

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Vol'jin: The Judgment

Brian Kindregan

THE JUDGMENT

The young troll crouched in the rain, staring ahead to where the path faltered in the face of the jungle's dense undergrowth. The sunlight could not penetrate that foliage, nor could the breeze. That part of the island was called First Home, and nobody went there besides shadow hunters and fools.

Vol'jin was no shadow hunter.

He felt the water running in rivulets between his toes. It was a fierce rain, and each drop that hit his back pushed him toward First Home. Sometimes the shadow hunters returned, but the fools never did. Behind Vol'jin, another troll sheltered under a great palm leaf.

Zalazane was no shadow hunter either.

"We not ready," Zalazane said, chewing noisily on hunks of kommu meat. "De judgment be for older trolls who already done mighty things. We be young nobodies."

"I just young; you the nobody." Vol'jin chuckled and stood up. "We got to, Zal. My papa, he stared into a fire for many hours last night, and now he actin' like his doom be upon him. I think he saw a vision. Change comin', and we got to be ready."

"You think the loa goin' to make you a shadow hunter?"

"They gonna judge me, for sure. Test me. I don't know what dat mean, though."

"They say the loa gonna take our minds," Zalazane said grimly. "They gonna warp us and twist us around and make us see visions."

"Many tests, I hear. If they find me worthy, I be a shadow hunter," Vol'jin answered. "If they find me unworthy... nothing can save us."

"Oh, they gonna be impressed with me." Zalazane smiled knowingly. "But they gonna laugh at you." He stepped into the mud and ambled over to stand beside his friend. They looked at each other for a moment and broke into wide grins, tusks bared. Throughout their entire childhood in the Darkspear village, this had always been a sure sign that Vol'jin and Zalazane were about to do something particularly stupid.

With a mighty cry, they ran headlong into First Home. They crashed through grasping vines and roots. The place teemed with death both sudden and slow, but they were young, and they were sure they couldn't really die.

But there were loa here. The ancient spirits of those who had transcended death could grant wondrous boons or inflict terrible punishments. Loa could give a troll second sight—or drive him mad so that he would pull out his own eyes. Their judgment was vicious, swift, and unpredictable.

Vol'jin and Zalazane ran for a time, and both began to wonder if the legends of First Home had been exaggerated. There did not seem to be any great threat. Two huge fronds blocked the path ahead. With a twitch, they slid to either side, exposing a large carnivorous plant: a nambu. Furry lips parted wide, waiting for them. Fibrous teeth writhed eagerly in the gaping maw, and Vol'jin could not stop in time. He threw himself to the left, grazing the side of the nambu.

Twisting, flailing, he skidded into something hard and scaly. He staggered back, dazed, shaking his head. That something turned, revealing that it was a very angry, very large raptor—by far the biggest Vol'jin had ever seen. He fell back farther, aware that the nambu was somewhere behind him. He could hear Zalazane making strange, muffled sounds, but Vol'jin had lost track of his friend.

The raptor darted its head down at Vol'jin, and he tumbled to his left. Immense jaws snapped shut where he'd just been standing. Ribbons of saliva flew from the creature's mouth. The

nambu reacted to the motion with lightning speed, locking its teeth onto the raptor, funneling poison into the beast's torn flesh. Vol'jin had only a few heartbeats to take advantage of the distraction: he drew his glaive and stalked around the nambu, assessing. Zalazane was on the far side of the plant, thrashing in a nest of alchu bugs that had swarmed over him, biting and stinging. He would be no help for a time.

The raptor ripped the nambu from the ground, tearing roots and flinging the plant far away. The beast's tiny, enraged eyes settled on Zalazane, attracted to the troll's frantic motions.

There was no time. Vol'jin let out a war cry, thrusting wildly with his glaive. Flesh parted: Vol'jin had given the raptor a trail of blood down its back. Shrieking in rage, it swung around, head-butting Vol'jin into the shrubbery. Vol'jin could not see, his face crowded with dewy, sticky leaves. He felt the ground shake as the beast charged. Vol'jin staggered back and to the right, feeling the raptor's jaws once again inches from him. He cleared his face of vegetation in time to see the raptor rear back and come for him again.

He heard Zalazane on the other side of the raptor, yelling and making noise.

Vol'jin scrambled backward, not daring to turn away from the beast. He could see that Zalazane was attacking from the other side, but the raptor swung its tail low, taking Zalazane's feet from under him. The maneuver bought Vol'jin only a second, but that would have to be enough.

