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HORLEY

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# The Jade Hunters

*by Matt Burns*

*Queen-Regent Moira Thaurissan requests yer presence. Immediately.*

Fenella Darkvire lingered before the massive oak door to the royal chambers, repeating the words in her head. She licked dry lips, wiped sweaty, soot-stained hands across her metalworking tunic. She'd been hammering at an anvil in the heart of Ironforge when a royal advisor delivered the message. She wished she could've had time to change into something more presentable.

But one did not make Moira wait.

Fenella knocked.

"Enter," a muffled voice replied from within.

"Stay here, Koveth." Fenella turned her head slightly, enough to see the enormous golem looming behind her. A mountain of metal, sorcery, and Dark Iron ingenuity.

"Affirmative," the construct rumbled.

The door creaked as Fenella pushed it open. She'd never set foot in the royal chambers. Very few had. Fine dwarven tapestries depicting historic events covered the walls. Moira sat, back straight, behind a wooden table that looked big enough to pass for a merchant ship. Broken quills and scrolls lay scattered across its surface, the casualties of battles waged with promises, threats, and half-truths. The war of politics.

Fenella swallowed, wondering whether she should be the first to speak. She had met Moira on a few occasions. Once was after Fenella had finished construction of the now-

famed Ruby Crystalarium in Shadowforge City. Still, being in the queen's presence made her nervous.

"Fenella," Moira finally said, donning a relaxed smile. She cradled a small object in her hands: a statuette of deep jade, carved into the shape of a spiraling serpent.

"Yer Highness."

"Thank you for coming. I presume you know these lads." Moira gestured to one side of the chamber.

Fenella had been so focused on the queen that she hadn't noticed the other dwarves in the room. One was a Bronzebeard—a freakishly large Bronzebeard, two heads taller than the rest of his kind. The second was a burly Wildhammer with tawny skin marred by dozens of blue tattoos. A giant hammer hung from a strap on his back. He grimaced when he saw Fenella.

"Can't say I do, Yer Highness," Fenella lied, more to spite the other dwarves than to deceive her queen. Of course she knew them. Ever since the Wildhammer, Dark Iron, and Bronzebeard clans had reunited, Ironforge had become oversaturated with masons and smiths, most of them megalomaniacs who believed they were destined for fame and glory. Every day, she saw these two roaming the Great Forge as if they owned the place, belittling everyone else's work.

"Then introductions are in order," Moira said.

Unease flitted through Fenella. Why had she been called here? Why were *they* here?

"This is Carrick Irongrin." Moira gestured to the Wildhammer. "A blacksmith and miner of legendary strength. I've also heard that he can speak to the stones. That is true, Carrick?"

"Course it is."

"And here we have Fendrig Redbeard, the 'Hand of Khaz.'" Moira turned to the Bronzebeard. "A member of the Explorers' League. He has mined the depths of Uldaman, the Borean Tundra, Bael Modan, and many other dangerous locations. By all accounts, his bravery is without equal."

Fendrig let out a long sigh, as if his presence here were an utter waste of his time.

"Lastly, Fenella Darkvire of my own Dark Iron clan..." Moira paused. "A mason, a smith, an engineer, and an accomplished architect."

And the daughter of a traitor. She had skipped that part. Not that it mattered. Everyone knew Fenella was the offspring of Fineous Darkvire, the late chief architect of the Dark Iron clan. A dwarf reviled for how he had cheated his way into the coveted position. That, at least, was the story.

Carrick muttered something under his breath. Fenella ignored him. Being both a Dark Iron and the daughter of Fineous, she was accustomed to scorn. It did not bother her. She had learned long ago that she worked better alone. It made things easier for her and for everyone else.

"You're wondering why I have called you here." Moira twisted the statuette in her hands. "I have handpicked all of you for a special team—a job that requires the best masons in Ironforge."

"A team?" Carrick exploded. "With these two?"

"Ye expect me tae lead them?" Fendrig guffawed.

"No." Moira nodded to Fenella. "I expect her to."

Fenella's stomach tightened. She nearly shouted in protest before biting her tongue to hold the words back. Nothing good would come from openly disobeying her queen.

"A Dark Iron? Out o' the question!" the Wildhammer bellowed.

"On that I agree." Fendrig shook his head in disgust and made his way for the door. "I've got better things tae do than waste me time as part o' this fool's errand."

"I'm sure Muradin will be interested to know what you think of this idea—an idea he wholeheartedly supports," Moira said.

Invoking the name of the Bronzebeard clan's leader brought Fendrig to a halt. He turned slowly.

"The Council of Three Hammers has unanimously agreed to this venture," Moira continued. "I have been tasked with overseeing the details." The queen carefully set the serpentine statue aside and then unfurled a long roll of parchment. She beckoned the masons forward.

Fenella and the others crowded around the desk, jostling for position. The seals of Muradin, Moira, and the Wildhammer clan's leader, Falstad, were clearly marked at the bottom of the paper. So were the three masons' names, written in thick, black, permanent lines.

"Me name... I didn't agree tae anythin'." Carrick scowled. "What's this nonsense?"

"*This* is a chance to prove our greatness to the Alliance, to show that we are no longer a nation of bickering rivals but a people united. And if you refuse..." Moira leaned forward. "This decree will be a record that you opposed the council's struggle to forge a new future for all dwarves."

Fendrig crossed his arms and drew his brows together. "Stinks like blackmail tae me."

"Blackmail is a gamble. A tool used by the desperate." Moira smiled wider, but her eyes were daggers of ice. "I deal in absolutes, lad. I included your names because I knew that you would not be foolish enough to put your own petty animosities over the greater good of our people."

The queen's gaze moved between Carrick and Fendrig, daring them to prove her wrong. The Wildhammer shifted on his feet but stayed silent. So did the Bronzebeard. Moira then looked at Fenella. As much as the idea—the very thought—of working with a Bronzebeard and a Wildhammer sickened her, what could she do? Moira was her queen, her clan's guardian.

Fenella forced herself to nod, all the while hoping this "assignment" would be a quick one.

"Good. Now that we have that settled, we can move on to the specifics." Moira plucked the jade statuette from the table as she leaned back in her chair. "How much do you know about Pandaria?"

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*A pandaren acolyte of the August Celestials once asked, "Did the land give birth to the celestials, or did they breathe life into the land?"*

*Her master chuckled knowingly, for he had pondered this very question. Yet time had granted him wisdom. "I have a much simpler question to consider—a question whose answer will solve this riddle of yours," he replied. "Which came first, sunrise or sunset?"*

—The Scrolls of the Celestials

The job was simple: rebuild the Serpent's Heart statue. Any apprentice mason with a lick of talent could have finished it up in no time. Fenella had been in the Jade Forest for three weeks with nothing to show for it. The pandaren masons she worked with moved at a snail's pace, but the Dark Iron hesitated in pushing them. She was, according to Moira, an "ambassador."

"Make me proud," the queen had ordered before Fenella left Ironforge.

