



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS OF PANDARIA

MORLEY

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Bleeding Sun

by Matt Burns

Dezco clutched a lock of his dead wife's hair and waited for the ritual to begin.

The Shrine of Two Moons loomed behind him, dark and silent in the night. Even the mountain city's normally bustling Golden Terrace was quiet. For that, Dezco was thankful. He and his Dawnchaser tribe had the great stone platform to themselves. Now was no time for distractions.

A gust of warm air flowed over the terrace, rustling the white plainhawk feathers and small earth-toned wooden charms tied to Dezco's horns, wrists, and leather vest. He eyed the ceremonial trappings, disappointed. If he'd been back home in Mulgore, he would have worn proper ritual garb. But here, in the strange and distant land of Pandaria, he was forced to make do with the resources at hand.

Leza would understand, he told himself. She wouldn't mind.

Dezco shook away his worries and stared out from the terrace, down across the moonlit hills and wooded thickets blanketing the Vale of Eternal Blossoms. Even at night, the place was mesmerizing.

"A crucible for change," Leza had called it. "A valley golden with blossoms, filled with the hope of peace."

For months, she'd dreamed of the vale. Dezco and other tauren had seen visions of it as well, but they'd been strongest in Leza. Without her, the tribe would've never succeeded on its arduous voyage to find Pandaria and, from there, the vale hidden deep in the heart of the continent.

The search had been brutal. Violent storms had destroyed three ships filled with members of Dezco's tribe. Friends. Family. When the last remaining vessel made landfall in Pandaria's sweltering coastal jungle, more death followed. The fact that Leza was pregnant made Dezco increasingly worried about the dire situation. Then, his wife contracted a fever that, despite the tribe's best efforts, seemed incurable. Through it all, Leza always remained steadfast, a beacon of hope as every Sunwalker strived to be.

"It's still night," she'd say, "but the sunrise is near. I can feel it just ahead."

When she finally went into labor, the strain proved too much for her ailing body. She died weeks before the tribe would ever find the vale, still believing the hardships were almost over. Dezco remembered that dark day with biting clarity: his wife's last tormented cry as the fever sapped the life from her veins, his failed attempts to spare her from death, and later, the smoke and fire that roiled up from her funeral pyre...

"The Bleeding Sun!" one of the tauren behind Dezco shouted, bringing him back to the present.

Dull light pushed away the darkness, painting the vale in shades of violet and gold. It was the moment before dawn, that fleeting time of the day when An'she, the sun, remained hidden but somehow a glimmer of his light managed to spill across the world.

"Bring the children." Dezco motioned with his hand, keeping his eyes to the east.

Leza's cousin, Nala, quietly approached, holding two infant tauren in her arms. Ceremonial feathers and beads dangled from their tiny horns. The first was called Redhorn,

and the second, Cloudhoof. Dezco handed the lock of his wife's mane to Nala and then scooped Leza's final gifts to him into his arms.

"Begin!" Dezco commanded. Without hesitation, twelve tauren sitting behind him pounded their fists against small leather drums. The beat was quick, a warrior's heart on the eve of battle.

As Nala braided Leza's hair into Dezco's mane, he leaned into his sons. "Watch closely, little ones," he whispered. They were too young to understand what was happening, but it felt right telling them. His children yawned and stared forward with half-open eyes.

"Every morning, An'she bleeds," Dezco continued. "He sacrifices part of his light to let us know that dawn is coming. But he doesn't do this alone. The *yeena'e* help him. Your mother helps him."

Yesterday, the twin moons had appeared during the day for the first time since Leza's death, signaling that her spirit had finally joined the *yeena'e*, "those who herald the dawn." She was in good company now, alongside all those other great ancestors who had died in the process of saving lives or, as with Leza, making *new* ones.

The drumbeats slowed as An'she peeked over the vale's impassable mountains. Sunlight shimmered across fields of honey-colored grass. Gold leaves rustled in the breeze on tall ivory trees. Dezco had seen the sunrise here many times, but he was still amazed by how brilliant An'she's light was. It was as if his gaze were fixed on the vale, and all other lands merely basked in a reflection of his light.

The beauty of the place was cruel in a way. Things were supposed to have gotten easier once Dezco and his tribe reached the vale, but they hadn't. Battle was raging. Horde politics had become a daily annoyance. Dozens of refugees from the war-torn lands north of the region streamed into the shrine morning and night in search of food, shelter, and

respite from the strife.

And then, just days ago, his boys had taken ill, crying and refusing to eat. Dezco and Nala had tried to puzzle out the sickness with no success. By An'she's grace, Redhorn and Cloudhoof seemed normal this morning. Perhaps the ritual had healed them somehow, Dezco pondered.

"Look." Nala stepped forward, pointing down into the vale.

Dezco peered over the terrace railing. A cluster of figures moved along one of the well-worn stone-and-dirt paths leading to the shrine. In the dawning light, their shadows reached across the ground like outstretched arms.

"The Golden Lotus," Dezco said, recognizing one member of the group who was different from the rest. Mokimo the Strong's gait was unmistakable even from afar. Like all of the hozen race, he had long muscular arms that nearly dragged along the ground when he walked. Dezco couldn't make out the other Lotus, but he was surprised that so many of the vale's ancient guardians were coming to the shrine. Normally they kept to the Golden Pagoda, their meeting place nestled in the center of the land.

"Do you think this has anything to do with the rumors?" Concern tinged Nala's voice.

"Never put faith in rumors," Dezco replied. He'd heard the talk: stories about the vale's caretakers meeting in secret and visiting locations throughout the region for some unknown purpose. As the ambassador between the Lotus and Dezco's people, Mokimo would've been able to explain what was going on, but he'd been away from the shrine for over a week. Regardless, Dezco didn't see any reason to worry. The Lotus were a mysterious order, yes, but they were also his trusted allies.

"I know." Nala nodded slowly. "But I'm more concerned about the younglings. We aren't sure if the sickness has passed yet. Visitors might make it worse." She stroked

Redhorn's cheek. Ever since Leza's passing, her cousin had become fiercely protective of the children. Dezco sympathized with her. This far from home, the infants were some of the only family she had.

"Take them inside while the Lotus are here," Dezco said, and then added, "*after* the ceremony."

With that, he turned back to the rising sun. Loud voices and heavy footsteps began echoing across the terrace as early morning risers flooded out of the shrine's catacomb halls. Merchants groaned as they set up rickety stands. Refugees huddled together and shared food. Orcs, blood elves, and other members of the Horde who had followed Dezco into the vale mingled on the platform.

The drumming stopped as An'she, in all his brilliance, ascended above the mountains.

For a moment, Dezco felt at peace. Maybe today was the day the hardships would finally end, he thought with cautious optimism. Maybe the dawn Leza had always spoken of had finally come.

