



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS OF PANDARIA

HORLEY

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

The Strength of Steel

by Raphael Ahad

Koak was falling. He tumbled endlessly through countless leagues of clouds and rain, the earth below him forever just beyond his sight. All around him flew the dragons, with scales as red as blood and eyes of molten gold, crimson phantoms in an eternal storm. Koak could feel their seething hatred buffeting his orcish body.

He raised a fist toward the dragons and shouted with the authority of the Dragonmaw clan. "Obey me!" he commanded, but his voice was tainted by fear and doubt.

"NO!" they roared in unison. Their myriad shadows melded into one, larger than the sky itself. Lightning flashed, and Koak caught a glimpse of Grim Batol in the distance, a smoking ruin he had once called home.

"Koak!" someone shouted.

The dragons' breath birthed a conflagration, and the heavens were set ablaze. Koak howled in pain as the storm clouds were burned away and his world was consumed by fire. His descent accelerated, suddenly and without warning, and the unforgiving ground came rushing up to meet him...

"KOAK!"

He awoke abruptly at the point of impact, with the echo of an explosion ringing in his ears. Beneath him was a deck of sanded and polished wood; above him was the bulbous balloon of a goblin zeppelin. The ship itself was a blazing inferno, and its crew was frantically fighting to keep it in the air.

"Abandon ship!" the captain screamed.

Koak rose unsteadily to his feet, blood from an open gash trickling down his brow. "The Alliance..." he said groggily. Looking over the edge of the hull, he saw a retreating gunship vanish into the clouds high above the Jade Forest.

With a squeal of twisting metal, the zeppelin ponderously lurched to its side. Koak scrambled to grab hold of something—anything—as the waters of the Mistveil Sea came into view over the starboard bow. Then another explosion knocked him off his feet and sent him sailing over the edge into the open air, the captain's cries for help dying on the ocean breeze.

* * *

A light rain was falling and the coastal winds were whispering in his ear when Koak washed ashore. His leg throbbed with relentless pain; it had taken the brunt of the blow when the currents had smashed him against the rocks. As he lay broken and bleeding on

the sand, he wondered whether this was what Hellscream had in mind when he ordered them to paint the continent red.

He was on a small island, a single stone spire rising up from the center and into the clouds high above. All around him, pieces of the zeppelin's flaming wreckage trailed away from the shoreline and toward the spire, jetsam that had fallen off during the ship's final descent. The rest of it floated atop the ocean waters, along with the charred corpses of his former crewmates.

For the Horde, he thought bitterly. There was a time when those words had meant something to Koak. The pain in his leg flared as he made to stand.

Leaning on a makeshift crutch, Koak hobbled inland among the ship's scattered remains to search for survivors. Acrid smoke from the ship's ruptured fuel tanks stung his eyes and seared his lungs. He nearly choked on the fumes as he rounded a section of the zeppelin's demolished hull.

Before him loomed a monstrous cloud serpent, its scarlet scales shining wet with blood.

Koak gasped and stumbled backward, his mauled leg giving out beneath him. The serpent was lying in a nest of flattened stone at the base of the spire, its body a patchwork of burns and bruises. It raised its enormous head and stared directly into Koak's eyes.

"Easy..." whispered Koak in his most placating tone. The serpent was thirty feet of solid muscle, with claws so large that they could easily curl around Koak's torso and crush his ribs while the creature's massive jaws tore him in half. But it made no move to attack him, and Koak realized that it was dying. He took in the twisted metal and scorched wood that surrounded the nest.

We did this, he thought. He suddenly felt sick.

Slowly, as if it meant to show him something, the serpent uncoiled itself. In the center of its nest was a single egg the size of Koak's chest, pristine and undamaged, its shell shining like polished garnet. The serpent coddled it gently, her tenderness at odds with her ferocious appearance. She could have escaped her fate but instead had stayed to protect her egg. For some reason, that filled Koak with anger.

"You sacrificed yourself in vain," he growled under his breath. "Your whelp will still die, abandoned and alone." He grimaced as another bolt of pain shot mercilessly through his leg. Blood was flowing from it like a river, staining the soil beneath his feet. *And I will likely die with it.*

The serpent raised her tail and wrapped it around Koak's wrist, insistently pulling him toward the nest. She crawled to his side and nudged him from behind, and he found himself before the egg.

She wants me to care for it? Me?

"No," Koak protested, but he was unable to look away.

He stretched his hand toward the egg. The space between them felt thick and heavy, like the calm before a storm. When he touched it, a stinging shock snaked its way along his arm. Koak could feel the egg trembling beneath his palm subtly at first, but soon it began to shake so forcefully that Koak backed away in apprehension.

All at once the top of the egg exploded, showering Koak with fragments of shattered shell. A bright halo of red smoke billowed out from the fissure and rolled across the ground like a bank of fog. From within arose a glistening newborn cloud serpent with ruby scales and eyes of sapphire, eyes so deep and fluid that looking into them was like trying to mark the bottom of the sea.

The hatchling met Koak's gaze and held it. Koak reached out his hand; the hatchling snaked forward and closed its tiny jaws around the meat of his palm. He did not flinch, bearing the pain until the young serpent came to be at ease, curling its body around his arm.