Fenella mulled over the words as she marched to the construction site, a clearing on the eastern side of the forest. Foreman Raiki, the lead pandaren mason, had called a meeting. What this entailed was beyond the Dark Iron. She just hoped things would get moving.

The pandaren were there en masse when she arrived. *Promisin'*. Fenella squinted to ward off the blinding sunlight as she settled back against a boulder. The Jade Temple reached skyward in the distance, heat waves shimmering off of its tiled green roof.

Raiki slowly made his way to the center of the gathering. "You all know the task ahead!" he bellowed, gesturing to a debris field nearby.

An immense, circular stone pillar towered behind him. Around it lay the broken chunks of the Serpent's Heart. The statue had been built in the image of the Jade Serpent, one of the four legendary August Celestials. They were, from what Fenella could remember, godlike beings native to Pandaria, but she had yet to see any of them in person. The Serpent's Heart had been destroyed when the Alliance and the Horde had gone to war in the region. According to the story Moira told her, once the masons finished the reconstruction, the Jade Serpent would transfer her life essence into the statue and be "reborn," although Fenella wasn't exactly sure what that meant.

"We need more jade to rebuild," Raiki continued. "That is why I propose a Great Jade Hunt!"

A murmur rippled through the crowd, but the excitement was lost on Fenella. Her eyes drifted over the masons until she spotted Fendrig, standing out like blood on new winter snow. The Bronzebeard stared right back at her, smug and condescending as always. On another side of the construction site, Fenella found Carrick, watching her, anger twisting his face.

The last time they had spoken was on the sea voyage to Pandaria. The bastards just couldn't cope with the fact that Fenella was in charge. For all the talk in Ironforge about equality, it wasn't so easy to wash away old hatreds. Being led by a Dark Iron was a mountain too high for them to climb.

*Simpler this way, Fenella told herself. Finish the job an' get on with life.*

"The hunt will begin at sunrise and end at sunset. The use of carts is prohibited; bags and satchels, however, are permitted. Good luck!" Raiki adjourned the meeting to a round of applause.

"Fenella!" The foreman plodded over to the Dark Iron as the pandaren masons mingled, forming into teams. "Do you have any questions about the hunt?"

"No," she replied. "I've got it."

"I wouldn't take it too seriously. It's something of a tradition to get the spirits up."

"A Dark Iron never takes a minin' challenge lightly, lad," she stated matter-of-factly.

Raiki gave a good-hearted chuckle. "So I've heard. That's why I'm looking forward to seeing those famous dwarven skills in action." He glanced back at Fendrig and then at Carrick, neither of whom had moved. "Do you and your team need any advice on mining spots?"

Fenella discerned a note of hesitation at "team." The tension between the dwarves wasn't lost on the pandaren. They were just too polite to prod her about the problem.

"I'll manage."

"Good hunting, then. Jade Serpent watch over you." Raiki bowed deeply and then departed.



Before returning to her camp, Fenella shot a glance at Fendrig and Carrick. They were dwarves. Formality or not, this Great Jade Hunt had stoked the fire of competition in their blood. The Dark Iron gave each of them a long look, eyes narrowed. She cracked her neck from side to side.

Fendrig yawned. Carrick spat on the ground, kicked grass in her direction, and then stormed off.

Game on.

Koveth was waiting back at camp, guard protocols initiated. Fenella rummaged through her things until she found a stack of maps marked with well-known mining locations. Raiki had given her the bundle when she had first arrived in Pandaria. She pored over the scrolls, circling promising spots with a stick of charcoal, calculating travel time, necessary provisions, and—

"Hello."

A pandaren cub in a blue dress, obsidian hair tied up in two buns, stood at the edge of the camp.

"Och." The Dark Iron laughed nervously. "Gave me a fright."

"You are one of the dwarves. From Ironforge," the cub said, curious.

"Aye."

"The three of you seem pretty angry at each other."

"You've a lot tae learn about dwarves, lass." Fenella left it at that. She turned back to her maps, hoping the child would leave her be.

"Teach me."

"What?"

"Teach me about dwarves."

Fenella sighed. What was there to say? "A long time ago, we all lived in Ironforge. Then we got into a scuffle o' sorts an' went our separate ways. Now, we're all back in Ironforge." She decided to leave out the more "controversial" parts, such as how the Dark Irons had, until recently, been enslaved by the elemental lord of fire, Ragnaros, and pushed inexorably down a path of evil.

"But you're not really together."

"We're different," the Dark Iron replied, her anger getting the best of her. "Always will be."

"So you won't be going on the hunt with them?"

How many questions was this girl going to ask? "They can come with me if they want. Dinna matter. I'll pull in more jade than the two o' them could mine in a week."

The girl's brow furrowed. "I see." She cautiously stepped toward the dwarf and gestured to the map in her hand. "In that case, you should avoid all those locations. They will be crowded with pandaren. And the jade there has been mined very low. But I know a good place where no one goes..."

"That so?"

"There." The girl pointed to a spot on the map, northwest of the Serpent's Heart. "The entrance is covered in weeds and stones, but you will find it if you keep looking. It is an ancient mine, filled with jade more beautiful and pure than anything the others will bring in."

Fenella marked the location. "If it's so special, why dinna the rest o' the miners go there?"

"You've a lot to learn about pandaren." The girl grinned. "They go to the places they know. Routine is comforting."

Fenella nodded. "Watch fer me come sunset, lass. Maybe—"

She stopped short when she looked up at the girl, noticing her eyes for the first time. They were strange, red eyes—eyes ancient like elementium. Out of place on this small, innocent cub.

The Dark Iron recovered and said, "Maybe I'll save some jade fer ye."

"I hope you do." After a polite bow, the girl scampered off.

Fenella shuffled through the maps for the next hour, but she kept returning to the one she had marked on the cub's advice. *Jade more beautiful and pure than anything the others will bring in.* She didn't like taking mining instructions from strangers—especially children—but she was a foreigner in this land. This could be the edge she needed. *Nothin' great comes without a little risk.*

"Koveth," Fenella called out. "Ye ready tae do some diggin', lad?"

The golem's eyes flared violet. "Affirmative."

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Fenella set out while it was still dark. The rules stated that the hunt began at sunrise. Whether that meant preparations and travel or the actual mining was something she deemed open to interpretation. Near sunrise, she found the mine. Rocks and a tangle of thick thorny vines partially covered the entrance. A small green shape skittered across one side of the opening.

Shale spider.

Fenella grimaced. The pandaren had an apt nickname for these nasty little critters: "nibblers." They could chew through and gulp down solid stone. The creature stopped and reared at Koveth. Its mandibles furiously clicked together.

"Analysis: It wants to devour Koveth." The golem was to the point as always.

"Aye. But we aren't gonna let that happen now, are we?"

Koveth answered by lunging forward, crushing the spider to pulp with a precise punch.

"Lead the way." Fenella was happy to have Koveth by her side. The golem was the only "team" she needed. He was dependable, unquestioning, and could mine more stone than ten masons.