He leapt at the raptor and threw his long arms around its neck. For a terrifying instant, his face was pressed against the beast's lower jaw, its breath ruffling his mohawk. Then he managed to wriggle around the neck and lock his knees across the raptor's shoulder blades.

The raptor screeched and bucked. Zalazane sprang to his feet and brought his staff down on the beast's clawed foot. Vol'jin heard bone shatter. He hugged the neck even tighter and put his glaive to the creature's throat.

The raptor had given up on Vol'jin and was advancing on Zalazane, dragging its broken foot. Zalazane backed slowly away, but Vol'jin could feel the beast's muscles tense and coil. Seconds remained.

Vol'jin yanked viciously, feeling the glaive dig into muscle and artery. Blood burst forth in a scarlet curtain as he brought the glaive out in a wide arc. The raptor staggered first one way, then another, falling to the ground, its mouth inches from Zalazane's feet. Vol'jin scrambled free.

"What was dat?" Zalazane panted. "Biggest raptor I ever seen."

"Maybe a loa possess it? Our first test?"

"I don' think so, mon." Zalazane moved to the raptor's gushing throat, ignoring the beast's death throes. "We know the test when it come." He cupped his hands, catching the raptor's blood, smearing it all over his face.

"Whatchu doin'?" Vol'jin asked.

"Dark magics, mon," Zalazane answered, putting the finishing touches on the blood mask and licking his fingers. He gestured for Vol'jin to do the same.

"I don' wanna smell like blood in this place," Vol'jin said. Zalazane plucked an insect off himself and threw it at Vol'jin. Without missing a beat, Vol'jin caught the bug and threw it back.

"We gonna smell like de blood of a big bad thing. We gonna smell like death and danger," Zalazane said, throwing another insect. He had recently begun working with Master Gadrin, the Darkspears' chief witch doctor, and sounded confident.

Vol'jin batted the insect away and moved to catch some of the blood that was still pouring from the dead creature.

"Could save us," Zalazane commented. "But not from de loa."

"Not from de loa," Vol'jin agreed, smearing the warm, sticky blood across his face. It smelled sharp. "But we only gonna survive this judgment by facing the loa anyway. And take what comes."

"Ya, mon."

"Ow!" Vol'jin looked down, feeling a sudden pain. While he'd had his eyes closed to smear the blood, Zalazane had attached three angry insects to his chest.

"When I become a shadow hunter," he told Zalazane, "I gonna ask the loa to kill you."

"I be havin' my own powers then." Zalazane laughed.

Night had fallen. The jungle was dark at all times, and Vol'jin only knew it was night from the coolness in the air and the clouds of angry buzzing insects that rolled past in great waves. Mosquitoes as big as his hand searched for prey. Vol'jin and Zalazane sat on the crown of a small rise. To one side, a sheer drop ended with jagged rocks. They'd walked until their feet were sore and their breath came in choked gasps. The air was thick and still.

"This a strange test," Zalazane said in a low, cautious voice. "We just walk around and kill beasts. Where the loa?"

Vol'jin was about to reply when his spine went cold and he sensed a presence. There was a loa on the rise with them. He could not see it, and he could not smell it, but the hairs on the back of his neck told him it was there. A glance at Zalazane showed the same stark terror mirrored in his friend's eyes.

Then there was pain. Worse than the pain of a broken bone or a stab wound. Thicker and deeper than any pain Vol'jin had ever felt, it flooded his mind, making thought impossible.

A voice whispered to him. "De cliff," it said soundlessly. "De rocks below. Dey bring an end to the pain. Quick. Easy." Vol'jin realized it was true: he could be over the edge in a heartbeat, and the pain would be gone. His only other choice was to endure.

Vol'jin closed his eyes and endured.

After an eternity, his body fell away from him. He floated, free of sensation. A vision dripped into view before him. He was there, older, more confident. He watched the vision from afar and inhabited it at the same time. A file of Darkspear trolls stretched out behind him. They walked through a strange land with little vegetation and orange rocks. A great city rose in the distance, full of sharp edges and spikes. War drums sounded and smoke hung thick over the city. Strange, squat green creatures in elaborate armor were arrayed ahead. A few other creatures, great and shaggy, with hooves, watched from one side.

