



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MIDNIGHT

LEGACY
OF THE AMANI

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The sharp scent of soot, iron, and earth saturated the room. Firelight painted solemn faces in swatches of shadow and flame. A pyre burned atop an altar, crackling in accompaniment to the low croon of Kinduru's voice.

The speaker swayed before ancient stone shaped in the likeness of a great eagle, her wings outspread, her noble face turned toward the hidden heavens. Akil'zon. Mother of storms and skies. Once primary loa of the Amani, but no more. She had forsaken them.

And still Kinduru danced. He stamped his feet against the packed earth in a sister rhythm to drums that beat for him alone. His arms twisted overhead, then spread wide as if he meant to take flight.

From where she knelt nearby, Zul'jarra watched her uncle worship. She listened to him sing Akil'zon's praises and beseech blessings that would never come.

A waste of time, some small part of her protested.

With a last, lingering note, Kinduru collected a wooden bowl from the altar and lifted it in offering and supplication. He bowed deeply before the great eagle, then faced Zul'jarra.

She felt her spine straighten but did her best to remain still, her knees in the dirt, her hands at her sides, and her body bent forward. Hopefully, this would be done soon.

“Akil’zon!” Kinduru called. “We lay your mark upon this chosen daughter.” He dipped a finger into the bowl. It came away a deep red, which he then swept against Zul’jarra’s arms, shoulders, and neck.

“You look just like your mother,” Kinduru murmured as he painted. “But I see the fierceness of your grandfather in your eyes, sharp and dangerous.”

Anger burned like venom in Zul’jarra’s belly. “I am nothing like him.”

Kinduru’s smile faded at the edges as he regarded her, still kneeling at the center of the hazy circle of torches, the smoke and cloying scent of the ceremonial oils heavy in the air.

The speaker raised his voice once more. “Great eagle. Take her mind, body, and spirit under your wing. Give her strength and wisdom. Keep watch over her, guide her, so she may do the same for her people.” His paintless hand fell atop her head. “Zul’jarra, blood born of Zul’jin, soon Chieftain of the Amani.” His words were firm, but the faintest curl to his lip betrayed his pride.

“I still don’t understand why she has to do this.” Zul’jan stood just outside the circle with their mother. “And I don’t understand why you have to step down.”

“Then you mean to misunderstand,” Chieftain Zarama pushed from behind clenched teeth.

Zul’jarra’s annoyance mirrored the sharpness of her mother’s reply. Why did her brother always make a point to press at an unpleasant topic as if it were a bruise? And now, of all times. This ceremony should have been a moment of celebration for their family. The two of them here to witness her ascension. Instead, a thread of tension twisted through it all tight as a bowstring.

Zarama went on. “You worry for your sister, but she is strong. Stronger than I.”

It took every ounce of Zul’jarra’s not insignificant will to keep her gaze from dragging to her mother’s injuries. Burn wounds concealed by a cloak Zarama clutched closed as she spoke.

“Strong enough to dissuade challenge from the other tribes.”

“And you’re not?” Zul’jan retorted. “The mighty Zarama, who fought off a gnarldin on her own in the dead of night. Then, bloody from battle, marched home bearing the scars of victory, hmm?”

Some weeks ago, their mother’s caravan was ambushed by the giants that roamed the forests near their settlement. They’d crushed her ribs in with a burning log, shattered her leg; against such burns, even the greatest troll would find difficulty healing.

“On top of everything else you’ve done.” Zul’jan tutted, his voice snatching Zul’jarra back to the moment at hand. “Isn’t that enough?”

Few could match her mother, true, but Zul’jarra had begun to build her own legend, and not just as Zarama’s daughter. Her skills in combat could not be denied. They’d been tested not only in training but in the wilds, during reconnaissance missions and skirmishes along their borders to maintain what lands had not been stolen.

Zarama placed one hand upon her son’s shoulder. “You don’t have to defend my name. It stands on its own. But these are wounds . . . I may not heal from.” Her hold on the cloak tightened. “If I remain chieftain, am challenged and defeated . . .” She did not have to finish. They all understood what that meant for their family. For their people.

Zul’jan pursed his lips around his tusks. “But you can—”

“Enough, Jan.” Zul’jarra had little patience for her brother’s protests. “This is happening. It was always going to happen.”

Zul’jan dipped his head in deference. He couldn’t argue the truth of that. She was the eldest. This was her path.

Kinduru, who stood by silently during their disagreement as he so often did, cleared his throat. “If you’re finished.”

Zarama sucked her teeth and gestured for them to continue.

Zul’jarra faced her uncle.

“As I was saying.” He set his hand on her head once more. “Zul’jarra, blood born of Zul’jin, soon Chieftain of the Amani. Arise, and present yourself worthy.”

Zul’jarra pushed to her feet, her knees complaining, her legs numb. She could imagine her uncle prattling on about how, in his day, they could kneel for hours without issue. “But the young people no longer pray.”

“Enough, Jan.” Zul’jarra had little patience for her brother’s protests. “This is happening. It was always going to happen.”

Because there is no one to hear us.

Finished, he backed away and bent low as he declared, “One to the other, let it be passed.”

Zarama approached her daughter, her cloak falling back to reveal her own painted palm and a brief glimpse of the gnarled skin at the edges of scarred flesh. The sight tore at something inside Zul’jarra.

With steady fingers, Zarama left her mark on her daughter’s face and fate.

Zul’jarra saw a softness dancing in her mother’s eyes. Something fond. Then it was gone.

“The other tribes await our arrival.” Zarama took up her axe. It was a massive thing with spikes as long as her fingers around the head of the blade and flame at its heart. She faltered under its weight. Both Zul’jarra and Kinduru reached for her. Even Zul’jan had stepped forward, but Zarama waved them off then gathered herself with her shoulders back and her head high. “Let us greet the future of the Amani.”



The journey from Akil’zon’s shrine to the meeting hall wasn’t long at all. A single bridge hung suspended between the structures, situated on the two tallest hills. Amani’Zar stretched out around them. The village had become a waypoint of sorts for any driven here with high elven blades and magic at their backs. The colonizers and their allies raided Amani lands and snatched up territory, forcing people from their homes—those who weren’t slain. Here, in the cover of Akil’zon’s Reach, there was safety. Shelter. This was sovereign land, at one time under the protection of the loa. Survivors took time to recover before moving on, though some chose to remain.

Thus, the Amani survived in the shadows of the sprawling cities that had once dotted the empire. Cities Zul’jarra had never laid eyes on, but they filled her dreams still, each stone placed by stories the elders told.