Koak saw its mother watching them, sorrow written plainly upon her face. She fixed a final look upon Koak, and he withered under her unblinking stare. She closed her eyes, and her body rose and fell with one last labored breath; then she lay still. The hatchling saw her, and from its anguished cries Koak knew it understood what had happened. He watched in stoic silence as the serpent sidled up to its departed mother, longingly nuzzling her and curling up within her shadow.

In the days that followed, Koak struggled to keep himself and the hatchling alive as he waited for a rescue party that he suspected General Nazgrim wouldn't send. And why should he? The life of one orc was of no concern to Hellscream, no more than the life of one dragon would have been a concern to the Dragonmaw. Koak was on his own.

The rain provided them with only limited fresh water, and no matter how many sugar minnows he caught, the serpent's ravenous appetite was never sated. His leg tormented him incessantly, as did the question of what to do with the hatchling.

On the fifth day, the rains stopped. As Koak's hopes of salvation dwindled into dust and the serpent sat shivering in the cold, they spotted two figures in the clearing skies. A pair of cloud serpents, fully grown, flitted effortlessly between the other spires across the sea, each with a pandaren rider astride its back. They circled deftly around the mountain peaks and returned to the cliffs of the Jade Forest with breathtaking speed. A story he had heard weeks ago from one of the natives echoed in Koak's mind.

The Order of the Cloud Serpent.

* * *

The windswept cliffs of the Jade Forest rose tall and sheer over the Mistveil Sea. Koak and the hatchling had crossed the water in a raft he had cobbled together from the zeppelin's broken hull, and were arduously making their way along a steep and narrow path toward the forest proper. Koak's leg pained him unceasingly, beset by dull aches and

sharp pangs. It didn't help that the serpent fought him with every excruciating step, struggling against the frayed length of rope with which Koak had leashed it.

"Calm down," Koak huffed, exhaustion seeping into his voice. "We'll be there soon enough, and then you'll be the order's problem."

The Horde's advance forces had only recently arrived on the shores of Pandaria, but Koak had already heard much of the Order of the Cloud Serpent. Mighty warriors who rode on the backs of the ferocious beasts, the serpent riders were said to swoop into battle as swiftly as the wind itself, striking with the strength of storm and sky. Koak had been harboring a secret desire to meet them, to witness their power and stack it against that of the Dragonmaw.

Of course, there wasn't much Koak knew about the Dragonmaw. He was only a child when the red dragonflight destroyed Grim Batol, and was one of the few too weak to evade capture by the Alliance when the rest of the clan escaped into the Twilight Highlands. What he knew of his clan he had learned from stories recounted by veterans of the Second War, and from the dreams that plagued his restless nights. He had never bent a dragon to his will; the stubborn serpent hatchling he was dragging up the hill was proving to be enough of a handful.

The Order of the Cloud Serpent must be fearsome indeed, Koak pondered, to tame such willful beasts.

When they reached the top, Koak thought for a moment that they had scaled the wrong cliff. He had expected a fortress of steel and iron, a mighty citadel encircled by patrolling serpents adorned in armor and ready for war. What he saw instead were a humble cottage and an airy gazebo, both hewn of simple wood and stone, surrounded by wallows of mud and bales of hay.

"This can't be the right place," he mumbled to himself. But as he led the hatchling around the corner of the cottage and into the area beyond, Koak was greeted with the sight of cloud serpents of every size and color. Some lounged in open pens while being attended with brushes and bags of feed. Others floated calmly beside their companions as they strolled through the grounds on an afternoon walk. A few hatchlings sat coiled and placid in the laps of pandaren meditating peacefully by a tranquil stream.

Koak was utterly confused. Where were the warriors of legend?

"Ah, we have a visitor!" called a kind voice from behind him.

Koak turned to see an elderly pandaren emerging from the gazebo, her hair and fur going gray with age but her eyes alight with youth. With her were several more pandaren, each of them accompanied by a cloud serpent of a different color. She stepped forward and bowed.

"Welcome to our home, traveler," she said with a smile. "I am Elder Anli, and we are the Order of the Cloud Serpent."

"Are you all right?" asked one of the pandaren with her. "You don't look so good."

"Oh, and who is this little one?" chirped another in a cheery voice.

The hatchling retreated behind Koak's leg, shielding itself from the eyes of the onlookers. Koak shifted to the side and brought the hatchling into view, shaking the fog of bewilderment from his mind as the pandaren cooed and fawned over the infant.

"He's yours," he replied, offering his end of the rope to Anli. "And I am not all right. I am injured, and I require transport to the nearest Horde outpost. If you could provide it, I would be in your debt."

Anli watched him thoughtfully before shaking her head. "I'm afraid that will not be possible."

"You do not wish to involve yourselves in our conflict." Koak fought to keep his tone free of scorn and to push the image of the hatchling's maimed mother from his mind. "If you carried me to Dawn's Blossom instead—"

"No," Anli interrupted. "I mean you cannot leave this serpent with us and depart."

Koak frowned. "What exactly are you saying, pandaren?"

"It seems to be quite attached to you," she replied calmly. "I take it you must have been the one to hatch it. And so you must be the one to raise it."

She took a step toward him, closing his hand around the rope and pressing it back against his chest. The members of the order were watching him, stroking the scales of their serpents as if they were pets. Koak regarded them with unmasked disappointment. They were supposed to be great warriors; he saw nothing here but a nursery. And he would take no part in it.