Dezco commanded extra guards to patrol the terrace and keep order in preparation for the visitors. He'd lived at the shrine for weeks now, acting as the city's de facto leader, and almost every day he'd had to deal with fights and arguments breaking out between members of the Horde. The scuffles were never serious, but he dreaded the thought of the Lotus seeing how chaotic the place could become. They had welcomed Dezco and his people here—a land the Lotus had guarded for many centuries—with open arms. It was the tauren's responsibility to honor that trust.

After changing out of his ritual garb and donning his armor, Dezco gathered four Dawnchaser guards and awaited the Lotus at one of the great curving staircases leading up to the terrace. Two golden statues towered at either side of the steps. The monstrous figures grimaced fiercely, pointing long-bladed spears down the stairs as if to ward off anyone who dared ascend. Dezco's blood boiled just looking at them.

They were mogu, a brutish race that had once ruled the vale, using the power there to build an empire of hate and domination. Dezco had battled some of them before. They were mighty and ruthless opponents, devoid of honor. Fortunately, their empire had fallen long ago.

But things were changing. One clan of mogu, known as the Shao-Tien, had managed to infiltrate the vale. Dezco had heard numerous reports about their growing numbers. As he waited at the terrace steps, he wondered if the war between the Shao-Tien and Lotus had taken a new turn. Why else would so many of the vale's protectors be coming to the shrine?

The question lingered in his head until the visitors arrived. Dezco was glad he'd taken the time to get the terrace in order when he saw Zhi the Harmonious among the caretakers. There were few people in Pandaria who he respected more than the sage pandaren leader of the Golden Lotus.

"We're not disturbing anything, I hope. We heard drums as we approached," Zhi said as Dezco led him and the other Lotus into the shade of a buzao tree growing at the center of the terrace.

"Not at all. It was a ritual to honor my wife, but it ended at dawn."

"Your wife, yes." Zhi nodded gravely. "Do all tauren honor their dead the same way?"

"A few. The ritual is an ancient one. It was nearly lost to memory before the Sunwalkers breathed new life into it. The ceremony fit well with our beliefs."

"Interesting." Zhi stroked his braided gray beard. "There is much I wish to ask about your order. I see many similarities between it and the Lotus. When the turmoil in the vale settles, we will have to talk."

"I would like that," Dezco said as he looked over the other Lotus members who were nearby. The tauren had met some of them when he'd first arrived in the vale, but only briefly. One familiar face was Weng the Merciful, a plump, soft-spoken pandaren who was a fixture at the shrine.

And then there was Mokimo. The immense hozen wore pieces of sturdy wood-and-iron armor. He kept his hair pulled back in a short ponytail. Tufts of white-gray fur framed a long hairless face that was marked by teal paint. Mokimo glanced furtively around the terrace and then, as he sometimes did, spat out a string of incomprehensible words in his native tongue.

"No cubs?" the hozen finally asked in a language Dezco understood.

"I'm afraid they need rest. They've been up since before dawn."

"I see." Mokimo's white tail drooped in disappointment.

"Perhaps later." Dezco gave the hozen a hearty pat on the back, although he was glad his sons were inside the shrine with Nala. Their illness had returned after the *yeena'e* ceremony, much to Dezco's distress. But more than that, he felt as if disaster was just around the corner whenever Mokimo was near his children. The hozen were a rambunctious people, prone to spontaneity and mischief. Although Mokimo spoke and carried himself much more like a pandaren than one of his own kind, the younglings

brought out the hozen in his blood.

"The way Mokimo talks about them, you'd think they were *his* cubs," Zhi chuckled. "I've been wondering about the children, though. Are they healthy?"

"Well..." the tauren said before stopping. He didn't want to worry Zhi with the sickness, especially when he wasn't sure how serious it was. "They're growing quickly, as they should."

"I see." Zhi seemed deep in contemplation for a moment. He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts and then looked to Dezco. "We'd best get to work. I know you're busy here. I don't want to take you away from your duties any more than I already have."

Zhi motioned to the waiting Lotus. They sprang into action. A few hurried off to a clot of refugees near the shrine's entrance. The others unclasped the locks of a large wooden chest they'd brought with them.

"If there's any way I can help, please tell me," Dezco said, his curiosity rising.

"I wish there were. But the truth is we've come here at the behest of the celestials."

Dezco tried to hide his surprise. The celestials sent them *here*? Zhi had once told him that the four great spirits had been watching over Pandaria since before recorded history. They were akin to gods, as far as Dezco was concerned. It was the celestials who had opened the vale to outsiders not long ago, believing that people like Dezco and his tauren could help the Lotus defend the region.

"As you know," Zhi continued, "the vale is large, and we Lotus are few. Now, with the Shao-Tien encroaching, I fear our ranks will soon grow even smaller. We have come here to seek new members."

"There are Horde who would be honored to join you," Dezco said.

"I'm afraid it's not as simple as that. The celestials guide us in this task; they tell us exactly whom we should look for... Until now, that is. The great spirits are distraught. Their messages have become muddled. Recently, the celestials told me that a worthy guardian exists *here*, in the vale of all places. In the past, our order has always ventured outside the region to find new guardians. Then I realized why the spirits had directed us here: this land is now home to many other people."

"Master Zhi!" Weng called from across the terrace. "We are ready!"

Near Weng, a silver gong had been erected, emblazoned with symbols representing the four celestials: Niuzao, the Black Ox; Yu'lon, the Jade Serpent; Xuen, the White Tiger; and Chi-Ji, the Red Crane. A handful of pandaren refugees had gathered in front of the gong.

"One moment!" Zhi replied, and then turned back to Dezco. "All that's left for us to do is perform a simple test. It will be quick. I'll speak with you afterward."

"I—" Dezco began, but Zhi had already strolled off toward the gong. The tauren stared on, disappointed. He'd been hoping the Lotus would ask something of him, for some kind of help. The Horde was assisting with the war effort, but Dezco himself had been feeling more and more useless. Nearly all his time was consumed keeping watch over the shrine.

Mokimo loped to Dezco as Zhi began addressing the refugees.

"Oh, I hope it works," the hozen said, wringing his hands together. "We've been to every corner of the vale in the past week. I can't even remember how many cubs we've performed this test on."

"Cubs?" Dezco asked. Suddenly, he noticed that all of the refugees standing by the gong held small children in their arms.

"Our members are always chosen at a young age. When I was just a child, Zhi traveled to my village in the Jade Forest to give me a new life. But we've had to resort to other means of finding members now. Three days ago, we rang the Singing Gong. It sends out a call to any children who are in some way tied to the celestials. Well, that's what the old writings say, at least. This test had never been done until recently."

"Three days ago..." Dezco said, more to himself. He tried to remember when Redhorn and Cloudhoof had become sick. It seemed about three days ago. Or was it longer? He couldn't recall with certainty.

"What happens when the gong rings?" he asked Mokimo.

"I don't know. No one really does. I suppose the child would become upset. Almost like an illness. The purpose is to show which child has potential. Ringing the gong a second time is meant to soothe the affected cub and, in so doing, verify that he or she has been chosen. That would be followed by some sort of signal from the celestials."

