



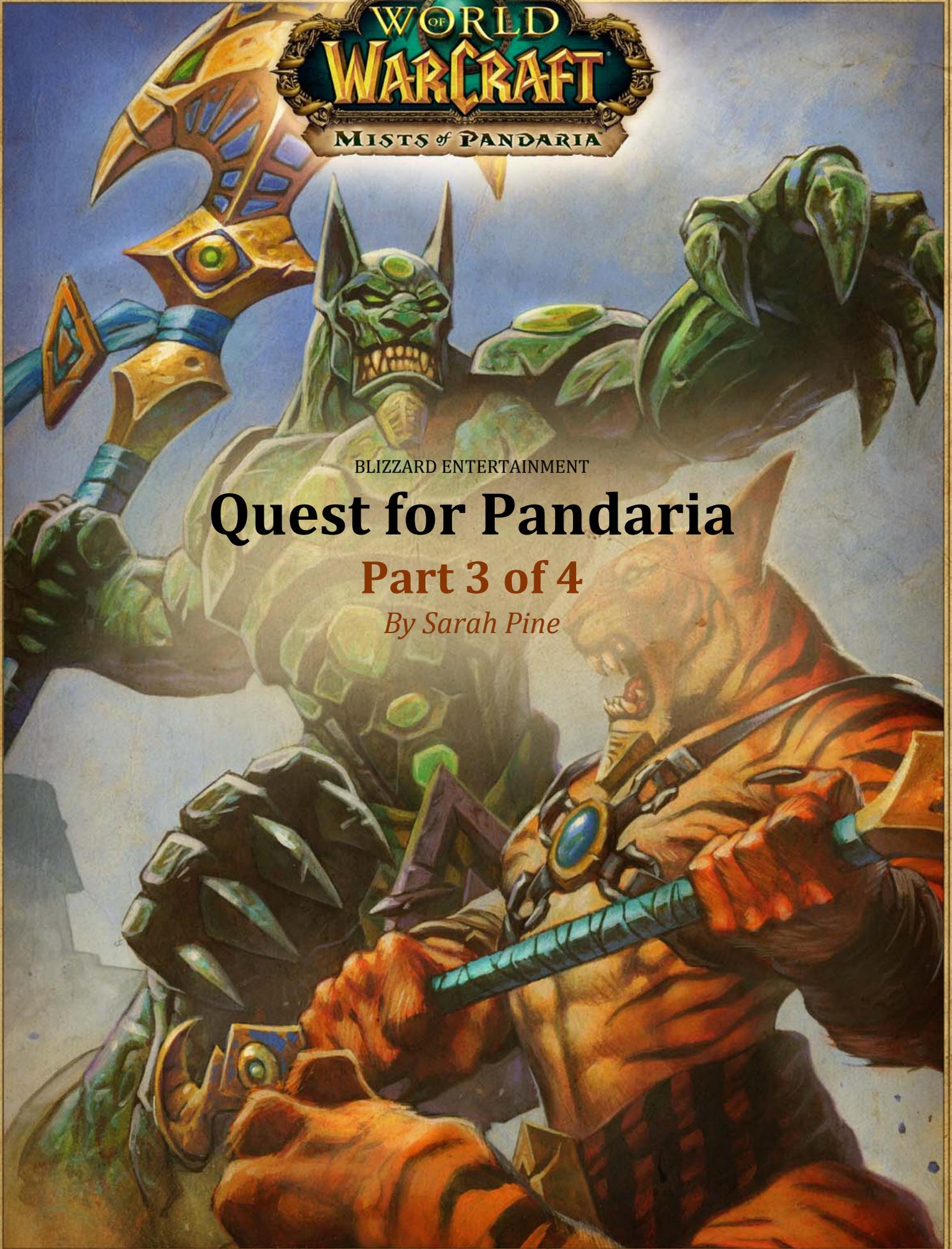
WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS of PANDARIA

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Quest for Pandaria

Part 3 of 4

By Sarah Pine



Quest for Pandaria: Part 3

Steam from the teapot filled the air with the clean scent of mint, reminding Chon Po of the times when Shen-zin Su swam into higher latitudes and the days grew short and cold. To fight the chill, Xiu Li used to boil water for tea, the two pandaren cradling the ceramic cups in their paws and trading anecdotes as they wrapped themselves in cloaks for warmth. Now it was not Xiu Li who poured the tea, but her mother, Mei.

"You've been so tired, Po," she commented.

Chon Po picked up his teacup, then put it down again. Mei sat at the table in the same place Li Li had the evening he had lost his temper at both her and Chen. The following night, Li Li had snuck off with the pearl. He'd received only vague letters from her since. He missed his daughter terribly.

"I'm worried about Li Li," he said. "And Chen."

Mei sipped her tea. The graying fur around the sides of her face matched the silver hair she had combed back and plaited into a braid. When she looked at Chon Po, his stomach clenched for just a moment. Her eyes were Xiu Li's. They were also Li Li's.

"To be worried for your family is natural," Mei said.

"What did I do wrong?" Chon Po blurted out. Mei raised her eyebrows at him, then drank more of her tea.

"You'll have to elaborate," she said.

"I've failed. My family is splintered, and only my son remains with me. My daughter despises me." Anger and frustration bubbled below the surface of his voice. Mei shook her

head.

"Li Li doesn't despise you, Po," she said. "You are not asking the right question."

"What question *should* I be asking, then?"

"You should be asking yourself whether you believe the death of the body is a greater tragedy than the death of the spirit."

Chon Po blinked. "What?"

Mei set down her teacup and folded her paws.

"When Xiu Li died, you lost a wife. I lost a daughter. I know what you fear, because I have experienced it."

Chon Po's heart leaped into his throat. Mei continued.

"My daughter loved the fishing boats. She loved the sea; she loved the way the work oscillated between leisure, careful patience, and excitement. And, yes, she loved the risk, too."

Mei's eyes drifted from Chon Po's. They seemed to look beyond him, some memory playing out in her mind.

"I used to watch the way her face lit up when she tended to her boat. Each day as she guided it from the shore, out into open sea, it made her spirit sing."

Mei's gaze refocused.

"Would you have taken that from her, just to keep her longer?"

Chon Po stared at his teacup and saucer.

"Strongbo followed Li Li at my behest and was killed for it..."

"Did either Li Li or Chen tell you what Bo said before he died, Po?"

He looked up at Mei again, caught off guard, suddenly nervous.

"No," he answered.

