



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS of PANDARIA

HORLEY

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

The Untamed Valley

by Robert Brooks

I

"Neither of you will survive the night," the orc said.

Vindicator Maraad and Sentinel Commander Lyalia ignored him. He had made similar threats every night since he had been captured. Lyalia poked the campfire with one of her moonblade's blades, repositioning a log. The flames roared briefly. The light played off Maraad's hammer, sending thin, flickering violet rays across his armor.

"The night elf will die first," the orc said a few minutes later. "I will make you watch her die, draenei. I promise this to you." He shifted his posture, and the shackles on his wrists jingled softly.

Maraad didn't bother responding to him. "You should sleep tonight, Lyalia," the draenei said.

"So should you," she said. "But since you cannot, I will not." Even as she stirred the ashes in the fire, her eyes swept over the wide, open terrain. "Besides, he is talkative tonight. Maybe he will finally tell us his name." She gave the orc a level glance. "No? What is the harm in a name if we will not survive the night?"

The green-skinned prisoner glared at her but said nothing.

"Suit yourself," she said.

The sun touched the horizon.

"What exactly do you mean," Haohan Mudclaw asked, "by 'When Thunder blow, Thunder gonna blow big'?"

The hozen farmhand loped along the roadway through the heart of the valley, keeping pace with Haohan's cart. "Since you been gone, Thunder not go."

"Not go'?"

Mung-Mung waved his hands in front of his nose as though smelling something foul. "Me not want to be around when three days of dook comes out of his ooker."

"Wonderful," Haohan said. The last thing he needed to deal with today was a constipated mushan. "Mix up some olive oil into his feed. Should clear him right out."

Mung-Mung shivered. "Did. Began two days ago. Still nothing."

Haohan stared in disbelief. "You've fed him oil for two days? And nothing?" He shivered too. *When Thunder blow...*

They passed the next half-mile in silence. "You know, Farmer Fung arrive early. Already at your house," Mung-Mung said.

"Good. Wait," Haohan said, giving him a suspicious look. "What are you thinking?"

"Mung-Mung think that grouch obsessed with fertilizer."

Haohan grinned broadly. "And maybe he'd like fresh ingredients. That's the best idea I've heard in weeks." One problem solved, hopefully. "Who else is at the house?"

"Geezer." Old Hillpaw, he meant. Not a member of the council but a neighbor. "Gina." Haohan's daughter.

"Who else?"

"Just them," Mung-Mung said.

"Where's Nana and Mina and Tina and Den?"

"Jade Forest, still."

"Still?" Haohan frowned. "I thought they'd be back today. I wanted this to be a full council meeting. What about Yoon?"

"He went with them."

"Oh." Now Haohan remembered. Yoon was planning a food-delivery contract with some dwarven masons on behalf of the Tillers' Union.

With a light touch on the reins, Haohan steered to the right, and the two horses turned onto the road to the Mudclaw property. Mung-Mung continued to knuckle-walk alongside the cart but made no move to jump on. He didn't trust horses. Haohan preferred mushan leads, too, but that Alliance quartermaster down at Lion's Landing had offered to trade two healthy horses for a cartload of carrots, and that was a deal a Mudclaw couldn't pass up. He had to admit the horses were a lot easier to handle. Even well-trained mushan had a tendency to wander a bit on the reins.

Mung-Mung suddenly sprinted ahead and climbed a signpost, peering into the distance. "Uh-oh," he said.

"What?"

"Listen, boss."

"Your ears are better than mine," Haohan said.

"I hear virmen," Mung-Mung said.

Haohan sighed. "Let's scare 'em off before they annoy anyone to death."

II

One of the virmen, a larger male with white-streaked fur and a strangely curved front tooth, hopped forward and flung a paw's worth of woodchips at Vindicator Maraad. "Here money. Give carrots!"

The draenei let them bounce off his face and chest armor. "I do not have any carrots," he said calmly.

Angry chattering rose from the dozens of red-eyed rodents that had surrounded the trio. Several thumped the ground threateningly with their feet. At Maraad's side, Lyalia put her hand on her moonglaive's grip but did not remove it from her belt loop.

"Think they will be trouble?" she asked lightly.

Maraad chuckled. "I doubt it," he said. In a louder voice, he asked, "You want to buy carrots?" The virmen's grumbling took on a passionate tone. "I am sorry to disappoint you. I do not have any carrots to sell."

The virmen with the woodchips bounced on his hind legs, agitated. "We see Halfhill! We see market. Tall ones like you give round things and get carrots." He flung another pawful of chips at them. "Now give carrots!"

The small pieces of wood showered the prisoner. The orc growled and kicked out but missed the virmen. His shackles jingled.

Vindicator Maraad kept a firm grip on the orc's arm. "As I said, I have none to sell or give," he said. "And most merchants deal in gold, not... the coins you have."

"Hey!" A voice cut through the din. Lyalia could see a pandaren and a hozen huffing toward them. A cry of alarm went up among the virmen. "Get out of my fields!" the pandaren bellowed.

The virmen scattered. One darted around the hooves of the draenei, picking up most of the "coins." The hozen flung a rock at him, narrowly missing. Soon all of the rodents had retreated to their warrens.

"Stupid ookers," the hozen muttered.

"Sorry 'bout that," the pandaren said. "They ain't as crazy as they were a couple months back, but they still need a swift kick every now and then."

Lyalia smiled. "I do not think they meant any harm," the night elf said.

The hozen inspected the woodchips. He sniffed one and grinned. "Hey, boss," he said. "Axle." He hooted with laughter.

The pandaren uttered a strong oath under his breath. "Those idiot virmen... *This* is why they gnawed through the axles on three of my carts? Of course it is. Probably saw me buy them with coins and assumed the carts were actually made of 'em." He ran a paw through the fur on his head and sighed. "Well, comes with the territory, I suppose. You want to live in the valley, you get to deal with them.

"My name's Haohan Mudclaw. I own this farm."

"Thank you for your help, sir. My name is Lyalia. I am the commander of the Sentinels on Pandaria. My friend here is Vindicator Maraad of the *Exodar*. And him... We do not know his name, so I cannot introduce you properly."

The pandaren's eyes lingered on the orc. And the shackles. "You're an odd group to see around these parts."

"We do not mean to trespass. If you wish us to leave, we will," Maraad said.

Haohan shook his head. "Ain't nothing growing where you're sitting, so it's no problem." He glanced again at the restrained orc. "I thought the issues between y'all had been settled for now," the pandaren said carefully.

"The ceasefire is still in place," Lyalia said. "This one wiped out a small Horde caravan two weeks ago and tried to ambush my Sentinels ten days past. *After* the ceasefire." The night elf's expression was cold. "He committed murder against both sides. If I had to guess, I think he is unhappy with Hellscream's fall."

"So a criminal, not a soldier," Haohan mused. The orc grunted but said nothing intelligible. Haohan raised an eyebrow. "And the Horde accepts your... custody... of him?"

"We decided to avoid the Horde altogether," Vindicator Maraad said. "Simple misunderstandings have a way of spiraling out of control. Tensions are still high. We do not wish to threaten the peace."

"And what they don't know won't bother them." Haohan scratched his chin. "Makes sense. Well, come on. I have a cart just around that hill."

Lyalia and Maraad exchanged glances. "And where would we be going?" Lyalia asked.

"To my home. Bed you three down for the night."

"We appreciate the offer," Maraad said, "but we have to decline."

"It's no trouble."

"No, thank you."

"Those virmen will come back."

"We will handle them," Lyalia said.

"I don't think you understand," Haohan said. "If I know these virmen, they're arguing in their warrens right now about why their plan failed. When they come up with another scheme, they'll go to the other warrens first and rally even more troops. You might turn around in a couple hours and see a few thousand drooling virmen staring at you, chanting about carrots, and if you can't produce the goods..." He shrugged. "Maybe you can take care of yourselves, but I'm not sure you'll enjoy fighting them all off."

Vindicator Maraad looked troubled. "Very well. We will pick another place to settle for the night."

"You *definitely* don't understand," Haohan said. "Unless you get yourself a dozen miles away from here within the next half-hour, they will find you. You won't believe how persistent they'll be until you're willing to kill a few to show you mean business. They've learned to steer clear of Tiller homes, though. We have rakes and we know how to swing 'em. You'll be fine at my place."

"Still," Lyalia said, giving Maraad a worried look, "we cannot accept."

The orc suddenly spoke up. "Do not offer aid to the Alliance, farmer," he said, "unless you wish to share their fate."

Haohan blinked. "Oh. I see." He smiled at the draenei and the night elf. "You think your prisoner is dangerous. That I can't take care of myself."

Lyalia guided the pandaren a few steps away, out of the orc's hearing. "We cannot put you at risk," she said. "We do not know anything about him or whom he might have been working with. We have skirted wide—very wide—of the Horde presence in Krasarang to get him to Lion's Landing unseen. If he was not acting alone, we could be attacked at any time."