Dezco's pulse quickened. Beads of sweat trickled down his snout. *An illness...*

One of the Lotus handed Zhi an iron mallet. The elder grasped it in his paws and then slammed it into the gong. The silver disc vibrated and swung forward, but there was no sound. At least not that Dezco or anyone else could hear. None of the pandaren couples or their cubs reacted. There was no signal from the celestials.

"Nothing happened." Relief flooded through Dezco as he thought of his children. *And why would anything have happened to them?* The Golden Lotus was composed of Pandaria's

ances: jinyu, pandaren, hozen, and others who had been tied to these lands for many thousands of years. His children were tauren. Foreigners.

"Nothing..." Mokimo lowered his head. The other Lotus glanced around as if seeking some explanation for what had transpired. Zhi turned the mallet over in his paws, forlorn.

Dezco felt a pang of sorrow for them. The order's members had lived in peace for so long. Now, war was at their doorstep. Now, the celestials who had guided them were—

Someone in the crowd screamed.

The gong trembled violently. Cracks spread out from the center of the disc like spiderwebs. The silver artifact crumbled to the terrace floor in shards. A gold and blue sphere of light hovered in the air. Slowly it twisted and expanded into the form of a giant crane. The creature stretched his neck forward and then ruffled the yellow, red, and white plumage along his body.

"Chi-Ji," Zhi said, remaining calm. He and the other Lotus bowed in unison.

"The call is answered," the Red Crane's avatar said in a rumbling, ethereal voice. The celestial, over twice Dezco's height, peered at each of the pandaren cubs in turn.

"Not here," he finally said. The celestial's head snapped up at the gilded face of the shrine jutting out from the mountainside. Suddenly, he marched through the city's immense doorway. The crowd lingered for a moment and then surged after the Red Crane.

Dezco pushed forward, his thoughts on Redhorn and Cloudhoof. He passed through the shrine's vaulted hallways, racing to Summer's Rest. He knew that Nala would've taken his little boys into the inn, tucked at the eastern side of the fortress.

So did Chi-Ji.

To Dezco's horror, the Red Crane was already there, looming over one of the folding wood-and-paper partitions that demarked each of the inn's "rooms." Nala was inside, standing in a defensive position before two small cradles.

"You're not the mother," Chi-Ji said curiously.

Dezco brushed past the celestial and put his hand on Nala to calm her. Redhorn and Cloudhoof looked up from their cradles. They were giggling for the first time in days, reaching out toward Chi-Ji.

"There must be some mistake." It took all of Dezco's strength to keep his voice even.

"You are the father." The celestial's eyes locked on Dezco, burning like twin suns, fiery and unrelenting. The tauren felt the Red Crane peering into him, searching his thoughts and memories. "The mother is gone. She died in childbirth. But in death, she gave two lives."

Chi-Ji cocked his head. "You call them Cloudhoof and Redhorn, but those are not their real names."

"Not their real names?" Mokimo squeezed through the refugees, Lotus, and Horde who were crowding around the partition, eager to watch.

"No." Dezco looked at the Red Crane in astonishment. Redhorn and Cloudhoof were the children's weaning names—a rare tradition his tribe carried. In time, they would take on their true names: one for an old and dear friend who had died in Pandaria's coastal jungle, and the other for a new friend who had helped his tribe.

"I did not foresee twins." Chi-Ji's avatar turned to Zhi. "Only one need serve the vale."

"I understand." Zhi nodded. The elder's calm facade had crumbled. There was genuine shock on his face. His eyes met Dezco's. "Children from afar... I never expected this, my friend," the Lotus leader said. "It had crossed my mind, of course, but I never thought it was a real possibility."

"They're my sons." Dezco struggled to make sense of what was happening. The whole series of events had unfolded so quickly. "What you're asking me is—"

"To protect that which you have traveled so far to protect," the Red Crane replied. "To honor your wife's dream. To sacrifice for the vale, as she did. It is good you have two. One will help the vale; one will stay with you. The only thing left to do is choose." Chi-Ji's avatar began to fade into the air like smoke.

"Wait!" Dezco shouted.

But there was no reply. The Red Crane disappeared. The Lotus members clapped in celebration. Behind them, refugees worked their way toward the children. The faces blurred together. Nala shoved a pandaren who was reaching out for Redhorn, sending him crashing into the partition.

Someone slapped Dezco hard on the back. He whirled in defense and saw Mokimo, grinning wide. "What a day!" the hozen yelled over the din of the crowd. "What a glorious day this has become!"

Choose...

Chi-Ji's command haunted Dezco, following him like a restless spirit for hours. By the time his aimless wandering brought him out to the Golden Terrace, An'she had long since disappeared beyond the western horizon.

Redhorn and Cloudhoof slept peacefully in two baskets—one at Dezco's back and one at his chest—that he'd made after they were born. The baskets were connected by a length of rope that hung over his shoulders. The whole contraption had been a great boon during his journeys through Pandaria, helping him keep his younglings close and have his shield and mace at the ready. These lands were filled with so many dangers that he'd refused to let his children out of sight even for a short time.

Little good my weapons do me now, he thought as he surveyed the terrace. This late at night, the platform was nearly empty. A few orcs squatted under the buzao tree, sharpening their blades with whetstones in the light of a single lantern. Near the shrine's entrance, blood elves in long flowing robes talked heatedly about the magical properties of the vale. Normally, Dezco would have greeted them, but tonight he passed them by without a word.

"A golden opportunity, if you ask me," he heard one of the orcs whispering to his comrades. "There's power in the vale, yes? That's why we've come. Well, the Alliance is here too. Right now we're both on equal footing. But if we had a member of the Horde in the Lotus..."

"Don't be a fool," someone else replied. "The pup wouldn't be one of us anymore. Horde wouldn't mean a thing to the child. Look at Mokimo. He doesn't act like any hozen we've met. The Lotus took his culture from him. His identity."

Dezco paced out of earshot from the conversation. He'd heard the arguments a hundred times. The day had passed like a dream. No—a *nightmare*. He only remembered

fragments: the Golden Lotus congratulating him and then disappearing just as quickly as they'd come, endless meetings with the other members of the Horde to discuss what had happened, and the constant stream of refugees who wanted to see his children as if they had become sacred objects.

He was glad to be alone now. He'd reached the limits of his patience and had sent his advisors—even Nala—away hours ago. Dezco sighed, frustrated by how the day had started out so well, only to spiral into chaos.

Dezco set his crystal mace and jagged-edged shield against the lacquered wooden railing at the edge of the terrace. Ahead, scattered torchlight and campfires burned against the dark terrain. Five sacred pools glowed with a ghostly blue light in the distance. Mokimo had often spoken of the waters. They were the vale's power: its lifeblood. Perhaps Dezco and his people had been drawn here to protect or use them in some way.