Vol'jin approached the leader of the green creatures, who bore a strong, wise visage. They clasped hands as equals and smiled. Words floated into Vol'jin's mind. *Orcs. Orgrimmar. Tauren. Thrall.*

The green creatures made welcoming gestures, and the Darkspears put down their burdens, looking relieved... but somehow beaten.

"Why?" a voice asked. Vol'jin felt the voice in his bones; it rumbled inside him. "Why you lead our people to subjugation? Surely it be better to fight alone an' proud, to die alone an' proud."

"No," Vol'jin said, thinking it through. "De Darkspears should always be free an' proud. But we got to be alive to be free. If we dead, we lost. Better to bide our time, to endure. We be an ancient race, mon, and we endure."

He felt the truth of it as he spoke. He had always been the strategist among his friends, the one who thought around the problem. His determination to survive and win was strong.

"You wise for one so young," the voice said. "The Darkspears, they goin' to suffer; they goin' to fight. For them, enduring is survival." The vision melted before him to reveal what could only be the loa: a glowing sphere emanating ancient wisdom and sadness, something faded and tarnished. Something that had lurked in First Home since long before Vol'jin was born. Images and shapes swam and disappeared under its surface. Vol'jin barely had time to register the loa, then it was gone. The world changed around him.

"I grant you sight," the voice said, fading. Vol'jin found himself back on the rise. Zalazane was there.

"We can see loa. We can see dem!" Zalazane exulted. The two trolls smiled at each other.

"Maybe we gonna live to see tomorrow," Vol'jin said.

"Too much hope, you," Zalazane said. "We not done. Gadrin said there be many lessons to learn. The judgment be complicated. The loa, they have more in store for us."

"What the loa show you?" Vol'jin asked. He and Zalazane sat around a fire, turning a kommu on a spit. Fat dripped from the creature's bones and fell into the fire, sizzling and popping. It had been several days, so far as Vol'jin could tell, and the fire was a foolish luxury. But the wildlife

seemed to be leaving them alone, as if they had been marked by the loa. It was not as reassuring as it should have been.

"I was a big witch doctor to the Darkspears," Zalazane said. "We were in a strange land, struggling. Our survival in doubt, mon. We needed to be strong, an' we weren't. Hard times for all, especially our leader. I don't know who the leader was, but he not your papa, mon," Zalazane said quietly. Then he smiled. "I become a witch doctor!"

"I lied to you, Zal," Vol'jin said. He could sense Zalazane's instant attention, even though the other troll simply waited for Vol'jin to go on. The two had known each other their entire lives, and neither had ever lied to the other about anything serious. "My papa did more than act strange. He told me about a vision. Told me I had to go and do the judgment. Told me there was no time."

"He told you we had to go?"

"Not we. Just me. I never saw him like dis, Zal. He wouldn't hear anything but for me to go. He was in such a hurry, but when I walked away... I looked back at him."

"Ya?"

"An' he just lookin' at me like he never gonna see me again. Like he sendin' me to my death."

"So you thought you wanna kill me too?" Zalazane asked with a mischievous smile. He'd always been able to raise Vol'jin's spirits. They'd always been able to help each other.

"I not ready, Zal. I couldn't do it alone. But I thought together we..." Vol'jin could hear his father's voice in his head as he said the words. *Weak, Sen'jin would have said. Weak and soft. No leader of de Darkspears can be those things. Life be too hard, even here on our island.*

"Together we stronger. It okay, mon. I help you when you weak." Zalazane grinned, taking the sting out of his words. "You always help me. We do it together."

Vol'jin opened his mouth to reply, but froze when he saw a glow in the jungle. Another loa, even more primeval and unknowable, shone through the leaves. It was far away, but it called to him. Vol'jin sprang to his feet and stalked out into the trees.

"Where you goin', mon?" Zalazane shouted, but Vol'jin continued. He could not let the loa leave. As he neared the light, stumbling over branches, the loa blinked out, and Vol'jin found himself standing alone in the gloom of the jungle.

Finally, he caught sight of the telltale glow to his right. He launched into a run, brushing aside leaves and roots, diving for the loa. As he pulled the last branch aside, the spirit disappeared once more.

He waited, panting for a moment, and realized that there was no point in standing still. The loa had left him alone in the steamy dark of First Home. He would not play the loa's game. Let it try to lead him on when he was wandering among the trees. Perhaps he would find it before it found him again. He moved through the dense undergrowth with more caution, stepping carefully. He had no idea where he was in relation to the camp, but he didn't care. Finding the loa meant survival. Failing to find it meant death. The loa was all that mattered.