"I don't think so," he said dismissively.

Koak dropped the rope on the ground and turned to leave, but he made it only a few steps before a sudden pain jolted through his leg. Bracing himself against his crutch, Koak fell to one knee and cursed his injuries. He felt someone tugging at his wrist.

"If you will not take me to Dawn's Blossom..." Koak trailed off when he turned his head and saw not a pandaren at his side but the hatchling. It had curled its tiny tail around his wrist and was pulling him back toward the others, an imploring look in its eyes.

It didn't want him to leave either.

Koak watched as a pair of riders streaked across the clouds above them, spiraling into serpentine twists and turns, executing death-defying maneuvers with casual ease as they raced against each other. The Order of the Cloud Serpent was not made of the fighters Koak had expected, but there was no denying that its members could *fly*.

Something inside Koak shifted. When next he looked upon the hatchling, he saw not a burden but an opportunity: a chance, at last, to become a true Dragonmaw orc, to train his

own war mount, to ride it into battle, and to conquer the skies. Let the others prepare their serpents for a life of peace and playtime. He would prepare his for war.

"Very well," he said, as much to his hatchling as to Anli. He took the serpent in his hands and lifted it above his head, the sun gleaming off its crimson scales, as red as the dragons his clan used to command.

I will make the Dragonmaw proud, Koak pledged.

I will make my serpent obey.

* * *

The first week of training did not proceed as Koak had hoped. The serpent proved to be willful and stubborn, certainly more so than any other hatchling under the order's care. It seemed determined to chew and devour everything except precisely what Koak was trying to feed it, and whenever Koak attempted to call it to heel, it chose instead to chase its fellow hatchlings with its snapping jaws. The serpent was quick and agile, and Koak's mangled leg continued to hinder him, leaving him little recourse but to bark at the hatchling until his face was red and the order's students eyed him with concern and amusement. Yet his leg was healing, thanks to the ministrations of the pandaren, and it occurred to Koak that any order that sought to ride such raucous beasts must be well practiced in the mending of broken bones.

On his eighth day with the order, as the sun rose over the peaks of the spires out to sea, Koak found his hatchling's pen conspicuously empty. Anli was standing at the fence post with a warm smile.

"It seems my hatchling has an early start on the day's mischief," Koak grumbled.

"Oh, not at all," Anli explained. "Jenova will be in charge of your serpent's care for today. Please, take a walk with me."

Their walk was quiet and meandering. Anli led him through the serene splendor of the Arboretum, dappled by sunlight and caressed by a calming breeze, until they eventually arrived at the Windspire Bridge. True to its name, the bridge spanned the distances between several of the natural spires that jutted upward from the ocean far below. Each of its arches was an architectural marvel, a monolith of masonry that seemed to defy gravity and stood stalwart against the buffeting coastal winds. The bridge appeared not unlike a cloud serpent itself, a massive creature carved from wood and stone, snaking out over the Mistveil Sea to watch over the Jade Forest in perpetuity.

Anli waited until they had traversed the majority of the bridge's expanse before she turned to address him.

"Have you named your serpent yet, Koak?" she asked.

"No," Koak answered. "And I will not do so until it has earned one. That is the way of the Dragonmaw."

"We are not the Dragonmaw," Anli replied. "And their ways are not ours."

Koak bristled. "I will do this the Dragonmaw way or not at all. There are no other options."

"This seems to be quite important to you," she remarked.

Koak stopped for a moment, searching for the right words before continuing to walk. "When the Alliance took me prisoner, I was separated from my clan. I had the chance to be reunited with them after the Cataclysm, but I did not take it."

"And why not?" Anli asked.

"I don't expect you to understand," Koak replied, "but I dishonored myself and the Dragonmaw by being placed in chains. How could I possibly face them without first proving myself worthy?"

Koak turned away from Anli, looking north across the sea, in the direction of the Eastern Kingdoms. "I am Dragonmaw in name but not in action. By taming my serpent *our* way, I can change that, and I can once again be with my people."

"I see," Anli murmured. They had reached the end of the bridge and the ornate shrine that sat atop the farthest and tallest of the spires. Behind them lay a breathtaking vista of the Pandaren coastline and the bridge's winding path over the open sky and water, the golden pagodas of the Temple of the Jade Serpent hazy in the misty distance.

Koak did his best to avert his eyes from the edge of the spire and the long and fatal fall to the sea. His best was not good enough, though he did manage to mask the fear that took root within him.

"The Order of the Cloud Serpent," Anli began as she stared out at the ocean, "was founded thousands of years ago by Jiang, a young girl from Dawn's Blossom. She came across an injured hatchling, named him Lo, and nursed him back to health.

"Back then, the citizens of Pandaria feared cloud serpents. They were seen as violent and aggressive creatures, and even to approach one was to flirt with danger. Everyone thought that Jiang's actions would lead to disaster."

"Taming a monster is no task for a little girl," Koak grunted.

"Ah, but they were wrong," Anli continued. "When the Zandalari attacked the Pandaren Empire, and our armies were fighting a losing battle on a bridge much like this one, Jiang rode in on Lo's back and turned the tide of the entire war. Together, Jiang and Lo struck the batriders from the sky and plucked the trolls from the bridge. Jiang founded the order shortly thereafter, and the sight of a cloud serpent has filled the pandaren with hope ever since."