There were six pools in total, but one was hidden from his view, deep within Mogu'shan Palace. Faintly, he made out the facade of the colossal fortress, once the seat of the mogu empire, carved into the vale's eastern mountains.

He'd always thought it odd that the Lotus had never torn down all the statues and edifices of the vale's former rulers. Leaving them up was like giving the mogu a reason to come back. Once, he'd posed that concern to Mokimo, and he had replied, "The mogu believed that the vale *served them*. The Lotus believe *we serve* the vale. We leave their statues as a reminder of hubris and vanity."

At the time, Dezco had been taken by the wisdom, but now the words seemed hollow. An excuse for inaction. If the celestials were so powerful, why didn't they scour the mogu invaders? If the vale was a crucible for hope and peace as Leza had thought, why didn't the energies welling up from this land help the Golden Lotus bring a swift end to the war?

Dezco took a long, deep breath. Too many questions. Too many uncertainties.

"It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" someone asked.

The tauren turned as Mokimo slowly approached.

"You're back," Dezco said gruffly. The hozen had disappeared along with the other Lotus after the test, leaving the tauren alone to puzzle out the day's events. Mokimo never seemed to be around when he needed him.

"Just now." The hozen leaned against the railing beside Dezco. "Zhi asked me to accompany him. We met some members of my order who had returned from battle. There are more Shao-Tien entering the vale than we'd expected. I'm glad you weren't there to see the defenders. They were so close to despair... so afraid."

"I'm sorry." Dezco put his frustration aside at the thought of the mogu gaining more victories.

"But when we told them about the Red Crane and your cubs... they changed! One minute, sorrow; the next, joy. One minute, despair; the next, hope!" Mokimo hopped up and down on his short, stout legs.

"They're children," Dezco said. "They wouldn't make a difference in war."

"We Lotus live and die for tomorrow. The Red Crane promised us a future. He wouldn't have come here if he didn't believe we would need a new generation of protectors." Mokimo pulled a small wooden carving from his tunic and set it down on the railing in front of Dezco. "Here. This belonged to one of my order. He was killed yesterday. I

can't think of a better way to honor him than giving it to you."

Dezco inspected the object: an intricate carving of the Red Crane. Strange characters in a language he didn't understand spiraled around Chi-Ji's body from feet to beak. It was only a piece of wood, but it unnerved him.

"The words say, *Fate is the wind, always changing. Life is the cloud, gone in an instant. The vale is the sky, everlasting.* It's an old saying in our order. It reminds us that even in the worst of times, there is hope. That in death, our struggle goes on. I thought you would like it. You often speak of your wife and the dawn she saw ahead."

"Mokimo, you know I want to help you. But I..." he began to say, but stopped short when he saw the look of joy on the hozen's face. He couldn't bring himself to crush Mokimo's dream. He wasn't even sure if the caretaker would understand. The Lotus seemed to think that whether or not Dezco would actually choose wasn't up for debate. It was expected.

"No need to talk about it now," Mokimo said. "I'm not supposed to be here. Zhi told me not to speak with you until you had more time to think and choose. I just wanted to give you the gift. I wanted to thank you." The hozen backed away from the terrace railing. "I'd best go. They'll be looking for me at the pagoda."

Mokimo hurried down the platform's staircase. Dezco lifted the carving of Chi-Ji from the railing. *Choose*, the celestial's voice boomed in his head. *Choose what?* he wanted to shout back. The Lotus regarded his children as saviors now. If he refused them and stayed in the vale, he knew he and his sons would be a blight on the land, a constant reminder of a shattered dream.

Dezco set the carving back down and then removed Cloudhoof and Redhorn from their baskets. He hugged them tight in his arms and pictured them in the years to come,

learning the ways of the Sunwalkers, assisting him with leading rituals to honor An'she and the Earth Mother, hearing of Leza's bravery in the face of death.

"Leza..." Dezco whispered, wishing she were at his side to help him through this, and wondering what she would've done. Suddenly, he remembered something his wife had said just before she died. *My love... whatever happens... you must protect our... our child...* She hadn't known that she was giving birth to twins. To Dezco, that made her last wish all the more powerful.

And his choice became clear.

"I will," he said, staring down at his little boys.

"Nala!" Dezco called out, and turned his head. He figured she was lingering nearby in the shadows. Even though he'd sent her away, he knew her too well not to expect that she had followed him.

Leza's cousin emerged from behind the buzao tree. "The Lotus don't understand, do they?"

"It's not their fault."

"What should we do?" Nala asked as she approached the railing.

"We..." Dezco said. "I'm placing you in charge of the shrine."

"What?" Nala gaped at him, perplexed. "For how long?"

Dezco gave the Chi-Ji statue one last look. "Permanently."

It was nearing dawn when Dezco set out from the shrine with Redhorn and Cloudhoof snug in their baskets. The farewell with Nala had been tearful, but in the end she'd understood. She was a Sunwalker, and she knew that in all things there was only one true path, one right decision.

What could be a truer path than keeping family safe? Keeping family *together*?

Nala's concerns stemmed more from her desire to accompany Dezco and look after the children, but he needed her at the shrine. He couldn't imagine anyone else keeping the place from falling apart. Like Leza, Nala always knew when to be firm and when to be flexible. She was a born leader.

Apart from that, Dezco wanted to distance himself from his comrades as much as possible. This was *his* choice, and *his* alone. He didn't know how the Golden Lotus would react, or more importantly, the Red Crane. The last thing he wanted was to imperil the Horde's place in the vale. This land, despite recent events, still meant something for the future of his people.

Dezco felt ashamed leaving Mokimo in the dark, but there was nothing for it. A clean break, even though it pained the tauren, was for the best. It would make it easier for the Lotus to get on with their lives.

The tauren made good time through the morning hours. He stayed off the main roads, working his way through the northern foothills. He estimated that before nightfall he would reach the Gate of the August Celestials, which led out of the vale.

Around noon, he stopped at the base of a small hill and set his children on the ground. He pulled out a skin of herbs and yak milk that Nala had taught him how to brew.

She'd assured him that the drink would keep his sons healthy until he reached Mulgore and found a tauren female to nurse them correctly. She hadn't, however, warned him how much the younglings would hate the brew. After one sip, both of them began to cry, refusing to take any more.

"It's not that bad," Dezco grumbled. He took a gulp of the mixture. The thick, unbearably bitter drink made him cough uncontrollably. Redhorn's and Cloudhoof's cries quickly turned to laughter.

"It's not wise to disrespect your elders like that, little ones," Dezco growled playfully.

Dezco was about to try the nursing again when the ground started to shake. Three yak-driven carts roared over the hilltop, overloaded with pandaren. The yaks snorted, their mouths frothed with saliva.

"Mogu!" one of the passengers screamed as the carts raced past Dezco. "At the gate!"

Impossible. Dezco scrambled to lift his children into their baskets. He slowly climbed the hill, shield raised high. At the top, a gust of wind washed over him, heavy with the smell of smoke and battle.