Haohan peered at the orc. "He's a Hellscream loyalist? And maybe other loyalists will come to rescue him? It's settled. You're staying at my home."

"We cannot."

"Well, you can't stay out here. I'm serious about the virmen," Haohan said. "I want to help. People like him have done enough damage to our land. Tomorrow morning, I'll take all three of you to Lion's Landing on my cart."

Lyalia hesitated. That would shave days off their journey.

"I won't take no for an answer," Haohan said.

Farmer Fung scowled at the newcomers as they arrived at the Mudclaw property. "More guests, Haohan? Outsiders, even?" he said. "Is this your way of manipulating me?"

"They were being harassed by virmen," Haohan said. "Just giving them shelter for the night."

"Don't play games." Fung jabbed a finger toward Haohan's chest. "You *happened* to bring some outsiders on the night we're talking about outsiders? At least Farmer Yoon isn't here. He got lucky. He partnered up with a good one. Just because I like one outsider doesn't mean I want our valley overrun by them forever."

"Your opinion is noted, Fung," Haohan said wearily. "Hey, Mung-Mung, weren't you going to talk to Fung about something? The mushan, perhaps? Fertilizer ingredients?"

"Really?" Fung said, brightening.

Mung-Mung gave Haohan an annoyed look as Fung dragged him inside.

"Haohan," a new voice said. Haohan turned. Old Hillpaw was standing near the mushan pen, calling out to him. "You got a sick mushan."

"Mung-Mung told me, Hillpaw," Haohan said, joining him at the fence. They both looked at the mushan pen, where Thunder noisily chewed hay. "I don't know. He seems fine to me."

The mushan belched roughly, and a horrible smell filled the air. Haohan wrinkled his nose. It was a wonder the nearby crops didn't wilt. The sound echoed off the mountains to the north. He could have sworn the *smell* echoed, too. Haohan sighed. "Yeah, the old boy's sick."

"Feed him some oil," Hillpaw said. Haohan felt a headache coming on.

Lyalia helped the orc off the cart. Maraad stepped down after him.

The night elf noticed the older pandaren standing next to Haohan. Hillpaw looked away from the mushan and appeared to be closely studying the trio of outsiders. She nodded to him. He didn't nod back. A wide-brimmed straw hat kept his eyes in shadow. The fur on his chin had grown into a long beard. The other one, Fung, had at least made his hostility clear. Lyalia couldn't read this one's intentions.

She turned her attention back to her duty: the prisoner, and any who might try to rescue him. She scanned the horizon.

The Mudclaw home stood near the top of a small hill, close to the mountain range separating the Valley of the Four Winds from the Vale of Eternal Blossoms, and had a spectacular view of the surrounding farmland. Even in the waning light, Lyalia could see rows and rows of gigantic vegetables and other plants stretching into the distance.

Between the home and the mountain range, the ground sharply sloped down into a body of water.

Not a single threat in sight. Time to deal with more pedestrian matters.

"Can you handle the orc alone for a moment?" she asked Maraad. He grunted in agreement.

Lyalia grabbed her empty waterskins and carefully moved down to the pond's shore. A moment later, that older pandaren, Hillpaw, joined her.

"Don't step in there," he advised.

The surface of the large pond seemed calm enough. "Why?"

"Watch," Hillpaw said. He whipped his arm forward, and a stone skipped across the water. Ripples spread from each bounce. And then...

... something massive surged from the deep, breaking the surface. A giant eye stared at the two figures at the water's edge. The creature was easily six or seven times as long as Lyalia was tall. Maybe even more.

It sank out of sight, and the water returned to its tranquil state.

"What was that?"

"Cattail grouper," Hillpaw said. "They get big sometimes."

"That is a little more than *big*," Lyalia said.

"That's why you cull 'em. Or rather, why you're supposed to. Mung-Mung has been slacking." Old Hillpaw grunted. "You're safe on the edge of the shore unless it decides it doesn't like you. Just don't go jumping in the water."

"I will remember that." Lyalia finished refilling her waterskins.

Old Hillpaw didn't leave. "I recognized that orc's shackles. I saw the sigil of the White Tiger," he said.

"Ah."

"Shado-pan manacles. The kind they use to restrain people with... unusual power. Unknown power."

"You're right," Lyalia said. "They were a gift."

"The Shado-pan aren't in the habit of giving gifts," Hillpaw said.

"True enough. Call them a payment instead," Lyalia said. "In exchange for removing anyone who might wear them from your land as quickly and quietly as possible."

"Now that sounds like the Shado-pan."

"You have dealt with them before?"

Old Hillpaw didn't answer. Lyalia didn't press him.

"How long have you and your friend been in Pandaria?" asked Hillpaw.

"Vindicator Maraad arrived rather recently, and he will probably be leaving soon. But I was one of the first of my people to land on your shores," Lyalia said.

"Why? What brought you here?"

She hesitated. Hillpaw showed no expression at all. She didn't know if he was asking out of curiosity or suspicion. She decided to be honest. "One of our leaders saw a vision of a blessed land. Some of us were looking for other things"—Lyalia bowed her head for a moment as memories of her father suddenly surfaced—"but it was that vision that launched our ships. It turned out to be the Vale of Eternal Blossoms."

"And what did you do there?"

Fought off the mogu for months, only to see a tyrannical orc raze the place. There was a limit to what Lyalia wanted to share. "I tried to protect it." Her voice dropped into a whisper. "Elune knows I tried."

Silence settled over the pond. The water rippled. Finally, Hillpaw grunted again and left her alone at the shore without another word.

Lyalia looked back at the pond. Of the danger lurking beneath its surface, there was no sign.

A thick green finger stirred the ashes of the extinguished campfire. "Still warm. They were here tonight." The orc turned toward the other eight. "We take them before sunrise. Pair up. Prepare."

One of the others shifted uneasily. "The spirits won't behave, Zertin."

"The spirits here are spoiled and soft, Kishok." Zertin's response was laced with anger. "They are children in need of discipline. If you can't handle a child, open your veins now and save me the trouble of gutting you."

There were no more objections.

"Good. Move."

They did. Quietly. The dark of night cloaked them.

III

"Don't use all the sauce, Gina," Farmer Fung said. "You'll drown the meat."

"That would be horrible," Gina Mudclaw said without an ounce of sarcasm. She gave her father, Haohan, a steady look. He didn't return it. He was paying far too much attention to chopping the vegetables. "Imagine all that meat being tender, flavorful, falling apart with each bite. Simply tragic." So perhaps there were a few ounces of sarcasm.

Fung scowled. "Fresh meat doesn't need that much sauce. But this is from one of Old Hillpaw's chickens, isn't it? That explains it. If I raised chickens, they wouldn't taste as gamey as his. I can see why you'd want extra sauce. Still, only use half of it."

"Your mouth," Old Hillpaw said, "does you no favors, Fung."

Gina gave Fung a slanted smile and dumped the sauce into the wok. All of it. Fung clucked his tongue.

"Where'd our guests go?" Gina asked.

"Cellar," Haohan said. He flinched at his daughter's reaction. "Their choice, not mine, Gina."

"Cramped down there," Gina muttered. "Packed in with the carrot harvest."

"Enough room for three, if they're on good terms with each other."

"Or if one of them is in chains and doesn't have a say in it," Fung said.

"True. They also asked us to lock the doors shut later tonight."

Gina filled three bowls with soup and handed her slotted spoon to Fung. "See if you can salvage my stir-fry," she told him wryly. "I'll bring these to our guests." She stepped away from the wok, balancing the bowls on her arms, before Fung could object.

Deafening chatter filled the packed warren. "Hooktooth say we get carrots!" one of the virmen shouted. "We give money, they give carrots. No stealing! We buy! That what Hooktooth say!"

Hooktooth snarled back, his hackles raised, white-streaked fur standing on edge. "We chew coins out of carts. That what *you* say! Tall ones not want cart coins. They want shiny coins. Not my fault!"

The warren mother slammed her feet into the ground with a roar. The crowd went silent. Scores of glowing red eyes turned toward her. She shuffled through the warren, giving Hooktooth a sharp glance. He bristled and sucked air through his teeth but said nothing. "Hooktooth right. Tall ones want shiny. Not cart coins. Tomorrow we steal shiny from tall ones. We use shiny to buy carrots!"

"Why steal shiny?" one of the runts asked. A bigger virmen nipped his ear. Hard. The runt hopped out of his reach and refused to stay silent. "Why not steal carrots like always?"

"They hit with rakes and shovels when we steal carrots. We buy, they not hit," the warren mother said.

"What they hit with when we steal shiny?" the runt persisted.

The others hadn't considered that. More arguments erupted.