"The last sentiment Bo expressed was gratitude at having shared Li Li's travels with her. He said that he had been enlightened. That if he had to do it all over, he would have done the exact same thing. He had no regrets."

Chon Po struggled with this idea for a moment.

"Is that true?"

"Both Li Li and Chen told me this. I do not believe they were lying. They were heartbroken over Bo."

Mei reached over and put one gnarled paw on Chon Po's.

"Po, you cannot bend Li Li to your will. You know this. She's defied you twice already. Li Li is what she is—a fighter, every bit as much as you. The wanderlust is part of who we are, and our home on Shen-zin Su is a testament to that. But she'll never stop being your daughter. Even if she never comes home, Li Li isn't lost to you."

"I just want her to be safe," Chon Po said, closing his eyes.

"She will find her own safety," Mei answered. "And her own happiness."

* * *

She saw golden dunes racing beneath her, each effortless step propelling her long yards across the sand. The setting sun flared off to her right as Li Li chased down the jagged mountains at the southwestern border of Tanaris. She swept by a little cactus oasis in the foothills, dashing toward a narrow pass that cut so suddenly and cleanly through the rock it may as well have been cleaved by some cosmic axe. Four stern, magnificent statues guarded the road. One looked like a typical human woman, but the others had the heads of animals. Li Li turned to them, and they sprang to life, extending their palms forward invitingly. She slowed, intrigued, and moved toward them. As she did, their demeanors changed. They snarled and stretched spindly fingers capped with scythe-like claws out toward her. She opened her mouth to shriek. The statues morphed into a single entity, becoming her father. His intent remained malicious; he too would catch and trap her. She tried to run, but her bounding stride, so effortless a moment before, faltered, and she tumbled to the ground. She watched herself pitch forward in slow motion, each second an eternity. As the stone road rose up to meet her, the entire landscape liquefied, copper-bronze rock turning to sapphire blue. She splashed into an angry sea, battered in the midst of a terrible storm. Swells the size of Shen-zin Su lifted her and threw her violently down again. She clawed at the water to stay afloat, gasping for air. A wave carried her upon its crest, and she caught a glimpse into the trough. Another pandaren was swimming toward her, calling her name, caught in the same vicious ocean.

"*Mama!*" Li Li screamed.

Xiu Li cried out for her daughter. Li Li reached toward her with both arms, forgetting to swim. The wave she rode didn't roll on beneath her; it broke, water lancing down onto

itself. Li Li hurtled forward, the spearhead of the onslaught. Her mother's face rushed toward her, the thousands of tons of water roaring behind Li Li as effective a tomb as any dug by mortal hands.

* * *

Something wet splashing against her head sent Li Li sputtering into wakefulness. She tried to stand, lost her balance, and crashed back to the floor, dislodging various bits of equipment from their packing.

"Li Li?" Chen's concerned voice steadied her, quelling her panic. "Are you okay?"

Li Li sat up, gingerly this time, rubbing her eyes. Her mind slowly disentangled fantasy from reality. She was in a wagon, crossing Tanaris as part of a dwarven caravan heading toward Uldum.

"Yeah," she mumbled, still woozy from her nap and the nightmare. "Bad dream." The image of her mother's desperate face burst into her thoughts, and she shuddered.

"I figured. You were tossing around in your sleep. You knocked one of the waterskins over." Chen held up the container, a dark streak on the leather marking where the water had spilled. Li Li pressed her palm into her forehead, trying to come up with a joke of some sort, but her wit failed her.

"What were you dreaming about?" Chen asked. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"It started out like the vision the pearl showed me in Gadgetzan. I was traveling across Tanaris. I saw the oasis, and the pass with the statues. And then..." Li Li trailed off. Chen waited patiently.

"Then it turned into a nightmare. I was... trapped at sea in a storm," she finished.

Chen didn't press her for more details. "It's all right, Li Li," he said. His presence was more reassuring than Li Li wanted to admit.

The two of them pushed through the canvas flaps at the front of the wagon, climbing onto the wooden seat next to the driver, a charcoal-haired dwarven woman named Felyae. Tanaris's endless golden sands stretched in every direction. The only break from the visual tedium was the southwestern mountain range, which a few days prior had begun to appear on the horizon as they crested the dunes. The knowledge that the caravan drew ever closer to the desert's edge motivated the entire company forward.

"How are ye feelin', lass?" Felyae asked Li Li kindly. "Didn't sound like yer nap was restful."

"She had a bad dream," Chen answered before Li Li could say anything.

"Aye, th' desert heat is bad fer th' mind," Felyae replied. She slapped the camel's reins lightly against her thighs to emphasize the point. "Give anyone nightmares an' hallucinations."

Li Li had never before thought of the pearl's visions as hallucinations, but her experiences over the last few weeks were inspiring her to reconsider. Once arrived in Gadgetzan, she had fully expected to be able to charter a ship on the strength of Catelyn's connections, allowing Li Li and Chen to finally head south to search for Pandaria. But even with a famous pirate's recommendation, finding a willing captain had proved impossible. Again, she'd turned to the pearl for guidance, and it had shown her a trail across Tanaris and beyond the mountains, into the land of Uldum. So to Uldum she and Chen went, buying passage with a group of dwarves from the Explorers' League.

"We'll be at th' border in a day or two," Felyae commented, filling the silence. "What have ye got planned fer yer time in Uldum?"

"Heading to the city," Chen said.

"Ah, Ramkahen?"

"Er, yeah, Ramkaaa... hen," Li Li replied, stumbling over the pronunciation. She hadn't been aware of the city's name. "That's the one on the lakeshore, right?"

"On th' north lakeshore, at least," Felyae confirmed. "Named fer th' folk who live there."

"The tol'vir," Chen stated. Felyae nodded, and he went on, "Do you know much about them? I know very little."

"Well," Felyae began thoughtfully, "th' tol'vir are sort o' like centaur, only big cats instead o' horses."

Chen sat up in visible fascination. "How interesting!"

"Aye," she said. "I've been tae Ramkahen once before, met a few. Anyway, th' tol'vir are divided into tribes, named after th' cities they live in. Th' Ramkahen live in Ramkahen. There used tae be two others—th' Neferset and th' Orsis—but they're mostly gone."

"What happened to them?" Li Li asked.

Felyae shook her head sadly. "War. Civil war. Now th' Ramkahen are th' only ones really left."

"That's terrible," Chen said quietly.

"Aye, 'tis," Felyae agreed. "I haven't been tae th' city since th' war ended, so I canna tell ye what tae expect anymore, but it was a grim place last I remember. Beautiful, but filled with

sorrow."