The golem cleared the rest of the vines and rocks with a swipe of his iron hand and then disappeared into the yawning darkness. Once inside, Fenella pulled a small violet crystal from a pouch on her belt and knocked it against the wall a few times. The gem, fashioned by a Dark Iron sorceress back in Ironforge, rattled and flared to life, illuminating the passageway. She found nothing remarkable as they picked their way through the tunnel, and her mind began to wander.

Why was she here?

The Dark Irons had recently won respect in Ironforge by playing a major role in fending off a brutal troll invasion, saving a number of dwarves—members of the other clans. After such a victory, Fenella was perplexed why Moira had chosen her—a Darkvire, of all people—to lead the expedition.

Was she missing something?

"Jade." Koveth pointed to the ground.

A dozen small objects were scattered on the floor, covered in a layer of dust. One was a figurine of the Jade Serpent. The others were the rest of the August Celestials: Xuen, the White Tiger; Niuzao, the Black Ox; and Chi-Ji, the Red Crane. She picked up the Jade Serpent statue. Heat radiated off of the carving. A strange heat, warm enough for Fenella to feel through her leather gloves.

*Sorcery*. Some part of her screamed to leave. Warned her she did not belong here.

"Just like a Dark Iron..."

Fenella leapt back. Koveth crouched into a defensive position.

Ahead, Carrick emerged from the shadows, a single flame burning on his steel helmet.

"What are ye doin' here?" Fenella asked.

"I would ask ye the same question, 'cept I know the answer. Ye followed me!"

"Hostile intent detected," Koveth growled. "Shall I obliterate him?"

"Your little friend takes one swing at me, an' I'll turn it into scrap." Carrick drew his hammer to make good on the threat. A pale blue energy crackled around it. Most miners used pickaxes or rock picks to do their work. Fenella knew Carrick was different. He had a pointed stormhammer, imbued with the power of lightning. A weapon like what many members of his clan carried.

"Stand down, Koveth," Fenella ordered, and then she said to the Wildhammer, "I found this place on me own, stubborn bastard."

"That so? Well, the word o' Fineous the Fraud's daughter is worth about as much tae me as straw stuck tae a gryphon's arse."

"Quit yer yappin'. Neither o' ye found this place on yer own." Fendrig's gravelly voice echoed from back the way Fenella had come. The enormous Bronzebeard casually strode forward until he loomed over the other dwarves. "Looks like all three o' us had a visit frae that pandaren lass."

"The girl..." Carrick smashed his hammer against the wall. "What's her angle in this?"

"She was tryin' tae help," Fenella said. "Doesn't understand the bad blood between us."

The three dwarves lingered in silence, glaring at each other, faces scrunched up in thought. Fenella knew they were all wrestling with the same dilemma. *Jade more beautiful and pure than anything the others will bring in.* To leave would be to give in—to concede. None of them made a move.

"Well?" Carrick sneered. "Ye can both go now."

"We're all foreigners in this land," Fendrig retorted. "Ye got nae more claim tae this mine than we do."

The veins on Carrick's sweat-sheened temples bulged. "If the two o' ye want tae follow, that's yer choice. Just dinna get in me way!" he shouted, and then he stomped down the tunnel.

Fenella caught a hint of unease—of fear—on Fendrig's face, like dark soil peeking through late-winter snow. When he noticed the Dark Iron watching him, his features hardened again. "Might be worth a laugh tae see the two o' ye struggle with minin'." He plodded forward.

The Dark Iron stood alone with Koveth, gnawing her lip. It was past sunrise now, she figured. It could take a few hours to even find another suitable mine. If she was lucky.

"Come on." She motioned to Koveth.

The golem filed after her as she walked down the gullet of the mountain.

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*A dark chapter hangs over pandaren history—the mogu empire. It is difficult for us to imagine how much our ancestors suffered during that era. The terrible mogu trampled pandaren culture beneath their feet. They banned all worship of the celestials. Merely speaking their names was punishable by torture and death. In time, even those who had known the celestials best forgot their wise teachings.*

—The Scrolls of the Celestials

*Should have ignored that girl's advice, found a mine on me own,* Carrick fumed.

The heavy silence around him only stoked his anger. When he was young, his parents had recognized his gift—his ability to speak with the stones. A Wildhammer elder had requested that he undergo shamanic training, but it wasn't the life for Carrick. He was a miner at heart, and his innate connection with the elements made him one of the best in the clan. One of the best in the world.

At least, it had, back when he could still hear the stones. Their silence now was like a sharp object jammed between his ribs, a constant and painful reminder of how far he had fallen.

Carrick mulled over these thoughts as he continued forward, emerging into a large circular room. The flame on his helmet sent a wash of light to the far side of the chamber. Cracked and faded murals covered the walls, all depicting Xuen, the White Tiger. In one mural, Xuen was battling a giant armored mogu whose body crackled with lightning. In another, chains bound the White Tiger atop a mountain peak. The creature was struggling against his shackles, roaring in fury, his face twisted in uncontrolled rage. The mogu brute watched from afar, arms raised in victory.

"What is this place?" Fenella asked as she and her golem blundered into the room. The Dark Iron waved around the gem in her hand, casting a sickly purple hue over the chamber.

Fendrig followed close behind. "Neither o' ye thought tae do a little research before comin' here? Figures." The Bronzebeard sighed and walked over to a series of Pandaren runes etched into the wall. He pulled out a long scroll tucked into his belt, the worn paper marked with similar-looking symbols. Next to those were Dwarven letters.

Carrick eyed the cipher. "What's it say, then?"

"Ye want tae know, ye do the legwork yerself." Fendrig turned his back on the Wildhammer and then continued examining the runes.

Carrick opened and closed his hands in quick succession. A pleasing image came to mind: his fist slamming into Fendrig's oversized maw, wiping away that smug smile.

Fenella cursed and clicked her tongue. She was standing across the room. A monstrous stone, chiseled into the shape of a snarling mogu face, blocked what looked to be the only passageway that led deeper into the mine. "The lass didn't say anythin' about this."

"No one's been in here fer generations. Probably didn't want folk snoopin' around," Fendrig replied. "We'll have tae break through."

Carrick inspected the boulder. Solid. Sturdy. He drew closer and placed his palm on the rock to give it a testing shove. When his skin touched the stone, a painful jolt of energy raced up his spine. The air in the room suddenly grew warmer, crackling with a force akin to magic.

Before his eyes, the mogu face slowly morphed into something else.

A hideous, scarred visage. A Dragonmaw orc.

Carrick stumbled back and shook his head.

The orc remained. Seeing it there, his enemy staring back at him with beady stone eyes, challenging him, made Carrick's heart race. He twisted his neck and stretched his arms. Muscles popped. He took his great hammer in his hands and swung it forward, putting all his strength into the blow.



Metal hit stone with a thunderclap of sound and a blinding flash of light. Carrick lost his grip on the hammer, and it went flying.

Fendrig chuckled. "I can't tell if ye hit the stone or the stone hit ye." The Bronzebeard casually hefted his pickaxe. "Let me show ye how it's done, lad."