Then Hooktooth looked straight up. "Quiet!" The warren went still. "Listen!" Soft tremors rattled the earth. Footsteps. Above their heads. Too big to be other virmen. "More tall ones! Maybe they have carrots!"

The virmen stampeded toward the warren hole. "Bring the cart coins!" the warren mother shouted.

There were nine tall ones traveling through the turnip fields. Odd that they weren't using the road, Hooktooth thought. In moments, all nine were surrounded.

"Carrots! Carrots!" the virmen chanted. Hooktooth hopped forward and flung pawfuls of cart coins into the lead outsider's face. Then he froze. A look of pure fury seemed etched into the tall one's expression. Hooktooth tentatively tossed another

pawful and then hopped back into the crowd. Something about the outsider's eyes made him nervous.

The warren mother stepped forward. "We have coins. We want carrots. You give—"

A gust of wind blew her onto her side. The other virmen went quiet. Sometimes the wind would rise, and sometimes the earth would shake, but there were always warnings. The virmen had learned to read the signs. They knew to stay underground if a storm might blow them away and to flee their warrens if they might collapse in a tremor. The spirits could be mischievous and playful, but they were rarely cruel, and they never knocked virmen over without reason. And they would never do it because the tall ones asked.

The warren mother regained her footing. Her uncertainty lasted for only a few moments. Yipping with anger, she bounded forward. "You give carrots! Take coins!"

Again, there was no warning. The wind swept her off her feet, lifting her into the air. The warren mother screamed. It was as if the spirits screamed with her. The wind suddenly sent her careening toward the ground. Earth rose to meet her.

Earth and wind howled together. And together, they crushed her.

The virmen drew back. The remains of the warren mother flopped over, lifeless.

The tall ones smiled.

Hooktooth turned and fled back to the warren with the others, screeching at the top of his lungs. They all had experienced strange things in recent months—the dark energy of the sha that had whipped them into a fervor, the hozen raids, the masses of outsiders stomping through the Valley of the Four Winds—and none wanted any part of whatever new power these nine were wielding.

The virmen huddled together in silence, hoping the tall ones would leave soon.

Gina carried the steaming bowls of soup down the cellar stairs. The draenei and the night elf were talking quietly, leaning up against the pile of harvested carrots. The orc was sitting with his back against the dirt wall to the north. He was smiling.

"What's he so happy about?" Gina asked.

"I would ask him if I thought I would receive an answer," Vindicator Maraad said. The draenei was still wearing his armor, his hammer within easy reach.

Gina gave a bowl of soup to both Lyalia and Maraad. She set the third down by the orc's feet. The prisoner didn't look at it or her. "You two travel together often?" she asked.

"First time," Lyalia said.

"Choice or necessity?"

"Both," Maraad said. "I volunteered to help the Shado-pan find the culprit in the convoy attacks. A few of her Sentinels were in the area. We searched in pairs. Here we are."

"The draenei have business with the Shado-pan?"

Maraad offered a slight smile. "Not in the way you mean. The campaign on your land is over. Prophet Velen wants strong relationships with all on Pandaria. He is here himself, though most of his time will be spent in the north. It is a fascinating place with a fascinating history. Much to learn here." He sipped from his bowl of soup.

"We work fairly well together," Lyalia said, "considering neither of us has slept in six days."

Gina's eyes went wide. "Six?"

"Maraad watches the orc." Lyalia wondered if she should explain that paladins had ways to squelch any unexpected spellcasting. She had no idea whether the average pandaren understood things like that, even after months of mingling with outsiders. Gina simply nodded; perhaps she did. "I keep an eye out for everyone else." The night elf grimaced. "I know we could not have left the vale undefended, but I wish we could have spared a few extra Sentinels for this journey. Or at least my nightsaber." Ash had taken a minor wound to one of his legs a couple weeks ago, and Lyalia had been worried he couldn't yet cope with such a long walk.

"The vale? Why would it still need defending?"

"Most of the Shado-pan went north, to Kun-Lai. The Temple of the White Tiger," Maraad said. "Have you not heard about the—"

—*thrum thrum thrum thrum...*

Maraad went silent. Gina tilted her head. "What's that sound?"

... *THRUM thrum thrum thrum THRUM thrum thrum thrum...*

The orc raised his eyes. His smile had turned feral. The sound vibrated through the earthen walls of the cellar. Little bits of dirt fell to the floor.

"Maraad?" Lyalia slowly lifted her moonglaive. "That feels as if it is coming from the ground. Is it the elements?"

"I am no shaman, but I believe so," Maraad said quietly. His hammer began to glow with the Light.

Lyalia tightened her gauntlets. Her green eyebrows drew down. "Now we know what our friend is, don't we?"

"Yes."

Haohan, Hillpaw, and Fung stopped talking immediately as the ground rattled with a strange rhythm. *THRUM thrum thrum thrum...*

"That's not good, is it?" asked Fung.

The cellar doors swung open. Gina jumped out. The two Alliance members followed, pushing the orc ahead of them.

"No," the night elf said, "it is not."

"Look at these ookers." Mung-Mung whistled softly.

From his perch in the tree just outside the Mudclaw home, he could see nine orcs forming a wide semicircle. With the mountains to the north, there would be no way to

escape without fleeing through their midst. Two of the orcs' arms moved in time with the tremors in the earth.

THRUM thrum thrum thrum...

This was supposed to be intimidating. They were posturing. Mung-Mung understood posturing. When he was six (and simply named Mung), a bigger hozen had pushed him down. The other hozen had beat at his own chest and hooted at him to stay down, to give up, to leave the wildfowl hunt "to the real grookers."

THRUM thrum thrum thrum...

The bigger hozen had fallen. Mung had earned his name name that day. Mung-Mung.

"They wanna mess with a real grooker?" he whispered. "Fine with Mung-Mung."

He counted again. Nine orcs.

"Our prisoner and the orcs outside are dark shaman," Vindicator Maraad said. "This is not good news."

The prisoner straightened up. "They are members of the true Horde," he said. "And they follow my orders. I am Mashok of the Kor'kron. I command the dark shaman on this continent." He smirked at Lyalia. "You were right, Alliance. Since you will not survive the night, there is no harm in telling you that much."

"Kor'kron?" Farmer Fung did not look impressed. "Hellscream's henchmen? They didn't do so well at Orgrimmar."

"That's what I heard," Gina agreed.

"Had proto-dragons and the power of a sha and still couldn't win," Haohan added.

An ugly expression passed over Mashok's face. His shackles jingled together. "Watch your tongues, if you wish to keep them. Some of you may still have a chance to see another sunrise."

THRUM thrum thrum thrum THRUM thrum thrum thrum...

Mashok raised his shackled hands and snapped his fingers. The rhythm instantly stopped. Lyalia gave Maraad a startled look. The draenei didn't take his eyes off the orc, but he made a slight gesture with his hammer. The Shado-pan shackles. He could see she understood. *They might suppress much of his power, but not every scrap of it, apparently.*

Silence filled the Mudclaw house.

For a moment.

"So you dark shaman can make music," Farmer Fung sneered. "We're supposed to be afraid? I've heard better."

"What you heard," Mashok said with relish, "were the elemental spirits of your land marching to our orders. They are already under our control. We trained in *Durotar*, you pandaren fool. A harsh land. Not soft and bloated and childlike like yours. The spirits here never had the slightest chance of defying us."

Old Hillpaw had stood silent throughout the conversation. No longer. "So. Dark shaman. Dominator of the elements. Member of the 'true Horde.'" He stepped closer to Mashok. "Captured by only two of the Alliance. Your power truly knows no bounds. Why were you raiding Horde camps before these two caught you? Because they weren't part of the 'true Horde'?"

Mashok threw his head back and laughed. "They chose to betray their warchief. They deserved much worse than what I did to them."

Old Hillpaw wasn't done. "Explain why a group of Kor'kron dark shaman is here in Pandaria. Obviously you weren't present at Orgrimmar. Were you left behind after your warchief defiled our land?" Fire blazed in the orc's eyes. Hillpaw nodded. "I suspected so. You weren't even valuable enough to merit a thought in Hellscream's head when he went back to Orgrimmar."

"Here is the only deal you farmers will ever get," Mashok snarled. "There are fifteen fellow Kor'kron standing outside right now. You—"

"Nine. There are nine." Mung-Mung swung into the house, landing on a table. He scratched an armpit and grinned at the orc. "Mung-Mung checked twice."

Mashok spluttered. Maraad and Lyalia shared grim looks. *Nine dark shaman?* Long odds, even if Old Hillpaw was right in assuming these weren't Hellscream's elite. Better than fifteen, though. *Interesting that Mashok would feel the need to lie*, Maraad noted.

"If you pandaren have an ounce of intelligence between you, listen well," Mashok finally said in a dangerous voice. "Release me now. Now. And I will not kill you. I will kill them"—he gestured toward Vindicator Maraad and Lyalia—"but not you. If you resist in the slightest, I will tear this house to the ground around your ears."