He stopped in a clearing. He could see bits of the sky through the canopy here—darker splotches against the softer dome of the jungle. He paced his breathing, trying to stay quiet, and scanned the trees. He saw nothing. Gradually, like waking from a deep sleep, he became aware of a heat on his back.

He spun—the loa was behind him, inches away. So close he could see the movement and play of shining tentacles within its surface. The loa's glow expanded to fill his vision.

He found himself in a cave, a tunnel of some kind, and the path ahead forked. In each branch of the path there was a vision of himself.

In one he sat upon a throne of purest gold. There were giant roasts wrapped in palm leaves, drafts of the finest jungle brew all around him, troll females dancing for his pleasure. He looked healthy and happy. A tiny golden chain stretched from one ankle to a leg of the throne. In the other vision, he was wounded and bleeding, haggard and surrounded by enemies. The view was cloudy and shifted continually, but he was always fighting, always struggling. Sometimes he led other Darkspears; sometimes he fought alone; but the message was clear: a life of constant struggle and strife, no rest, always more slaughter.

Vol'jin laughed. "Is dis supposed to be a test, mighty loa? Dis be easy. I take freedom. I fight and strive, an' maybe I never find happiness, but I take freedom."

From far away, the low, primordial voice of the loa came to him. "The choice was not the test, little brotha. If you hesitated, if you had to think about it. If you had even one heartbeat of temptation, you would have failed." Vol'jin shivered at hearing the tone in the loa's voice. It sounded as if failure would have meant death or worse.

The cave melted away, and Vol'jin found himself in the stands overlooking an arena. He looked down at his hands. They were his, but older; they bore scars and calluses from many years of hard martial work. Around him were arrayed elders and fighters of the Darkspear tribe. Beyond them were orcs, tauren, and others. All watched raptly as two creatures fought. A brown orc with a mighty axe and a tauren with a spear. Both were clad only in loincloths, oiled for the fight. Once again, words came into his mind: Garrosh and Cairne. Gorehowl and runespear.

The two fought back and forth in the arena. The brown orc bled from several wounds, while the tauren was untouched. With his new sight, Vol'jin could also see the loa everywhere. They swarmed the air and hovered around the edges of his vision. They were gathered and agitated. This moment clearly held vast implications for Vol'jin's people, and perhaps all of Azeroth.

As Vol'jin watched, the orc brought his axe down in a great arc, the weapon letting out a wild shriek as the air whistled through grooves cut along the side. The tauren held his spear up in a parry, but it was not enough: the axe shattered the spear, grazing the tauren.

Both combatants paused for a moment. The orc was almost too wounded to stand, while the tauren was barely scratched. Yet it was the tauren who swayed, his hands falling to his sides. A piece of the spear hung loosely in nerveless fingers.

The orc raised his weapon and charged. The shrieking of the axe filled the arena. The orc brought the weapon down into the tauren's neck.

Vol'jin felt a stab of pain in his heart at the grievous harm done to the tauren. He realized that this was a feeling of true sadness echoing through time from the Vol'jin in this vision, sadness at the loss of a friend and respected elder.

The tauren collapsed. Before he hit the ground, the world slowed to a crawl. Vol'jin's senses came alert, and he felt as if the entire universe had just drawn in its breath in the instant before a scream.

The loa raged. They hissed and whispered. They darted back and forth, clamoring in his ears and diving through him. No one else was reacting yet. The other witnesses were motionless. The tauren was still falling toward the ground, blood spurting.

Then Vol'jin understood.

Poison. It came to him suddenly: the axe was poisoned, and this was wrong. This was not the way of these people.

The tauren hit the ground with a loud thump. Everything began to move at normal speed again. The crowd roared in adulation and outrage.

It all melted away, and a new vision formed. He saw it, and he was in it. He found himself at the head of a line of trolls once more. They carried their belongings and looked determined. He was still in the strange orange landscape. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the great city from the earlier vision. It was darker, somehow sharper. Orcs lined the top of the wall, watching the departing trolls with sullen menace. Vol'jin felt a deeper sense of unease; there was something else that bothered him about the vision. Then it struck him.

Zalazane was nowhere to be seen.

Where Zal? Vol'jin wondered. I need my friend now more than ever.

Vol'jin felt apprehension and uncertainty in his heart, overlaid by a cold anger, a determination to bring the Darkspears through the dangerous times ahead.

