He trusted that now that the initiates were fully armed, the girl's jungle savvy combined with Heavy Chan's strength would be enough to slay the thing. There were more shouts and another hiss. He felt something slam against the ground, followed by a long silence. Then, the rap-rap-rap of knuckles against the bell.

"Python? Is that you?" Ten replied.

Heavy Chan's voice was tired and hot with anger.

"The snake is lying in several pieces across the dojo floor, runt. Now Pei-Ling and I are going to knock over the third bell, complete the test, and leave you to rot inside your little metal cave. Or who knows? Maybe I will come back here once I have become a Shado-pan and stick another serpent inside the bell with you."

Ten could hear the Krasarang girl (apparently Pei-Ling was her name) laughing at the idea.

Fantastic. By arming the initiates and saving their lives, I have earned their hatred.

It was what he had become accustomed to. From his father, his brothers, even the other pickpockets in the alleys. Why should he expect anything more from these initiates?

One cannot change the seasons.

Ten knocked on the bell.

"Heavy Chan, check your wrist. I think you dropped something."

There were a few more seconds of silence and then a cry of rage.

"Thief! Degenerate! Hozen-loving root eater!"

The insults carried on this way for quite some time, until there was another dull thump. It was Heavy Chan, slumped against the bell.

"That bracelet was a gift from my mother, you misbegotten toad. Crawl out from under there and return it to me."

There was a grunt, a sneeze, and the bell began to tip upward. Ten rolled clear and found his back against the third bell. Pei-Ling was sitting on the ground, cleaning blood from her spear. She looked up at Ten and gave him a mock salute, then returned to her weapon. Ten was confused by the action. Even in jest, he had never seen this before.

A show of respect.

Heavy Chan dropped the bell and turned, puffing and shaking so hard he could barely raise his axe. He had been wounded in the battle, one pant leg bloody and torn as though the large youth had been dragged across the stone floor. The wound, the icy swim, and the repeated bell lifts had cost the initiate, and he appeared to be coming down with the flu. But Heavy Chan's anger drove him forward.

"Give me the bracelet, runt," he wheezed. He slammed his axe against the bell he had just dropped, and Ten cringed as sparks flew from the clumsy blow.

"Calm down, Chan. I have your little trinket right here—"

"Give it to me now!"

At the sound of Chan's shout, the ground shuddered in a sickening motion that rippled out from the third bell and shook him from his feet. Thinking this was some trick of Ten's, he growled and climbed to his knees.

"You filthy runt. One does not steal from Heavy Chan!"

Pei-Ling shouted, pointing at the bell. This finally caught Chan's attention, and he turned with eyebrows raised.

The bell was shaking. It lurched to one side and then to another. There was a sound of impact, of metal being twisted, and a bubbling snarl...

... followed by a tremendous crack. The third and final bell had just split down the middle, and whatever ancient magics had held it together across the centuries were rent in vibrant whorls of glowing energy as a shadowy black claw tore through the thick bronze. The two halves of the bell fell to the ground with a syncopated clang, revealing a writhing cloud of smoke and ebony flame.

No, it's a living thing. A monster.

It seemed to be carved from nightmares, shadow given flesh. Ten looked more closely and shuddered. The horror was crouched over the body of a dead tiger, and Ten realized that something had gone wrong.

The tiger was supposed to be our enemy. The death that hides, a stealthy hunter. Not this thing.

He remembered that Master Nurong had spoken of an enemy Ten had never heard of before—the sha. What had the Shado-pan said?

"Just being near them... has a way of hardening one to the gentler aspects of life."

He crawled over to Heavy Chan and Pei-Ling, trying to push them away from this sha. Both were frozen with terror, and Ten could see that the creature seemed to grow as their fear did. It was pulsing now, moving in sync with the initiates' panicked breathing. The sha was already larger than the three of them combined and was sprouting new claws and tentacles with each passing second. As long as it was feeding

off of their fear, the monster did not appear to be in any hurry to attack. Ten knew that this would not last for very long.

"Look at me! Both of you!"

The two looked at him, terror wet in their eyes. They had been trained in combat, yes, but never before had they faced an enemy that seethed with such darkness. It was one thing to know how to fight. Another thing entirely to know fear.