Far ahead he saw the Gate of the August Celestials. Fires burned everywhere. An army of dark-blue-skinned Shao-Tien swarmed around the vale's entrance. Clusters of lightly armored shapes—the Golden Lotus—rushed toward the advancing mogu. Cannon fire cracked through the vale like thunder. An entire group of Lotus defenders vanished in a torrent of fire and blood. The rest of the order's warriors made a hasty retreat, the mogu

following at their heels and slaughtering stragglers.

Dezco cursed under his breath. His path was blocked. He turned and descended the hill, weighing his options. The tauren had heard of another gate far to the west, but he wasn't sure if it was open. Perhaps, though, he could find a way through... a secret mountain pass or tunnel known to the locals.

The only thing he knew for certain was that he couldn't return to the shrine. He wasn't a part of that place anymore, not now, after he'd made his choice. *Hold to your choice. Stay strong*, he told himself.

One of the refugees was waiting for him at the base of the hill. He was an old pandaren with a long, wispy beard that trailed off his chin. "Nothing for you that way but death," he said.

"So it seems. Where are you bound?" Dezco asked.

"Mistfall. Many of us have been separated from our families. We've heard that some of them might be there. I'm looking for my grandchildren. Where do the winds blow you?"

Dezco mulled over what little he knew about Mistfall Village. The small refugee camp was tucked near the southwestern side of the vale. From there, Dezco could learn news of the other gate. And if that way was blocked too, at least the journey would buy him time away from the shrine. Perhaps even enough time for the Lotus to rout the Shao-Tien and retake the Gate of the August Celestials.

If they had the strength to do so, he wondered grimly.

"Mistfall," Dezco said.

Dezco and the refugees cut through the vale's eastern half, putting the twin mountains that rose from the center of the region between them and the mogu front. The presence of injured and elderly pandaren slowed the journey to a snail's pace, but Dezco didn't mind. He enjoyed his time with his children, keeping to himself most of the way. His only real concern was running into members of the Lotus, but he saw no sign of the order.

Just before nightfall on the second day, the caravan approached the vale's southern edge and the mountain pass that would take them to Mistfall Village. The sacred pools shimmered in the fading sunlight to the south, east, and west. So close to the waters, the air seemed to hum with an odd, almost tangible power. Dezco was admiring the distant pools when the caravan ground to a halt.

"Something ahead!" a shout went out from the front of the refugees.

Dezco moved through the other travelers from his place at the rear of the caravan, fighting off fatigue. He'd barely slept during the journey. The refugees had good hearts, but they lacked military training. The tauren didn't trust them enough to leave his children unguarded for even a few hours at night.

A group of refugees was standing close to the lead cart, deep in discussion. In the distance, Dezco spied a large campfire burning near the mouth of the pass, effectively blocking the path.

"Any idea who it is?" he asked the gathered pandaren.

"We've sent someone out to look," a young refugee dressed in ratty clothes replied. He waved his paw at the others standing nearby. "Some of them think it's the mogu. But they wouldn't make a fire out in the open like that."

"When did you become an expert on the mogu?" another pandaren challenged. "I've heard that Shao-Tien raiding parties are skulking all over the vale, murdering anyone they find and then disappearing like ghosts. That fire could be a trap to draw us close."

An uneasy silence descended on the group. Dezco's tail lashed back and forth as he tried to subdue his anxiety, telling himself that mogu couldn't have made it this far into the vale.

The scout returned a short time later, waving the caravan forward. "It's safe!"

The pandaren around Dezco sighed in relief, but he remained cautious.

"More refugees?" he yelled to the distant scout. Apart from the mogu, there was another enemy that concerned him: the Alliance. The Horde's rivals had established an embassy at a fortress similar to the Shrine of Two Moons in this corner of the vale. Dezco had formed a bond with one of the Alliance's leaders, Prince Anduin Wrynn. Like the tauren, the young human didn't want conflict. He'd come to the vale driven by the promise of hope and peace. Still, the tauren didn't know how much weight that camaraderie carried. There were just as many warmongering fanatics in the Alliance as there were in the Horde.

"No," the scout replied. Faintly, Dezco could see him smiling. "It's the Golden Lotus!"

"Sit! Eat! Rest!" Mokimo shouted with his arms raised.

A great fire roared behind the hozen. Steam curled up from iron pots hung over the flames. Nearby, Weng the Merciful scooped rice from the cauldrons into smooth wooden bowls etched with carvings of the four celestials. A pandaren who Dezco had never met before unpacked cups from leather travel bags. He was monstrous, dwarfing the tauren in

size, and adorned in massive pieces of dark armor. Apart from a brown topknot and beard, his coat was pure white.

The refugees brushed past Dezco and hurried to the fire, famished and exhausted. The tauren's own stomach rumbled as the wind blew the savory smell of warm food toward him, but he held his ground. The presence of the Lotus irritated him. By now, surely they'd learned of his choice. The honorable thing to do would've been to let him go on his way, and live with the ramifications of his decision.

Instead, they had followed him.

"Dezco!" Mokimo waved to him. "Come! You must be starving!"

Dezco flicked his ears and snorted, annoyed by the casual tone. The way Mokimo spoke, it was as if meeting the tauren out in the middle of the vale wasn't a surprise at all.

Without responding, the tauren took a few strides away from the camp and picked out a clear spot of land. Before long he had a fire of his own popping and crackling in the night. He pulled Cloudhoof and Redhorn from their baskets and began nursing them with the yak milk mixture. The feedings had become easier. His little boys were even taking a liking to the drink.

The children had just finished nursing when Mokimo approached Dezco's fire. "I would have come sooner, but the refugees were very hungry," the hozen said. "Thank the celestials you and the cubs are all right. We've been worried." He crouched down and smiled wide for Redhorn and Cloudhoof. The younglings giggled and batted at the long tufts of white fur around the hozen's cheeks.

"You remember Weng." Mokimo gestured back at his two companions, who mingled with the refugees. "And the big one is Rook. He's never been much good at formalities, but he's loyal to a fault. A gentle friend, but also a ferocious enemy. I think you'd like him. Why not join us? There's plenty of room at our—"

"You followed me," Dezco said.

"Well... not exactly," Mokimo replied. "We anticipated where you would travel. What with the Gate of the August Celestials closed off, there are only so many places in the vale to go."

"I've made my choice, Mokimo," Dezco said, his voice firm. "It was wrong of me not to tell you in person. For that I'm sorry. But following me doesn't change anything. My children belong home in Mulgore. *Together*. This is my decision." He added, "The others at the shrine had nothing to do with it."

"Nala told me. I met with Zhi, and he agreed that if it is your desire to leave, you are free to do so."

Dezco wasn't sure how to react. He'd been expecting some kind of resistance. "Just the other day you spoke of how important my sons were to the future of your order," the tauren said.

"And I was happy. So were all the Lotus. But it's not my decision, is it? That lies with you."