Koak scoffed. "So now you all follow her example? These serpents are born to hunt and kill. You cannot change the nature of a beast through compassion, no more than you can change the nature of war."

"It is not a question of change, Koak, but of choice." Anli turned to face him. "Cloud serpents *are* wild and tempestuous by nature and, if mistreated, may still grow to be that way as adults. But a cloud serpent is not bound by its nature, no more than you or I. Jiang didn't force Lo to fight; Lo *chose* to fight, because Jiang *chose* to trust him and treat him with compassion. That is why we follow her example. We all choose who we will be."

Koak remained silent for a long moment. Could such a thing really be true? Could a rider, with life and limb on the line, release his reins and trust his mount to do his bidding? It seemed like madness.

"An interesting sentiment," he said at last, "but I still say that chains are more effective than choices."

"Is that so?" Anli pondered quietly.

She stepped backward and plunged off the edge of the spire.

"NO!" Koak bellowed. He sprang forward, the pain in his leg momentarily forgotten. But he was too late. Anli was gone, and all that was left of her was the sound of her laughter dancing on the wind. That confused Koak; Anli hadn't been laughing when she fell.

But she was laughing now. From beneath the bridge's closest arch she emerged on the back of her onyx cloud serpent. It rose before Koak, swaying and billowing like liquid smoke.

"Are you insane?!" Koak exclaimed. "What if your serpent had allowed you to fall?"

"Do you know the difference between steel and iron?" she asked him calmly.

Koak faltered. *She is insane*, he thought.

"Steel is stronger," he answered. "Any competent warrior knows that."

The corners of Anli's mouth curled into an enigmatic smile. "So it is."

She touched the side of her serpent's neck, and it twisted away in the direction of the distant coastline. "I trust you can find your way, Koak!" she called over her shoulder, darting toward the Jade Forest as quickly as she had reappeared. "Jade Serpent guide you!"

Koak watched them go, leaning heavily on his crutch at the end of the bridge, the wind in his hair and much on his mind.

* * *

"I did not agree to this!" Koak shouted. "You have deliberately misled me!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Ace. "Anli said you agreed to be trained in our ways!"

Ace Longpaw was unlike the other disciples of the order. While the others espoused humility in their simple attire and good sportsmanship, Ace chose to adorn himself in fine

silken shirts and gaudy jewelry. He kept his moustache waxed and his hair expertly coifed, and never missed a chance to boast about his prowess both in the sky and with the fairer sex. Koak found his boisterous nature more than a little obnoxious—particularly because the order seemed to think they were so much alike. Still, he was the one Anli had selected as Koak's personal tutor, and after weeks of playing nursemaid to the hatchling, Koak was eager to begin the *real* training.

This, however, was not what he had in mind.

"I agreed to *training*," Koak argued. He reached into the bag that Ace had brought with them and pulled from it one of a dozen leather balls. "But this is a child's game!"

"Then it should be perfect for the both of you," Ace retorted with an insufferable grin. "All riders in the order play catch with their serpents," he explained. "It teaches you to read each other's moves and instills in serpent and rider a vital give-and-take relationship. It's an important lesson!"

"That's foolish," Koak sneered. "In the heat of battle, a single moment of deliberation can lead to death. There must be a master, and there must be a servant. There is no room for 'give-and-take.'"

"Come on, Koak," Ace sighed. "Just give it a try, will you?"

Koak scowled and looked from the ball to his hatchling. He had nothing to lose now that Ace had dragged him out here, to an open field an hour's walk away from the rest of

the order. Whistling to catch the serpent's attention, he lobbed the ball in its direction. The hatchling sighted it and then bumped it toward Koak with a bob of its head.

"See," Ace chimed in as Koak caught the return, "that wasn't so bad, was it?" He turned toward the order's grounds. "Now do it twenty-five more times—in a row, mind you—and I'll meet you back home."

"*Twenty-five?*" Koak hissed. But Ace was already walking away, leaving Koak with a bag of leather balls and a hatchling that had a history of making his days difficult.

"Let's get this over with," Koak grouched. He tossed the ball to the hatchling again. The serpent spun around in a tight circle, slapping the ball with the side of its tail. The return came back wide, far too wide for Koak to reach it, and his aching leg gave out under his weight when he tried. Pulling himself to his feet by way of his crutch, he looked across the field to the hatchling and could swear he saw it smirking.

That little... Koak thought. *It did that on purpose!*

"You have made a grave mistake," Koak said ominously. He pulled another ball from the bag as the hatchling kept a close watch over him. He held the ball low, hiding it behind his hip.

"Now," he said with a growl, "let's play a game, you and I."

Koak tensed his arm and then shot the ball at the hatchling hard and fast. Its eyes widened and it jerked out of the way just as the ball struck the ground with a loud thump and an exploding cloud of dirt. The hatchling screeched at him, and Koak laughed.

"That's what I thought!" Koak shouted. "Maybe next time you should think more carefully—"

The hatchling hooked its tail around the ball and sent it straight at Koak's chest with the speed of a bullet. It struck him with a resounding thud, knocking him off his feet and filling his vision with a plethora of vibrant, flashing colors as the air was forced from his lungs.