Ten knew fear. He drew his dagger and held it up in front of them.

"Listen! We are not frightened children. We are Shado-pan. We crossed the lake of ice; we returned the burning coins; and we slew the death that steals. This is our test, our chance to prove our worth and enter the ranks of those who hunt the darkness. We can *do* this."

The other two nodded, gaining courage from Ten's words. Ten reached into his tunic and pulled out the golden bracelet.

"Here, I am sorry that I stole from you, Chan. I kindled the anger that fed this thing."

Heavy Chan looked over Ten's shoulder and paused, a curious expression on his face.

"The monster. It shrank just then, when you apologized."

As if in response, a snarl boiled from the sha, and it began to crawl across the arena floor toward them. Ten grimaced.

Whoops. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea.

The little thief helped the initiates to their feet as they stumbled back, away from the sha. He whispered a quick command to Pei-Ling, and she gave him another salute before slipping around to the side of the monster. It growled as its prey split up, but decided to stay focused on the two pandaren in front of it.

As he retreated, Ten took the dry cloak from his back and offered it to Heavy Chan, who was still wet from his earlier swim.

"I suppose I'd better give you this as well. Bind your leg to stop the bleeding."

Heavy Chan considered for a moment, then extended a broad paw to the little thief. The large pandaren's grip was weak and clammy.

"I... I am terrified beyond all reason right now, runt. This thing is a nightmare. But I have every confidence that you will find a way past it, just as you skipped across the lake like a damn pebble. Keep the bracelet; even my mother would say that you've earned it."

Ten put the bracelet back into his tunic and then gripped Chan's paw as tightly as he could.

"Keep your fear in check. Move around the monster as I approach it. Do not attack."

Ten released the initiate's paw and turned to face the sha.

"And my name is Ten."

Smiling grimly, Heavy Chan tied the cloak around his leg and then stepped away. The monster growled and started after the larger pandaren, so Ten hurried and ran *toward* the sha, dagger drawn. It whirled to confront him with claws and tentacles raised. The little thief regarded the horror calmly, or at least with what he hoped seemed like calm.

"You do not belong here, monster."

The sha drew closer, shadowy tentacles poised for violence.

"This monastery is a place of meditation and focus. Your intrusion upon these grounds goes against—"

With a snarl, the sha struck at Ten, a pair of tentacles the size of tree branches whistling through the air like monstrous whips. Not even Ten could dodge these, and the blow sent him tumbling back across the dojo floor.

Ok, that really hurt.

Ten painfully climbed back to his feet. One of his ribs was broken, and a line of blood ran from the little thief's mouth. He had managed to keep ahold of his dagger, and he lifted it pitifully as the sha crawled toward him.

"I have been an orphan since age seven. I have slept in sewers and fought packs of virmen for food just to survive. I have sheltered under the twilight rain in alleys with thieves and murderers."

The sha snarled and struck again. Again, Ten tumbled backward, his dagger clattering across the stone floor. Another rib broken. Could he even stand now? He had to. With a groan, he stumbled back to his feet. Blood ran freely down the side of his face.

"You think I have never taken a beating, monster? Just last season I was whipped by a butcher for stealing his garbage, and by a blacksmith for warming my paws at his forge."

A thick tentacle lashed out, wrapped around him, and caught him up in a smothering grasp. The sha drew Ten close to its toothy maw. Ten had lost his dagger, and so he rummaged through his tunic with his one free arm. Heavy Chan's bracelet felt cold and solid in his paw.

"I have lived in the shadow of hunger, pain, and death all of my life," snarled the thief. "You don't scare me."

He snapped his paw toward the sha, and Chan's long golden bracelet whipped through the air. It tore through one of the creature's glowing eyes with a pop. The sha screeched and dropped its prey, coiling backward with tentacles waving in agony. Ten crawled to his knees, coughing blood. The sha was now only slightly bigger than him.

"Now, Pei-Ling!" he cried, hoping his voice would carry over the monster's wails. The girl from Krasarang burst from the shadows with her spear extended. She drove it through the sha, using the force of her momentum to carry the flailing thing past Ten and toward Heavy Chan, who stood waiting next to the first bell.