When she and her brother were younger, their uncle and mother spoke of the past, how the loa dwelled in their temples and the speakers—who were numerous then—would invoke their blessings for everything from the anointing of a new chieftain to the birth of new babes. The people offered prayers before eating, before

travel, before visits to friends and family, before planting crops or harvesting the same, before placing bets on games or tournaments; reverence for the gods saturated every aspect of Amani life.

We were truly blessed, Kinduru would say with this far-off look in his eyes. A look of wonder and longing.

Now? Some might say the Amani were lucky to be alive.

As their small group went along, Zul'jarra glimpsed new faces mingling among her people. Perhaps *mingle* wasn't the right word. The visitors remained in tight groups, though some broke off to speak with others. The rich brown armor and pale paint of the Witherbark was easy to identify. So were the brilliant yellows and burning oranges of the Shadowpine and the vibrant greens and blues of the Vilebranch. The bones of their masks made it especially easy to pick them out.

As a matter of fact, the number of white faces amongst green was a surprise. And a concern. "There are so many, eh?"

"I noticed as well," Kinduru murmured without turning. "Seems Kol'anji has traded elders for warriors."

Zul'jarra barely repressed a snarl. Time spent at her mother's side meant she'd attended many a gathering with leaders from the other tribes. Of them all, she liked the arrogant Kol'anji the least.

"I don't see any Revantusk," she remarked.

"Likewise."

"Have they been waylaid?"

"Perhaps," Kinduru assented, though he did not sound convinced.

Neither was she. Few good things resulted in the absence of a tribe's entire retinue.

Guards stood on either side of the meeting hall's entry. At Zarama's approach, they straightened and offered salutes. The sounds and smells of the gathering reached Zul'jarra before the sight of it. Oiled leather, the heady aroma of roots and herbs carried by the shaman, and beneath it all, the acrid scent of sweat.

Inside, each tribe had taken their usual place around the grand room. There were so many Vilebranch, they spilled over into the empty space reserved for the Revantusk. Zarama paused to greet each tribe's representative personally, and Zul'jarra took the opportunity to scan the eastern wall of the room.

Sure enough, a familiar face stuck out amongst the shadows. A tall but slim figure stood braced against a support beam, arms folded, piercing green eyes slowly roving over their guests. Zul'jarra waited until that gaze found hers, then tilted her head in silent beckoning. The figure melted into the crowd, disappearing for a moment before reemerging at her shoulder.

“Zul’jarra.”

“Ral’ji.” Zul’jarra didn’t address the figure directly, instead keeping one eye on her mother as she finished her greetings. “Any word from the Revantusk?”

“None,” Ral’ji offered. Barely a year older than Zul’jarra, Ral was one of their finest scouts. If there was anything amiss, she could uncover it. “I’ve prepared a small search party, just in case.”

“Send word of whatever you find.”

Ral’ji bowed, then stepped back and away, slipping from the hall.

“What was that about?” came a curious murmur from Zul’jarra’s back. Her brother no doubt overheard the conversation but, thankfully, had not interrupted.

“Following a hunch.” She shot him a look she hoped conveyed they would speak about it later. Too many roving eyes and open ears present.

Zul’jan’s brow puckered. He clearly had questions but held them behind pursed lips.

“Careful or your face will get stuck like that,” Zul’jarra said.

“I’ll still be prettier.”

She smiled for the first time in hours. Leave it to Jan.

Soon their group was moving again. The rumble of conversation receded as they passed, those in attendance lowering their heads or offering salute to Zarama. It didn’t go unnoticed that a number of Vilebranch did not.

Zarama reached the table at the head of the room, taking her seat behind it. Zul’jarra stood at her mother’s right hand and Zul’jan on her left, while Kinduru made a show of bowing before stepping off to the side entirely.

Zul’jarra followed her mother’s gaze as it landed on each of the representatives at the front of their band. Well, two of three. Kol’anji remained seated and wore the faintest sneer. It widened when his gaze caught Zul’jarra’s, and revulsion rippled through her.

"We have much to discuss, hmm," Zarama began.

Heads bobbed, affirmations scattered through the room like rain.

"Our scouts bring word of newly established supply lines from the south. Behind their gilded walls, the elves are building something. We must be ready to stand against whatever comes." Zarama's gaze flicked to the empty Revantusk section, but it was only for an instant. "To that end I—I will no longer be your chieftain. I would have my daughter, Zul'jarra, lead in my place."

At the sound of her name, Zul'jarra stepped forward.

Zarama continued. "Trained by my hand, she has braved many dangers to ensure the safety of our people. She has studied our enemy, knows their tactics, and will be their reckoning. The legend of our line sings in her blood."

Cheers erupted around the room, and pride swelled in Zul'jarra's chest. This was it. Everything her mother, her . . . her father, and her uncle had instilled in her, it was all for this moment. She lifted her chin as she had seen her mother, her chieftain, do so many times.

"I believe," an unpleasantly familiar voice interjected, "that before the mantle is passed, we get a say." Kol'anji tilted forward, flexing muscled arms covered in more scars than skin.

Zul'jarra's jaw clenched tight.

"Kol'anji," Zarama acknowledged with practiced poise. "You wish to speak?"

The Vilebranch leader offered a smile that was all teeth. "I do." He finally stood, taking hold of a massive mace. The head was well worn from pounding his enemies into a pulp, the pommel shorn into a wicked, red-stained spear. Lifting the weapon with one hand, he leveled it at Zul'jarra. "You claim this girl knows the elves. Has she faced them in more than border skirmishes? Stared down their numbers, the downpour of their arrows, the fire at their fingertips, and chosen to fight anyway?"

Not for the first time since learning she was to be chieftain, Zul'jarra felt a hollowness in her being. A lacking she wasn't sure how to reconcile.

"Nooooooooo? Unsurprising." Kol'anji switched targets, aiming a thick finger at an unmoved Zarama. "Your family's failures have cost us what little our enemies didn't take. Now you present this untested child to lead?" He sucked his teeth, the insult carrying to every corner of the room. "I think not."



“I believe,” an unpleasantly familiar voice interjected, “that before the mantle is passed, we get a say.” Kol’anji tilted forward, flexing muscled arms covered in more scars than skin.

White-hot fury filled Zul'jarra. "You choose now, of all times?! Infighting while the elves could be preparing an attack."

Manic delight danced across Kol'anji's face. "Elves are the least of your troubles, girl." He played his tongue against his teeth, teasing the leather band around one tusk. "I invoke the right of challenge."

The room exploded with cries of treachery from one side and the demand to honor the challenge from the other. Zarama lifted her hands for silence, but the tribes continued to hiss and spit. Weapons appeared in raised fists. Insults and accusations flew like spears.