How in the world, Koak thought as he gasped for breath, can anything that small be that strong?

As he rose again to his feet, ball in hand and stars fading from his sight, Koak glared downfield. The serpent responded in kind, and Koak knew that it understood. The battle was about to begin.

Koak threw the ball with as much force as he could marshal. The hatchling whipped around and met the volley with its own show of strength, sending the ball rocketing back toward him. Koak caught it just before the point of impact, the clapping of the leather against his palm reverberating across the grass. Then he sent it hurtling at the hatchling, and the cycle began anew.

In time, both Koak and the hatchling grew tired, and ferocity gave way to fatigue. Their attempts at ballistic retaliation degenerated into half-hearted lobs and feeble tosses, and when the sun had set and the moons had risen in its place, the two of them were simply catching and returning each other's throws. Nevertheless, the hatchling appeared to be enjoying itself and seemed genuinely disappointed when Koak finally decided to hold the ball instead of throwing it again.

"Enough now," Koak said. He made his way to the ball that had started their skirmish, the one that the hatchling had shot too wide for him to catch. "It's time we had something to eat."

As he knelt to retrieve the ball, he heard a shuffling sound behind him. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the hatchling dragging the bag across the dirt toward him, the burlap between its teeth, struggling against exhaustion. When it reached him, the hatchling pulled back the lip of the bag to hold it open.

The act took Koak by surprise. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Koak dropped the ball into the bag and closed it. The hatchling curled its body around his arm and shut its eyes. A moment later it was asleep, trailing wisps of vapor puffing peacefully from its nostrils. Koak watched it silently for a short while before hefting the bag over his shoulder and starting back toward the order.

* * *

Days became weeks, and weeks became months. The seasons in Pandaria were mild in their differences, and Koak lost track of how long he had been with the order. His serpent had grown quickly and was now easily ten times the size it had been when it first hatched. A crown of ivory horns, long and sharp, had sprouted from its scalp; its face, once smooth and round, had become ferociously contoured and angular, flowing whiskers drooping downward from just above its deadly teeth. Its infinitesimal claws had developed into razor-sharp talons capable of rending a suit of armor into ribbons. A broad and spiny fin decorated its elongated neck, which was draped with a full and thick mane, and its ruby scales had deepened into a shadowy scarlet.

Koak had watched as it matured, day by day, and for a time had grown accustomed to the idyllic pace of life within the Arboretum. But his wounds had long since mended, and he was becoming increasingly restless. The war raged on without him, and news of battle had trickled its way across Pandaria to fall upon his ears. The Horde had strengthened its position on the shores of the Krasarang Wilds, and Hellscream's agents were scouring the continent for buried relics of ancient power, going so far as to tear a hole into the Vale of Eternal Blossoms. Vol'jin and the Darkspears had risen up in open rebellion against the warchief, and the Horde was splintering as its warriors chose one side or the other.

Koak knew where the Dragonmaw would stand. Warlord Zaela vocally admired Garrosh's style of leadership; the Dragonmaw were just as intolerant of insubordination as he was. They would fly for Hellscream, and there was no better chance for Koak to prove his strength to them. He could wait no longer; the time had come for him to ride. Even if it meant fighting against the very same orcs who had watched over him in the internment

camps and told him stories of his lost clan when he had no one else. *The Dragonmaw do not forgive disobedience*, Koak told himself, *and neither should I*.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Ace warned him. "If you ask me, neither you nor your serpent is ready."

"By now, a true Dragonmaw orc would be racing his fellow riders across the sky," Koak replied. He held a saddle in his hand and was striding toward the hill that marked the end of the order's racecourse.

"Oh, ho!" Ace chortled. "I didn't know the Dragonmaw like to race! Tell you what: you manage to ride your serpent, and I'll owe you a match."

"Deal," Koak agreed. He had to admit that for all his bluster and bravado, Ace was occasionally good company.

With some effort, Koak crested the hill. His leg still ached when supporting his full weight, and the slope was not an easy one to climb. He wondered sullenly how Ka Saltboil managed to haul his carts to the top of the hill each day.

Koak caught sight of his serpent lounging nonchalantly in the shade of a tree. Crowded into the stands by the finish line, and standing around the periphery of the hill, were all of the order's students and riders.

Koak shot a look at Ace, who shrugged in fake innocence. "I may have told a few of the others that you'd try to saddle the serpent," he confessed sheepishly.

"No matter," Koak mumbled. There were so many of them, watching him, judging him. "This will be short and uneventful."

Ignoring the onlookers, Koak approached the serpent. It raised its head as it noticed him and narrowed its gaze into a suspicious squint when it saw the saddle. The serpent had grown in every other way, but the deep cerulean of its eyes had remained the same.

Koak made to swing the saddle over the serpent's back, but it slithered to the side. "Be still," Koak said. He tried again; the serpent caught the saddle with its tail and flicked it away. The beast clicked its tongue at him, and Koak began to grow angry. He thought he could hear the pandaren in attendance whispering to each other and giggling at the expense of his pride.

"No more games," Koak snarled. "This is what we've been training for!"

He lifted the saddle off the ground and threw it over the serpent's back yet again, reaching out to hold the beast still. It whined loudly and moved away, pulling Koak off balance. He redoubled his efforts, wrapping his arm halfway around the serpent's circumference as he tried to buckle the saddle's straps.