Old Hillpaw showed only cold, raw anger. He stepped nose-to-nose with the orc. "This land is not yours to command," he said. "This is where I raised my family. This is where I buried my family. It will be mine and theirs forever. Do you really think we'll surrender to the likes of you?"

Mashok smiled down at the elder pandaren. "The deal," he said, "no longer applies to you. The rest of you should make your decision quickly."

"Don't bother," Haohan said. "We're not stupid. You're not letting any of us survive this." The other Tillers nodded.

Maraad slowly let out a heavy breath. If the Tillers had wanted to surrender...

"We will hold them off for as long as we can," the night elf said, exchanging another grim look with Maraad. Nine versus two. At best, they would only buy minutes with their lives. "Run to Halfhill. Sound the alarm. The Alliance will assist you. The Horde probably will, too," she added reluctantly.

"Don't bother with that, either," Gina said. "We're not running."

"This is not your fight," Maraad said.

"It is my house," Haohan said.

"I meant what I told him." Old Hillpaw's eyes were fierce. "I will not surrender to them. This land is not so easily cowed, and neither are we. And if you believe we aren't willing to fight, you don't know us very well."

Farmer Fung sniffed with disdain. "You don't need to lay it on so thick, Hillpaw," he said. "But yes. I won't run either."

"Fools," the orc prisoner said under his breath. "Absolute, weak idiots. Every one of you deserves what's coming."

Everyone ignored him. Maraad smiled. "Then here is what I propose. We lock the prisoner in your cellar. I will take the lead outside, draw their attention—"

A sound cut him off. Steel clinking. Hollow thumps.

Mashok's shackles hitting the floor.

A small, thin vine quickly retreated beneath the space between two wood slats. It had picked the lock. The orc was free.

Thick roots, thorny and brown, smashed through the floor of the home in three places. Vindicator Maraad did not hesitate. He flung the power of the Light. The orc staggered, fell to a knee. The roots went limp.

But after a moment, the orc smiled. And stood back up. The roots twitched.

Maraad continued to push the Light forward, numbing the orc, stopping him from calling upon his power, but he could feel the dark shaman stretching his will, building his strength bit by bit. The other dark shaman outside were forcing the spirits to lend him their aid.

Gina picked up the shackles. "I'll put these back on."

"Stay where you are," Maraad said.

"I'm not afraid of him. I can—"

"Do not move any closer to him." The draenei was relieved to see Gina step away. He had seen the orc's stance. Mashok would have taken her hostage or killed her outright. Maraad strained to keep the orc's power at bay as an unbelievable wave of strength flowed into him from outside. Those shackles wouldn't help at all unless Maraad could completely subdue the orc first.

The Light was infinitely powerful. Vindicator Maraad believed that. But he was simply a vessel. And vessels had limits. And flaws. Maraad knew that very well. These nine dark shaman—these *ten*, including Mashok—would eventually overwhelm him.

Someone needed to disrupt the dark shaman outside. And someone needed to keep Mashok contained.

Lyalia hefted her moonblade. Maraad could feel her concerned gaze. "Are you well?" she asked.

"Mashok and I have things to discuss," Maraad said. "We will have our conversation in the cellar. We do not want to distract you."

Lyalia went very still. She asked a silent question with her eyes. *Are you sure?* Maraad nodded. Lyalia clenched her jaw.

The orc saw their wordless exchange and laughed, but Maraad redirected a bit of the Light to the floor around him. The consecrated ground crackled with energy. Only a small circle directly beneath the orc's feet remained untouched. Slowly, Maraad moved it toward the cellar doors. Mashok stepped along with it, amused. Maraad was sure the shaman could force his way out of the impromptu consecrated circle if he wished, but he would expend strength doing so. And it would hurt. A lot.

Mashok's expression soured once he realized he was being corralled toward the cellar. "Fine, draenei. Let's end this quickly," the orc said. He descended the cellar stairs without resistance.

"Bar the doors behind us," Maraad said. He gave a final look toward Lyalia. "Light be with you. Fight well, Sentinel."

"Join us when you can, Vindicator," she said.

The doors closed behind him, plunging the cellar into darkness. Only the shimmering Light radiating from Maraad's hammer allowed him to see anything at all. The orc was sitting calmly against the dirt wall to the north again.

"Shall we begin, paladin?" Mashok asked.

"Yes," Maraad said, and drew deeply from the Light.

Haohan slid one of his oversized metal chopping knives between the cellar door handles. That would keep the doors shut for the moment.

The pandaren stared down at the roots lying on the floor. "Snakeroot," Farmer Fung said. "Since when do you grow snakeroot, Haohan?"

"Seen the prices on minerals at Halfhill? The outsiders can't get enough of 'em." Haohan shook his head. "Seemed like a good idea at the time. Maybe it still is. I'll need the money to repair my floor."

The hozen peeked out the door. "Orcs are waiting. Not moving," Mung-Mung said.

"Can we win?" Gina's voice and eyes were calm. "I'm not talking about miracles. Do we have a real chance of beating nine of these... dark shaman?"

Lyalia wished she could say yes. "If we fail, it will not be for lack of effort," she decided to answer. "Nobody is unbeatable."

"Why didn't they attack earlier?"

Everyone turned to face Old Hillpaw. "What do you mean?" Lyalia asked.

"If they had attacked you two on the road, it would have been nine versus two. Now it's nine against seven. Well, six." Old Hillpaw glanced at the cellar doors and tapped a claw on his cheek. "Why didn't they attack you two earlier?"

"We were moving fast." But not *that* fast.

"Maybe." Hillpaw didn't look convinced. "Maybe it was more than one thing. This... Mashok... seems to be the strongest of the bunch. Maybe they don't fight as well without him. Maybe—"

"What's your point, Hillpaw?" Fung interrupted.

"There could be many reasons they waited to attack. But they had such overwhelming numbers; what reasons could possibly outweigh that? It had to have been something significant." Hillpaw's voice dropped to a whisper. "Perhaps we have an advantage here. They don't know this land. We do."

"That will certainly help," Lyalia said carefully. "Knowledge of terrain is always vital."

"No," Hillpaw said. "We *know* this land. We Tillers are not shaman. We can't speak to the elemental spirits. But we work with them every day." He lifted his paws. "We care for them. We fight to protect them. We've invested generation after generation into them."

Lyalia didn't want to give them false hope. "Dark shamanism is harsh. I do not understand every aspect of it, but I am not sure your spirits can resist."

"Mashok said the spirits here are soft. If he believes that, if the others believe that, then they are sorely mistaken," Hillpaw said.

Understanding dawned on Haohan. "Childlike. He called them childlike."

Lyalia could see all of the others' faces brighten. "Is he wrong?"

Gina smiled fiercely. "In ways he can't even imagine," she said.

"That strange sound, that rhythm in the earth," Fung said, "was probably a lot of fun for the spirits. They won't think it's so fun when they're told to kill the people who keep the land watered and the soil tilled."

"You saw the pond, night elf," Hillpaw said. "Great predators grow alongside our great crops. This is not a tame valley."

"I see." Lyalia glanced outside the door. There was still no movement. The shaman were holding their positions. Waiting.

"Can we win?" Gina asked again.

"Do you have weapons?" asked Lyalia.

"We have hoes and rakes outside," Haohan said.

"Don't give us that look, night elf," Fung said. "We can handle ourselves."

Lyalia schooled her expression back to calmness. They were not warriors. Untrained. But they had the right to fight for their land. "Of course." She faced Gina. "Can we win? I will tell you this: I spent months inside the Vale of Eternal Blossoms. I did everything I could to protect it. It was not enough. I will not let them do to your homes what Hellscream did to the vale. I would die first." She turned toward the door. "I will take the

lead. They will see me as the biggest threat." *And if they are more powerful than we hope, my quick death will warn you to run.* A grim thought.

"Here we go," Lyalia said.

IV

"Planning to use that?" the orc asked. The cramped confines of the cellar made his voice unnaturally loud.

Maraad glanced down at his hammer, glowing with the Light. "Not right now."

The two sat cross-legged, staring at each other across the narrow length of cellar that wasn't packed floor to ceiling with carrots. To the untrained observer, they might appear to be meditating, preparing for a battle.

Few would know that the battle had begun. Glimmers of energy were already visible. Shining motes of yellow spun around Maraad. Dark brown and red flashes sparked around Mashok.

Maraad kept the Light pressed down on the orc. Waiting for the next attack. It came quickly, a small jab, trying to seize control of the earth. Maraad brushed it aside.

"Hit me once with that thing, and all this ends," Mashok taunted. "Otherwise I'll keep my promise. I'll make you watch as they die."