The three of them sat in silence for a while on the gently lurching wagon, watching the camel plod along, climbing the slope of yet another dune. As they approached the top, they heard a loud whoop, and Dalgin, the caravan's leader, called out across the sand.

"Ye can see Thistleshrub Valley down in th' foothills! We're nearly tae Uldum!"

Dalgin's excitement was contagious, and Li Li, Chen, and Felyae all grinned at the announcement despite the somber topic they had been discussing. Li Li felt a true shiver of anticipation run down her spine. Uldum had never been described in any of Chen's letters.

* * *

When they reached the valley, everyone's mood lifted. The sand gave way to firmer ground, and the caravan's pace quickened. The stark mountains rose just in front of them, a telltale break in the hillside revealing the continuing road.

Dalgin ensured that nothing occurred without announcement. "We're approachin' th' pass!" he yelled. "We'll be at th' campsite by nightfall!"

The caravan trundled steadily onward into the shadows along the base of the steep mountain walls. Towering far above, the guardian statues flanked the travelers, even bigger than in Li Li's vision. She shuddered, remembering her dream, but the great carvings remained still, imposing but harmless.

The camels' hooves rang softly against the pavement, the faint echoes rolling like distant bells. Li Li swiveled her neck in every direction. She longed deeply to meet the people who had created this place, to listen to their tales, to learn more of their art. She caught a glimpse of Chen as she glanced around, and on his face he wore the same awed, fascinated

expression. Had Liu Lang felt this way as well? Is that what drove him and his followers to pursue their life of exploration? A pang of sorrow rang in her heart as she thought of her father. He had no idea what he was missing.

Light once again flooded across the caravan as they exited the pass. The road continued west, leading through a grand ruin. A huge statue of a catlike person with wings guarded a tomb, carrying a giant sword. Li Li was so busy staring at it that she barely even noticed when the caravan lurched abruptly to a halt. The shout of Dalgin's voice broke her daze.

"What in th' name o' Brann's beard is this all about? What're ye pointin' those things at us fer?"

Li Li, Chen, and Felyae exchanged wary looks. Instinctively, Li Li reached behind her for the staff she knew was propped just inside the covered wagon, but Chen grabbed her wrist, restraining her. With his other paw he pointed toward the ruins. Li Li followed his gaze.

Striding toward the caravan were several tall, four-legged creatures of tawny gold, rich brown, or onyx black. They bore torsos like humans but the lower bodies and heads of cats. Li Li sucked in her breath—tol'vir! Her excitement was short lived. These were *angry*-looking tol'vir, and they were armed.

"Oi!" Dalgin shouted, approaching the tol'vir. "We've done nothing wrong!"

The leader of the tol'vir party stepped forward, easily distinguishable by the garments he wore across his chest and withers. In one of his hands he effortlessly hefted a truly enormous spear. Dalgin was half his height. Li Li admired the dwarf's courage. Or recklessness.

"You must come with us to the city of Ramkahen," the tol'vir leader boomed. "To explain yourselves to King Phaoris."

"Ah, come on, we're just here havin' a look around!" Dalgin argued. "Document some things, take records..."

"You will be escorted to the city," the tol'vir repeated, unrelenting. Dalgin muttered something in Dwarven. Li Li spent some time imagining what it might have been, snickering at a few of the cruder possibilities. The caravan rumbled onward, the stern tol'vir marching alongside the wagons, guiding them toward Ramkahen in silence.

* * *

They came to the city by way of a great river and the oasis that lined its banks. Li Li was captivated by the scenery. She marveled at the diversity of life along the river. Palms and wide-leafed ferns choked the shore, shading the banks and providing shelter for a variety of creatures—frogs, toads, lizards, and spindly-legged birds. She was amazed that such a fragile strip of bounty could thrive within the harsh desert.

Abruptly, the trees thinned. Four stone pillars rose from the earth, and beyond them, two more great statues with the heads of hawks guarded the entrance to the city. To the south Vir'naal Lake sparkled like diamonds beneath the brutal sun.

They had arrived at Ramkahen. The tol'vir ushered them into the city, ordering that their wagons be left outside the gates. Li Li brandished her staff warily as she walked alongside the far larger tol'vir, but none of them so much as glanced at her.

Ramkahen itself would have been fascinating to the pandaren had their current circumstances differed. As it was, Li Li was too annoyed to notice the beautifully paved streets or the colorful awnings that decorated every doorway. Chen was equally ill at ease.

As their company continued through Ramkahen, it became apparent that there was

something unusual occurring. A mob of tol'vir was gathered around the city center, calling and yelling angrily. Guards stood alert all around the great square, scanning the crowd for potentially dangerous behavior.

"What on Azeroth is going on here?" Chen wondered aloud.

A grand building bordered the square's north end, with a wide staircase leading to an elevated veranda. Upon it were five heavily shackled tol'vir. They were escorted by three other tol'vir, one of whom sported a magnificent mask that obscured his face entirely. At her distance, it was hard for Li Li to be sure of her eyes, but the prisoners' skin seemed different from the other tol'vir, somehow. She squinted, trying to get a better look.

One of the tol'vir at the top of the stairs called above the din.

"King Phaoris addresses you! Silence yourselves and listen!"

The mob quieted. The tol'vir wearing the mask—King Phaoris—spoke, not to the gathered people, but to the prisoners. His rich voice boomed across the square.

"You, the surviving Neferset, are hereby accused of colluding with the evil dragon Deathwing. You are accused of accepting his offer to reverse the curse of flesh in exchange for your allegiance to him and his ally, the air elemental lord Al'Akir. You are accused of using the power they provided to then wage war on your own people..."

"Uncle Chen, what's the curse of flesh?" Li Li whispered.

"I don't know," he whispered back.

"It's a condition that affects titan creations," Felyae, standing beside them, answered quietly. Both pandaren blinked in surprise. "Th' titans fashioned their creatures with stone, mostly,

or other mechanical means," she explained, "so they could carry out their assigned duties tae th' world without fear o' deterioratin' or gettin' weak. But there are beings o' great magic an' malice that hate th' titans, and they sabotaged these creations by turnin' their bodies tae flesh like th' other creatures o' Azeroth."

"How do you know all this?" Li Li asked in a low voice. Felyae half smiled, half grimaced.

"Cause we dwarves are afflicted with it too," she said. "We were once creatures o' stone, made by th' titans themselves."