"Cretins, all of them." Zul'jan played at disinterest, but his wide eyes betrayed his worry.

Fed up, Zul'jarra snatched her mother's axe from its place on the table. She hefted it overhead and, with a roar, brought it down. The blade struck the chamber floor with a sound like thunder, a webwork of cracks splitting the stone. A snarl curled her lips as she heaved the weapon from the fractured floor.

"Your chieftain called for order." She addressed the gathering while glaring at a still smiling Kol'anji.

Silence fell in her wake as she returned to her mother's side. Zarama's expression was unreadable, but the anger that had roiled in Zul'jarra glittered in her mother's eyes.

"Very well," Zarama said, her voice the quiet before a storm. "The challenge will be answered."



It was a miracle the conclave dispersed without violence. Kol'anji took his forces and retreated beyond the bounds of the settlement. The other tribes returned to their designated lodgings. The hall stood empty, save for Zul'jarra and her family. While an all-out brawl had been avoided, there was still plenty to fight about.

"Let me face him!" Irritation pounded in Zul'jarra's temples. "He is *one* troll!"

"Jarra," her mother began while massaging her brow.

"I can do it!"

"No." Zarama cut the air with her hand. "Kol'anji may be a conniving, backstabbing snake, but his fangs are sharp, and his strike is deadly." Her gaze fell to where her axe rested on the table once more. "If he wants a fight, then *I* will give it to him."

Incredulity lodged itself in Zul'jarra's throat like a fist.

Before she could shake it loose, Kinduru interjected. "And you will lose. Don't look at me like that—I was there when you all but tumbled into the healing hut. You were a mess, but thank the loa you were alive. You've only just recovered enough to call this conclave and stand for the ceremony; you cannot face another warrior in a fight to the death. Besides, if you stand in for Jarra, it will only undermine her." The speaker looked from his brother's wife to his niece, then back again. "Zul'jarra was the one challenged. By right, the decision is hers."

"And what about the next challenger?" Zul'jan said. "Or the one after that? And the one after that?"

Zul'jarra narrowed her eyes at her brother. "Why would . . ."

"Kol'anji didn't just pick a fight, he called you unworthy. Beating him won't make that go away."

Unfortunately, her brother was right. Given the responses during the conclave, others shared Kol'anji's sentiments. She could be fighting off challengers for the rest of her days as chieftain.

"In my day—" Kinduru began.

"Here he goes again," Zul'jan murmured.

"*In my day*"—Kinduru cut a look at his nephew—"a loa's favor was enough to dissuade challenges."

"The loa are gone," Zarama snapped with a tut, losing her patience. "And so is their favor."

In moments like this, it was easy to feel how the loa's absence haunted the tribes. Like a broken bone left to heal without being set, her people were recovering but they would carry this hurt the rest of their lives.

"The loa are *missing*, but their favor lingers." Kinduru turned to Zul'jarra. "You must make the climb to Akil'zon's temple."

"Out of the question!" Zarama barked. "The mountain is too dangerous now!"

Kinduru pressed on. "In the temple you will find an axe. Akil'zon gave it to our people long ago. A gift from the loa carries their divine touch. And while the journey is perilous, it is not impossible. Returning with the axe would be proof enough for many that, while silent, the loa may still watch over us. Over you. Defeat Kol'anji with it. Show them you are worthy indeed."

Silence stretched to fill the hall. Whatever rebuttal Zarama had prepared seemed to wither on her tongue as she realized, along with the rest of them, that this was probably the only way to ensure the stability of her daughter's reign. She closed her eyes and released a breath heavy enough that Zul'jarra felt her own shoulders sag with it.

"You truly wish to do this?" Zarama asked, her voice soft but tight.

Zul'jarra nodded. "I want to. I . . . need to. Whether or not it means the loa favor me, doing this will prove I am strong enough to lead our people *and* defend my name. Undercut Kol'anji's claim that I am untested."

Without another word, Zarama rose and came around the table. Zul'jarra noticed how she favored her right leg in a slight limp but said nothing. She simply went into her open arms.

"The challenge requires two days of preparation," Zarama whispered into her hair. "I can stall for that long, but if you don't return by the third . . ."

"I'll make it, Mother."

The embrace tightened, almost painfully so. "You come back to me, you hear? Come back."



With the decision made, Zul'jarra saw to preparing. The mountain was not far, but the peak where the temple rested was high, and the enchanted winds that used to carry people to the dais went still the day the loa vanished. Without the Sky Mother's blessing, the ascent was practically a death sentence. One Zul'jarra would face.

Her eyes went to the gathered supplies spread across the table centered in her chambers. It was usually covered in maps and missives. Tonight, she'd laid out the provisions she'd need to make this journey.

“I want to. I . . . need to. Whether or not it means the loa favor me, doing this will prove I am strong enough to lead our people and defend my name. Undercut Kol’anji’s claim that I am untested.”

A knock sounded at her door, briefly distracting her from the task.
“Enter.”

To her surprise, her brother stepped through. He took in the supply-covered table. “A little light for a two-day journey.”

“More than enough for what I need to do.”

Zul’jan sank back against the closed door. Neither spoke as she packed, the silence between them thickening until, “There are *other* ways you could defeat Kol’anji. Ways that don’t involve you risking your life for a ceremonial weapon that means nothing now that the loa are gone.”

It wasn’t the words themselves but the way he spoke—softly, as if sharing a secret—that made Zul’jarra pause. She considered him carefully. “Such as?”

“A poison.”

“Tempting,” Zul’jarra admitted. “But no.”

“Nothing potent enough to take his life, just . . . slow him. Steal his strength for a while. Give Mother time to—”

“So you doubt me as well, hmm?” Zul’jarra spun to face her brother. She felt her lips purse and her brows lift in an open challenge for him to answer.

Zul’jan met the look with his usual quiet confidence. A lifetime together meant he had something of a handle on his sister’s moods. “I am probably the one person who *never* doubted you, but if you want to stand a chance against Kol’anji, you should spend the next few days resting! Training! Anything but chasing after some fairy ta—”

“Enough, Jan. *Enough!*” She cut the air between them with her hand. “I am doing this. I *have* to do this.”

“Why?” That single word was both demand and plea. She could see it in his eyes: the hurt, the fear. For her.

She wanted to hug him. To pull him close and promise all would be well. “I just do. I don’t expect you to understand.”

A different sort of pain flickered across his face. “Then I suppose it’s a good thing that I don’t.”

With a feeling like stones in her stomach, Zul’jarra returned to making her preparations. “And you never will.”