The serpent was having none of it. It thrashed wildly against him, vigorous and agitated, slamming its tail into the tree and nearly uprooting it. Koak fought to gain control, but the serpent was limber and strong.

"Hold still!" he commanded, slapping his hand against the serpent's firm back. "I said hold still!"

A collective gasp arose from the crowd as the situation escalated. "Koak, maybe you should take it easy!" he heard Ace shout above the clamor.

But Koak and the serpent continued to wrestle, smashing each other against the tree and tumbling into the stands. The onlookers quickly evacuated, retreating to the far edge of the hill. Try as he might, Koak could not reach the serpent's back, and with a final flail, he was flung violently into one of the posts holding the checkered banner of the finish line. The pole splintered and cracked upon impact, then came crashing down with the ropes and flag streaming behind it, but Koak's mind was on his recently healed leg, which had been under him when he fell.

Pain lanced through him, and Koak felt hot blood rushing to his cheeks and clouding the edges of his vision with a haze of red. How *dare* the creature defy him! After all he had done, after all the training and capitulation! He grabbed a fallen rope and brought it to bear, swinging its length overhead with a snap and cracking it like a whip inches from the serpent's face.

"OBEY ME!" he bellowed.

His words echoed in the stunned silence. The serpent, shocked into stillness by the outburst, cowered before him. *Good!* Koak thought. *Learn to fear me! Learn your place! LEARN TO OBEY!* Koak beat the air with the length of rope again, and the serpent shrank away from him as he approached. Koak was livid, his heart pounding loud and heavy in his ears.

He heaved the saddle over the serpent's back and made to tighten the straps. The serpent yowled in protest and struggled against him.

"You will *obey!*" Koak snarled. He lashed out with the whip, this time making contact with the serpent's scales. The creature shrieked in pain, its anguish naked and terrible, echoing across the Arboretum.

It will hate me.

Koak pushed the thought aside. Of course the serpent would hate him. That was only natural, and Koak didn't care. It would hate him as the dragons had hated the Dragonmaw, and as he had grown to hate Hellscream. It would hate him as any slave hated his master. Koak grabbed the serpent's horns and yanked its head around, prepared to meet its hatred head-on and deflect it with a hardened heart.

But when he looked into its eyes, Koak did not see hatred. He saw betrayal, and confusion, and a sorrow so deep that Koak could drown in it. He saw not a terrible monster to be tamed but the frightened and orphaned hatchling that had cried itself hoarse on the night its mother had sacrificed her life to save it. He thought he saw tears in the serpent's

eyes; it was a moment before he realized they were his own. The rope slipped from between his fingers as his rage died in his throat.

By the ancestors, what had he done?

"I did not..." he stammered. "That was not..."

The serpent cut him off with a terrible roar that shook Koak to his core. It drew a deep breath, its chest and throat expanding, and then let it out with the full fury of a storm. Koak ducked out of the way as the lightning rolled over his head, singeing his hair as it stood on end. The serpent spiraled up into the air and looked down upon him.

Koak didn't know what to say or think. He watched in silence as the saddle slipped off the serpent's back and came crashing to the ground, breaking and splintering into a hundred different pieces.

The serpent turned away and skulked out across the sea. Koak rose shakily to his feet. The crowd had seen it all. His shame was sudden and complete, and his anger did its best to eclipse it.

"What did you expect?" he asked them. "What did you expect?! I am a Dragonmaw orc! This is our way! This is who I am!"

As he looked out over the crowd, he caught a glimpse of graying hair and youthful eyes. Anli stood quietly among the spectators, those bright eyes now filled with sadness.

We all choose who we will be.

The pandaren left him then, and not a word was spoken. They trudged down the hill in silence, Koak's failure shrouding the finish line like a pall. Ace hung back for a moment, but Anli placed a paw on his shoulder and shook her head. Then they too were gone, and Koak was alone.

He turned toward the sea, in the direction to which the serpent had fled. He knew where it was headed, because he knew from his own tortured experiences that there was one place where all creatures went when their worlds had crumbled and their hearts had shattered.

His serpent was going home.

* * *

A sudden squall had darkened the skies of the Jade Forest and sent sheets of rain pounding into the sea. Night had fallen in the hours since the serpent had left him, and Koak fought to control his shivering body as the rainfall soaked through his clothes. He had found the raft where he had hidden it months before, left miraculously untouched by enterprising thieves and the elements. Koak had never paid much homage to those elements, and as the raft reached the island's coast, he wondered whether they had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to punish him for his insolence.

Beset by the forces of wind and water, Koak took his old crutch in hand and trudged across the muddy beach toward solid ground, tracing his own footsteps from the fateful night he had found the egg. A short time later, he came upon the site where he knew he would find the serpent.

The nest of stone was shattered and broken, as it had been the night Koak had stumbled across it, though no trace remained of the serpent's mother. Koak's serpent sat coiled at the nest's center, its mane drooping with the weight of rainwater. When it saw Koak approach, it hissed at him and retreated to the rear of the nest. The sight broke Koak's heart and filled him with renewed shame.

"I have not come to harm you!" Koak shouted over the sound of the pouring rain, and he meant it. He held his arms out at his sides as he slowly made his way to the nest.