It was clear from Felyae's face that she had mixed feelings about being made of flesh. Li Li wisely said nothing, but she thought of the time she'd spent in Ironforge during Brewfest, and had trouble imagining that it would be the same boisterous, jovial affair were the dwarves their original, stony selves. She couldn't help but feel a bit glad that they were now mere creatures of flesh and bone like her.

"The tol'vir must have been created by the titans, then," Chen commented. Felyae nodded.

Up at the top of the stairs, King Phaoris was finishing his speech. Li Li had missed the second half of it.

"... The High Council will discuss this matter for the remainder of today and tomorrow. On the day after, your fates shall be decided. If any of you should want to speak in your own defense, you must do it within this time!"

"The prisoners must die!" someone in the crowd yelled.

"Make the traitors suffer!" another voice called.

"The deliberations shall commence," King Phaoris said, addressing the restless mob. "Any

citizen wishing to contribute an argument as to how the situation should be handled may speak with the council."

The Neferset prisoners were led away by a cadre of guards, accompanied by the shouts and jeers of the onlookers. King Phaoris and his companions entered the magnificent building and disappeared from sight. Slowly, the crowd began to disperse, angry murmurs running through it in currents. The tol'vir guarding Li Li, Chen, and the dwarves prodded them forward, up the grand staircase, and into the king's enclave.

* * *

The party was presented directly to King Phaoris, who spent a few unnervingly long moments looking the group over before he spoke.

"My guards have brought you to me for a reason," he stated coolly. "What are you doing here?"

Dalgin stepped forward. "We're archaeologists," he said, his chest puffing out slightly with pride. "From the Explorers' League o' Ironforge. We're here tae learn what we can from th' ancient sites o' Uldum."

Li Li could have sworn Phaoris rolled his eyes, but his mask made it impossible to know for sure. He did sigh a little.

"An expedition of gnomes went poking around in the ruins to the south, and they all completely lost their minds," he announced, an edge of impatience to his voice. "It is true that outsiders like you provided us with invaluable aid during the recent war, but remember that you are guests in our lands. Some things are better left buried. You may stay in my city for now, but do not push the boundaries of your welcome. You are dismissed."

The dwarves began to file outside, grumbling under their breaths. Li Li caught half sentences that included things like "obstruction tae scholarship" and "stuffy old codgers." She suppressed a giggle. Chen hung back, his eyes darting around the room, drinking in the architecture and décor of this foreign place. Li Li smiled and dawdled along with her uncle.

After a moment, they made to leave, intending to find the dwarves and search for a tavern or the Ramkahen equivalent. As Chen stepped toward the door, he was nearly bowled over by a tol'vir rushing into the building.

"King Phaoris—!" the new arrival cried. "Please, I must speak with you and the High Council."

The king huffed audibly. "We have heard what you have to say already, Menrim."

"Please," Menrim repeated, "please listen to me. The Neferset prisoners deserve mercy..."

"Of course you would say that," one of the council members snorted. King Phaoris held up his hand, calling for silence.

"Menrim, I know you are concerned for their fates. The High Council will ensure justice is delivered, whatever form it may take."

"They waged war and were defeated," Menrim said, pleading. "Is that not enough? Do we have to answer blood with blood?"

Another tol'vir in the room muttered something that sounded a good deal like "Yes."

Li Li and Chen hurried out of the building, escaping while everyone else's attention was focused on Menrim. As they hesitated in the square, unsure of where to go next, Menrim exited onto the top of the stairs, his sand-colored paws dragging dejectedly with every step.

His weariness permeated his whole manner, and Chen's heart went out to him. On impulse, Chen decided to speak to the solitary tol'vir.

"I overheard what you said to the king," he stated, striding toward Menrim. "I think you are very courageous. It's not easy to advocate for mercy toward those who have wronged you."

Menrim seemed taken aback at Chen's words. His eyes swept over the two pandaren, obvious foreigners in this land. He didn't speak, but his face lost some of its haunted look.

"My name is Chen Stormstout. My niece, Li Li, and I are new arrivals here. We wish you good will through your troubled times."

"My name is Menrim," the tol'vir replied. "Thank you for your sentiment." He paused for a moment, then added, "I would be pleased to host you and your niece for the evening meal, if you would like."

"We would be honored to accept, Menrim," Chen said.

* * *

Menrim lived in a modest ground-floor home that overlooked Vir'naal Lake. As the sky darkened, the lights from the town across the water became visible.

"What's the other city over there?" Li Li asked, indicating the flares of orange and red. In the kitchen, she helped Menrim clean the dishes following dinner.

"That is Mar'at. It was close to Orsis, when Orsis still stood."

"Was Orsis destroyed in the war?" Li Li asked. Menrim nodded.

Yes. Al'Akir sent his armies to bury it in an enormous dust storm." Menrim sighed. "Orsis and Neferset really were beautiful places. Especially Neferset."

"Have you been there?"

"I was born there," Menrim answered softly.

"Oh," Li Li said. She awkwardly wiped a dish with a towel. "Are you a Ramkahen?"

"I am now," Menrim replied after a time. "But I was once of the Neferset tribe."

"Oh," Li Li repeated. She continued with her work.

"I..." Menrim began, a defiant spark of pride briefly flickering through his voice. He frowned.

"You do not seem perturbed by this."

Li Li blinked. "Should I be?"

Menrim looked at her oddly, considering. "I suppose you would not find my heritage strange, necessarily."

"Menrim," Li Li said, "I know basically squat about the tol'vir. There was a civil war, and I heard the Neferset allied with Deathwing." Menrim winced as she spoke the former Dragon Aspect's name. Li Li continued, "But you don't seem like you're with Deathwing. Not enough death."

Menrim cracked the barest of smiles at Li Li's words.

"No wings, either," he replied. Li Li rolled her eyes good-naturedly at him. Menrim took a deep breath.

"In that case, I think I had better tell you and your uncle a story."

"We love stories," Li Li told him. He grimaced.

"Maybe not this one," he said.

* * *

Chen and Li Li faced Menrim in the front room of his little home, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Menrim folded his legs beneath him and began.

"The city of Neferset is south of here. It is—was—magnificent, much larger than Ramkahen. I was born there, and so was my brother, Bathet.

"All tol'vir are well aware of our history. We know that we are titan constructs, tasked with protecting Uldum and its secrets. That said, we are also our own people. We are not automatons. Originally the titans gave us bodies of stone in order for us to better serve as guardians."

"When the curse of flesh first appeared among the tol'vir, we grieved for our weakened bodies, but there seemed to be nothing we could do to reverse it, so we accepted it and went on with our lives. Even so, many never stopped mourning the loss.