"The bell, Chan!" cried Ten, trying to climb to his feet. He prayed that the large pandaren youth still had enough strength for this one last effort.

Heavy Chan nodded, already guessing Ten's plan. He crouched and bent his knees, wrapping his arms around the bell. With a mighty roar, he lifted it into the air.

Pei-Ling pushed the thrashing sha toward Heavy Chan at a full sprint. The monster was mad with pain, writhing tentacles and claws whipping blindly around with violent abandon. It struck at the girl, drawing blood along her shoulders and arms.

With a shout, she hurled the spear—and sha—directly into the bell. Heavy Chan staggered backward as the impact knocked into him, growling as he slammed the bell's mouth down. The floor cracked under the weight.

The bell shook as the tentacles caught under its rim flailed wildly. Heavy Chan drew the axe from his belt and grimly set to chopping them off. Pei-Ling joined him, using her foot to keep the tentacles steady as the axe flashed down and rang against the ground.

Ten stumbled over to them both, holding tightly onto his side.

"That should hold this monster as long as we can keep our emotions reined in."

Pei-Ling laughed her raspy laugh.

"I think," she said, "that won't be a problem."

Ten and Heavy Chan looked down. The bell had gone quiet. A murky fluid bubbled and smoked through the cracks in the floor. Ten wiped blood from his brow to keep it from running into his eyes.

"Let's go try to ring the pieces of that third bell. I believe that we have passed the Test of Strength."

Master Sagewhisper and Master Snowdrift stood quietly arguing on the terrace overlooking the frozen lake, their expressions calm. This was how the Shado-pan argued, Ten supposed, and after his fight with the sha, it made sense. The little thief

leaned forward and strained to hear what they were saying, but the masters' words were lost in the cold wind. The motion hurt his ribs, which were still not entirely healed. Ten winced and sat back on his haunches.

There had been some alarm at the discovery of a sha within the monastery, and the initiates had been questioned repeatedly about what had taken place. Shado-pan agents had been sent out to investigate what had gone wrong. While he had waited in the infirmary, Ten had learned that the tiger waiting beneath the third bell had been sent as a tribute from the village of Firebough Nook, but it turned out that none of the villagers knew anything about the gift. Ten had heard the acolytes' whispers of mantid scheming, even a mogu conspiracy. Regardless, someone had attempted to corrupt the Trial of the Red Blossoms and foul the Shado-pan's sacred tradition. From what Ten surmised, things could have gone much worse. If the sha had been able to kill the initiates, it could have easily hidden inside the monastery and set to corrupting the Shado-pan where they were most vulnerable. Nobody would have suspected anything; after all, initiates died at every trial.

In other words, Ten and Pei-Ling and Heavy Chan were heroes.

Ten glanced over at Pei-Ling, who knelt beside him. She was dressed in the uniform of an acolyte, white scarf highlighting the snowy fur that curled around her ears. The girl from Krasarang smiled and nodded at the large figure kneeling next to her. Heavy Chan was also in an acolyte uniform, but he wore a dirty, threadbare cloak wrapped around his neck in place of a scarf. The little thief rolled his eyes; apparently Heavy Chan had sworn to wear Ten's cloak as a token of honor as long as he was a Shado-pan.

If we truly are Shado-pan.

And that was why the three had been called here. It seemed there was some debate over whether or not they had earned their place in the order. After all the questioning had finished, Ten, Heavy Chan, and Pei-Ling had been visited by Master Snowdrift as they recuperated inside the infirmary. It had been he who commended them on surviving a test he would not have given to even his most senior students. He was proud of the initiates' strength, he said, and there would be no more testing required to prove their worthiness to the order. When the three were healed and ready,

they could begin their training in the dojo. White-scarved acolytes had then appeared behind Master Snowdrift, bowing as they presented the initiates with their uniforms.

The following day, Master Sagewhisper had arrived with another handful of acolytes. She had thanked the initiates for their bravery but had sternly intoned that tradition called for *three* tests, and the Trial of the Red Blossoms was not yet complete. The intrusion of the sha, while regrettable, had provided valuable combat training and certainly qualified as a test of strength. It was not, repeated Master Sagewhisper, a test of spirit. Was she to promote those initiates who had frozen in the lake during the Test of Resolve merely because this seventh season happened to fall upon one of the coldest winters in memory? Her acolytes had then removed the uniforms from Ten, Heavy Chan, and Pei-Ling, bowing to the initiates as they departed. The next day, Master Snowdrift had returned the uniforms. This had gone on for a week.