"Ye won't break it either. I'll handle this." Fenella beckoned that infernal golem of hers.

Carrick grabbed his hammer and whirled toward the other dwarves. "Back off!"

He didn't wait for their reply before taking another swing at the Dragonmaw.

Then another.

And another.

He didn't make a scratch, but this fact was lost on Carrick. His anger roiled within, molten hot, reshaping everything around him. Before long, he found himself back among the green hillocks. Back in Northeron.

The smell of smoke filled his nose; the sounds of battle, his ears. Dwarven gryphon riders soared through the ash-choked skies, trading blows with orcs riding on their cursed enslaved red dragons. Carrick watched as a swarm of Dragonmaw descended on a smoldering village just down the hill.

His village.

He had replayed these memories in his head a thousand times: rushing out of the mine when he received word of the attack, racing down the hill to his blazing home. But no matter how quick he ran or what shortcuts he took, he could never make it back fast enough. This time, however, seemed different. The memory was more visceral than previous ones, filling him with confidence.

"Ho there," a small voice said.

A young Wildhammer in a white tunic, a plume of brown gryphon feathers sticking out of her red hair, approached Carrick.

*Can't be*, he thought. He rubbed his eyes, but the girl was still there.

"Rhona!" Carrick picked his daughter up and squeezed her tight. In some corner of his mind, he knew this was an illusion. She had never appeared in his other dreams or memories of this day. But he could feel her now. He could smell the hill daisy pollen in her hair.

"What ye doin'?" the girl asked after he had set her down.

Carrick looked to the base of the hillock, at that burning village.

"Tryin' tae make it," he said.

"It's too late." Rhona took a feather from her hair and twirled it in her fingers.

"No. It's different this time. I can feel it."

"It's the same." Rhona laughed innocently, as if this was all some kind of game to her.

Something in Carrick snapped—something deep within that he had no control over.

"Dinna say that!" he roared. The fury quickly ebbed, and guilt came rushing in to take its place.

Rhona slowly backed away, tears welling in her eyes.

"I... I'm sorry." Carrick kneeled and stretched out his hands. "Please, lass. Fergive me."

"If ye promise me somethin'."

"Anythin'."

Rhona came close and wrapped her arms around her father's neck. The smell of hill daisy pollen vanished. The pungent odor of death, of burning flesh and a dream turned to ash, enveloped Carrick. His daughter's tiny voice whispered, "Stop comin'. There's nothin' left fer ye here."

Rhona kissed him on the cheek and then danced away. The wind suddenly picked up, blowing the feather out of her fingers. She laughed and chased after it down the hill.

"Wait!" Carrick shouted.

He started after her, but hands grabbed at him from behind, pulled him away. He blinked, and Northeron disappeared. He was back in that damn hole beneath Pandaria, writhing on the ground. Pain blossomed up his arms. Blood was pouring from his knuckles. His hammer lay a few feet away.

"Oi!" Fenella said. "Ye gone soft in the head? Tryin' tae punch through stone?"

"What?" Carrick managed to say through the fog of confusion that had settled over him.

"What was that business about the Dragonmaw?" Fendrig asked.

"Ye were screamin' at 'em like they were here in the room," Fenella added.

Carrick considered waving them off, considered shouting a retort. But when he looked down at himself, sitting on the dusty floor, bloody and bruised, all the fire left his veins. *The mighty Carrick Irongrin*. There was no hiding how pathetic and useless he had become anymore.

He hadn't told anyone about the Dragonmaw attack in years, but when he opened his mouth to speak, the words forced their way out, and he was too exhausted to stop them. They had, he realized, been held in for far too long. Like water in a dam, they wanted to flow free. So, he let them.

"Ever since that day, I haven't been able tae hear the stones," he said when he finished the story.

The other dwarves were unreadable, but they didn't belittle him as he had expected.

"Just wait there," Fendrig sighed. "I'll take care o' the boulder."

"Hold on." Carrick dusted himself off and approached the rock. The snarling orc was still there. He met its stony gaze, wondering how much longer he would let this anger consume him—how many more friends he would drive away due to his temper. For all his talk, the truth was that he had built nothing of worth since that day in Northeron. He didn't have the patience for it anymore.

He could blame the Dragonmaw all he wanted for that, but in the end, it wouldn't change a thing.

Carrick took a deep breath, tried to calm his nerves. He put his palm against the stone and stared hard at the orc. The Dragonmaw's sneer widened. The anger returned, the smoke filling Carrick's nostrils. The urge to wrangle those memories, to make them into something better, like stone quarried and prepped for shaping, overwhelmed him. He shut his eyes, fighting the desire, and let the memories run their course.

*I'm through with ye.*

Something moved against his skin. The boulder was vibrating, that old, familiar sensation of the stones singing to him. The pure rush of excitement and relief almost caused Carrick to pull his hand away, but he kept it steady. He opened himself to the elements, let them guide him as they once had. Every rock, every mountain, had a weak point. That was what they showed him.

When Carrick opened his eyes, the mogu stared back at him. His palm was touching a spot to the right of the carving's nose. *There ye are.* The Wildhammer swung his hammer, biting his lip from the pain in his hands.

*CRACK.*

Rather than crumbling, the giant rock rolled sideways, revealing a dark passage beyond.

Carrick let the other dwarves go through the opening first. When they were gone, he leaned against the wall for a long time, every muscle in his body violently trembling. It felt as if he had been carrying a sack of iron on his back and, finally, had found a place to set it down.

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*Some pandaren wished for revenge. They built their strength for the day when they could strike at the mogu. Anger was the motivation for every breath. But what is strength without control? These poor slaves soon became instruments of wrath, turning their hatred on everything and everyone. They had forgotten Xuen's most fundamental lesson: "The only enemy is yourself."*

—The Scrolls of the Celestials

Beads of sweat slowly trickled down Fendrig's neck. The fear was creeping back, churning in his guts, roaring like distant thunder. Down in the depths of this Light-forsaken mountain, he wondered if the storm would finally overwhelm him. He could only hold it at bay for so long.

Dark thoughts rattled around inside his head. Who knew how stable this place was? What kind of safety measures did the pandaren take with their mines? Maybe none, when these tunnels had been built. Maybe that was why the pandaren masons avoided them.

Fendrig cursed himself for not staying back at the camp, but what good would that have done? The Dark Iron and the Wildhammer would have returned and seen that he hadn't mined a thing. And then, perhaps, they would discover that the "Hand of Khaz" hadn't gone into a mine in over a year.

"Another chamber ahead!" the Dark Iron called out.

Relief flooded through Fendrig. The jagged walls had been growing narrower, squeezing in tighter around him. Making it hard to breathe. He took a moment to compose himself, to erect that cool mask that he had become such a master at keeping up day in and day out.

The long rectangular room was much larger than the last one. Fortunately, there was a doorway at the other end, and it was open. The ceiling and walls were unnaturally level—finely crafted.