The serpent wailed at him and rose into the air. It swooped past him, landing on an outcropping high above, and continued to watch him with obvious suspicion. Koak threw his arms up in exasperation, sending droplets of rain spraying around him.

"Even now?" he huffed. "Even when I come to you, my pride discarded, to plead for your forgiveness? Even now you resist?" He plopped down on the opposite side of the nest as his crutch fell, clattering against the rocks. "Why must you always be so willful? You answer every command with defiance, simply because you can. Even now, when I have braved this wretched storm in search of you! A true Dragonmaw orc would never tolerate

this! A true Dragonmaw..." But he trailed off, his fervor doused by the downpour and his own insurmountable doubt.

"A true Dragonmaw," he croaked. "As if I knew anything about that. I am no 'Dragonmaw orc.' And I never will be."

He said it barely louder than a whisper, and it hung onerously between them in the falling rain. Koak suddenly felt very tired. The skin of his soaked hands had pruned, and his hair was matted flat against his head. He sighed heavily, breathing a lifetime of anguish into the cold night air, and closed his eyes as the rain ran down his brow and beard.

"I grew up in an internment camp," Koak said into the silence, "but I was born in Grim Batol. My father used to tell me that I would one day ride on the back of a great dragon—that the Dragonmaw would rule the skies, and the rest of the world would soon follow."

He swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. "That was before those same dragons rose up and burned the clan alive. We lost control, and we were too weak to regain it.

"The humans found me afterward and placed me in chains, because I lacked the strength to escape with the rest of my clan. My slavery did not end until Thrall brought the camp's walls crashing down, just as the red dragonflight had done to the Dragonmaw. That is the way of the world, you see. With strength comes freedom; with weakness comes servitude.

"Now the Dragonmaw belong to Hellscream," he said, and the admission crushed his heart. "They depend on him for vital resources and military support. To defy him is to be destroyed. You cannot see the chains, but they are there nonetheless. Until they too are broken, we are Hellscream's to command. And after all these years, I am still searching for one thing: the strength to regain control."

Koak took a slow, deep breath and exhaled until his lungs burned for air. He looked to the skies, to the storm clouds, and into the falling rain. He was crying now, the tears coming forth as freely as the night his clan was destroyed, and a part of him wanted to believe that their spirits were weeping with him.

He heard a scratching sound above him and saw the serpent crawling down the face of the spire to meet him. It came to rest at his side, coiling around itself in protection against the wind and rain. Koak reached over, cautiously, to place his hand on the serpent's head and gently stroke its mane. The serpent tensed for the briefest moment, then relaxed.

They sat quietly together, waiting for the storm to pass as they had done for the first five days of the serpent's life. When the rain had stopped and the wind had died and Koak could see the reflection of the moons on the surface of the sea, the serpent was slumbering peacefully, small puffs of smoke rising from its nostrils.

Koak wrapped his arm around the serpent, closed his eyes, and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

Koak had always appreciated the morning after a night of heavy showers. He found solace in the crisp air and sparkling foliage that followed a downpour, in the way the land was refreshed and renewed. He awoke to gray skies and the scent of rain, and the early morning fog was so thick it seemed the entire world was shrouded within a cloud. Koak was surprised, but unfazed, when Elder Anli emerged from the mists like a ghost in a dream.

"It was simple enough to find you," the old pandaren explained. She started on a narrow, winding path up the side of the spire and beckoned for them to follow. Both Koak and the serpent did so, though Koak suspected the serpent only came because of Anli.

"Most serpents make their home on Windward Isle," Anli continued, "but some of them—the headstrong few who prize their independence and solitude—roost on the lone spires surrounding the island."

"And you thought my serpent must take after its mother," said Koak.

Anli smiled. "Or perhaps its rider."

Koak immediately felt chagrined. "I am not its rider. That has been made unmistakably clear."

"So why pursue it all this way?" she asked.

Koak looked to the sky, remembering the Alliance gunship that had shot him down and the search party that never came. "Hellscream abandoned me on this island," he answered. "I will not do the same to my serpent."

"You seem to dislike this Hellscream fellow," Anli observed.

Koak thought at length about how to respond. "The Horde is his army," he said at last, "but we are not his people." It was treason to say so, but only Anli was there to hear him. "Garrosh demands loyalty, but to him that just means dying at his command. He doesn't know what loyalty is. Thrall inspired loyalty. What Garrosh wants is obedience."

Anli nodded in understanding. "The two are not always the same."

Koak glanced at his serpent. "No," he conceded, "I suppose they are not."

They continued in silence, and in time they reached the summit of the spire. The mountainous peaks and verdant coastline he had espied from the top of the Windspire Bridge long ago were obscured by the oceanic fog. A light drizzle had begun to fall, its droplets as cool as mist on Koak's shoulders and chest.

"When you first came to us," said Anli, "it was because you heard that we were great warriors. And when you saw how we treated our serpents with affection, you thought the tales were false."

"And yet when I asked you the difference between steel and iron," she continued, "you told me that steel was the stronger of the two."

"Yes, I remember," Koak responded, slightly confused. "What is your point?"

Anli strolled to the edge of the spire, peering into the impenetrable mists. "You balk at the act of caring, Koak, but the strongest steel is forged through love. A smith folds it with the utmost care, hundreds upon hundreds of times. Such is the Order of the Cloud Serpent. We are the smiths, and the serpents are our steel."