Maraad didn't rise to the bait. He didn't even blink. The concentration needed to put the orc down with a hammer's blow would give the dark shaman an instant of uncontested access to the spirits. And that was the real danger. Not strength. Speed. Mashok was fast. Maraad would only get one swing of his hammer.

He would wait. He would make it count.

The orc began probing. Here. There. Again. Faster and faster. Maraad kept pace, knocking down each attempt.

Rivulets of sweat soon ran down both of their faces. The colors whirled ever brighter.

"You will obey me," the dark shaman Kishok growled. The reply from the spirits of fire came back as a series of confusing, overlapping pleas:

—*we don't understand we don't want we don't know we don't need we hate we can't we won't*—

The orc extended his will through his totem and clamped down hard. The spirits howled in pain. He smiled. This wasn't so difficult. The spirits had rebelled briefly after Zertin forced them to kill that warren mother, but once the Kor'kron had begun to work, the elements had been quickly brought under control.

"You will lend me your strength," Kishok said. "You will lend me a minion. Send it forth, the strongest and the mightiest of you. *Bring it to me.*" More howls of pain and fear. They resisted. They fought. Finally, they yielded. Kishok could feel the heat even before the minion appeared. "Yes. Good." He straightened his back and spread his arms wide, awaiting the most powerful fire elemental of this land.

Swoosh.

Kishok stared down. The elemental craned its neck to look back up at him. It was barely tall enough to reach Kishok's knees. It seemed to be wearing a mask, ornamental. Playful. Childlike.

He shook the spirits in a fury. "You mock me!" he roared. "You dare to send *this?*" The elemental shrank back, fear plainly visible in its oversized eyes. "This is an infant! I demand strength. I demand—"

"There she is!" Another orc pointed toward the pandaren house. Shouts of alarm rose among the Kor'kron.

A lone figure sprinted out of the door. A night elf. Alliance. She was but a dark blur in the moonlight. Her moonglaive was out, all four of its blades bared. She intended to die fighting.

Good, Kishok thought.

The nine dark shaman gathered their might. The earth groaned. The wind howled. Kishok glared down at the fire spirit. "Banish the shadows," he commanded. "Leave her nowhere to hide. If you are even capable of that," he added with contempt.

The small spirit lifted a hand.

Fire blazed in the sky. A giant ball of rippling blue flame, perhaps fifty paces wide, hung hundreds of paces above the ground. Even at such a height, the light was blinding. Kishok shaded his eyes. The heat nearly singed his skin. *Such power...* He had misjudged this little one. Spoiled and childlike indeed, but not without use.

"Excellent!" he bellowed, laughing. "Now—"

Cries of pain ripped through the night, and the air went still. The wind, and its spirits, fell silent.

What? Kishok squinted against the bright light and peered into the fields. A second cry of agony rose, and Kishok could see the night elf dashing away. Dark liquid dripped from her blade.

And the wind remained still. There had been two Kor'kron controlling it. *She killed both of them?*

Rage erupted within Kishok. The elemental's light had helped the night elf, not the Kor'kron. "Stop that!" The ball of fire disappeared. In its absence, absolute darkness swallowed the land.

Kishok heard confused shouts. The orcs' night vision had been obliterated. "Do as I say. We need light. Bring—" Without warning, the ball of fire returned, brighter than before. Kishok squeezed his eyes shut. He saw the veins in his eyelids.

In pure, blind anger, Kishok turned to where he had last spotted the Alliance elf and unleashed his fury. The sound of thunder filled the air.

He didn't see the other figures darting out of the home's front door.

Old Hillpaw stayed low and went south. No immediate attacks came his way. He snatched up one of Haohan's rakes. The prongs were made of ghost iron. Expensive. Durable. Sharp.

Perfect.

The enraged shouting was a good sign; the night elf must have killed at least one of the orcs. The flicking waves of light meant the spirits were not being completely obedient to their new masters. Those irregular flashes showed him where the orcs were. They shifted west in pairs, all looking for Lyalia.

They found her. The night erupted in chaos. The earth trembled. Hillpaw kept his footing all the way to the nearest pair of shaman.

They had their backs to him. Hillpaw planted his feet—just as Master Bruised Paw had taught him so long ago—and jabbed his rake's shaft toward one of the orcs' throats. Cartilage crunched under the blow. The unfortunate orc fell to the ground, a high-pitched wheeze escaping his ruined windpipe.

The other dark shaman bellowed in surprise. The two must have been controlling the spirits of water. Hillpaw saw that a globe of foul, dark, oily liquid vileness hung suspended over him and the orcs. But without both orcs exerting their will, the spirits apparently didn't feel compelled to obey any longer. The globe popped like a bubble, showering down. Hillpaw felt the first few drops sizzle against his fur, and he ducked away, rolling smoothly. The dying orc's gasps turned to gurgles as poisoned water splashed over his face.

The other orc was utterly doused. He shrieked in pain, stumbling to the north, desperately scrambling toward the large pond, his skin burning and peeling.

The gurgling continued near Hillpaw's feet. The pandaren swung the rake one last time, and the orc was finally quiet. Hillpaw had to pry the prongs out of the motionless corpse. That took longer than he wanted.

The other orc disappeared down the slope to the water's edge. Hillpaw was tempted to follow, but that would take him away from the fight. He turned toward the fields instead, seeking a new target.

Goosebumps rippled over Lyalia's skin as lightning gouged gaping holes in the ground a few paces behind her. The storm seemed to sweep in an arc—away from her,

she realized after a moment. *At least someone is blinder than I.* The giant ball of flame flickered out again. One of the orcs began shouting angrily in the distance.

She continued to run. She swerved east, across a dirt path, into the snakeroot field. Thorns tore at her legs. One stabbed deeply into her calf. She grimaced but didn't slow. Lightning lit the field before her. Two silhouettes, with a totem between them, were peering in the wrong direction.

Too bad for them, she thought.

Lyalia smiled and let her moonglaive's blades lead the way.

"The night elf is fast," Haohan said.

"Follow her example, Father," Gina said. The night elf was drawing the outsiders' focus east. The Mudclaws sprinted west, looping around behind a lone orc. Odd that this one was standing by himself. The others stayed in pairs.

"Together?" she asked.

"Together," Haohan agreed.

Haohan lowered his shoulder. Gina took two more steps and firmly planted the shaft of her hoe in the dirt, vaulting into the air, her foot aimed directly at the orc's throat.

"Zertin! Watch out!" One of the other Kor'kron shouted a warning from across the field.

The orc turned. With a cry, he flung himself away, evading both Gina and Haohan. *This one is good,* Haohan thought.

The orc faced them and raised his arms.

"Father!" Gina hurled herself at Haohan, knocking them both flat. Snapping teeth closed where he had been standing. The two Mudclaws scrambled back to their feet and stared into the glowing eyes of a black shadow. Lightning flashed elsewhere on the field, illuminating its shape. It was a wolf. A spirit of a wolf. It howled at them, anger and torment plain in its cry.

The orc offered a savage laugh. "You have many wolves in your land. But a few less now," he said. Then he turned to run, heading back into the fight with the night elf.

The feral spirit leaped at the two pandaren. Gina swung her hoe. The farm tool hit squarely on the ghost wolf's flank, pushing it to the side. It snarled at her but sprang toward Haohan. He barely dodged.

"Gina, give me that!"

She tossed the hoe. He snatched it and spun. Whacking virmen over the head for so many years made the movement effortless. The shaft whistled through the air, and the wolf instinctively flinched back from the sound.

Haohan hesitated. Then swung the tool again. The noise made the wolf back up. "Good wolf," Haohan said unconvincingly. "Nice wolf." He kept swinging the hoe. The wolf's red gaze followed it.

"Father," Gina hissed. "What are you doing?"

"A few less," Haohan said. "A few less wolves. That's what the orc said." Haohan suddenly drove the hoe downward, planting it in the dirt. The wolf stared at it, not advancing. "I think this wolf was from this valley." The spirit sat down on its haunches. It began whining, an unnerving sound.

"Where? The farms in the east?" Gina asked.

"Wolf packs sometimes pass through, right?"

"Yes, they do," Gina said. "This one remembers the farmers."

Haohan gritted his teeth. "And these orcs killed it. Enslaved its spirit."

"I see. Good wolf," Gina said, equally unconvincing. "Nice wolf. Father? Do you think the other wolf spirits will recognize farmers, too?"

"What other spirits?" Haohan glanced over at Gina and froze. "Oh. Those."

Seven more pairs of glowing eyes closed in on them. A parting gift from the orc named Zertin, no doubt.

"I hope so, Gina."

"Wonderful," she said in a small voice.

V

The air in the cellar howled at hurricane speeds. Cracks crept up the dirt walls. The earth shook.

Neither Vindicator Maraad nor the orc had moved. Their battle was one of wills. The orc could only manage the lightest touch on each element before Maraad stopped him, but with each touch, Mashok increased his control a hair's width. The amused smile on the orc's face had long since vanished. It was clear Maraad could keep pace with him.