"You told my brotha that it better to survive," the loa said, "even if it mean bein' weak, so you can fight another day. Better to endure than die with glory." The voice ripped Vol'jin's mind from the vision; it rattled around in his chest. It was the voice of one who had seen greater glories and horrors than Vol'jin would ever know. "Now you take the Darkspears from the safety of Orgrimmar; you risk an alliance that represent strength. You can't make up your mind?"

Vol'jin hesitated. He was being asked a very important question, and he had no context at all. Why would he do this? He looked around. His people were angry, afraid, determined, excited. He looked back up at the wall.

Then his eye fell on Garrosh. The imposing warchief watched from the battlements, ostensibly stern, but with a tiny smile of satisfaction playing about his lips. He was framed against the sky in his armor, light striking the stark black tattoo on his lower jaw.

He was a brute with a gift for violence and war, but no understanding of diplomacy or compromise.

Then Vol'jin knew.

"I brought de Darkspears here to protect our bodies," he said. "We live to fight another day. But that just our bodies. One thing the Darkspears can't lose, loa, we can't ever lose, is our soul. The Darkspears have a soul, and if we stay with this orc, do his bidding, we lose our soul. And there be no comin' back from that."

"Darkspears must survive, but it worth nothin' if they lose their souls. Darkspears must be true. Be true," the voice said. "You hear all loa now. You will hear us all the time. You got to learn how to listen."

Vol'jin opened his eyes. He was lying on the always-muddy surface of the jungle floor. Several types of insects were happily building mud cocoons over his body. He was still next to the fire, which now burned low. There was no sign of Zalazane. Just as in the vision. Vol'jin struggled to a sitting position.

A moment later, Zalazane limped from the darkness and sat beside him. They stared into the fire in silence for a few heartbeats.

"I saw..." Zalazane hesitated. "I saw meself leadin' Darkspear fighters away from de tribe. The leader, he was so weak, he sell us out, mon. I became the new leader, an' the tribe split in half." Zalazane refused to look at Vol'jin.

"Who this leader, Zal? You say it not my papa, but it have to be someone we know."

Zalazane still would not look at Vol'jin.

Vol'jin picked up a stick and stirred the fire. "Enough of these tests," was all he said.

Vol'jin paced around the fire. He was restless and angry, ready to kill something. He'd been pushed and pulled, torn and spun. His world was making less sense with each passing moment. Now his friendship with Zalazane—the only thing Vol'jin had ever really counted on besides the love of his tribe and father—was strained to breaking.

"No more," he announced without looking at Zalazane. "I goin' huntin'. We be needin' food, and I be needin' to kill." He drew his glaive and slid off into the dark undergrowth. Moving alone into the most dangerous part of the island just *felt* right.

It was strength.

At the fire, Zalazane began a low voodoo chant. Ahead, in the gloom, Vol'jin heard a twig snap. A large creature trying to stay stealthy. Vol'jin grinned, lips pulling against his tusks, fingers pulsing on the glaive.

He moved forward, feeling the fine hairs on the large upka leaves brush his face. He heard the sound again, now off to his left side. He turned, circling to keep the creature on his right.

Again, he heard movement in the vegetation to his left. Realization struck. The creature was stalking him. There was only one thing to do: he charged.

Branches and roots grabbed at him as he hurtled forward with a guttural cry. Ahead, another troll stood up to his full height.

Vol'jin barreled into him, and they both fell. He brought his glaive around to the other's neck in the darkness. Every troll on the island was a Darkspear and a friend, but Vol'jin had grown up with tales of the vicious Gurubashi, and anything was possible in this place.

The other troll looked up, his features caught in a ray of light from the distant fire. It was Sen'jin, Vol'jin's own father.

"Papa?" Vol'jin asked in shock, taking his weight off the prone troll. Sen'jin smiled and shoved Vol'jin off. The younger troll landed in the mud, laughing.

Sen'jin leapt to his feet, twirled his staff, and aimed it at Vol'jin's chest. Vol'jin read the murderous intent on his father's face and squirmed away, narrowly avoiding a blow that would have crushed his ribs into his heart. Vol'jin came to his feet, wary and on guard, but not attacking.

"Papa?" he asked. "What's wrong?" Sen'jin merely smiled and swung the staff in a deadly, low arc. Vol'jin leapt over it, but Sen'jin used the momentum of the swing to thrust his head forward into Vol'jin's chest.