"As you know, the great dragon Deathwing recently returned to the world. He aligned himself with Al'Akir, the leader of the air elementals, as well as the Old Gods, who were the source of the curse."

"Aligned with the Old Gods?" Chen said weakly. "I can't believe it..."

"Believe it," Menrim said heavily. "When Deathwing came here, he offered the tol'vir a deal: join him, and he would return our original stone forms to us. The curse would be reversed."

Li Li and Chen nodded.

"My fellow Neferset, led by Dark Pharaoh Tekahn, overwhelmingly agreed to the bargain. I, however, felt differently."

Menrim collected himself.

"I tried to convince other Neferset that it was a poor idea. Yes, we would regain our stone bodies, but we would forever be indebted to Al'Akir and Deathwing. My kin were arrogant, believing we could overthrow them and regain our independence once our old forms had been restored. Fewer and fewer of my people shared my hesitation. Even Bathet disagreed with me. I begged him to reconsider, but he would hear none of it. He was one of the most vocal proponents of the alliance in the whole city. Eventually, it was clear that I was in danger. I fled to Ramkahen and offered my allegiance to King Phaoris instead. When the rest of the Neferset became openly hostile, I worked to help defeat them."

"And your brother?" Chen asked softly. "What happened to him?"

Menrim did not immediately answer. His features looked tired in the orange light from the oil lamps.

"He survives," Menrim replied at last. His voice shook. "He is one of the prisoners of the Ramkahen. They await the High Council's decision as to their fate."

* * *

That night, Chen lay awake in his bedroll, staring at the ceiling of the front room of

Menrim's home. Li Li's soft snores informed him that she slept; however, he knew that she didn't sleep easily. He had listened to her toss and turn for at least an hour before she succumbed to her exhaustion.

He, though, could not rest. He understood perfectly well why Menrim dared to oppose the other tol'vir and argue in favor of mercy for the Neferset prisoners of war. Chen only had to imagine how he would feel if Chon Po faced execution—even for crimes such as Bathet's—and he knew that he, too, would do everything in his power to spare his brother's life. The more Chen considered the situation, the more his stomach clenched painfully at the thought of what Menrim must be going through, knowing he might be the sole thing standing between his brother and death. Eventually Chen got up and returned to the kitchen to sit at the table. He felt desperately restless and extremely tired all at once.

"I see you cannot sleep, either." Menrim's quiet voice startled Chen out of his thoughts. He hadn't heard the tol'vir enter the room, and Chen marveled that even at his size, Menrim could still walk as silently as a house cat.

"I apologize that the floor is not more comfortable," Menrim said, and Chen shook his head firmly.

"I've slept in far worse places than this, believe me. I'm awake because I keep thinking about what you told us after dinner."

Menrim sighed. "I do too. Everyone here knows my story. They were sympathetic once, but war hardens the most compassionate heart."

"I have a brother myself," Chen replied. "He's Li Li's father. We haven't always gotten along, but I cannot imagine us ending up on opposite sides of a war."

Menrim stared into the middle distance. "I have argued long with the High Council. Not

many are open to mercy for mercy's sake, but a number of them are willing to consider it if the prisoners repent. I have tried to convey this to Bathet, but so far he seems without remorse." Menrim's voice cracked, and he bowed his great feline head to his chest, flattening his ears.

"I care about my family more than anything," he said. "I always tried to lead by example. I am older than Bathet. I wanted to show him how to live a good life, but I did not want to get in his way, either. I tried not to tell him what to do, but I would always speak with him honestly if he came to me. When he became such a staunch supporter of Deathwing's offer... I often wondered where I went wrong."

"You aren't responsible for his choices," Chen said. "You can only live your own life and be true to yourself. Bathet probably did the same, as awful as that may sound. Maybe he really did believe he was doing the right thing."

"Maybe," Menrim replied. He didn't look at Chen. "I think I shall return to bed. Good night."

"Good night," Chen said. He knew his words offered no solace. He felt decidedly inadequate and vowed to do what he could—anything he could—to help both Menrim and his brother.

* * *

The following morning, before Li Li had awoken, Chen set out to find where the Neferset captives were being kept. The tol'vir tended to become openly hostile to him if he brought it up, but eventually one businesslike orc pointed him toward the eastern gate, where he and Li Li had entered the city the previous day. The ramp they had passed that descended into the earth was the entrance to a prison. Chen thanked her and went on his way.

Two jackals on pillars ominously guarded the top of the ramp. Chen paused and looked at them, hoping that he could have some positive effect on the situation but simultaneously

wondering if a single person could accomplish anything. He reminded himself that he'd seen individuals do great things. Taking a deep breath, Chen descended the walkway. At the bottom, a Ramkahen guard blocked the door.

"What is your business here?" he demanded, brandishing a pike as tall as Chen himself.

"Er, I would like to speak to the Neferset prisoners," Chen stated.

"What for?" the guard pressed him.

"To learn," Chen replied. "I want to know why they did what they did."

The guard eyed him closely, his gaze flickering up and down Chen's person. "You are an odd-looking creature," he said. "And clearly of no relation to any tol'vir. But, if you wish to converse with the detained, you may, as long as you leave all your possessions here with me. There is another guard inside who will supervise you."

Chen nodded. He dropped his staff and haversack to the ground. "Thank you," he said, pushing open the door.

It was clear that the underground structure was not meant to be a prison, but had been hastily converted to serve that purpose. As promised, another guard waited to ensure that his discussion with the Neferset remained innocuous.

The Neferset were firmly chained to the stone walls, their flimsy cages obviously temporary constructions. Chen wondered what real intent the High Council had of long-term imprisonment for these tol'vir.

"Which one of you is Bathet?" he asked.

"That one," the Ramkahen guard answered him, pointing toward a cage along the right-hand wall.

Chen nodded and approached Menrim's brother.

Now that he had fully adjusted to the dim light, Chen took a good look at Bathet and the other prisoners. They really had become creatures of stone. They almost seemed more like golems than living beings.

"You are Bathet, then?" Chen asked.

"What do you care?" the Neferset growled back at him. His eyes were the exact opposite of Menrim's—hard, cold, and angry.

"Answer his questions," the guard snarled, slamming the cage bars with his pike. The clash of metal against metal echoed jarringly in the underground space.

Bathet sneered and did not reply. Instead he paced his tiny cell restlessly, baring his teeth at Chen. The guard once again crashed his pike against the bars.

"I have come on behalf of your brother, Menrim," Chen said.

Bathet blinked at Chen, then laughed derisively.