The silence from before returned. She did her best to ignore it, to ignore the feeling of her brother's eyes boring into the back of her head. Then, just before she gave in to the need to say something, tell him to leave or to help, he spoke.

"I've known you to be many things, Sister. Steady. Passionate. Strong. Kind. But never foolish. Until now. Don't let your stubbornness cost more than you can give."

The door thumped closed behind him.

Left alone, Zul'jarra simply stood in the quiet. She knew her brother's words were born of concern, but to suggest such underhanded tactics . . . Then again, the Vilebranch weren't exactly known for their stringent morality.

Another knock shook her from her contemplations. "I'm not in the mood for any more of your nonsense, Jan."

"What did he do this time?" came an amused voice.

Zul'jarra turned to find Ral'ji standing in her doorway, her face full of gentle teasing, and couldn't help but smile faintly in return.

"Nothing. Just . . . my brother has a way with words. Sometimes the wrong way." She gestured for Ral to enter. "What did you find?"

The scout closed the door before speaking. "The Revantusk were not waylaid; they didn't come."

"What?!"

"They didn't come." Ral'ji splayed her empty hands as if in apology. "In protest to . . . in protest." She didn't have to say why; Zul'jarra already knew.

"To me," she spat. "My becoming chieftain."

"Maybe." Ral'ji crossed the small space to make herself comfortable on the bed. She patted the spot beside her in silent beckoning. "My sources say chatter about the elves gathering strength has them concerned."

"Not just them." Zul'jarra flopped beside Ral, earning a faint chuckle.

"No, but the protest is more a judgment on what happened the last time the tribes joined forces than you, personally. If it makes you feel better."

"It doesn't."

Ral'ji's expression softened as she folded one of Zul'jarra's hands in hers. "It's not you."

The warm press of fingers was a comfort, but Zul'jarra's traitorous thoughts would not leave her be. "No, just my family. One more stone my grandfather has placed around my neck." Bending at the waist, she dropped her face into her hands and swallowed a frustrated groan.

"I can't pretend to know what you're going through."

Hands fell to her shoulders and drew her out of her wallowing.

"But you don't need to face it on your own." Those same hands then lifted to cup either side of her face, thumbs brushing against her cheeks. "There are people you can turn to. People who care for you."

Zul'jarra's ire abated. She bowed her head and shut her eyes when Ral'ji's brow pressed to her own. "I know."

"Yet you will climb a cursed mountain alone." No doubt Ral had choice words about Zul'jarra's decision.

"I have climbed many mountains alone."

"I would go with you."

"I know."

"Without hesitation."

"I know."

Ral'ji sighed, the sound weighty with resignation and the quiet disappointment of being unable to help those you love. "If you know so much, then you know I'm not happy about this."

"Mmm."

"And that I'll be right here for you." Ral'ji folded her arms around Zul'jarra and held her close in the coming dark. "Always."



The village was quiet when Zul'jarra crept from her home and down the empty pathways. Under the cover of night, she was able to slip into the forest without alerting the Amani sentinels or the Vilebranch contingent camped at their door.

Keeping a steady but swift pace, she went over her plan for the hundredth time. It was much too dark to make the steepest part of the climb, but she would go as far as

she could. If she set out again at first light, she could reach the peak by midafternoon. Then it was just a matter of finding the axe, climbing back down, and returning in time to meet Kol'anji's challenge. It was a loose plan with too many opportunities for disruption, but it was all she had.

Along the path, she happened upon small shrines dedicated to Akil'zon. In the past, these monuments would be covered in candles and offerings left by the faithful: Tribute crafted by a believer's hands or baskets full of food. Some even offered furs from hunts. All meant to curry favor in various aspects of life. After the loa ceased speaking, the shrines grew empty and dark.

It was at one of these sacred sites that she decided to make camp. The area was relatively flat, slightly open but elevated. Not the most concealed, but defensible if necessary.

Lowering her bag, she began to unpack what was needed for the night. Around her the forest lay still. No wind, no creatures burrowing in the undergrowth. Yet her time amongst the trees meant when leaves rustled a touch too sharply, she knew she wasn't alone.

She reached as if to pull something else from her pack but closed her hand around her spear instead.

Another rustle, this time closer.

Then closer.

When her would-be assailant reached the edge of the clearing, Zul'jarra sprang upward, spinning on her heel in the same motion. There, a figure in the dark. She leapt, ready to drive her weapon through their heart.

Hands went up in defense. "Jarra!"

"J-Jan?!" Shock iced her body mid-lunge, and she nearly tripped over herself in an effort to stay her attack.

Her brother's eyes were wide in the moonlight, dancing between her and the tip of her spear.

"What are you doing?" she demanded in a hiss.

Zul'jan slowly lowered his hands. "Hopefully, not losing my head."

"But only barely!" She dropped her weapon, though not before smacking the pommel against her idiot sibling's arm. "I could've killed you!"

Zul'jan followed to where her pack rested. "You're too skilled for that."

"Why are you skulking around in the dark?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he asked in that sarcastic tone of his. "I'm here to help."

"I don't need your help."

"You might."

"You could have been attacked by gnarldin! Or elves!"

"So could you. Look, I know you have it in your head to do everything on your own. You have since we were children."

Zul'jarra scowled, hoping that if he couldn't see her expression clearly, he could *feel* it. "You're still a child."

"Yet you're the one throwing a tantrum." He dodged another swing of her spear.

"Let me start over. I understand why you're doing this." He paused, considered, then confessed, "Actually, I don't, but we promised to face this world and its challenges together. You were always going to lead, and I was always going to be there to support you. If this is how it starts, with you climbing a mountain in the middle of the loafsaken night to find some fancy axe, then I'm with you."

Staring at her brother, hearing his words, the last embers of Zul'jarra's irritation cooled. She sighed, shaking her head. "You're supposed to be the clever one."

Zul'jan smiled, eyes twinkling. "I am."

"Pretty foolish to come after me by yourself. I trek these forests alone all the time; you still get lost in markets."

"In my defense," Zul'jan began as he stepped closer, "that place is chaos incarnate. And there's no way I can get lost following you."

Despite their recent disagreements, Zul'jan had been in her shadow their whole lives. Not plotting a betrayal or planning his own rise, but genuinely there to look after her, as he knew she would always look after him.

"Fine. If you're going to come, at least make yourself useful. Gather wood for a fire."

Between the two of them, the task of setting camp was a quick one. Soon they sat near the trembling light of a newborn fire, rations warming on a stone. Zul'jarra poked at the flame's innards to coax out a bit more light and warmth while her brother busied his hands with coal and parchment. He was sketching, she realized.