So now they were all here. The two masters turned and walked back toward where the initiates knelt. Master Sagewhisper raised an eyebrow.

"I apologize for our inconstancy, young pandaren. I am sure that Master Snowdrift extends his regrets as well. This is what happens when tradition is not followed. Chaos."

The larger Shado-pan master bowed his head in acknowledgment, the shadow of a smile on his broad face as he motioned for her to continue.

"We have spent the morning debating the finer points of tradition versus practicality, and together have arrived at a consensus. We have decided... that the decision is not ours to make."

Here Master Sagewhisper stepped back, and Master Snowdrift took her place.

"The decision on whether or not to expect a third test from you initiates should be made by the Shado-pan responsible for the third test. Unfortunately, he left soon after your encounter with the sha. Such was his duty; matters pertaining to our loathsome foe are under his stewardship as the master of the Wu Kao."

A hawk called out in the morning air, and Ten smiled. He knew that sound.

"I thank you for your patience, fellow masters."

Master Nurong strode onto the terrace. His boots were heavy with snow, and his cloak bore the stains of travel. Ten noticed dark red marks on his sleeve. In one paw the Shado-pan master held a large crossbow; in the other he carried a sack. The spear that Ten had encountered on the rooftop months ago was strapped to his back. Master Nurong tossed the sack to the feet of Master Snowdrift and Master Sagewhisper.

The bag fell open, and three heads rolled out across the stone floor. At first Ten thought that they were skulls; then he noticed the bulging insect eyes. The serrated mouthparts.

Mantid.

Each of the heads had been pierced by a single crossbow bolt through the eye, and Master Sagewhisper lifted one of the grisly objects with an expression of academic curiosity.

"I tracked these assassins from their hidden den near the outskirts of Firebough," said Master Nurong. His voice was steady and deep, just as Ten remembered. "I was able to learn little from them before they died; mantid spies do not speak under torture. I removed their limbs anyway just to be certain."

Master Snowdrift nodded, then waved to an acolyte who stood against the far wall. The white-scarved attendant scurried to stuff the heads back into the sack, taking the one that Master Sagewhisper proffered to her with a bow.

"Well, now we know where the attack came from, or at least have strong evidence suggesting its origins," said Master Sagewhisper. "Sadly, this will not change our tactics along the wall. We shall fortify where we can, but our forces are still outnumbered."

Master Nurong smiled and for the first time looked down at the initiates.

"At least we have three able new members of our order—or we soon will, if they can pass the final test."

Master Snowdrift cleared his throat, frowning. "I had thought that you more than anyone would be impressed by the courage these young initiates have shown by slaying a sha infiltrator. Is there any other way to prove the Shado-pan spirit?"

Master Nurong replied earnestly, "I *am* impressed. From what I have heard, the initiates demonstrated courage, strength, and some... remarkable cleverness." Here he nodded toward Ten, who blinked awkwardly and ducked his head.

"But tradition calls for three tests. And three tests shall be given before these initiates are accepted into the Shado-pan."

Master Sagewhisper bowed, a placid look on her face (which may have been the closest she could come to a smile). She took a step back as Master Nurong joined her in front of the three young pandaren. The one-eyed Shado-pan crossed his arms.

"Initiates, on your feet."

Ten, Pei-Ling, and Heavy Chan stood.

"I am Master Nurong of the Wu Kao discipline. The Wu Kao are scouts, hunters, spies, and assassins. We bring death from the shadows and teach monsters to fear the night.

"You have each taken the first test, and you were marked for your resolve. Look down at your paws, for you bear our sign."

The three initiates looked down and saw the round scars that had just finished healing on their palms. The scars had taken the shape minted upon the coins—the face of a tiger. Ten could see that Heavy Chan was smiling.

Of course. He has three.

Master Nurong continued, "You have each taken the second test, and you were marked for your strength. These scars are more numerous, and I promise that you will join them with countless more if you take up our standard."