"Well, *that* explains why you would want to waste your time in the dark with us conquered folk! I suppose dear Menrim begged you to help me see *reason*."

"Actually, he has no idea that I'm here," Chen said. Bathet laughed again.

"Even better! He has so moved your heart that you have been inspired to do his dirty work

for him! Magnificent."

Chen tilted his head to one side and regarded Bathet. He knew that attempting to counter directly would only lead to more mockery, so instead he contemplated the best approach to get Bathet to converse with him.

"This *is* a pretty dirty place in which to conduct work," Chen said. "I assume none of you has bathed in some time, though I guess that's where we can be grateful that you're just a lump of rock."

The Ramkahen guard at Chen's side seemed mildly offended by the remark, but snickered nonetheless. Bathet looked startled, and Chen made a show of dusting some imaginary grime off his own black-and-white fur. He crossed his arms and shot Bathet the smuggest expression he could muster.

It worked.

"You fleshlings go right ahead and think you are so righteous. In fact, feel free to tell my brother that, too. When you do, take a good, hard look at that moralistic, whiny, long-suffering face of his and note the way he will sigh in despair, his sad eyes saying, *Oh, I am so disappointed in you, Bathet*. Then let him know that he is a—"

Bathet snarled a stream of foul epithets that Chen silently vowed never to repeat. Even the guard was taken somewhat aback.

"—and that is what I think of him and his saintly superiority complex."

"Sure thing," Chen lied.

"Menrim is wasting his breath, anyway," Bathet continued. "Even if the council falls for his

oh-so-heartfelt appeals to clemency, I would rather die here with my *real* family than spend one more moment in his presence."

With that, Bathet turned his back on Chen and faced the wall. Chen didn't try to keep talking; he knew he was done here.

"I'll be leaving now," he said to the guard, who nodded.

The sunlight was dazzling, and Chen stood blinking for a few seconds as his eyes readjusted to the outdoors. One prison guard shut the door behind him, while another regarded him curiously.

"I hope you learned what you wished to," he said. "But I doubt that you will find much enlightenment among the prisoners. They are all fanatics."

Chen reflected on the conversation in the jail as he collected the belongings he'd left at the door. While "fanatic" did seem a reasonable classification for Bathet, he had not once mentioned Deathwing or riches or any kind of power narrative. He had only expressed a deep and thorough hatred of his brother.

"I learned enough," Chen said. He walked up the ramp, lost in his troubled thoughts.

* * *

"Well, look who decided to go sneaking off!" Li Li commented. She was waiting for him outside of Menrim's home, shading herself under a palm tree. She had been studying one of the maps she'd taken from Shen-zin Su, marking the places they had been and adding in missing landmarks, such as the entirety of Uldum.

"How early did you get up?" she went on. "Can't you see we're on vacation?"

Chen tried to smile at his niece's jokes, but he wasn't in the mood. Li Li immediately sensed his melancholy.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I went to visit Menrim's brother in prison," he said.

"A breezy breakfast conversation that was, I'm sure."

Chen stared out across the gleaming Vir'naal Lake, unresponsive. He thought of both Menrim's sorrow and Bathet's vitriol.

"Uncle Chen?" Li Li put a paw lightly on his wrist. "Why did you go to the prison?" Her eyes shone with genuine concern for him. Chen hugged her close.

"I'm not sure exactly," Chen confessed, releasing Li Li. "I suppose I wanted to see what could drive somebody to make the choice that Bathet did.

"Bathet despises his brother," he said. "As soon as I mentioned Menrim's name, he... well, he wasn't happy."

Chen leaned against the trunk of the palm tree. "I don't know what to make of it. Bathet called the other Neferset prisoners his 'real' family, so he clearly wants to distance himself from Menrim, but I don't understand why. Last night Menrim could only talk about how much he cares about his brother."

Li Li frowned and said nothing. Chen went on.

"How could Bathet hate him *that* strongly? What could have happened between them?"

"He left," Li Li said quietly.

"Of course he did," Chen replied. "He didn't want to work for Deathwing."

"No, before that." Li Li shook her head. "While you were gone, I was talking with Menrim. He's older than Bathet. Menrim went to work with the priests to maintain the titan devices once he came of age. He spent all his time away. He barely saw Bathet."

Chen looked at Li Li quizzically. "So what?"

"So... Bathet resented him, I guess," Li Li mumbled. "He felt abandoned and bossed around. Bathet didn't give two shakes about Deathwing; it was about having a place to belong."

"How would you know what's in Bathet's head?" Chen challenged her.

Li Li grabbed fistfuls of her hair and tugged on them in frustration. Chen had never seen her act like this before. She seemed to struggle within herself.

"I know because it's what Bo said once. About you."

"*What?*"

Li Li looked miserable, but she kept talking. "When Papa sent Bo after me. He told me..." Li Li trailed off.

"What did he tell you?" Chen asked. His heart pounded in his chest.

"Bo told me that you left because you cared about your beer and your adventures more than us."

"That's not true!" Chen protested.

"I know it's not!" Li Li shouted. "Geez, Uncle Chen, I read your letters every day! But it's how Bo felt. For a long time. He was so angry at you."

Chen bowed his head. His argument with Chon Po the night before Li Li had taken the pearl flooded back to him with crystal clarity. He could see the pain in Po's eyes, hear the fury and anguish in his voice.

"I remember what Bo said to me on the beach as he was dying. I didn't quite grasp it all then; everything happened so fast." Chen rubbed his face, suddenly tired. "I should have known. Chon Po felt the same way. He still does."

Li Li said nothing. Above them, the tree's leaves rustled in the warm breeze.

"I think I know what needs to be done," Chen said.

* * *

Chen had the irrational urge to offer tea out of habit. Instead he stood uneasily, unsure of how to hold his paws. He clasped them before him, dangled them at his sides, and finally settled for threading his fingers together behind his back.

Menrim faced Chen and Li Li in the front room of his home, his pale brown eyes soft and inquiring.

"I went to see your brother this morning," Chen said. "To talk with him."

Menrim turned and walked a few paces through the room, lashing his tail. "What did he

say?"

"He's very angry," Chen said. Menrim nodded.

"I know."

Chen took a deep breath and wondered how well what he was about to suggest would go over.

"You should apologize to him."

Menrim whirled around. "*I* should apologize? He is the one who joined Deathwing!"

"Yes," Chen said. "But... I think he believes that you never cared for him in the first place."

"How could he think that? It—"

"Menrim," Chen interrupted, and even to his own ears his voice sounded heavy. "You can figure out the rights and wrongs of it later. But if you want any chance of him showing remorse for his actions and being granted clemency, I am almost certain that you need to apologize."