“Let me start over. I understand why you’re doing this.” He paused, considered, then confessed, “Actually, I don’t, but we promised to face this world and its challenges together.”

“You haven’t done that for a while.”

“Mmm?”

She gestured to the drawing.

“I do it all the time.” He scratched out a few more lines of what appeared to be a portrait. “You just don’t pay attention anymore.”

“Don’t pay attention anymore.” She pitched her voice to mock him, then smiled and leaned forward with interest. Her breath caught cold in her chest.

It wasn’t an exact likeness, things built from memory hardly ever were, but she knew the face all the same.

“Is that . . .”

Jan nodded. “Father. I draw him sometimes. When I’m afraid I’m forgetting what he looked like or wondering what he might do or say.” He tilted the parchment so she could get a better look.

Zul’jarra stared, transfixed. Jan was little when they lost their father, so it made sense he would struggle to hold on to the memory. Zul’jarra had been only slightly older, but for her, it never faded.

She remembered strong arms scooping them onto broad shoulders. She remembered how his booming laughter had filled their home. Their father was a big man with a big heart. Kinduru would tease him for being the soft one. Compared to Zarama most were, but that never stopped Man’ye from doting on his children. Where their mother exemplified discipline and the iron will of a chieftain, their father had embodied love. Love for one’s family and people. Zarama prepared her children for the realities of the future, for the trials that would surely come. Man’ye had instilled in them a respect for the past, when the loa still enchanted their world and dreams of reclaiming their people’s greatness seemed not so distant.

“What do you think he’d say?” Zul’jan asked, drawing Zul’jarra out of the memories. “About all this.”

“I don’t know.” Zul’jarra turned to check the food and sneakily wipe a few tears from her face. “Maybe he’d say you should go home before you get yourself hurt.”

Zul’jan narrowed his eyes, then set aside the sketch and shifted closer. “You’re the oldest and the heir, but don’t forget I was there too. For Mother’s lessons, for her training. During long nights when the weight of everything—not just the position but



the defeat that placed it on her head, the broken legacy it carried, the withdrawal of our loa and growing mistrust of the people—nearly crushed her. Without Father and Uncle by her side, it would have!”

Zul’jarra glared at the flames, watching them twist and dance. He was right, but that made the unfairness of it all harder to bear.

“You were the one born to carry the burden, but I know it as intimately as you do. I don’t want to see my sister broken.”

Hissing, Zul’jarra pulled away. “I am not breaking.”

In the swaying light of the fire, Zul’jan’s gaze was steady and a touch saddened. “Maybe not now, but if you continue down this path you’ve chosen?”

“I didn’t *choose this path*. It was chosen for me. Same as it was chosen for Mother.” By their grandfather’s actions. Deep down, Zul’jarra blamed Zul’jin for what had befallen their people. If he hadn’t let his pride bait him into challenging the Horde, then the Amani’s subsequent defeat wouldn’t have shattered them. And perhaps the Amani *and* her family wouldn’t have fallen so far. For all his blustering and pomposity, Kol’anji was right about one thing: failure was part of her inheritance.

“You’ve got that look on your face,” Zul’jan remarked flatly.

“What look?” she grumbled.

“The I-don’t-care-what-Jan-says-I’m-gonna-do-what-I-want look.”

A smile broke free despite her mood. A small one. “There’s a look for that?”

“Mm-hmm. That one.” He brought a knuckle to her face and dug it into her cheek. “Right there.”

“Eehh! Stop!” She swatted him away with one hand and rubbed her face with the other. Her small smile widened.

Jan wore a matching one. “Better,” he said. “Can’t go to bed angry.”

Something else their father taught them. Thinking of him settled something in Zul’jarra. What she wouldn’t give to be able to ask his advice on all of this. But he was gone.

“We *can* go back,” Zul’jan said. “Come up with a plan that doesn’t risk you falling from a mountaintop.”

“I won’t fall.”

Deep down, Zul'jarra blamed Zul'jin for what had befallen their people.

If he hadn't let his pride bait him into challenging the Horde, then the Amani's subsequent defeat wouldn't have shattered them. And perhaps the Amani *and* her family wouldn't have fallen so far. For all his blustering and pomposity, Kol'anji was right about one thing: failure was part of her inheritance.

“But you could. Then Mother will have to face the challenge while injured *and* grieving. How do you think that would go?”

She could feel her brother’s eyes on her, but instead of answering she took up a portion of the now-burnt meal and held it out. “Eat. Then rest. We have a trying day ahead.”



The sun hadn’t even crested the horizon when they broke camp, Zul’jarra taking the lead and setting the pace. Zul’jan followed wordlessly, accompanied by the constant scritch and scratch against his drawing pad.

Just like when we were younger. She remembered similar mornings, rising early to see to a litany of duties with Jan trailing after. Jan, who was ever present, ever loyal.

While she wouldn’t admit it aloud, she was glad he’d followed her one more time.

They didn’t stop to rest or eat, instead passing the water sack and a hunk of dried boar back and forth as they walked. Somehow, they reached the final climb without incident. At last, a stroke of good fortune.

“Right.” She nodded, then tightened the strings on her pack. “Wait here while I—”

“Wait here?” Zul’jan barked an incredulous laugh. “You still want to do this alone?”

“I’ll go faster with just—”

“If you are so determined to die, why not just jump off the mountain and be done with it, eh? Kol’anji can swing his mace at your memory.”

Zul’jarra felt her anger rise to a spear’s point. “What do you want me to do, Jan? Put venom in his food? Maybe slit his throat in his sleep?”

He shrugged. “Eeh. Better him dead than you.”

“So you would have me live with the shame of such a thing?”

“He’d do it to you if he could! And the point is you’d *live!*”

“I know *you* don’t mind running from a fight, but not all of us are comfortable skulking in the shadows and striking from hidden places. Our people need a leader, not a coward!”

Zul'jan recoiled as if struck, his eyes swimming with hurt. That's when it hit her that he thought she was talking about *him* when she meant *Kol'anji*. She opened her mouth to apologize but paused. If Jan was upset with her, he wouldn't want to go. He'd turn back. He'd be safe. Then, after she retrieved the axe and returned home, she could explain. While it killed her to hurt him like this, it was for the best.

It's what a chieftain would do.

No, no, no, look at him! some small part of her screamed. *You can't leave it! Apologize!* Instead, she lifted her chin.

The pain on her brother's face vanished under a mask of indifference, which was worse than if he had shouted at her.

He nodded. "It rained a couple of days ago," he murmured, his voice far calmer than it should've been. It sent a shudder through her. "Mind the loose rocks."