Vol'jin landed in a heap, the air rushing out of his lungs. He rolled onto his back, gasping. Sen'jin glided toward him, spinning the staff again.

"Papa, why you do this? Did I fail? I don' understand!" Vol'jin pleaded.

Sen'jin paused. "You don' fight because you think you know me? Weak."

With that, he brought the staff down on Vol'jin's outstretched hand. Every ounce of strength in the older troll's body was behind the blow, and Vol'jin's hand shattered. His thumb, trapped against his hand, caught the brunt of the force. Bones splintered, and the thumb curled in on itself like a talon.

Vol'jin's mind could not make sense of it. He rolled onto his side, left hand grasping at his right; everything past the wrist was broken, and the thumb was a pulpy mess. He was in shock, and he could feel the reality of his surroundings slipping away. He saw Sen'jin's big bare feet moving off into the jungle.

"Papa!" he called. Sen'jin did not pause, did not slow down, did not even glance back. The bushes moved, and he was gone. "Papa!" Vol'jin fell back, eyes squeezed shut, holding his arm.

After a moment, he reclaimed control of his mind and looked down at his hand. The thumb was destroyed. His glaive lay in the mud, the brushed metal splotched with dirt and blood.

The hand would heal. But the thumb would be misshapen. Vol'jin would never throw a knife with that hand, never hold a glaive. Never hunt, never signal an attack.

But there was a way to fix that. He knew there was a way.

Vol'jin took a deep breath, grasped the glaive in his left hand, brought it high over his head. He would do this with eyes open. He brought the glaive down in a long graceful arc. It whispered through the skin and bone of his right hand; the broken, misshapen thing that had been his thumb flew off into the darkness.

He wanted to scream to the stars above, but he bit his lips till they bled, rocking back and forth. He made no sound. The thumb would grow back cleanly. All trolls were blessed by the loa with some regeneration. They could regrow fingers and toes, even if more complex parts like limbs and organs were beyond their abilities. It would take some time, but he would be whole again.

He began to see a bright light at the edge of his vision, and he wondered if he was about to pass out. But the light grew brighter and brighter.

Vol'jin looked up.

A loa shone nearby. Its light was bright and vibrant. Stronger and somehow newer than the ancient, cagey loa he'd seen before. It was somehow familiar. He felt as if he'd known this spirit before, sometime.

Even as Vol'jin sensed the new loa, he found himself in a vision. He was on a jungle island, one very different from his current home.

He both saw himself and inhabited himself in the dream. He was older, wiser, harder, and infinitely sadder. He led a group of trolls through the leaves.

The scene shifted, and he was fighting another troll. A wild-eyed witch doctor adorned with fetishes and a rope necklace of claws. They fought to the death while others battled around them.

The witch doctor was Zalazane.

The loa spoke. "You fight your own? Another Darkspear? The friend of your childhood?"

Vol'jin said nothing, simply watching the struggle. It slowly faded from sight, colors running and falling like fresh pigment from an idol in the rain.

Not Zalazane. They'd run and fished and wrestled their entire childhood. They'd built mud forts, and their first kill had been the same beast. Zalazane knew things about Vol'jin that no one else did. His fears and triumphs. The time he'd cried over a dead pet when he was a small child, or the day he'd beaten an older bully senseless—Zalazane had been there for all of it.

Vol'jin looked down. The stump said it all.

"I kill anyone who is a threat to the future of the Darkspears," he said. "It don't matter who. The tribe is everything; its future... everything."

"You are wise, boy," the loa said with a familiarity Vol'jin couldn't place. "You didn't cut off de thumb to save your life; you did it to save you future. The Darkspears must be fierce. Be true. Endure. It never be easy, but it the only way."

"Who are you?" Vol'jin said. He had to ask.

The loa ignored his question. "I grant you the power to commune wit' loa," it said. "We not always do what you say, but we give you a fair hearin'. You a shadow hunter now, troll." It faded away.

Later, Vol'jin and Zalazane walked through the dense undergrowth.

"The future," Vol'jin said. "It not set. We not game pieces on some board. If I kill somethin', it dead by my choice."

"Ya, mon," Zalazane said. "In my spirit journey, it all came to me. We seein' paths. Not for sure, just possibilities. If one troll is weak when he should be strong, maybe another troll step forward. Maybe den the one that is weak..." He looked away from Vol'jin. "That one become the villain in the story of the one that is strong."