Maraad let a tiny portion of the Light leak away into the air. In it, he sent a simple message, a feeling.

I am not your enemy. I am not fighting you.

The message was not for Mashok. It was for Mashok's victims. The spirits. Maraad was a paladin, not a shaman, but perhaps the spirits would understand.

"How long until you fail, Alliance?" Mashok asked. "You haven't slept all week. I've slept well, thanks to you. You'll miss a step eventually."

Every second, Mashok tried to smash Maraad with earth, to burn him to ash with fire, to force water into his lungs. Maraad deflected each attack. But the orc was right. Fatigue weighed down on Maraad's mind. Eventually, he would fail.

Yet the draenei allowed himself an inward smile. No orc had come to Mashok's aid. They were all occupied aboveground.

Good work, Lyalia, he thought, and blocked another assault.

"Stay here," Hooktooth whispered. "Nobody go up."

The virmen murmured with fear, shivering as hollow booms shook the earth. Only a few of their glowing red eyes were open. Another warren had already collapsed due to the battle above. There was no telling when this one might fall.

"Hooktooth, we have to help," one of the runts said. It was the same runt who had questioned the warren mother's plan. "Land hurting. Green tall ones hurting it."

"We stay here," Hooktooth repeated.

"What if land hurted too much?" the runt insisted. "Tall ones can't grow carrots if they dead or land hurted too much."

A few of the virmen opened their eyes and looked to Hooktooth.

"We stay here," Hooktooth said, less certain.

"Someone could get hurt out there," Farmer Fung mused aloud.

He crouched behind the edge of the Mudclaw home, watching as a torrent of murky air swirled around the fields. Almost as soon as he had stepped outside, the foul vortex had spawned right above him. He didn't think it had been meant for him, but it had taken at least a minute for it to begin winding toward the night elf.

Unpleasant sounds came from beneath his feet. The cellar. *The draenei and the orc must be busy*, he thought.

There were also unpleasant smells. Fung turned, nose wrinkling. The mushan, Thunder, stomped his large hooves, whining, frightened by the battle. He was obviously no longer constipated. A pile of leavings grew by the moment. It would make an excellent base for Fung's new fertilizer recipe when this nonsense was sorted out.

"Fung wanna stare at poop all night?"

Mung-Mung hung from the home's eaves upside down, scowling at him. "I don't see you fighting down there," Fung snapped.

"Dookers made tornado. Mung-Mung stay in house until it pass." The hozen flipped off the eaves and landed next to Fung. "How you wanna smash stupid shaman?"

"I'm thinking." Fung eyed Thunder with disdain. The pandaren briefly considered riding the mushan into battle. Very briefly. Haohan's beasts might pull carts easily enough, but they likely wouldn't be much use with a heavy pandaren on their back.

Although...

Fung scratched his chin and sized up Mung-Mung. Then he looked back at Thunder. And smiled. "Hey, Mung-Mung," he said.

Mung-Mung had followed his gaze. He shook his head vehemently. "No. Mung-Mung say no!"

"I have an idea," Fung said brightly.

"No!"

Three down. Lyalia spun and thrust. *Four.* She began running again, trying to stay on the razor's edge of safe ground among the chaos.

The Kor'kron regrouped. Fresh attacks rained down around her. A tornado curved across the fields. Already her lungs felt as if they were on fire; she had taken a single breath of the invisible toxic fumes the last pair had conjured, and now each new breath scraped her throat like sandpaper. Jagged slivers of earth whistled past her head. One grazed her neck, adding another small cut to the many she had collected thus far.

Two more dark shaman stood in front of her. One of them raised a hand. She had no chance to dodge this time. A column of burning ash slammed into her. The force of the blast bowled her over, but the attack didn't cease. The ash poured down from above, tiny pebbles of fire, the sheer power of it keeping her flat on the ground. Lyalia gritted her teeth and covered her head, refusing to cry out. The searing rocks flayed her.

I got four, she reminded herself. *Four. Not bad.*

Father. I will see you soon.

She looked up at the orc who was only moments away from killing her.

The night elf locked eyes with Kishok. He smiled and contemptuously gestured toward her with a free hand. She was instantly engulfed in flames.

There. He let the rain of ash cease. Kishok peered into the darkness and spotted Zertin near the pandaren house, no doubt waiting for the proper moment to enter the cellar and end the remaining Alliance fool within. Perfect. Kishok set his totem pouch on the ground, adjusting its straps, preparing for the remainder of the battle. The orc next to him, a quiet one named Trokk, followed suit. It would be simple to finish off the farmers. A couple might run, but they would be easy enough to track. If the wind—

A loud hissing sound interrupted his thoughts.

Kishok spun. Steam rose from where the night elf lay. The flames were gone. The fire elemental giggled.

Shimmering blue light peeked out from behind an enormous turnip. Another elemental. Water. It had extinguished the fire. It shyly tossed a small globe of water into the air. The fire spirit launched a tiny spear of white-hot flame at it, and when they collided, the globe vanished in steam and sparks.

Both spirits giggled again.

Are they... playing catch?

With a scream of rage, Kishok tried to stomp on the fire elemental.

"Kishok, wait!" Trokk called out.

The fire spirit slid out of the way, and the orc's foot slammed into his pouch of totems. He felt several items shatter under his heel.

Kishok spitted Trokk with a sharp glance. The other orc wisely kept his mouth shut. "Enough!" Kishok snarled. The spirits refused to obey? They wanted to play games? Fine. *This* was why dark shamanism was necessary for the true Horde. The spirits had begun to shy away from responding to the warchief's shaman in Orgrimmar. That disobedience had been corrected swiftly.

Kishok would crush this spirit. Make an example of it. He reached out with his will.

And caught nothing. The fire spirit looked down at the shattered totems. And giggled again.

"I don't need those," Kishok said softly, stepping forward. "One way or another—"

"Hey, dooker!"

The ground shook, and a warning cry from Trokk was silenced with the sound of a gruesome impact. A moment later, a beast crashed into Kishok from the side. Kishok's face hit the dirt. He rolled to his feet with a growl. The shape of a lumbering mushan disappeared into the high stalks of the nearby turnip fields. The orc could hear the beast slowly turning around to charge at him again. Kishok dropped into a low crouch and looked around. Trokk lay still, his head deformed. The mushan had stepped on it.

Kishok heard a soft footstep in the dirt to his left—very close—and the left side of his torso went numb. The orc caught a flash of black and white out of the corner of his vision, and he desperately brought up his right arm, blocking a blow to his head.

One of the pandaren farmers stared into his eyes. His paw was clutching a strange, sharp weapon. "I hate outsiders. Most of them, anyway," the farmer said.

The numbness gave way to blinding pain. Another of the strange weapons was sticking out of Kishok's side. His mind delivered the news without panic. The orc was well trained. He ruthlessly squashed the agony and drew himself upright. A lesser creature might fall to such an injury, but not a Kor'kron.

The pandaren slid around his right guard, clumsy, but Kishok's reflexes were dulled by the pain. The orc's *other* side went numb. Kishok swung, and his fist slammed into the farmer's face, dropping him into the dirt. Kishok pulled one of the weapons free with a snarl. It had an odd handle, curved, and it was made of junk metal.

"What is this?"

"Shears," the pandaren said in a muffled voice, holding his broken nose. "For the sheep."

Kishok could feel blood dripping from his sides. He removed the second shear. "Understand who you're facing, *farmer*. I am not a simple—"

"Still alive, dooker?"

The ground shook again. The mushan had returned, and it smashed into Kishok, sending him head over heels, massive hooves mashing the soil only inches from his skull. Desperately the orc reached out. His earth totem had not been completely destroyed, and he managed to catch a spirit of earth by a fingernail. A wide swath of the field heaved, and the mushan tumbled onto its side, its hozen rider hooting with fury. The spirit wriggled and tried to escape, but Kishok refused to let go.

More pandaren were approaching from the east, a male and a younger female. A much older male closed in from the west. The mushan and the remaining pandaren were south. Kishok stumbled north. There was no room for subtlety. He was bleeding. Injured. He needed distance and time to fight them off. There was a slope leading to a large pond. Kishok stood at the edge of the hill and forced the spirit to raise a wall of earth five paces high between him and the pandaren.

The spirit obeyed, using the land just beneath Kishok's feet.

Kishok fell.

He skidded down the slope, all the way into the shallows of the pond. Fresh pain throbbed throughout his entire body, and for a few moments, he gasped for breath, waiting for the agony to subside.

They will pay. His rage grew with each heartbeat. *They will PAY.* He stood up, knee-deep in the water. He could see dark swirls of his blood.

His right foot bumped into something. He bent down and fished it out. A pouch. A shaman's totem pouch. Half of one, anyway. Kishok regarded it curiously. It looked as if it had been ripped in two—no, *bitten* in two.