Anli gestured for him to join her. As he came up to her side, she placed a paw on his chest and looked him in the eye.

"But with iron," she said to him, "a smith heats and hammers the metal, forcing it into the shape he or she wants it to be. When it cools, it becomes blackened and brittle. And though it may seem strong for a time, it will break when you need it the most. Do you understand, Koak?"

It hurt him to hear it, but Koak knew it was the truth. Such were the Dragonmaw, and their bitter bond between orc and dragon. "I do understand," he said as he glanced at the serpent, lounging silently behind them, "but what happens when the smith makes a mistake?"

"Then he must correct it," she replied, "while the metal is still hot."

Anli stepped off the edge of the spire. Koak made no movement toward her and was unsurprised when she reemerged on the back of her serpent. "You told me once that chains are more effective than choices. Well, you've tried putting your serpent in chains. Perhaps it's time you tried giving it a choice."

Koak watched as Anli flew away, wondering if he would ever do the same. She disappeared into the mists, and Koak was left alone with his serpent. The fog coalesced around him, blinding him to the rest of the world, but he knew that a foot in front of him, the ground fell away into a perilous drop just like the one that haunted his dreams. He felt as though he had been falling all his life. And he was *done with it*. Anli wanted him to give his serpent a choice? Then he would give it one *hell* of a choice.

"Serpent," Koak called. It occurred to him that he still hadn't given it a name. The serpent looked up and met his eyes. It saw what he intended to do, and it began to open its mouth in protest. He did not give it the chance.

Koak stepped off the edge of the spire and into oblivion.

In an instant he was plummeting headlong through cloud and fog toward the invisible beach below, his nightmare transformed into frightening reality. *My serpent will not save me*, Koak thought suddenly. *This is how I die*.

He heard a familiar screech from above and looked up to see a long and twisting shadow diving toward him. His serpent emerged from the mists and raced to his side. It had made its choice.

Koak had never been happier to be so wrong. But as the serpent approached, he realized with a sense of doom that there was no saddle or reins with which he could gain purchase on its scaly skin. Panic sunk its claws deep into Koak's heart. He reached desperately for the serpent, frantically grasping at it.

The serpent roared and craned its neck, meeting his gaze and holding it. When Koak looked into its eyes, he expected to see fear or doubt or despair. But he did not.

What he saw was strength.

Koak relaxed his grip and relinquished control. The serpent quickly swooped below him and caught him squarely upon a bend in its back. Koak instinctually read its movements and wrapped his arms around its body at the moment of impact, as the serpent had wrapped its body around his arm so many times in its youth.

With a roar that shook the heavens and echoed across the sea, the serpent pulled straight up with all of its might. Koak felt a spray of water on his face as they skimmed against the waves, and then they were climbing skyward as the fog lifted like a velvet curtain, the ocean and the coast and then the spires and the bridge and then all of the Jade Forest falling away and shrinking below them. Koak laughed, half in elation and half in disbelief.

His serpent had not allowed him to fall.

"Thank you," Koak called as he smiled at it. The serpent looked back at him, and Koak could swear he saw it smirking.

They broke through the clouds and into the brilliant light of the sun. The serpent pulled into a loop, and even without reins or a saddle, Koak remained astride it. He held on tight as they soared across the sky, free and strong and as fast as lightning. The serpent's scales caught a beam of sunlight and shone brightly like polished metal.

"Steel," Koak said without thinking. The serpent craned its neck to look at him again. "Your name is Steel."

The serpent roared in hearty approval. They dove under the clouds with blinding speed, Koak whooping and hollering into the wind. Koak was flying—no, *they* were flying, together, forged as one. It was like nothing Koak had ever imagined, and it was everything he had always hoped it would be.

Steel carried him from the eastern coast, and as they passed over the Arboretum, Koak saw the Order of the Cloud Serpent's members assembled by their open pens, waving to him with broad smiles on their faces. Ace was raising his paw high into the air as if Koak's triumph was his own, and Anli was beaming with a teacher's pride.

"You owe me a race, Koak!" Ace called up to him.

Koak laughed. "And you'll get it!" he shouted. "But first there is something I must do!"

Steel continued onward, over the treetops of the Arboretum and the roofs of Dawn's Blossom, toward the Vale of Eternal Blossoms and the Shrine of Two Moons. Koak had come to a decision of his own. His people needed him—not the Dragonmaw, but the Horde.

The Order of the Cloud Serpent had taught Koak a valuable lesson. True loyalty can never be enforced; it can only be earned. He had raised and nurtured his serpent, cared for and confided in it, and in return it had saved his life. The Horde had done the same for him: they had taken him in and given him a family when he was orphaned and alone, and now Koak would stand beside them against Hellscream and the Dragonmaw alike.

Doing so would forever mark Koak as an outcast from his clan. But the Horde was born of outcasts and rebels, homeless refugees with no one to depend on but each other. Together, they had built a home for themselves: Orgrimmar.

Together, they would take it back.

"For the Horde!" Koak exclaimed. He remembered now the meaning of those words. To fight for the Horde was to fight for one's brothers and sisters, to fold the strength of one into the strength of many and create a bond that could never be broken.

That was the true strength of the Horde—the strength of steel.