Then he turned and started back the way they'd come.

Zul'jarra watched him go, still wanting so desperately to call after him, to chase him, grab him, say she didn't mean it that way.

She swallowed the words and impotent desires, then spun on her heel and started her climb.

Fueled by her anger at herself, Zul'jarra took to the mountainside like a spider. Hand over hand, foot over foot, the burn in her belly propelled her ever upward. Twice she nearly lost her footing and almost went plummeting to her death. But her training and skill kept her grounded.

She had no idea how long she clung to the side of the mountain, but eventually she managed to heave herself onto the temple dais. She collapsed against the smooth stone, her arms trembling, her lungs on fire.

The sun burned overhead, blindingly so, as if to encourage her to get a move on. Its position put the time at just a few hours past midday. She lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the judgmental light. "I'm going."

Finding her feet on the precipice, she faced the temple. Years of abandon had left it crumbling in some places and discolored in others, but it evoked a sense of awe all the same. It was with a surprising amount of reverence that she climbed the stairs, bypassed the empty and broken altars on either side—now home to a number of eagle nests—and slipped into the cool shadow of the central tower.

As she passed through the archway and into the main hall, she noticed the statues. Three eagle heads, one on each wall. They peered down at her as if from on high, their empty eyes assessing. Scrutinizing.

She ignored them, instead taking in the rest of the space. Benches covered in tattered cloth. Offering bowls left empty, some in pieces on the floor. It wasn't hard to envision this place in its prime, full of priests, speakers, and worshipers. The walls must have vibrated with their veneration.

Sunlight poured through the slat above the entryway, and when a gust of wind stirred dust and ash from long-burned-out pyres, the mixture thickened the air with a cloud of twinkling starlight. It was lovely. And disgusting. Coughing, she covered her nose and mouth and squinted against the haze.

There. Something glinted at the base of an altar not unlike the one she'd knelt at yesterday. Something metallic. She crossed the distance at a run, sliding to a stop that sent more dust flying. Covered in a layer of grime and cobwebs was the axe.

Slowly, reverently, Zul'jarra curled her fingers around the handle and lifted. It was old but finely crafted. Heavy, but not too much so. Well balanced. It had seemed larger from farther away. A trick of the light, perhaps. The axe fit perfectly in her hands, almost as if it had been made for her. She tightened her grip and gave it a test swing. It cut the air beautifully. The edge still looked sharp enough to cut a man clean in half.

Or an arrogant Vilebranch chieftain.

With her prize attained, she turned to go but paused when her gaze lit upon one of the three eagle heads watching her.

Zul'jarra didn't put much stock in making offerings that always went ignored, but it felt wrong to take this without leaving anything in return. Besides, she had nothing to give, except . . .

Raising the axe on open palms, she bowed her head. "My uncle says you're still listening." Her voice cracked against the words. "I don't know if I believe that, but I do know our people need something to believe in. *I could use something to believe in.*"

A scream shattered the stillness.

"JARRA!"

"Jan?" Panic kicked against her ribs as she bolted for the exit, her heart in her throat, its frantic pulse screaming in her ears. She leapt whole flights of stairs to reach the edge of the dais as quickly as possible. What she saw below sent fear cascading through her.

Zul'jan dove to one side just as a massive club slammed into the ground, sending a spray of dirt and rock into the air as if it were water. A gnarldin roared as it hefted the weapon, which was truly just a tree with the branches broken off. The creature wasn't alone. At least two more giants lumbered after it, all of them clamoring to get to her brother. Zul'jan darted around the grubby fingers grabbing for him.

Zul'jarra dropped down the handholds quickly. It was dangerous, foolish even. One wrong catch and she'd be sent flying off the mountainside. She didn't care; she had to get to her brother.

One of the creatures reached for Zul'jan, but he drove his daggers into its meaty hand before darting aside as it pounded the ground, howling in pain. He tried ducking between the legs of another, but it caught the hem of his cloak. The fabric tightened around Jan's throat, choking off his shout as the monster hurled him toward a tree. The heavy thud made Zul'jarra's teeth ache, then Zul'jan hit the ground, tumbling over the edge of a rise.

Frantic, Zul'jarra flung herself forward with a roar. "No! Jan!" The sound echoed along the mountain, and all three giants turned toward her. Her leap carried her through the air, the blade finding a home in the neck of the gnarldin that had thrown her brother. She felt the give of flesh, the snap of bone. Blood sprayed the other gnarldin, blinding them temporarily.

Panic shrieked in her ears as she scrambled to the cliff's edge. Relief nearly sent her toppling over when she saw Zul'jan was alive, clinging to a root jutting out of the cliffside. Their eyes met, and without a word, he reached for her. She hauled him up onto solid ground, pulling him tight against herself and then shoving him back when the remaining gnarldin seemed to get their bearings. They bellowed as they charged, fists and weapons lifted.

"Stay behind me!" Zul'jarra called, then raced forward to meet them. She had no way to tell if her brother listened to her or not, but she couldn't focus on that. Her grip tightened on the axe, and she swung.

“My uncle says you’re still listening.” Her voice cracked against the words. “I don’t know if I believe that, but I do know our people need something to believe in. I could use something to believe in.”

Again and again, she brought the weapon up and around, slicing at muscled limbs and massive feet. Some of the blows glanced off their makeshift weapons, but that didn't slow her. She kept at it, the next swing sending a leg flying and the giant that lost it howling to its knees. A blow to the back of the head finished it off, and then she faced her final opponent.

She didn't see the unstable patch of rock until she was already mid-leap, bringing the axe down on the remaining gnarldin. Her weapon found its mark in the creature's chest, sinking deep. She held on and rode the body as it fell, right onto the sloping earth. The gnarldin slammed into the ground, which immediately began to dissolve beneath it. Beneath *her*.

"Jarra!"

Her brother's cry was the last thing she heard before she felt the world give way under her feet. The sky opened up above her as she was pulled down into darkness.



Zul'jarra dreamt of shadow.

Of the deep night.

Of impossibly high mountains.

She was climbing one, hand over hand, grueling inch by inch. The stones cut into her palms, and they wept fire. And no matter how long she climbed, she could never reach the top. She wanted to stop, but she knew she couldn't. They were counting on her. They were behind her, following. If she stopped, they would fall. She would fail. So she kept going, kept pushing toward the summit, where her grandfather stood staring down at her. There was judgment in his eyes.

Anger flushed Zul'jarra's entire body. "Don't you look down on me," she growled between clenched teeth. "Don't you *ever* look down on me!" Her voice echoed around her, shaking the mountainside. It felt like the entire thing could give way. Still, Zul'jin continued to stare, unblinking, unspeaking.