"Then why are you here?"

"Your children have been chosen; they are tied to Chi-Ji, and thus to the vale. The Lotus are sworn to protect this land at all times. Until the day your cubs leave it, we will

watch over them. But why you would want to leave is beyond me. I thought being here was why you traveled so far."

"It is... It was." Dezco lowered his head. "If Chi-Ji had asked me to march into the mogu lines alone, I would have honored his request without a second thought. I would have done anything. Anything but this..." He looked up at Mokimo. "This isn't why I came here."

"How do you know?"

"It's not," Dezco said, his anger rising. It dawned on him what was happening: Mokimo was trying to convince him. Zhi had likely sent the hozen and the others to talk him out of leaving.

"I've lost too much already," the tauren continued. "I didn't come here to lose *everything*. My tribe was promised peace. Hope. We... I haven't found anything I was expecting." The tauren took a breath to calm down. Without even realizing it, he'd lurched to his hooves. Weng, Rook, and the refugees at the other fire were staring at him in silence.

Mokimo remained impassive. "Expectation... a dangerous thing." He poked at the fire with a stray stick. "I expected much when I first joined the Lotus. But as the years wore on, I began to hate this place. Everything was so strange and confusing. I wanted to go home. Well, one day I decided to do just that, but Zhi caught me while I was trying to sneak out of the vale. He didn't scold me, though. He understood. In fact, he promised to take me to see my family. It is rare for a Lotus to leave the vale unless it is for official business. He did me a great honor.

"When the promised day came, we traveled to my village in the misty hills of the Jade Forest. I was scared and excited all at once. I hadn't seen my family in years." Mokimo untied a small teal band from his ponytail and held it out for Dezco to see. It wasn't much to look at: a simple leather strap, aged and worn by time. "This was my mother's. We found it

in the ruins of my family's old hut. The entire village had been destroyed. Everyone in it was dead. The hozen tribes often war, you see."

"I'm sorry," Dezco said, ashamed at his outburst.

"Why? If I'd never been chosen, I wouldn't be alive today. We can't predict where life will take us. Better not to fight things beyond your control. The moment you let go of expectation is the moment you are truly free. All we can do is serve the vale and know that wherever the winds blow us, we will have lived our lives for something greater than ourselves. For us, that is enough."

Mokimo rose and dusted himself off. "Come back to the shrine. That's all I ask. Why endanger the cubs out here? Nowhere is safe in the vale now. Nowhere."

Dezco breathed deep and stared at the flames, flickering and shifting. Always moving, never stable. Unpredictable, like so much in Pandaria. The only constant was himself, his own choices. He'd traveled through the coastal jungle, the northern mountains, and other regions with his sons. He'd faced brutal enemies like the mogu, lurking in every dark recess of the continent. All that time, he'd protected his children.

The shrine wasn't an impregnable fortress. In fact, some part of Dezco suspected that the Lotus only wanted him there for a chance to win him over. He'd be cornered. Trapped.

Dezco shook his head. "You're right that this land is dangerous, but there is a safe place for my sons: at my side. That's where they'll stay. If you want to follow us, so be it, but our destination is Mistfall."

It was still dark when Dezco suddenly awoke.

He propped himself up on his elbows, angry that he'd fallen asleep. He'd planned on keeping watch throughout the night, but the long journey had finally taken its toll.

Nearby, the yaks snorted and stamped their hooves into the ground, stricken with fear.

Dezco's thoughts went to Redhorn and Cloudhoof. They were safe, sleeping soundly on blankets near the fire. He carefully placed his children in their baskets and then secured them to his body.

At the other camp, a few of the refugees were slowly waking up, rubbing tired eyes. Mokimo, Weng, and Rook stood motionless at the far end of the fire, peering out into the darkness.

"What is it?" Dezco asked as he joined them.

Mokimo held his finger to his mouth in a gesture of silence. "Rook sees something," he whispered.

A low growl rumbled out of Rook's throat. His paw tightened around a giant iron mace adorned with vicious spikes. "Rook doesn't like those rocks," the white pandaren muttered.

"Why don't you like them?" Weng asked.

"They don't stay still." Rook gnashed his teeth. "Bad rocks. Stupid rocks."

Dezco put his back to the fire so his sight could adjust to the darkness. Slowly, details came into view: a steep slope, one side of the mountain pass they were planning on going through. Boulders of various sizes dotted the hillside. But nothing seemed out of place. It was just a—

Movement flashed against the slope. It was only for an instant, but Dezco saw it.

"Weng," Mokimo said. "Wake the refugees. *Quietly*. Hitch the carts to the yaks."

Weng nodded and scurried off.

Dezco kept his eyes locked on the mountain, unsure if what he'd seen had been real or just a figment of his imagination. Then the movement came again. And this time, it didn't stop.

"Run." Mokimo turned to Dezco. "Run!"

Ten giant boulders began tumbling down the slope in a landslide.

No, not tumbling, Dezco realized. They were *running*.

Rook raised his arms and roared as the boulders leapt off the mountainside, the details of their stout dog-like bodies and snarling faces becoming visible in the firelight.

"Quilen." Dezco sucked in his breath.

The beasts raced toward the camp, granite skin rippling in strange, unnatural waves. They were the mogu's hounds, cruel beings of living stone like many of their masters.

The yaks reared on their hind legs, only two of them secured to carts. Weng held them by the reins, struggling to keep them from bolting. Refugees scrambled around the

camp, lighting stray pieces of wood in the fire to use as torches. Redhorn and Cloudhoof wailed in alarm.

Rather than attack, the quilen formed a wide semicircle around the camp, creating a barrier between the refugees and the vale to the north but leaving the mountain pass open.

"The path to Mistfall is safe!" Weng shouted. "Everyone, go to—"

"Hold your ground!" Dezco bellowed, aware of what was happening. "They're trying to drive us into the pass."

"He's right." Mokimo loped to Dezco's side, his breathing heavy. The quilen snapped their jaws together and paced closer to the camp but still held off their assault. "We need to move north, back into the middle of the vale."

"Rook make path." The white pandaren lifted the unhitched cart over his head, his tree-trunk-sized arms quivering from the effort. With a deafening roar he threw the cart forward. It exploded into timber at the center of the quilen line, forcing the beasts to scatter left and right.

"Now!" Dezco waved his hand.

The refugees surged ahead. Quilen closed in from all sides. Rook caught one of them in mid-leap with his mace. Four others charged at Dezco. He said a prayer to An'she, and the cold air around him bristled with power, warming and brightening as if night had turned to day.

He unstrapped his shield from his forearm and hurled the slab of jagged iron at the quilen. Glowing, it spun through the air and slammed into the first beast, embedding itself into the thing's head. The momentum of the blow sent the creature crashing into one of its brethren, splitting the other quilen in half.

The two remaining beasts continued on unscathed. Mokimo vaulted toward them on his long arms, striking one of the quilen with his foot. Dezco had just enough time to turn sideways and cover his chest with his free hand, protecting Cloudhoof, as the other hound leapt forward and crashed into him.