Despite his research, Fendrig had not discovered the purpose of these chambers. Clearly, the pandaren had built them in honor of the celestials. But why? The runes carved on the walls didn't provide an answer. They were cryptic and vague. Mostly old pandaren proverbs.

A flat carving of Niuzao's head, the size of a warrior's buckler, was embedded in the floor at the center of the room. The ox's sapphire eyes glittered, reflecting light from the open flame on top of Fendrig's helmet.

Fenella stepped on the disc as she crossed the room, the golem stomping behind her. Carrick entered the chamber and, after a brief inspection of the surroundings, followed after the Dark Iron.

Fendrig barely noticed them. His attention was on one of the intricate murals worked into the chamber's walls. It depicted Niuzao, the Black Ox. Fendrig had read about this creature on the sea voyage to Pandaria. He was a mighty being, capable of standing against entire armies. It was no surprise to him that the pandaren worshiped the ox, hoping to mirror his fortitude.

Yet in this mural, Niuzao was anything but fearless. The Black Ox cowered atop a hill, surrounded by throngs of mogu warriors. On closer scrutiny, Fendrig realized the soldiers were fake—statues made of clay. The real mogu looked on in delight at the scene from the borders of the mural.

The air suddenly crackled with energy, an energy that coiled in the pit of Fendrig's stomach. This place was unnatural. He wondered if he had overlooked some detail while doing research. Perhaps the mogu had found these tunnels. Perhaps they had cursed them.

A shiver went through Fendrig when he noticed he was alone. "Oi! Where are ye two?"

"Down the tunnel!" Fenella's voice echoed from the doorway.

The Bronzebeard hurried toward the opening. His foot hit against a groove in the floor. He looked down and discovered he was standing on the emblem of Niuzao. The face of the Black Ox, once stoic, had taken on the same terrified visage as he had in the mural.

Fendrig leapt back as the disc turned and made a full revolution before stopping. The roar of stone grinding against stone shook the room. From behind the walls, Fendrig heard what sounded like wheels and pulleys—the creak of old wood and the strain of strong rope being pulled taut.

"What was that?" Fenella yelled from the tunnel.

"It'ssss..." Fendrig couldn't get the words out.

The rumble grew deafening. Slabs of thick rock descended over the chamber's two openings with alarming speed. He took a step, his legs like anvils. He tripped and slammed into the ground. His mining helmet clattered to the floor, the impact blowing out the flame that burned atop it.

"Bronzebeard!" Fenella shouted.

Fendrig raised his head and saw the violet light of the Dark Iron's gem. The stone slab continued sliding down. Fenella was crouching along with Carrick and the golem, their faces barely visible in the distance. All three of them were struggling to keep the doorway from closing, but to no avail.

He could have run for it. Instead, he watched like a helpless newborn lamb as the door shut. Darkness swallowed him. But in his mind, the din of grinding stone remained. It took on a different sound. The sound of the world breaking, of a mountain and its ancient wrath crashing down.

"Fendrig! Where are ye, lad?" an unseen voice called.

He recognized it. He hadn't heard it in over a year. Not since—

"CAVE-IN!" someone else cried.

Fendrig tried to stand, but his legs failed him. In the dark, he lost all sense of direction. A wave of nausea made his head spin. His lungs filled with an icy chill, and he knew exactly where he was.

Coldridge Pass.

"No. Nae here... nae here..." Fendrig muttered to himself as he glanced about. It was still dark, but he sensed a new enormity to the chamber. He wasn't in Pandaria anymore; he was in that cavernous mountain tunnel tucked deep within dwarven territory. He had been working there with twelve other miners when the Cataclysm struck, when earthquakes shattered his world.

Torchlight flickered around the room, the source indistinguishable. In the brief moments of illumination, he saw giant shadows falling, stones the size of wagons raining from the roof.

"Where's Fendrig?"

That voice again. Louder. A chorus of other familiar speakers followed it.

"Still in there! I'm goin' back!"

"I'm with ye!"

"No." Fendrig choked the word out. "Save yerselves!"



They didn't listen. Their torches grew brighter. Closer.

"This way!" one of them howled. "He's—"

A sharp, sickening crash silenced the voice forever.

Still, the others continued on, calling Fendrig's name. One by one, he heard the great stones fall. He heard the miners scream, watched the glow from their torches slowly fade into nothingness.

And through it all, Fendrig remained frozen in place, too afraid even to stand or seek out the dead and dying. Shivering but safe in a natural void formed by the falling stones. *Dumb, shameful luck.*

As suddenly as it had begun, the earthquake stopped. All was silent.

Fendrig blinked, telling himself that this was just a dream. But nothing around him changed. The air was still bitter cold and dry in his throat, the dust of pulverized stone still thick on his tongue.

"Oi." A boot kicked him hard in the ribs.

Fendrig looked up, expecting to see the rescue party that had found him in the rubble of the pass. Out of the thirteen miners who had entered that day, only he came out alive, and not even on his own two feet. The rescuers had carried him to safety because he lacked the strength to walk.

This, however, was not the rescue party he remembered.

A group of vaporous forms, glowing with a faint, iridescent light, encircled him. There were twelve of them in total, all adorned in mining gear. The twelve bravest dwarves Fendrig had ever known.

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"Enough, Koveth." Fenella leaned back against the tunnel wall, sweat pouring down her brow.

Her golem backed away from the stone door leading into the sealed chamber. He'd been hammering at it for some time, to no avail. All the while, Fenella and Carrick had scoured the tunnel, searching for a way to open the door. They had found none.

"Fool..." Carrick mumbled from nearby. "Why didn't he run when he had the chance?"

Fenella shook her head. She and Carrick had been forging ahead through the tunnel when the door had started closing. By the time they'd made it back, the rock slab was already halfway down, and even with Koveth's brute strength, they hadn't been able to keep it from shutting.

There was nothing else they could do for Fendrig right now, Fenella realized. They would need to return with blasting powder, or with help from the pandaren, before the air in the chamber ran out.

The Dark Iron motioned for Koveth and started off down the tunnel.

"Ye just gonna leave him in there?" Carrick asked.

"We need help tae free him, an' we won't get that until we find our own way out o' this place."

Carrick lingered for a moment in front of the door, head down, and then followed after Fenella.

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Fendrig stared at the ghosts of the miners, wondering if they had come here for revenge. After all, what had he done to honor their sacrifices? Until Pandaria, he hadn't ventured into a mine. He'd lied to get out of such assignments. He'd spent his days telling

stories of his past mining exploits, struggling to uphold his façade of fearlessness. It was the only thing he was good at anymore.

"What do ye want with me?" Fendrig hissed.

The phantoms didn't respond. They drew closer. The Bronzebeard took a wild swing at them.

"We ain't gonna hurt ye, lad," the ghosts said in unison. "We're here tae help ye up. Ye been lyin' down there fer far too long."

Fendrig took a deep breath to calm his nerves. He let the shadowy forms grab him, the sensation like eddies of air pushing against his body. They lifted up the Bronzebeard until he was standing.

"There we go."