The orc felt a chill. One of the other Kor'kron had come down to the water's edge. What happened to him?

The water in front of Kishok roiled. A giant mass heaved underneath the surface, jaws gaping, teeth gleaming in the moonlight. With a horrified cry, Kishok slogged backward. The huge—the absolutely *enormous*—fish launched forward, lunging, snapping its mouth closed. A crunch echoed off the mountains to the north.

The totem pouch fell into the shallows yet again. The fish slowly slid back into the deep.

"This is why you outsiders need to eat more," Farmer Fung said. He cupped his broken nose, grimacing. "Too skinny. If you had some padding on you, you'd probably feel fine."

"Probably." Lyalia groaned. She lay flat on her back. The flames had only lasted for a couple moments. Hopefully not long enough to badly injure her. Hopefully. It still hurt. She could see the water elemental that had saved her prancing in a nearby field, playing with the fire spirit.

"Can you stand?"

"Let's find out," she said. Fung pulled her upright. After a few heartbeats, Lyalia decided she wouldn't drop dead this instant, but if Maraad couldn't heal her within the hour, she didn't have high hopes. "How many are left?"

A terrible scream rang out near the pond. And then there was silence. The wall of earth blocking the slope to the water's edge collapsed into a pile of dirt. "One less," Fung said. Mung-Mung hooted, patting the mushan on the head as the beast stomped his hooves.

"I think there's only one more," Haohan said. He cradled his left arm, wincing. A gash stood out against a patch of white fur. "Plus the one in the cellar."

"What are we waiting for?" Gina said. Old Hillpaw grunted in agreement.

"He's strong, Lyalia," Haohan warned. "Very strong."

Lyalia tested her range of motion. Each movement sent pain shooting from head to toe, but at least she could swing her moonlaive. It would have to be enough.

"Stay—" She hesitated. They wouldn't stay here even if she asked nicely. She changed her approach. "Behind me for now. Wait for him to come after me. Then strike. It has worked well for us so far."

Fung eyed her injuries with skepticism but nodded. The others did too.

Zertin knelt next to the pandaren home, his fingers pressed into the dirt. He smiled. The spirits roiled under his feet, crying out, writhing. But obeying. Mashok would soon be free.

Footsteps. Behind him.

Zertin turned. The night elf was slowly approaching him. She looked injured. Charred. Her pandaren allies spread out behind her. A hozen was even riding a mushan in their midst.

"So," he said, raising his voice. "I'm outnumbered. You think I'll surrender, don't you?"

Lyalia stepped closer. "No," she said.

"At least you are not a total fool," the orc said. He spotted the father and daughter pandaren advancing with her. He called out to them. "Did you enjoy meeting my pets?"

"They're gone now," the daughter said. "They weren't interested in killing the farmers who once fed them."

"I see," Zertin said. "Then meet the ones I brought from Durotar."

Ghostly howls shattered the night, and a pack of wolf spirits leapt at the group. The elf turned to fight, to protect the farmers.

Zertin ignored her. He sprinted into the house.

There. The cellar doors.

Everything in the cellar shook. Everything writhed. Everything but the orc and the draenei. The shrill of the spirits and the whirling Light formed an unending assault on the senses. Maraad squinted, forcing himself to keep his eyes open.

Behind him, above him, the cellar doors rattled.

"They're here," Mashok said through clenched teeth. "You have failed. They're right above us."

I am not your enemy. I am theirs, Maraad called once more to the spirits. "That is exactly what I have been waiting for," he said.

Mashok looked confused. The cellar doors swung open. "Mashok!" an orc voice shouted. "I'm here to save—"

Maraad whipped his hammer off his lap and threw it. With a crunch, the hammer caught the newcomer underneath the chin, taking the orc off his feet. Maraad sprang up, clearing the cellar stairs in two strides. He heard a roar of rage behind him and a swelling of power as Mashok finally seized control of the spirits. Maraad snatched his hammer and ran for the home's entrance only a heartbeat before thick roots shot out of the cellar, twisting, searching for prey.

After that, things happened very fast.

VI

"Keep that mushan away from the house," Lyalia called out.

"Dooker not listening!" Mung-Mung shouted back, holding on to Thunder's neck for dear life. The ghostly wolves had been an illusion, nothing more, but the bucking mushan was utterly terrified. At least the beast was moving away.

The sound of wood bending and snapping drew Lyalia's attention. She saw Vindicator Maraad exit the Mudclaw home at a dead run.

"He is loose!" Maraad turned to face the door. "How many left?"

"Just those two," Lyalia said.

"This is it, then!" Maraad gave a quick glance to the pandaren. "Help if you can."

Two orcs emerged. Zertin was stumbling, a hand pressed to his jaw as though he had taken a heavy blow. The other was Mashok. The former prisoner raised his arms. Thick vines of snakeroot tangled around each of the Mudclaw home's support beams. The roots flexed once. The home shattered, collapsing into ruin.

"Roots. Are we sure he isn't a druid?" Lyalia said. Maraad sighed.

More roots broke through the earth beneath Lyalia's feet. She danced away. The ground heaved. She could see Maraad's hammer glowing as he dodged a different patch of roots.

"Ideas?" she yelled.

"Do not fight the spirits. Fight *them*."

Lyalia noticed he hadn't smashed any of the roots flat. "Good. I was worried this would be easy," she said. It had been only moments since the orcs had stepped into the open. Every passing heartbeat would make her job harder. She dashed forward, ducking and weaving, resisting the urge to cut a path through the looming roots. *I hope you know what you are doing, Maraad.* A chasm in the earth suddenly yawned beneath her feet, and she barely managed to leap over the gap. She saw the angry red glow of magma far below.

The two dark shaman slowly backed away as she advanced. Chunks of rock jutted upward between her and them. Snakeroot reached for her neck. It was impossible to close the distance.

A shape darted toward the orcs from the rear. Gina. Lyalia expected her to try a quick attack, in and out, but the pandaren female leaped on Mashok's back, tearing at his ponytail and locking an arm around his throat.

The other orc, Zertin, hesitated. Another shape closed in from the side. Farmer Fung. Lyalia and Maraad charged in. Mashok threw Gina off his back only to be bowled over by Haohan. Zertin dodged Fung's slashing shears, stepping into Lyalia's reach. The night elf swung her moonglaive once, twice. Zertin ducked the first swing, took a wound to an arm on the second.

"*Enough!*" Mashok was flat on his back, but he clapped his hands together, and suddenly Gina and Haohan were lifted, roots wrapped around their throats. More snatched at Fung, catching him by the ankle.

"Indeed," said Vindicator Maraad. His hammer whistled through the air. Mashok cried out and tried to roll away. The hammer still landed solidly on the orc's right thigh. Lyalia heard bone splintering.

An instant later, three sharp root tips pierced Maraad's abdomen, cracking his armor. He fell with a grunt, dark blue blood dripping to the dirt.

Zertin roared with rage, but his mouth clicked shut as a pandaren's open paw slammed into his chin. Hillpaw. Zertin dropped to his knees. Two roots punctured the older pandaren's shoulders and dragged him to the ground.

"Hillpaw!" Lyalia furiously drove one of her moonglaive's blades into Zertin's chest. *Five*, she thought. Before she could make another move, she felt a loop of root settle around her neck and pull tight. Thorns stabbed deeply into her flesh as she was yanked off her feet.

Five for me. Nine out of ten between us. Not bad.

Mashok lifted his hands and clenched his fists. The roots tightened, pulling the pandaren onto their backs, leaving them hopelessly entangled. Only the hozen was left free, and Mashok could hear his outraged hooting in the distance as he struggled to bring the mushan under control. The night elf yanked against the plant around her throat while the draenei breathed slowly, clutching his middle, the roots still embedded in his stomach.

It was done. The spirits wept and wailed in the orc's mind, a fitting victory song. Zertin gasped a final breath a few paces away and went still, joining the other dark shaman in death. It wasn't a terrible loss, Mashok decided. His underlings had always slowed him down.

"Now," Mashok said, savoring the cold pleasure of the moment, "I keep my promises." With a twitch of his fingers, the roots brought Vindicator Maraad to a kneeling position. "You and the night elf will die last. After I've dealt with every one of these farmers you failed to protect."

"Doesn't matter." The biting words came from Old Hillpaw, blood trickling from his shoulders and mouth. "You're alone. The land itself knows you are its enemy."

"Good." Mashok smiled. "You've spent generations tending this land? Hear me well: I will salt this earth. I will make the spirits pay for your stupidity. I will leave this valley *barren*." He looked down on the pandaren with contempt. "They will know you chose to fight me, and they will know that they are being made to destroy everything you have ever worked for."

"They already know. You mean to end them. We stood against you," the draenei said, his voice slurred and pained. "They know."