"You . . ." Zul'jarra seethed. She pulled herself upward, faster now, spurred on by her rage. "You." Faster still, impossibly so. She was on her feet now, running

up the mountain face. “You!” Akil’zon’s axe was suddenly in her hands. A gust of wind hit her back, launching her into the air, up and over her grandfather. “COWAAAAAARD!” She brought the axe down on his head.

Fire erupted around her, bright and blazing. The axe vanished, consumed by the blaze. So did Zul’jin. She was certain she would be next, but it didn’t happen. There was no heat. No pain. Just blinding light and the wrath thrashing in her chest.

Her eyes fluttered open. For a moment, the world was unfamiliar shapes and colors that gradually sharpened into the familiar sight of her room.

“W-what . . .” Her throat rebelled against the desire to speak. It felt like swallowing shards of glass.

A jostle of movement at her side preluded Kinduru leaning in over her, his face drawn up in worry. When their eyes met, his breath left him in a rush.

“Z-Zul’jarra,” he stammered, relieved. “Akil’zon be praised.”

“Akil’zon,” Zul’jarra repeated in a whisper. Her mind struggled to take hold of a memory, of a temple at the top of a mountain and an axe in her hands. “What happened?”

Kinduru sank back into the chair at her bedside. “You fell,” he said, breathless with disbelief. “From the face of Akil’zon’s Reach. That height should have killed you, but you barely had a scratch.”

She understood her uncle’s words individually but couldn’t quite make sense of what he was saying. “Fell?” she repeated.

He nodded. “Zul’jan found you near the mountain’s base, in an eagle’s nest of all things. Somehow, you survived. You even managed to keep hold of the axe. He brought you home.”

Zul’jarra followed her uncle’s gaze to the familiar-looking axe resting against the wall. Where did that . . . *Akil’zon!*

At that realization, memories flooded her mind in reverse: Fighting the giants with the axe. Climbing to the temple where she’d discovered the weapon. The reason she went searching for it to begin with—

“The challenge!” She bolted upright in bed, her muscles aching. “How long was I asleep?”

The shock on Kinduru's face melted away under trepidation. "At least a day. The challenge is underway."

Dread dropped cold through Zul'jarra.

"Your mother," Kinduru continued, "has gone to meet Kol'anji in your place."

"No," Zul'jarra gasped. Injured as Zarama was, she did not stand a chance.

Without another word, Zul'jarra threw off the blanket and forced her body to stand. She ignored the sharp stab of protest between her ribs.

"What are you doing?" Kinduru demanded.

"You *know* what I'm doing," she snapped, taking up the axe.

"You are in no condition to fight!"

"You said it yourself: I should be dead. Anything else is condition enough."

Zul'jarra stormed from the room, through their home, and out to where her war bear waited.

"The challenge will be met at the Broken Throne," Kinduru called as she climbed into the saddle and snapped the reins. "Akil'zon's wings speed you!"



The chanting of the gathered crowd reached Zul'jarra's ears before she caught sight of the ruined city. There were roars and jeers, back and forth, signaling the trading of blows. The fight was still on. The way was clear, save for a few stragglers, Amani sentinels and Vilebranch warriors eyeing one another from either side of the main thoroughfare.

Zul'jarra rode past them without a thought, ignoring the shocked cries of her name as well as insults hurled at her back. She made for the arena, pushing her bear to climb.

Faster. Faster!

At the crest, she leapt from the saddle and landed with a grunt. Pain rolled through her, but she kept going. The crowd was thick with spectators, their cheers punctuated by the ringing of clashing weapons.

"Move!" she tried to scream, but her throat still burned, the word flaking away.
"Move!"

Dread dropped cold through
Zul'jarra.

“Your mother,” Kinduru
continued, “has gone to meet
Kol’anji in your place.”

“No,” Zul’jarra gasped.

As she shoved through the throng surrounding the fighting ring, Zul'jarra did not have to turn to know her brother was at her side. She could feel his presence simply shift into place, as it often did.

"Your chieftain said to *MOVE!*" Zul'jan boomed, louder and with more fervor than Zul'jarra had ever heard from him.

People turned, saw them, then obediently stepped aside.

Zul'jarra raced forward, reaching the arena floor just as Kol'anji ducked a swing from Zarama's axe, then drove the sharpened end of his mace into her middle.

The sound of her mother's flesh splitting left Zul'jarra frozen. She stared as Zarama clutched at the weapon shoved in her belly. Kol'anji yanked it free and Zarama fell forward, dropped to her knees in the dust, catching herself on one hand. As she sank lower and lower to the ground, everything seemed to slow.

Kol'anji raised his arms, wet with blood, into the air as he gloated. Zul'jarra couldn't hear his words over the rising thunder of her own heart in her ears. *Mother, no!*

Impossibly, Zarama turned as if she'd heard that desperate cry. Her eyes found Zul'jarra. She saw her daughter. She saw the axe. The fear in her gave way to peace. She smiled, bloodstained lips moving around words that would never reach Zul'jarra's ears.

Then she fell still.

The sight of her mother lying there, the red pooling beneath her, belted something inside Zul'jarra like a mallet striking steel. The molten cold of grief that had seized her limbs thawed beneath the rage pouring through her. It bubbled and frothed, scorching her insides, filling her until it had nowhere else to go.

Then it burst free.

There would be stories told and songs sung of Zul'jarra's first true war cry. How it erupted from her like fire from a volcano, hot and scorching. How it shook the ancient stones of the Broken Throne and beyond. Any who heard would liken it to the shriek of a great eagle, and for days afterward those who weren't there but still heard believed Akil'zon had returned.

But it was not so.

The loa had not returned.



But a legend was born.

"Ah, the child." Kol'anji laughed. "Just in time to be made an orphan." He raised a hand and beckoned. "Come on, then."

"Jarra, wait—" Zul'jan began, but she was already racing across the arena floor.

Kol'anji stepped away from her mother's body to face her.

She threw her full weight into a swing. The blade of her axe crashed into Kol'anji's mace. The force of it reverberated through her, stunning her just long enough for his meaty fist to find her jaw.

She saw stars. The taste of blood filled her mouth. She threw herself backward to create distance and lifted her weapon.

Kol'anji chuckled, low and taunting. "You have fire, I'll give you that. When I am finished with you, I think I will take your head and your brother's." He glanced to where Zul'jan stood at the arena's edge, shouting for her to fight. "Keep the family together, yah."