"I'm sorry, lads." Fendrig cast his eyes down, too ashamed to look at the ghosts. "I should have come tae ye in the pass. I should have done somethin'. Anythin'. I... I was afraid."

"So were we. Difference was we didn't allow the fear tae stop us. High time ye did the same. We're gonna let go now." The phantoms loosened their grips, and a pang of terror spiraled through Fendrig.

"No!" The word leapt out of his mouth. "I'm trapped in here. I dinna know the way out."

"All we can do is get ye tae yer feet, lad. Whether ye lie back down or stay standin' is up tae ye."

Fendrig swallowed, his throat raw from the frigid mountain air of the pass. "I..." He tried to think of something to say, but he knew it was just an excuse to keep the ghosts at his side.

"Time tae start livin' again," they continued. "Ye ready?"

Fendrig's heart thumped in his chest. His breathing quickened. When his time came and he passed into the realm beyond this one, what would he say to the ghosts of the twelve? He had often pondered that question. Would he tell them he'd lived the rest of his days in fear? Or that he'd lived a life of purpose, eyes open, fire burning hot in his blood?

And now, here they were.

He cleared his throat. "Do it."

The ghosts let go.

Fendrig sank slightly and then stumbled back, struggling to keep his balance. He found his footing, found that part of himself still locked away under the stones in Coldridge. He was tired, and his leg muscles burned and ached from the effort. But the pain felt good. It felt real.

A faint blue light began shining from somewhere in the room. Fendrig saw the Niuzao carving nearby. The ox's sapphire eyes were glowing fiercely, brighter and brighter.

Without looking back, he stepped forward, planting one foot firmly on the disc.

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Fenella was a ways down the tunnel when she heard stones grinding behind her. She rushed back with Koveth and Carrick in time to see the doorway to the Niuzao room slide open. Cautiously, the Dark Iron crept into the chamber, glow gem in hand, and saw Fendrig.

A wicked grin stretched across the Bronzebeard's face.

"What happened?" Carrick rushed into the room.

Fendrig laughed from deep in his belly. "Wish I knew, lad." He pointed down at the engraving of Niuzao, where he was standing. "It's a trigger o' some kind. Must've tripped it when I came in."

Fenella eyed the disc with suspicion. She remembered stepping on it when she had walked through the room, but nothing had happened. The carving looked no different than it had at that time. It was simply an engraving of the Black Ox, his features stoic, unyielding, and fearless.

"Ye fine, then?" she asked. "Ye froze up in here."

"Aye. Just... lost me way fer a bit." Fendrig met the Dark Iron's eyes. His earlier coldness was gone, replaced by something else. Something real. "There's magic in this place. That's a fact."

The Bronzebeard glanced at Garrick, who gave a short nod.

"But it's alright now," Fendrig said. The giant dwarf struck flint, reigniting the flame on his metal helmet, and then, his head held high, led the way deeper into the mountain.

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*Other pandaren were stricken with terror. Merely hearing the name of their tormentors paralyzed them. This fear seeped into all aspects of life. They became afraid of every shadow, of every sound. They became afraid of life itself, content to waste away in a prison of their own making. If only they had remembered the mantra of Niuzao: "Fear seeks to diminish you. Instead, let it reveal you."*

—The Scrolls of the Celestials

On and on the tunnel wound. Murals of Chi-Ji, the Red Crane, shimmered on the walls to either side. The celestial—a symbol of hope, Fendrig explained as they walked—flew over throngs of rejoicing pandaren slaves in the first few murals. But as Fenella continued down the tunnel, the depictions grew darker: mogu warriors capturing Chi-Ji, binding his wings with chains, and then parading the Red Crane among the pandaren, all of whom cast their eyes down and wept at the sight.

The number of mosaics gradually lessened, giving way to a sea of sparkling gems. Ruby crystals blanketed the walls and ceiling, reflecting the glow of the dwarves' lights.

"Wonderful," Fenella said under her breath. This was true beauty, not the forests and flowers that grew topside. These crystals, these stones, these were things that lasted the test of time.

She noticed a dark green spot on the wall and moved closer. A large stone was wedged between two crystals. Fenella shone her glow gem across the ceiling and found more of the strange, almost perfectly shaped rocks. She had seen these somewhere before...

Curious, she reached out to touch one.

It shrieked.

Fenella lurched back as spindly legs unfurled from beneath the shale spider's body. Its carapace rattled. A cluster of green eyes gleamed in the darkness. The commotion roused the other nibblers. Dozens of them sprang to life on the ceiling and walls, their legs clicking and clattering.

"Koveth!" Fenella shouted. "Engage!"

"Affirmative." The golem struck the nearest clump of spiders, splattering them against the wall.

But there were more. They rained down on the dwarves, sinking razor-sharp legs into skin. Part of the ceiling crumbled, and a group of giant spiders, half the size of Fenella, plummeted to the ground.

"Too many!" Carrick swung his hammer, splitting the carapace of one of the larger spiders. "Run!"

He and Fendrig fled back the way they had come. Fenella tried to follow, but the seething mass of spiders blocked her. A portion of them broke off and chased after the Bronzebeard and the Wildhammer. Fenella looked in the other direction; the path ahead was clear.

"Koveth," she hissed. "Defensive retreat!"

Fenella sprinted, the sound of the golem's footsteps thundering behind her. She didn't stop to think of where she was going or how long she ran. She continued until she reached a fork in the passageway. A statue of Chi-Ji had been set high into the crystal walls. The Red Crane's wings were bound, and the celestial's head was turned toward the right tunnel, tears pooling in his eyes.

Fenella stopped to catch her breath. Nothing followed her save for Koveth, his iron body marred by jagged gouges.

A shrill cry rang out from the direction they had come from. A dwarven cry. Fenella's hairs stood on end. The air in the cavern suddenly grew warmer, tinged with a hint of sorcery.

*Can't do anythin' fer them.* The thought welled up in Fenella, crawling out from some dark part of her. *If I go back an' the three o' us die, I'll bring shame tae me clan. Moira put me in charge. Folks in Ironforge will whisper about how I botched the job, how I led a Bronzebeard an' a Wildhammer tae their deaths. But if I go on me way an' live, a Dark Iron will have succeeded where the others failed.*

The more she considered it, the more logical this line of thought seemed. Carrick and Fendrig would do the same to her if given the chance. They hated her. It was something branded onto the cores of their beings, something that neither time nor experience would ever expunge.

Fenella looked toward the forking passageway.

"Make me proud," Moira had said, to her in particular. This was what she meant, wasn't it? Why else would she have asked the daughter of Fineous Darkvire to lead this team?

Movement caught Fenella's eye. On the walls, reflected on each facet of the crystals, were images of herself. They were waving at her, calling to her, urging her to take the rightmost fork in the tunnel.

Fenella followed the reflections, scarcely aware that Koveth was matching her strides. The tunnel spiraled steadily downward, growing colder. She nearly tripped over something scattered across the ground—bones. From the shape of the skull, it looked like the skeleton of a pandaren.

"Nothin' fer ye this way, lass. You'll end up runnin' in circles down here."