Ten felt the bandage at his forehead and nodded solemnly.

"You have defeated an enemy that only our veteran soldiers dare to face. You have witnessed the horror of the sha and felt the creature's dark presence inside of your hearts and minds. And while your courage and strength may have saved your lives, the cost of this battle is greater than you know. There is a reason we do not send untrained warriors against such an enemy.

"From the moment your battle began, you were known and marked by the sha. And once the sha have left their mark upon you, it will never go away. Every encounter you have with them, from this day forward, will be more difficult and more terrifying. The sha *know* you now. They know your minds, your weaknesses, and your fears."

And Ten realized that truly he *did* feel fear. Fear like he had never known before. What Master Nurong said was true: he had been marked. Ten suppressed a shiver and looked up at the masters with hurt in his eyes.

Their faces were unreadable. Master Nurong closed his one eye.

"And now I present your third and final test.

"The sha are the collective power of all the fear, hatred, and evil in our land. They are an enemy who will show no mercy and will never tire. The Shado-pan's sworn duty is to destroy the sha. We are the sword and shield against their terror, the last and only line of defense against the evil they would bring to Pandaria.

"If you take the oath of our order, you are willfully choosing to battle the sha again. And again. For the rest of your lives. We shall train you in their destruction, and we shall arm you against their fear, but one thing is assured: it will never go away.

"Your final test is this: take the oath of the Shado-pan. Knowing all that you know, bearing the scars that you bear. Will you stand with us?"

Ten suddenly felt cold, a cold that came from deep inside his bones.

Face the sha again? We... we only barely survived it. And now it knows me? I cannot do that again, cannot stare into fear as it breaks me against the stone floor.

A breeze wound through the terrace, and Ten shivered. The frigid wind of this damn mountain made his ribs hurt. Ten stared down at the small round scar on his paw. He thought of returning to Halfhill, of his home in the alleys.

Life was not so bad there. I survived, didn't I? I did alright as a thief.

A thief.

Whitefeather called from the blue winter sky above. And Ten realized that title no longer fit him. It was simply too small.

One cannot change the seasons.

Ten stood before Master Nurong and grasped his paw.

"I will take the oath and join the Shado-pan, Master Nurong."

Pei-Ling stood beside Ten. Heavy Chan did too.

"I will take the oath, Master Nurong."

"And I."

Master Sagewhisper scowled, stepping forward to put her paw on Master Nurong's broad shoulder.

"But they cannot take the oath to be Shado-pan as a test for worthiness! The oath can only come *after* the test has been passed. This flies in the face of centuries of tradi—"

"You will *not* instruct me on my duties, Yalia!"

Master Nurong's powerful words rang throughout the terrace, his voice smoldering in a tone that was not anger but a dangerous warning. Master Sagewhisper stepped back, her face blank.

"Tradition dictates that the Wu Kao master holds the final test. I have done so. These initiates have elected to serve their people, knowing full well what terror awaits them in the coming years. They have shown the courage and strength of spirit that the Shado-pan need in these dark days."

Whitefeather flew into the terrace, alighting on her master's shoulder.

"You have passed the final test, young Shado-pan. You will give your oaths to Lord Taran Zhu at sunset upon the Bridge of Initiation—and, no, it will not drop you into the lake this time."

The two other masters filed out of the terrace with their acolytes behind them. Ten noticed that Master Sagewhisper's eyes refused to meet his. He wondered if her demeanor would always be so dour, and was not looking forward to training under her. But that could be dealt with another day.

Today, I am Shado-pan.

He bowed and followed Pei-Ling and Heavy Chan. They were to move into the dormitory now, and Ten was excited to have a bed of his own, hopefully somewhere near his new friends.

"Ten of the Peppered Scroll, I would speak with you."

He turned to see Master Nurong seated on a stone bench at the end of the terrace. The one-eyed Shado-pan was leaning back against the wall, obviously tired from his journey. Ten approached, head bowed respectfully.

"Yes, Master?"

Master Nurong looked at Ten with a weary eye and held out his paw.

"You have something of mine. I would like it back."

Ten smiled, reaching into his tunic.

"My apologies, Master. One cannot change the seasons... but old habits die hard."