"You'll be the one to lose your head!" Zul'jarra screamed as she hammered at the much larger troll, fury powering her frenzied strikes. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew she was being reckless. If she continued to attack in a rage, she'd eventually leave herself open.

Another part of her didn't care. If she let go of her anger, the anguish beneath it would swallow her, ending the fight before Kol'anji could.

She swung again. This time the head of Kol'anji's mace caught her axe at an angle and held it fast. The Vilebranch chieftain yanked her forward as he leaned close, his face wild with glee. "This has been fun, but—" He stiffened, his eyes locked on the axe. "Impossible."

Zul'jarra lashed out with a kick, driving her heel into his gut.

Sand flew as he stumbled back. His eyes flashed as his arrogance faltered for an instant. "That axe will not save you any more than you could save your mother, *child*."

"Chieftain," she spat through clenched teeth. Then she flew at him, swinging again and again, faster and faster. Metal screamed. Sparks vanished in the sunlight. Her heart thrashed, wild and furious. She felt her muscles straining. Her grip on the axe tightened, fury in her heart, fire in her throat, agony tearing free in a scream that emptied all of her. She swung.

The Vilebranch chieftain yanked her forward as he leaned close, his face wild with glee. “This has been fun, but—” He stiffened, his eyes locked on the axe. “Impossible.”

Zul’jarra lashed out with a kick, driving her heel into his gut.

The blade caught flesh. Tore through sinew and bone.

Kol'anji's smile disappeared. Then his head thudded to the ground.

His body followed.

For a moment Zul'jarra stared. The urge to drive the axe into him over and over again nearly took hold, but she fought it down. Swallowed it. Another scream welled inside her.

Instead, she turned to the now silent arena, her eyes scanning the faces of those who would call her enemy, friend, leader. Her people.

She stepped over Kol'anji's form and raised the axe overhead.

"I am Zul'jarra! Blood born of Zarama! Chieftain of the Amani and the forest tribes!" Her voice held steady even as her very being quaked. "Let anyone, *anyone*, who doubts me step forward!"



The Vilebranch chieftain was left in the dirt as Zul'jarra, her brother, and others lifted her mother from the arena floor. They wrapped her in sacred linen and placed her on their shoulders, keeping her aloft the entire way to Amani'Zar.

Zul'jan tried to convince his sister to step away long enough to be seen to by the healers, but she refused. The pain was the only thing keeping her from collapsing.

Kinduru met them at the edge of the settlement, his face wet with tears, his expression mournful. He led the way to the altar where Zarama would be prepared for final rites. Everything after that was a blur, people coming and going, offering congratulations and condolences. Zul'jarra remained at her mother's side and Zul'jan at hers. She held her brother as he sobbed.

By nightfall, Zul'jarra had somehow bathed and dressed for the ceremony to come. Torches were arranged in a circle around a grave so fresh the air still smelled of earth. She stood silent, unmoving, as they put her mother in the ground. Afterward, she found herself centered in a ring of firelight as Kinduru addressed those gathered to pay their respects. People would talk about how beautifully he spoke of the fallen, but Zul'jarra would never be able to recall the words. She'd never know if this upset her or not.

The next day would find her seated in the great hall in her mother's place. One by one, the other leaders came, offering respect and tribute to the new chieftain. All but the Vilebranch, who had gathered their chieftain and his head and faded into the forests.

Zul'jarra accepted gifts, passing them on to her brother. The first of many apologies she would offer for her words beneath Akil'zon's temple. He quietly accepted, his face that same unmoving mask. That night, there were no celebrations. No grand feasts. Only the emptiness of loss.

Finally, the conclave concluded, and Zul'jarra was free to return to her quarters. The chieftain's quarters. With all the commotion of the funeral and the conclave, she hadn't gotten the chance to do more than change her attire. But now? In the stillness of the aftermath, she stared at the trappings that had belonged to her mother mixed with her own personal items.

This wasn't right. She shouldn't be in here. This was her mother's place, these were her mother's things! She had no right! She . . .

A weight had settled over Zul'jarra at the arena and grown heavier with every step of the funeral procession. Heavier still with each commendation or commiseration, all of it driving home the truth that her mother was gone and she was to blame. More stones around her neck dragging her ever downward until she finally collapsed.

At some point Zul'jan joined her in the dark. Ral'ji came as well, quiet in her companionship. Eventually, Zul'jarra managed words enough to request to be left alone.

The night stretched on until there was a knock at the door.

Zul'jarra didn't answer.

It opened anyway.

Kinduru entered, carrying something. Her mother's axe.

"It's yours now," the speaker murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

"Mmm."

He set it on the mantel where Zarama often kept it.

"What happened isn't your fault, Jarra," Kinduru began.

A low growl rose from her chest. She didn't want to talk about this.

The speaker must have sensed as much, because he hesitated before clearing his throat and continuing. “Zarama knew the risks and went anyway. She offered herself up in your place, as any mother would.”

Tears welled instantly. They followed the tracks already staining her face, a cruel imitation of the lines her mother had painted just days before.

“You carry so much.” Kinduru knelt and leaned in to gently press his brow to hers. “She wouldn’t want you to carry this too.”

Zul’jarra threw her arms around her uncle and wailed. “They’re both gone!”

“I know.” He held on tight as her body shook and heaved.

Her fists battered his shoulders and back. “H-how could they leave me!”

“Let it out, Jarra.” His voice cracked around his own shuddering breaths. “Let it out.”

He let her cry and curse and spit and fight, all without letting her go.

When the storm inside her ebbed, Kinduru helped her to her feet and embraced her one last time. There was still much to do and already talk of Vilebranch discontent.

The speaker turned to go but paused when Zul’jarra called to him.

“Uncle.”

“Mmm?”

Her eyes went to Akil’zon’s axe where it lay after she’d discarded it upon returning from the arena. Kol’anji’s blood still darkened the blade’s edge. “Remove that thing from my sight.”

Kinduru’s brow furrowed. “Are you sure? Maybe if we put it—”

“No.”

That frown deepened. “After you worked so hard to earn Akil’zon’s blessing, you would discard it?”

“Blessing?” Zul’jarra heard herself laugh. It rang hollow. “That thing is a curse. I don’t want it anywhere near me.”

“But the loa—”

“I prayed to Akil’zon at the temple!” Fury crawled up her throat and beat against the back of her teeth. “And what did the loa do for me, eh? Sent me to watch my mother’s death, arrive too late to save her. The loa were not there for me, for *us*. My mother was.

And so it is her axe I will wield as chieftain!" She trembled with rage, but somehow her words remained steady. "Take. It. Away."

Kinduru bowed low.

"As you wish, my chieftain."