Mashok ignored him.

The land went quiet. The spirits went still. They no longer called for mercy. They no longer tried to escape. They no longer wept. *Finally, submission.* There was only a slight rustling in the fields behind Mashok. He didn't turn around. The hozen was still hollering at the top of his lungs far in the distance. Not a threat.

"I will cover your lands in ash. Fire will seek out even the bugs and mites that crawl through the dirt. Nothing will grow on this soil again. And then, and only then—"

"Not even carrots?" Farmer Fung asked. He could barely force the words past the roots around his throat. Mashok fixed his gaze on the immobilized pandaren. "Not even carrots will grow on this soil?"

A long moment passed. "Even now, you mock me?" the orc asked softly. "Even now—"

"It's a simple question," Fung said. "Will carrots grow here again?"

"No!" Spittle flew. Mashok's words echoed across the land. "Nobody will *ever* grow carrots here again!" Why was the farmer smiling? Mashok tightened the roots around the Tiller's neck until the thorns broke through his flesh. "I think I will kill you first," the orc said.

Abruptly Mashok paused. The spirits were still. Too still. Too obedient. The rustling in the fields had ceased.

He turned around.

A sea of red, glowing eyes greeted him. Virmen. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Simply standing, watching.

The rustling in the fields... The spirits had given Mashok no warning. A rodent stepped forward from the pack. It was the one with white-streaked fur and an oddly hooked front tooth. He sniffed the air. Mashok moved his hand in a scornful gesture. "Leave. Now," the orc said.

The virmen with the hooked tooth cocked his head but did not retreat. "You... kill carrots?"

Mashok bared his teeth. "*Leave.*" The land shook at the word. The spirits of the earth, at least, knew to obey him without question.

The mass of virmen swayed with the earth's trembling, but their unsettling red eyes did not waver. "You say you kill carrots," the hook-toothed virmen said. "Why kill carrots?"

This was absurd. *They need an example.* Coldly Mashok told the earth to swallow the lead virmen, to open a chasm beneath his feet.

No, the earth said.

Mashok squeezed one of the spirits. It shrieked in agony, but still it refused. *Every moment of your existence will be pure pain if you do not obey me*, Mashok told the spirit. He sent the same thought to the rest of them. *Do not dare to disobey me again. Give in.*

"Other tall ones grow carrots," the hook-toothed virmen said. "They make *big* carrots. You no kill carrots. You no kill tall ones."

Sear them to ash, Mashok commanded a spirit of fire.

No, the spirit said, and screamed.

A spirit of wind didn't wait for a command. *I will not obey*, it said.

Nor will I, said a spirit of water.

Mashok slammed his will into theirs, flogging them with his mind, inflicting untold suffering. And yet they did not yield.

They didn't fight us, said the fire spirit. *We will not help you.*

The roots loosened around the pandaren and the Alliance members. The draenei grunted as the sharp tips finally pulled free of his flesh.

"No," Mashok whispered.

"You no kill carrots," the hook-toothed virmen said again. Throughout the mass of virmen, the words were repeated.

"No kill carrots... No kill carrots..."

"You will bend!" Mashok roared aloud. He knew the spirits would hear. "Or you will break! Nothing can resist forever!"

We don't need to, the spirits replied in unison. *We only need to resist for a few moments.*

Mashok only glimpsed a flash of light before something smashed into the side of his head. His cheek in the dirt, Mashok saw Vindicator Maraad's radiant hammer falling to the ground.

The virmen surged forward. "*No kill carrots!*"

Mashok cried out and tried to ward off the wave of teeth and glowing eyes descending upon him.

Sounds of agony emerged from the center of the hellish, squirming mass. The orc was fighting, but each virmen he sent flying hopped back into the fray within moments. Haohan watched from his knees, breathing heavily. "Always knew those rodents were good for something. Are you okay, Gina?"

His daughter waved off the question, but he could see blood beginning to mat her fur.

The draenei caught Haohan's eyes. "Can you stop them?" Maraad asked. He stood in obvious pain, hands clamped over his stomach wounds. He limped to Old Hillpaw and knelt down. The Light glowed around him, and the pandaren hissed in surprise. The gashes in his shoulder vanished.

"Stop the virmen?" Haohan took another look at the chaos in his fields. It appeared that the dark shaman was still alive, struggling, but being dragged toward a nearby warren hole. "Why would I want to? He destroyed my house."

Lyalia slowly walked to Haohan. "Believe me, I understand the feeling," the night elf said. "But no matter what he deserves, it is better if we take him alive."

"Justice?"

"He is a dark shaman," Lyalia said. "Few have been taken alive, and few are as strong as this one. Anything we can learn from him will help." After a moment, she smiled, adding, "Justice, too."

Haohan rubbed an aching shoulder and shook his head ruefully. "You're right. This is too easy an end for him." With a groan, he stood and stumbled into the mass of

wreckage that was once his house. "Now where was...? Ah," he said, pulling aside some of the roofing and revealing the open entrance to the cellar. Even in the darkness before dawn, the rows of giant carrots were visible. "Gina, would you make the invitation?"

Gina grimaced with pain and cleared her throat. "Carrots!" she yelled.

The virmen instantly went silent, glowing red eyes turning toward her.

"Here are our carrots! With thanks! So much for our harvest." She muttered the last.

Haohan pointed toward the cellar and gave an exaggerated nod. "All of our carrots! Here you go!"

The creatures hesitated, looking at each other, at the orc, and back at the pandaren. The hook-toothed one abandoned the dark shaman first. Hundreds followed suit.

Vindicator Maraad waded against the tide of virmen. Not every one of them had given up beating and gnawing on the orc, and the draenei gently pushed those that remained to the side. They grumbled but soon gave in to the temptation in the cellar.

Mashok's eyes were wild. The rest of him looked like ground meat. Maraad knelt next to him, preparing to heal him. "I suspect," Maraad said, "that did not end how you imagined it might."

Dawn broke.

VII

The cart creaked loudly. Soon the Mudclaw home disappeared over the horizon. Vindicator Maraad kept his attention on the orc. His chest armor lay beside him; the battle had left it cracked and damaged. He had remarked that he would need to get it repaired or replaced.

Lyalia scanned the fields, but her gaze drifted to the road behind them. Maybe three dozen virmen were closely following Haohan's cart, staring at Mashok. In daylight, their glowing red eyes weren't as menacing, but every time one of them yipped, Mashok flinched. The orc was back in his shackles and hadn't said a word since sunrise.

Maraad had spent the morning healing the others. And himself, last. Lyalia had kept the orc company. Haohan had sent word to Halfhill that he was in need of workers to rebuild his home; outsiders were welcome to apply. Fung had objected strongly to the final part.

"I've been thinking," said Haohan. His paws rested lightly on the reins. "What would have happened if we had wanted to surrender?"

"But you did not," Lyalia said.

"Still. Our friend's offer. Your lives in exchange for ours. If we had believed him and wanted to take him up on it, what would you have done?" The cart creaked along in silence. "Seems like it would've been a pickle for you two. Do you fight *us* to save your own lives? Or do you give up and allow yourselves to die for an offer you know is a sack of mushan pies?" Haohan chuckled. "Some might call you two fools if you had chosen the second option."

"Some might."

"Some might call the whole Alliance a great heaping flock of fools for capturing defeated enemies instead of gutting them, because they might be a bit dangerous," Haohan said.

"Some might," Maraad said.

"Mmm." Haohan tugged on the reins, and the cart turned south at a fork in the road. Toward Krasarang. Toward Lion's Landing. "Look at me. Jawing the whole trip. Talkin' nonsense. Annoying you two after that rough night we all had."

Lyalia and Maraad shared a quick glance. The draenei shook his head in amusement and returned his scrutiny to the orc. Mashok flinched again as a virmen hopped up on the rear of the cart, yipped loudly, then bounced back onto the road.

"Still, I've been thinking," Haohan continued. "Maybe you can stand to bear a little more of a farmer's philosophizing. I wonder if the people who'd call y'all fools aren't missing the point. If you claim a standard, you have to live by it. Win or lose. Else the standard never meant nothing. You Alliance folk like to claim all sorts of civilized standards. I bet some people might think that puts you a step behind when the going gets tough."

"Some might," Lyalia said.

"Mmm. Still, I've—"

"—been thinking?" asked Maraad.

"How'd you guess? What I've been thinking is this: being all civilized probably does put you a step behind. If people trust you not to put a knife in their back, they get to scheming that maybe they could put one in yours without a problem." Haohan cracked the reins. "But that'd be a mistake, wouldn't it? There's nothing quite as frightening as a civilized person roused to anger. Some might not like what they get when they force good people to fight them."

"They might not," Maraad agreed.

"Are the virmen going to follow us all the way to the coast?" asked Lyalia.

"Probably," Haohan said. The orc shivered.

The cart rolled on.