The voice was barely audible, a ghost of a whisper.

Fenella whirled, her heart pounding. "Who's there?"

"Och. Ye dinna remember yer own pops?"

Then she saw him. Fineous Darkvire, reflected on the surfaces of a dozen crystals. The infamous mason wore his favorite monocle and suit, dressed to impress, as had always been his way. He lit a pipe with flint and took a long pull. The sweet smell of smoke drifted up from memory. The last time she had seen him was years ago, just before a band of outsiders invaded Dark Iron territory, slaughtering the more nefarious members of her clan. Including her father.

*Nae real.* Fenella shook her head, but Fineous remained.

"Ye gonna leave those two fer dead, lass?" he prodded.

Fenella ignored him. She trudged onward. Her reflections were still waving, but their movements had grown more frantic and urgent—almost manic. *Hurry.*

"I gave ye a second chance, an' this is what ye do with it?"

Fenella spun in anger, opening her mouth to curse Fineous for his hypocrisy.

But he was gone. In the crystals where he had stood, she saw a younger version of herself, fire-orange braids hanging down to her waist. This other Fenella crept through the corridors of Shadowforge City, a bundle of schematics under her arm. She had stolen them from a number of prominent architects and forged her father's seal on them. Fenella



watched her reflection slither through the Dark Iron capital and present the schematics to the emperor, Thaurissan.

The clan's ruler had been so taken with the work that he quickly appointed Fineous to the rank of chief architect. Rumors surfaced that he had not personally created the schematics. Thaurissan launched an investigation. Yet no one had ever been able to prove anything. Fenella had been sure of that. Her crime had been as solid and minutely honed as a thousand-cut diamond.

And she had done it all of her own volition.

Fineous had not been angry when he found out, but she remembered seeing something flash in his eyes. It was not specifically regret, guilt, or sadness. It was an amalgamation of the three, some mixture of emotion that had clawed through the darkness that ruled his heart.

"Never told anyone what ye did." Fineous's reflection reappeared. "Took the blame an' the scorn. In the end, I died a villain. I'm nae complainin'. I wasn't a good dwarf; ye know that. But fer a moment, a part o' me was. I had it in me tae do somethin' good. Tae give ye a future."

Fenella couldn't meet Fineous's eyes, even if he was just a reflection or some product of sorcery. The truth was, a day never passed when she didn't think about what she had done, what he had done for her. Whenever she heard talk of her father around the anvils, his name dragged through the muck, the guilt would hit her full force. She would realize, once again, that she had done nothing to change herself, nothing to honor his noble act.

But what alternative was there? To try was to open oneself up to failure. To try meant she would need to put her trust in others and have faith they would put their trust in her. There didn't seem to be a point to that, when in the deepest part of her, she knew that no matter what she did, she would always be that thief slinking through Shadowforge, ready to deceive a nation.

"I'm a Darkvire," she said.

"Name's nae an excuse. Thing is, I never had much o' a choice tae change. Ye do. All it takes is one step, lass. Strange that ye can't do somethin' so simple, when ye've accomplished so much else."

Fineous upended his pipe, dumping out the contents. Ghost embers vanished among the crystals. "Well, that's about all I've got tae say, lass. It was good seein' ye again."

Slowly, he faded away. When he was gone, Fenella could still smell smoke in the air.

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Dead end.

Fendrig put his back against the crystal wall. Hot blood pumped from the wounds on his arms and soaked deep into his leather gloves.

Carrick stood nearby, teeth bared. Fendrig had never been too fond of Wildhammer dwarves, but the lad at his side was a good one. Brave and fiery.

"Here they come again!" Fendrig tightened his grip on the pickaxe.

Ahead, a wave of shale spiders rolled toward them. Carrick hurled his hammer at the creatures. Jagged strands of lightning trailed off the weapon as it slammed into a particularly large spider, reducing it to a smoldering husk with an explosion of light and sound. As the spots in Fendrig's vision cleared, he saw the hammer arc back through the air, returning to Carrick's hand.

But the spiders didn't pause in their mindless attack. No matter how many the dwarves killed, more and more of the critters crawled out of the nooks and crannies in this place.

A brief flare of violet caught Fendrig's eye. A monstrous shape emerged from the darkness.

The Dark Iron golem charged through the spiders, crushing scores of them beneath his feet, smashing others with gigantic hands. The nibblers converged on this new threat. They scrambled up the golem's legs, chewing through his iron hide with ear-shattering screeches.

Fenella shouted from behind the construct, waving her glow gem. "Move, lads!"

Fendrig and Carrick sprang into action, leaping over the spiders and chasing after Fenella. They followed her down the passageway, eventually stopping to rest at a fork in the tunnel. A giant carving of the Red Crane towered above them, wings stretched over the two paths ahead. Chi-Ji's head was turned to the left, his slender beak open wide as if he were singing.

"What about the golem?" Carrick asked, concerned.

"Can't risk waitin' or goin' back." Fenella's voice was strong as steel, but Fendrig caught a glint of moisture in her eyes. "This is our only chance."

Carrick lowered his head. He made a fist and placed it reverently on his chest, in what Fendrig took for some kind of Wildhammer salute.

"Didn't think ye were comin' back fer us," Fendrig said to Fenella through heavy breaths.

She regarded him for a long moment. "I didn't either."

The Dark Iron gave no other explanation for what that meant, but Fendrig wasn't looking for one. He realized, surprisingly, that he was glad to see her. "Well, ye did. That's all that matters."

"We ain't outta the fire yet," Carrick said. "We dinna know which passage tae take."

"I do." Fenella stared at the carving of Chi-Ji, then down the right tunnel. Fendrig followed her gaze but saw nothing strange—just violet light from her gem flickering across the crystal walls.

"This way," she said, as she took the left path.

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*Still other pandaren saw the mogu as an undefeatable enemy. They lost all ambition. They became numb to every emotion, wrapped tight in a chrysalis of self-loathing. It is said that these slaves even lost the power to dream. For what would be the purpose of dreams, when their doom was already decided? But they had only to open their hearts—to believe in the power of themselves—to see that this was not so. As Chi-Ji is wont to say, "Hope is the sun behind a stormy sky. Ever in the heart but veiled to the eye."*

—The Scrolls of the Celestials

The narrow passageway gradually ascended, the slope steep but steady in its inclination. There were few twists and turns; the way was relatively straight. Before long, the three dwarves came to a threshold. A coiled Jade Serpent, carved in stone, framed the doorway.

Fenella passed through first, entering a vast cavern. Her breath caught in her throat.

Deposits of jade sprouted from the floor and walls. Even unworked, the stone was lustrous and deep green. It glittered in the heavy darkness as if it thrummed with a life force all its own. A trail of glowing sapphire arced across the ceiling in a jagged pattern that resembled lightning.

Carrick whistled. "That little lass wasn't lyin', was she?"

The three dwarves wandered the cavern in awe. In the center stood a large circular pillar, etched with pandaren symbols. A long cut of bamboo, thick as Fenella's arm, rested against it.