Something ripped. Dezco felt a weight lift off his shoulders. The quilen had severed the rope.

The tauren caught Cloudhoof's basket as it dropped. He whirled with his mace raised high, only to see the quilen bounding off toward the mountain pass.

It was dragging the other basket by the remains of the rope. Redhorn, tucked inside, was screaming.

The tauren sprinted for his crying son, his hooves tearing deep gouges in the soil. Mokimo raced up beside him and pulled on Dezco's arm hard enough to bring him to a stop.

"I'll get him," the hozen said. "Take Cloudhoof and go with the refugees."

"I'm not leaving Redhorn!" Dezco yanked his arm out of Mokimo's grasp.

"Then give me Cloudhoof and I'll take him to safety," the hozen pleaded.

Dezco lingered, torn by indecision. The refugees were making a haphazard retreat, pursued closely by quilen. Two of the beasts had wrestled Rook to the ground. He frantically batted at their heads with his paws.

"To where?!" the tauren shouted. "I told you before that—"

A bloodcurdling shriek tore out from the mountain pass.

Dezco shoved Mokimo aside and stormed toward the sound, Cloudhoof's basket held tight under his arm. He whispered a prayer to An'she and wove a protective shield of light around Cloudhoof to keep him safe from the battle he knew was coming.

The tauren was aware of Mokimo chasing after him as he approached the dark pass, but his focus was on Redhorn's distant cries. Firelight flickered ahead, the dull orange glow ebbing and flowing against the mountainsides. He followed the light, his blood thundering in his ears.

A few strides into the pass, Dezco found his boy.

Redhorn was dangling from the massive chiseled fist of a Shao-Tien. Apart from an intricate leather kilt, the muscular brute wore no armor. His dark-blue, rocky skin shimmered in the light of a torch in his other hand. The quilen stood a short distance in front of the mogu, along with two more Shao-Tien adorned in heavy armor and wielding long-bladed spears.

The mogu didn't say anything. Dezco never expected them to. They were not a race that could be reasoned with. Their actions defied the logic that honorable people lived by. They merely watched Dezco, scowling. The lead Shao-Tien jerked Redhorn into the air as if beckoning the tauren closer.

He accepted the challenge.

"Dezco!" Mokimo shouted from the mouth of the pass, but the tauren ignored him. The only sounds he heard were the cries of Redhorn and Cloudhoof, and the distant voice of his wife, pleading.

My love... whatever happens... you must protect our... our child...

The armored mogu and the quilen lunged forward. Dezco cracked his mace into the hound, shattering its head. A wave of light exploded out from the blow, cascading toward one of the Shao-Tien. The mogu lurched aside, but not fast enough. Half of his body, caught in An'she's light, crumbled into dust.

Ahead, the lead mogu staggered back, shielding his eyes from the light. He shook his head and threw his torch on the ground. The brute drew a short blade from his kilt. Long tendrils of crimson and black energy wormed out of the weapon, squirming around the steel.

Dezco watched in horror as the Shao-Tien raised his sword arm, readying himself for a strike at Redhorn.

The torchlight dimmed... Darkness enveloped the pass. A shadow moved overhead: Mokimo, leaping through the air. The last armored mogu jumped in front of Dezco, blocking his view. The Shao-Tien spun his spear in his hands and then swung it at the tauren. He dodged the heavy blade, but the weapon's wooden shaft broke against his wrist, sending his mace flying. The mogu stomped forward and smashed into Dezco, trying to knock him off his hooves. He held his ground and slammed his head into the brute's face. The Shao-Tien stumbled to the side, dazed.

Dezco fell to his knees, blinded as blood welled from his forehead into his eyes.

He frantically groped for a weapon. Anything. His free hand found the dead quilen.

Dezco gripped the beast's hind leg and rose, throwing his weight forward and spinning. Every muscle in his body became as tight as steel. The mountain pass went quiet. All the crying stopped.

"Redhorn!" he roared as he whipped the quilen one-handed into the armored mogu's chest with a sharp crack. The brute flew back and crashed to the ground, motionless.

Shadows flickered ahead. Dezco scrambled toward them. He felt Cloudhoof's basket bouncing under his left arm, safe. The tauren clawed at the blood in his eyes until his vision came back. Mokimo was kneeling. The lead mogu lay nearby, his own blade protruding from his stone head.

"Where is he?" Dezco asked.

"Here." Mokimo's voice was a wet rasp. Blood spurted from a deep wound in his neck. He extended his hands, holding Redhorn. The child's eyes were closed. He was covered in blood, some of it his own.

Before reaching out for his little boy, Dezco beseeched An'she to mend the child's wounds. Bright yellow light enveloped the youngling, but when it faded, he didn't open his eyes.

"No..." Dezco ground his teeth in rage. He was helpless. Useless. Just like when Leza had died. He'd tried so hard to save her, to keep her in his life. It hadn't worked. Nothing had worked.

"The mogu's blade found him," Mokimo said hoarsely. "The weapon was poisoned. It is too strong for you to heal his wounds... or mine. But hope remains." Mokimo feebly grasped Dezco's hand and brought it to Redhorn's chest. There was a heartbeat. It was faint and quiet, but there. "The cub lives."

"I can't help him..." Dezco slammed his fist into the ground in frustration.

"There's another way." Mokimo slowly rose. He swayed from side to side for a moment, nearly falling over. "The sacred pools. As long as there's still life in the cub, the vale's waters can—"

His voice trailed off, and his eyes widened. "Cloudhoof," the hozen said.

Dezco looked down where he'd tucked his boy in the safety of his own arms.

"Is he...?" Tears welled at the corners of Mokimo's eyes. "Oh no."

The basket hung in shambles around the child. Cloudhoof was draped over Dezco's arm, his body broken, crushed. The tauren dropped to his knees and loosened his grip, letting the youngling fall into his lap. He froze, his hands cradling his little boy, as the realization hit him like a blade through his heart.

All his focus had been on Redhorn. He hadn't even noticed when Cloudhoof had died.

"This way!" Mokimo shouted. Somehow, the hozen had found the energy to move despite his injuries. He frantically waved the mogu torch through the air, beckoning Dezco forward. The tauren followed, carefully holding Redhorn in one arm and Cloudhoof's body in the other.

Behind the hozen, a large pool glowed softly in the night. Intricate wooden archways encircled it, rising from flat stones placed around the sacred water. It was the southernmost pool in the vale, located not far from the pass where the attack had occurred.

Dezco fought to keep up with Mokimo. For the hundredth time, his mind raced through the battle. He recalled the series of events, trying to pinpoint when Cloudhoof had died. When was it? When the mogu had crashed into him, nearly knocking him down? Or had he done it himself?

Had *he* crushed him?

The tauren fell to the ground, sick to his stomach. "By An'she, it was me," he said. "I know it was."