"How do you know?" Menrim demanded.

"Because I have left people behind in my life. People I love, including a brother." His mind filled with memories of both Chon Po and Strongbo. "And... there have been consequences."

Menrim paced again, lost in thought. At last he stopped and faced the two pandaren.

"All right," he said. "I will try. I will apologize to Bathet." He grimaced, not thrilled with the

idea.

Chen nodded, attempting to be cheerful. "I think it will make all the difference in the world," he said.

Menrim didn't respond; he just stalked outside.

"I feel that went well," Chen said.

Li Li looked at her paws. "Sure thing, Uncle Chen."

* * *

Menrim didn't come back until long after sundown. Chen and Li Li had felt uncomfortable staying in his home without him there, so they had propped their haversacks and staves against the jetty's retaining wall and sat waiting by the water.

Li Li had fallen asleep against Chen's shoulder by the time Menrim returned, walking slowly through the street. Chen waved to catch Menrim's attention, but the tol'vir did not answer his greeting. Menrim turned his head deliberately, looked him right in the eye, and continued on.

Chen lowered his arm. "I was afraid of that," he said. Gently he shook Li Li awake.

"Oh, whaddaya want, Chen?" she mumbled, rubbing her eyes.

"Looks like we're not welcome back in Menrim's place tonight," he said. "Come on; let's go find an inn."

"At least there's a chance of a bed and not the floor," Li Li muttered, grabbing her things.

"The glass is half full, huh?" Chen said. For a moment he fiercely wished that he and Li Li had followed the dwarves straight out of their confrontation with King Phaoris, and that he had never seen Menrim at all. The pandaren would be staying with the caravan, wherever it was, laughing and enjoying themselves.

Once they at last found lodging, they were so exhausted that they slept well into the morning. When they awoke, the clamor of hundreds of voices drove them from their beds to dress hurriedly and find out what was going on.

Outside, the residents of Ramkahen clogged the streets, pressing their way to the center square, looking expectantly toward the building that housed the king and High Council.

"What's happening?" Chen asked. Li Li was ready with the answer.

"Time's up," she said quietly. "The High Council is about to announce its decision."

Chen's heart hammered in his throat. Li Li looked at her uncle.

"We need a better view."

Chen nodded.

They pushed and wormed their way through the crowd until they managed to get next to the giant sundial in the southwestern part of the square. A pile of crates teetered nearby, too narrow for tol'vir but just large enough for a couple of pandaren to sit on. Chen and Li Li scrambled to the top, where they could see the front of the grand hall with ease.

After a few moments a cadre of Ramkahen guards led out the five Neferset prisoners. They were chained together at the necks, wrists, and ankles, the clanking of the heavy links lost

among the roaring jeers of the crowd. Chen recognized Bathet, and he swallowed nervously.

King Phaoris stepped around the prisoners to the front and raised his arms. The crowd quieted.

"Citizens of Ramkahen!" he boomed. "The High Council has reached a decision. Before it is announced, however, we have decided to let each prisoner speak for himself before the public, so you too are able to understand why we have come to the conclusion that we have. May you all stand in solidarity with those of us who have deliberated long and hard as to the most just verdict."

The crowd cheered in response, but Chen sensed an undercurrent of ferocity, and not everyone seemed entirely pleased with the king's words. Phaoris stepped aside, and a guard prodded the first prisoner. He looked to one side, then the other, taking in the scope of the gathered onlookers. He opened his mouth to speak.

"My name is Nanteret," the first prisoner called, "and I stand by the alliance my people made!"

A deafening boom of sound from the crowd echoed in reply, shouts of fury and hatred. Chen's throat went dry.

"My only regret," Nanteret continued, screaming, "is that I did not kill more of you filthy Ramkahen!"

He spat down the stairs, punctuating the statement. A guard quickly shoved him back into place. King Phaoris called again for the crowd's silence, and the Ramkahen lowered their voices, awaiting the rest of the speeches.

One by one, the Neferset prisoners took their turns to speak. The next two echoed Nanteret

nearly word for word. By the time Bathet stepped forward, fourth in line, Chen's heart had sunk, though he couldn't help but feel a tiny flicker of hope.

"I am proud of the choice I made!" he shouted, pushing his voice as loud as it would go. "I have no regrets! I stand with my *brothers!*" Chen winced at the emphasis Bathet placed on the final word. Li Li put her paw on top of her uncle's. The crowd roared back at Bathet, and a smattering of objects rained upon the stairs. A half-eaten pomegranate smashed into the side of his face, its dark red juice dripping down his cheek.

The last Neferset spoke his part. Chen barely heard him. Whatever the prisoner said, it was unrepentant, as had been the rest.

King Phaoris stepped again to the front, and he raised his arms.

"Let it be known that the Neferset were given the chance to speak their minds for all to hear. They display no remorse for their blasphemous alliance with Deathwing and Al'Akir! They have no regret for the thousands that they murdered in the name of their own greed for power! They are traitors to everything the tol'vir have ever stood for!"

"The High Council's decision is unanimous," King Phaoris went on. "They shall all be put to death."

The crowd cheered.

Li Li gasped, covering her mouth. Chen grabbed her arm.

"We have to find Menrim," he said.

She nodded. "Let's go."

* * *

At some level, Chen realized it was probably complete folly to try to find a single individual among the crush of people that swarmed Ramkahen's streets. He and Li Li were persistent, eventually running into someone who had seen him, and they managed to track him down. He sat by a fountain in the northern part of the city, partly hidden. He noticed Chen and Li Li as they approached, but didn't acknowledge them.

Chen sat down beside him. "I'm so sorry, Menrim," he said.

Menrim turned away, his face hardening. "He showed no remorse. He sealed his own fate."

Li Li and Chen were both surprised at Menrim's callousness, but Chen attributed it to shock at the High Council's verdict.

"Still," Chen said, "I know you care for your brother. I cannot imagine how hard this is for you."

They all sat, unspeaking, the fountain's continuous splashing the only noise.

"May I ask," Chen gently prodded, "how Bathet reacted to your visit yesterday?"

"He reacted how you would expect," Menrim snapped. "Like the rotten, selfish traitor that he is."

"What did he say," Chen went on, "when you said you were sorry?"

Abruptly Menrim stood and began to walk away. After a few paces, he stopped and turned around.