"But what if the first become strong again, Zalazane?"

"I don' know, mon. Dark voodoo in all that. Maybe both be great leaders. Maybe they friends. Or maybe the second troll become the villain."

"Zalazane, we not gonna let that happen. We friends, an' we learnin' things. You and me, mon, we got to endure, and be true, and be fierce."

"Ya," Zalazane said, but with little hope. "We figure it out, Vol'jin."

Vol'jin and Zalazane moved through the undergrowth, rapidly leaving First Home behind them. They began to see familiar signs that told them the lands of the Darkspears were close.

The visions and revelations of the past few days were quickly fading. Vol'jin tried with frustration to remember the details, but with each step away from First Home, the memories lessened. Perhaps that was how the loa wanted it—just a vague sense of what was needed. Only a few words remained. *Endure. True. Fierce.*

Vol'jin and Zalazane were different now. They moved with confidence, constantly scanning for danger. They had transformed in First Home. They had entered as cubs and emerged as predators. They were dangerous, proud, strong; they were of the Darkspear tribe.

As they approached the village, they began to see alarming signs. Trampled leaves, splotches of blood. The smell of smoke in the air.

Every sense that Vol'jin possessed told him that something had changed. Some fundamental part of the ebb and flow of life on the island had been forever altered.

He held a hand out, and Zalazane stopped instantly. They stood on the trail a short distance away from the Darkspear village. It was still out of sight, but even the sounds were wrong. Vol'jin heard activity, the noise of work crews cutting wood and hammering.

Vol'jin closed his eyes and breathed deeply, listening to the loa. They whispered to him, but they were still hard to understand. He would learn in time.

"I think our village been attacked," he said to Zalazane, trying to decipher the messages of the agitated loa.

Zalazane only nodded knowingly. He had his own methods now, and their different perspectives had created a gulf between them.

They moved forward again, weapons drawn, taking each step with care.

They came through the leaves and saw the Darkspear village before them. Huts had been knocked over, and debris lay strewn everywhere.

There were corpses arranged in neat rows along the edge of the village. Trolls moved among the dead, laying them in positions of peace. Females and children knelt over a troll here or there, sobbing and tearing at their hair. A priest rocked back and forth, eyes closed, mumbling.

The trolls, living or dead, were all Darkspears.

Vol'jin and Zalazane broke into a jog, heading toward the center of the village. The wreckage was even more devastating here. They passed many Darkspears, all of them too busy with their own affairs to notice the two.

Near the lagoon, they saw crews of Darkspears building ships. Many ships. The organized teams were very foreign to the relaxed island life that Vol'jin was used to.

His heart began to beat faster. His people had not been conquered, but in the short time he'd been gone, they had changed.

Vol'jin and Zalazane stopped in the village center, two still figures in a sea of bustling activity. A few trolls hurrying past threw them cautious, confused looks.

The loa began to clamor loudly. Only Vol'jin could hear them, but he knew something was coming. He scanned his surroundings and saw a troll approaching. Vol'jin and Zalazane turned to face old Gadrin, the chief witch doctor of the tribe, as he strode up to them.

"Boys," he said. "Where you been? I thought you be dead."

"Whatchu mean, Master?" Zalazane asked. "We been in de jungle for a week."

"A week? Vol'jin, Zalazane... you been gone three months. So much happened. Strange green creatures came from across de water—"

"Orcs," Vol'jin said.

"Ya, mon," Gadrin said, surprised. He became thoughtful as he continued. "Your father, Vol'jin... he fought de sea witch, an' he..."

"He gone beyond. He wit' Bwonsamdi now, Master Gad. I know it." Vol'jin realized the truth of it as the words left his lips. He could tell his father was no longer among the Darkspears. At least, not as a troll.

"We gonna follow de orcs across de sea," Gadrin went on. "The sea witch too strong; we can't stay here. Your papa, he said we go. It take some time, though. We have to prepare."

"I understand," Vol'jin said, filled with a sudden confidence. "I take charge of the evacuation."

"I help," Zalazane said with a smile.

Vol'jin grinned back at his friend. The smartest thing would be to send Zalazane ahead to prepare the way. Zalazane was his most trusted friend, and he would do the job well. But part of Vol'jin balked at the idea. He did not know why, but he felt that he should keep Zalazane close to him now.

They would help each other. Together they could do anything. They would be true, and fierce, and they would endure.

End.