"Get up!" Mokimo struck Dezco across the head with the bottom of the torch. The blow snapped the tauren out of his daze. He glanced around until his eyes settled on the blood-soaked hozen.

"He's gone. How, you will never know," Mokimo said. "All that matters is Redhorn."

Dezco struggled to his hooves and followed Mokimo to the edge of the pool.

"The mogu once used these waters for evil, but good can come from them too," the hozen said. "Each of these pools represents a different emotion. Courage... peace..." Mokimo stepped into the pond, wincing. The blood from his wound clouded in the water. "This is the pool of hope."

"What—what do I do?" the tauren asked. A handful of fish, illuminated by the pool's energies, fled from him as he loomed overhead.

"Give me Redhorn."

Dezco handed his boy over without hesitation. There was nothing else he could do now. Nothing. All the tauren could do was watch as Mokimo carefully—lovingly—lowered Redhorn into the water up to the child's neck.

He was suddenly taken by the scene: by how Mokimo held his son as if he were his own, by how much the hozen had risked to give Redhorn a chance, however dim it was, of life. Looking back on the battle, it was clear what had happened. Mokimo had put himself between the mogu's blade and the child. Even though the weapon had still cut Redhorn, Dezco knew his boy would be dead if not for the hozen.

"Come." Mokimo struggled to wave his hand. He was fading. "Leave... Cloudhoof at the edge."

Hesitantly, Dezco set Cloudhoof's body by the pool and then splashed into the water.

"Take... handful," Mokimo said. "Pour... over Redhorn."

Dezco obeyed, his heart pounding. He let the water fall across his son's head. Mokimo did the same. Glowing beads trickled down Redhorn's nose. It didn't seem to have any effect on the child.

"Nothing's happening." Dezco scooped up more water, but Mokimo grabbed his hand.

"Let... vale do its work," the hozen said, his breathing shallow. "You can't control this. You can only have... hope. Believe as Leza did. When she faced death, did she... despair?"

"No." Dezco clenched his eyes shut. She'd always believed. She'd always been so strong. Leza deserved to be here. Not him. If she had been, none of this would have—

A wave of heat flooded over Dezco, and he opened his eyes. A translucent image of Chi-Ji walked on the water as if it were solid ground. Gold light rippled outward from where his talons touched the pool. With each step, a faint chime, like a tiny bell, rang.

The celestial snapped his wings open, and the sudden rush of air blew a shower of water across the tauren and hozen. Mokimo righted himself and patted his neck. His wound had sealed shut.

Chi-Ji leaned forward, piercing through the water with his beak and touching Redhorn's chest. Dezco watched and waited, the moment seeming to go on forever. And just when he'd begun to fear for the worst, the child squirmed. Dezco stared at him in disbelief. Redhorn's eyes opened and darted around until he saw his father. Then, he clawed out toward Dezco, crying.

"Thank you!" Dezco hugged his child close. Then he remembered Cloudhoof, and he turned back toward the edge of the pool, where he'd laid his son's body. "My little boy. Red Crane, is there still a way to—"

His words trailed off as he faced Chi-Ji. The Red Crane was gone.

"Quilen dead. Refugees with Weng." Rook thumped a giant paw against his chest. He'd arrived at the pool shortly after Chi-Ji's appearance. When the monstrous pandaren had learned what had happened to Cloudhoof, he'd sat down and sobbed for a long time before recovering. Dezco had never expected the death to impact Rook. He'd barely even met the children.

But it did. Somehow the Lotus cared for them so much. Dezco wished he understood why. All he knew was that the order's concern was genuine. In some way, the younglings were like family to them.

"Good!" Mokimo said to Rook, and then he turned to Dezco. "It's best if we return to the shrine for now. I know you want to leave, but we have to make preparations. Whatever it takes, I'll find a passage home for you and Redhorn."

Home. Dezco thought about his tribe's small enclave in the sunny plains of Mulgore. When he and Leza had left, they'd wondered if they would ever see it again. He'd believed they would, but he knew his wife hadn't. She'd always spoken about the land in her visions as if it was their home. A home they'd always belonged in but hadn't yet known. He finally understood what she'd meant. He'd seen the vale's power, its potential not only for him, but for the lives of so many people across the world.

"I'm not leaving," Dezco said.

"Truly?" Mokimo replied.

"There's something else," Dezco added. He looked down at Redhorn in his arms. "Will you still..." he began to say, but it was too hard. He held out the child to Mokimo.

"That isn't necessary." Mokimo shook his head. "If you're thinking Chi-Ji wants something in exchange for what he did, you're mistaken. The gift was given freely."

"Take him," Dezco pleaded. "This is why we came. This is it." *By An'she*, he thought, *I was a fool not to realize it sooner.* They had come so far to seek the vale, to see it with their own eyes, to dwell within it. But to be a part of it... *to be one with it.* That was so much more.

"If this is what you want," Mokimo said, "what you really want, then of course."

"It is," Dezco replied. "Is there something we need to do? To make it official, I mean."

"We..." Mokimo lowered his head. "There are rituals, yes. I will take the child to Zhi, and then he will present him before Chi-Ji for anointment. I'm afraid only the Golden Lotus may be present when that happens. I'm sorry."

"I understand." Dezco's voice caught in his throat. "Go now, then."

"It doesn't need to be now," the hozen said. "We can return to the shrine first."

"Go. Before I change my mind."

"Once the rituals are over, you can see him," Mokimo added as he took Redhorn into his arms. "He'll be busy training in the years to come, but he'll be here in the vale."

"One of the Golden Lotus."

"And your son," the hozen said. "Always that, but now something more."

Mokimo glanced at the basket with Cloudhoof inside, hanging at Dezco's chest. The tauren had mended the remains of the basket, tying it around his neck with rope. "And him?" the hozen asked.

"I'll build a pyre and light it at dawn so that An'she can watch my boy's passing," Dezco replied. "I... I'd prefer that I do it alone."

Mokimo nodded slowly. Without another word, he motioned for Rook. Just as they set off to leave, Dezco called after them, remembering something.

"Wait." The tauren felt for the lock of Leza's hair on his head and quickly unbraided it. He wove the lock into Redhorn's mane and then leaned down and touched the child's forehead with his snout.

After that, Rook and Mokimo departed. Dezco spent the next hour gathering wood for the pyre, thinking about the days ahead. He would resume his duties at the shrine, but he didn't look forward to telling Nala and the others what had happened. What would he say? Would they forgive him for the loss of Cloudhoof? Would he ever forgive himself? Maybe not. But that much he deserved. All of this had been his choice: a terrible and mistaken one.

Dezco sat down to rest before beginning the funeral. It was still dark out, but the dawn would come soon. He could feel it. The *when* didn't concern him any longer.

"We're home," Dezco said aloud. He held Cloudhoof in his lap and stroked the child's mane. He turned to face the east, knowing it was only a matter of time before the *yeena'e* appeared.