"Who do you think you are?!" he yelled. "You barge into my life, tell me what to do? I need to apologize to Bathet? I do not need to do anything of the sort! *He* is the criminal, the blasphemer, and I have been working tirelessly to spare his life! He should be begging me for forgiveness, thanking me from the bottom of his ungrateful, granite heart! By comparison, I am a *saint*."

"I have nothing to be sorry for, and I told Bathet as much. How dare you try to blame me? Get out of my life," Menrim snarled. He turned his back on Chen and Li Li and strode off into the city.

Chen closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against his paws. Li Li gave him a gentle hug.

"You did your best, Uncle Chen," she said. "You can't fix everything."

There was no way for Chen to articulate the senses of personal responsibility, obligation, failure, and guilt that all warred for supremacy in his heart. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so miserable.

* * *

It was difficult to kill a stone-skinned Neferset, so the High Council opted to have the prisoners crushed. A complex machine of pulleys and counterweights had been commissioned for the occasion. Several guards would work the levers, and a pile of enormous stone slabs would rise dozens of feet into the air. When the lock was released, the slabs would crash back down to the ground, pulverizing anyone beneath. Li Li could think of few contraptions more brutal.

What seemed like the entire city of Ramkahen crowded the open space by the waterfront where the machine had been erected. Li Li and Chen climbed on top of an awning. They didn't speak as they waited for the spectacle to begin. If they had both been perfectly

honest, neither of them really wanted to witness the execution at all, but Chen felt that he should, and Li Li wouldn't leave him.

In the late afternoon, the Ramkahen guards led the prisoners through the streets. The spectators jeered and called, crowing insults at the condemned Neferset. Li Li thought she might be sick.

There was very little decorum involved with the killings. A guard simply detached one Neferset from the line, led him to the designated place, and locked him there. Other guards activated the machine. Li Li tried to make herself watch in a gesture of respect, but she couldn't bear it. She squeezed her eyes shut and judged the events by the noise: the labored squealing of the pulleys as the rocks were lifted, the whoosh of air being displaced as they fell, the grinding *crunch* of the prisoner being crushed to death, and the clatter of the rubble that remained being swept away to make room for the next in line.

Chen grasped her shoulders tightly, trying to prevent his paws from shaking. He did watch the executions, though he envied Li Li for closing her eyes. He felt riveted, as if some intangible force demanded that he look. As with the speeches, Bathet was fourth in line. He died as unceremoniously as the others. It was over so quickly, and yet it seemed as if a thousand years had passed. Chen knew this day would haunt him forever.

Somehow, Chen recognized that his lungs still breathed, his heart still beat, but every sound and sensation felt miles away from him. The awning could have collapsed beneath him, and he did not think he would have noticed. His thoughts drifted away, and he sat there, trancelike, staring unseeingly across the lake, for a long time.

"Uncle Chen," Li Li called softly.

"Yes, Li Li?" he asked. She looked vaguely ill.

"I... I want to leave as soon as we can. I don't know why the pearl led us here. This place is full of misery."

"Oh." At Li Li's words, he too felt a powerful urge to get out of Ramkahen.

"I don't know exactly where we'll go next," Li Li said, "but as long as it's not here, I don't care."

"I agree," Chen said. "Let's just get some rest and leave in the morning."

They climbed down from the awning and made their way back to the inn. When they got to the door, someone stepped out of the shadows to meet them. It was Menrim.

"What do you want?" Chen asked bluntly.

Menrim hesitated before speaking.

"I wanted to apologize," he said.

Both Chen and Li Li stared at him.

"You were right," Menrim continued. "You were right, and I should have listened to you. I should have done what you said; I should have—"

"It's a little *late* for this, don't you think?" Chen interrupted. "What are you trying to accomplish?"

"I... I tried to do it. I tried to tell Bathet I was sorry, but... but he just blamed me and I got so *angry*... and it is not as if *everything* was entirely my fault, anyway."

"Oh, spare us," Li Li said.

"I wanted to save him!" Menrim yelled. "I wanted to save them all; I asked the High Council for clemency over and over—"

"Of course you wanted to save him," Chen replied flatly, "as long as it didn't involve compromising your own pride, or anything."

Menrim stared at the two pandaren, wide eyed. "I know I failed. I know it... I knew it the moment I saw the stones fall, and my brother... my only brother..." His voice broke, and Menrim began to weep. "My city... my people... my brother... How did it come to this?"

Chen didn't have the heart to be anything but tired. It was true that Menrim, that all the tol'vir, had suffered horribly. It was true that Bathet and the other Neferset had done terrible things. It was true that Bathet had rightfully resented Menrim. And it was also probably true that nothing either sibling could ever have spoken would have prevented Bathet's fate that afternoon.

Chen barely knew the brothers, and yet...

"What do you want us to say?" Chen asked heavily. "My niece and I, we can't absolve you. We can't absolve Bathet. We can't change anything for anyone. What's done is done."

Menrim wiped his eyes on his arm and seemed to collect himself somewhat. "I know," he whispered, "I know. But... thank you, for having tried." He inhaled.

"Li Li," Menrim began, "we talked about your travels yesterday while your uncle was away. I cannot imagine you want to stay here in Ramkahen after all this."

"You got that right," Li Li said.

"If you follow the Vir'naal River south, you will come to the Lost City at the river mouth. It was once a stronghold for the Neferset, but they were driven out during the war. My family had a small boat. From what I know, it is still there."

Menrim held out a large iron skeleton key. "This is the key to the lock on the mooring chains. Take it. You can get out of Uldum much more easily this way. The currents to the south are not so bad, and the winds should be calmer since Al'Akir was defeated. Please," he said. "It is yours."

Li Li reached out and took the key from his hand.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Tears slid from Menrim's eyes as he nodded. "I do not know if there is any recovering from what has happened to my people. Maybe the days of the tol'vir are over. I will try to be better than I was. I wish the two of you luck in your journeys. I hope you find whatever it is you seek," he finished.

"I wish you peace, Menrim," Chen said softly.

Menrim turned and walked away, back toward his home, alone.

Li Li and Chen returned to their rented room in silence. Their mood was heavy as they prepared for bed. As Chen checked their haversacks to make sure they had everything ready to leave first thing in the morning, he noticed that Li Li had smoothed a sheet of paper on the floor in front of her.

"What are you doing?" Chen asked.

"I'm writing a letter home," she answered. "I figured I should. It's been a while." She looked up at him. Something occurred to Chen.

"I'd like to write one too," he said.

Li Li pulled some scrap paper and another stylus from the depths of her bag. Chen sat on the floor in a different part of the room and flattened the blank page before him.

Dear Chon Po, he began.

I owe you an apology.