Fendrig picked up the bamboo, eyeing it curiously. He reached inside and pulled out a roll of scrolls. The Bronzebeard sat down on a nearby rock and carefully unfurled the parchment, revealing rows of elegant Pandaren script. Fendrig removed his cipher and closely studied the runes.

"What is it?" Fenella asked.

*"The Scrolls o' the Celestials,"* Fendrig replied. "Shall I read it?"

"Aye," Fenella said. Carrick nodded as he took a seat on the floor near the Bronzebeard.

Fendrig read in a halting voice, checking his cipher intermittently. The scrolls told of the history of the celestials, of the rise of the mogu empire, and of how, when that terrible era occurred, the pandaren had become broken, lost to anger, fear, despair, and doubt.

"The celestials, each in their own way, tried tae help the slaves," Fendrig said. "But this drew the fury o' the Thunder King. One by one, the mogu emperor overpowered the meddlesome celestials until only Yu'lon, the Jade Serpent, remained. She'd begun spreadin' her wisdom tae the miners o' the Jade Forest, causin' some tae abandon their duties fer the pursuit o' knowledge. Durin' one o' her journeys tae a slave camp, the Thunder King hurled a bolt o' lightnin' through the sky, piercin' her side. Yu'lon crashed down into the thickets o' the forest an' knew no more.

"When she awoke, she found herself deep below the world. Pandaren miners had spirited her away tae their most sacred place—chambers hidden frae their mogu overlords. Inspired by Yu'lon's recent teachin's, these pandaren had built a refuge tae worship the celestials in secret. The Jade Serpent, so moved by what she saw, imbued the place with her

magic tae help the miners find the wisdom, hope, fortitude, an' strength they had lost in life. Then, she made a request—"

"Tae build a statue o' her..." Fenella interrupted. Her hand traced along the stone pillar. It was beautifully worked, almost identical to the one at the Serpent's Heart construction site.

"Aye," Fendrig said. "Fer a hundred years, generations o' miners toiled. All the while the Jade Serpent, still wounded frae the Thunder King's attack, drew closer tae death. At the moment when the work finished, she breathed her last breath. The miners wept. They thought they'd failed tae save her. But just then, the statue moved. Its eyes opened. Its tail coiled. It had become a new Jade Serpent. This reborn Yu'lon looked out over the weepin' miners an' said tae them, 'There is but one certainty—every end marks a new beginnin'.'

"These miners would go on tae spread the wisdom o' Yu'lon, instillin' in other pandaren the great traits o' the August Celestials—enough, at least, fer them tae survive until the day when the legendary slave Kang, the Fist o' First Dawn, rose up an' led his people tae freedom. Many years later, when Emperor Shaohao taught all pandaren how tae overcome their fear, doubt, despair, an' anger, the offspring o' the miners would build immense temples in honor o' the celestials an' found an order dedicated tae upholdin' their teachin's—the order o' the August Celestials."

Fenella closed her eyes and let everything sink in, let the ancient air of this place envelop her.

The silence stretched on until Carrick chuckled. "Y'know, I expected tae come here an' show the pair o' ye up. Instead, I only made a fool o' meself."

"We all made fools o' ourselves," Fendrig replied. "We're just three washed-up masons. What I dinna understand is why the council chose us fer this job."

Why indeed? Fenella wasn't sure. Part of her wondered if this was all some political gambit by Moira and the council. Throw the most rancid of Ironforge's masons in a crucible, and hope that they made it out in one piece. If they failed, it would merely be

another example of unfortunate tension between the clans. If they succeeded, the victory would be priceless.

Then another thought came to her. The truth was, the three of them had accomplished great things in the past. Maybe, just maybe, everyone still believed they would again.

Everyone but themselves.

"Who knows what goes through their heads?" Fenella said. "But here we are."

"Probably nearin' sunset," Carrick added. "Nae enough time tae mine."

"I'm nae concerned about that anymore." Fenella extended her gloved hands, one toward each of the seated dwarves. "We've got a statue tae build, if ye lads are up fer it."

Carrick and Fendrig stared at her open palms for a moment, then at each other. With a slight shrug, the Wildhammer gripped Fenella's arm and raised himself up. The Bronzebeard did the same.

"Let's get buildin' then," Carrick said.

Fenella walked over to an outgrowth of jade, sizing it up. She swung her hammer down, deftly breaking off a piece as big as her fist. "We can start with this." She tossed the chunk to Carrick.

The Wildhammer slipped the jade into a pouch at his belt. "Let's hope gettin' out is easier than gettin' in."

"Dinna think that'll be a problem, lad." Fendrig was still holding *The Scrolls of the Celestials*, scrutinizing something. "Says here another passage was built directly into this room."

The three dwarves quickly spread out, examining the walls in search of any opening.

"Here!" Carrick shouted from one end of the cavern.

Fenella and Fendrig rushed to his side. A circular slab of stone, twice the height of the Dark Iron, was set into the bedrock. Fenella removed one of her gloves and held her bare hand near the edge. A soft current blew against her skin. The boulder itself was featureless, save for a small etching of Yu'lon in the center.

Carrick sighed. "Would've been nice fer the lass tae tell us about this."

"I've only seen mention o' it on those scrolls." Fendrig shrugged.

"Come on, lads." Fenella braced herself against the stone.

Carrick spit on his bruised hands and placed his palms on the rock. Fendrig squatted, pressing his massive upper body squarely against the boulder.

"Three... two... one..." Fenella said. "Ho!"

The boulder gave slightly.

"Ho!"

The rock slid back into the tunnel with a groan. A torrent of air gushed into the room, washing over Fenella. Up ahead, daylight glimmered in the pitch-black passageway.

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The contest was long over by the time the dwarves returned, and night had set in. A team led by a pandaren named Hao Mann had won, hauling in five bulging bags of jade. From the way the masons celebrated, however, it was impossible to tell whether there had been any winners or losers.

Foreman Raiki was speechless when he saw the rock the dwarves had brought. He gathered the other pandaren around, and the revelry stopped momentarily. The masons



gawked at the lustrous jade, mouths agape. None of them had ever seen a stone so beautiful.

Amid the congratulations that followed, Fenella spied the pandaren girl across the camp.

"Lads." Fenella nudged Fendrig and Carrick. "It's the lass. Figure we should thank her?"

"Aye," the other two dwarves replied.

As they made their way toward the girl, she scampered off to the north.

"Oi!" Fenella shouted. "Wait!"

The dwarves wove through the pandaren masons, but when they reached the edge of the construction site, the girl was gone. Only an empty hill stretched out before them.

"Where'd she go?" Fendrig asked.

Fenella was opening her mouth to speak when she saw something flit through the air overhead. The Jade Serpent peered down at the dwarves. Fenella briefly met her gaze and found herself lost in Yu'lon's strange eyes—eyes ancient like elementium.

The Dark Iron stood next to the other dwarves for a long time, silently watching the celestial ascend higher and higher, a vein of jade against the diamond sky.