

## A Change of Ways

*By Emil Erik Hansen*

*All he could see in every direction he looked was red, deserted plains. The heat had taken a firm grip on him, and was slowly making him restless, dizzy and tired. He had lost all sense of how long exactly he had walked, but he knew that all he could remember, had been the very same plains. In fact, he wasn't quite sure how far he could remember back. A sudden glimpse beneath his right hoof caught the last remains of his attention. He kneeled down to look, and noticed a small ring. As he picked it up, it suddenly burst into flames, and he threw it to the ground in shock. The fire increased in strength and grew upwards, even though there was no notable source of heat, other than the scorching sun above. He slowly backed away, but instantly stopped, as he felt immense heat behind him as well. He spun around, and saw flames had risen from the ground inches behind.*

*A voice filled his head, and he noticed that he was now suddenly covered in shadow. "Your time has come..." Again, he spun around, and saw that the fire that had started from the ring, had taken the shape of a giant fiery snake-like creature. It stretched out its arms, and pillars of fire erupted from its palms, coursing towards him... "The Master demands it..."*

Tanek sat up, bathed in sweat; yet another nightmare. They had become increasingly realistic as the days had passed. The strange thing was... he was not afraid, but calm instead. When the nightmares had started, his screams had often woken several others. The Elders had told him that it had probably been fragments of his past that haunted him, and for a time Tanek had believed that it was true. The nightmares had however continued. Now however, he was beginning to see what they meant. He had even stopped thinking of them as nightmares, but more like visions. And, more importantly, he was convinced that there was a reason that these had manifested themselves in his mind.

He rose from his furs, and walked outside his tent to get some fresh air. At this time of the year, the night often had fresh breezes over Thunder Bluff and, with the dreams happening almost every night, he often took a walk in the middle of the night. The air had always been kind to him since he had started his shaman training years ago. Of all the elements, it was the one he found the most calm in, although his tie with them had changed over the time. He felt it increasingly difficult to ask for assistance, it just felt... wrong. The elements were indeed powerful entities; he knew that, but it felt more right to force them instead of asking.

The elders had been close, when they had guessed his so-called nightmares were because of his past. During his shaman-training, the *Rite of Fire* had been the most difficult one. The element of fire had not been so easy to lend him its assistance. A terrible accident not long thereafter had resulted in him getting his right horn almost completely burned to ashes. The exact details were long forgotten, as he had lost consciousness after the incident. He was certain he could still feel the heat sometimes, but shrugged off the memories and walked back into his tent. As he lied down again on his furs, he became convinced that he would try to venture out to find the source of his dreams, and why he had been chosen. As his eyes closed,

he thought of this fascinating snake-like being of pure flame. Such power... such... *Skaldrenox*. He fell asleep.

The name still resounded in his head as he woke up. He quickly realized that he had slept well, which hadn't happened for a long time. Strangely enough, he also knew where to go - *Silithus*. The place have had been overrun with a cult known as the *Twilight's Hammer*, which had been mostly annihilated when the Cenarion Circle had started a base of operations there, and strategically wiped out the camps. He had been a part of the battles that had ensured the victory, and fought the cultists at their camps, shattered around the sandy hills. He had however not been present at the final battles against the highest members of the cult. The so-called victory had only been stories; no solid proof was ever given of the cult's full demise, as most of the military force had been focused on the kingdom of *Ahn'Qiraj* to the south. Could they be the answer to his questions? Could they show him who this ... *Skaldrenox* was? Were they even still existent at all...?

Not giving it further thought, Tanek swiftly rose, packed his few belongings, and left his tent. It was still early. He decided that it was best to leave, before anyone noticed. They would probably find it strange that he didn't focus on more pressing matters, such as the front slowly conquering Northrend back. It would probably take a few days travel by kodo-back to reach Silithus, but it was the only suitable choice, as the Wind Riders, always on their posts, would notice him. A few minutes later, he had found his trusty kodo Tulap, and soon rode over the plains of Mulgore, and looked back one last time towards Thunder Bluff. It might be the last he ever saw of it...

The days passed, and Tanek's journey towards Silithus was soon ending. Having just passed the vast deserts of Tanaris, the fabled crater of Un'Goro lay ahead of him. It had always been a valley of myths and adventures slightly more strangely than what else had happened. Tanek knew that he had to pay attention to where he moved, as the thick lush jungle contained many dangerous beasts, even to one as him. The giant creatures had caused a lot of havoc during the times, but weren't actually as offensive as the stories told. Soon, Tanek spotted the ridge that stood proud in the middle of the valley, notable between the trees and everything else, as its scorching lava always left a lifeless area without any vegetation around it. He remembered the place all too well. Not only had he passed this exact ridge while first going to Silithus, but it had also been the place where the fiery accident had happened. He stopped his kodo, dismounted, and paid his respects to his old fallen friend. Their last conversation roared through his head...

*"Tanek! Up here..! You have to get them away from us!"...*

*"They're ... too strong for me, Crog! They're not obeying, not listening to my calls! You have to jump." ...*

*"It's too far. The lava..." Then there was the only image Tanek could remember: Crog leaping towards him over the lava, and himself stretching out in an attempt to catch his friend.*

Tanek blinked, and touched the remains of his right horn. The only true memory he would ever have of his long-lost friend. He stood in silence for some time, until Tulap grunted and looked uneasily at him. The kodo had without doubt sensed the atmosphere, and smelled the predators in the area. It was right, they had to move on. And as the sun began disappearing behind him, towards Tanaris, the sandy and rocky landscape of Silithus began stretching out before them. Tanek decided it was best to get some sleep before

investigating the area, although he would be hard to go unnoticed around, so he found a nice hidden spot in a small alcove, hidden from the surroundings, with just enough room for him and Tulap. Even though the landscape was hot and tough, the nights were still chilly. Hoping the elements would still listen, he asked them that the sandstorms would not pass the resting spot. He didn't have much hope though, as even the wind had begun to occasionally not answering his calls. Despite his feeling of unease, he quickly fell calm, and looked at the stars, and wondered how he was going to communicate with these hostile cult members. His last thoughts hoping for a dream-vision, he fell asleep.

The light from the sun awoke Tanek, and he slowly rose. The day was bright, without even the smallest cloud in the sky. He took some time preparing his things, but quickly realized an unnerving fact – he hadn't dreamt that night. Nothing. Not the ordinary nightmare, no visions, no... anything. Had he still been at Thunder Bluff, he would probably have been glad, but this close to his final destination, he felt it strange.

Not wanting to be thrown off his concentration that early of the day, he shrugged off the emotion, and turned towards Tulap, looking deep into the kodo's eyes.

"I have to leave you here, it's too dangerous if I'm seen wandering the desert", he said.

The kodo looked at him with a strange look. Then it nodded, as if understanding what Tanek had just said.

"I have left enough food for you for a few days," Tanek pointed at his bags behind the ledge, "if I'm not back by then... travel home".

Understanding the tone of his voice, Tulap gave a sad look, but seemed to agree to the premises, and knowing what it would mean if Tanek did not return. He clapped the kodo one last time, packed up a small provision-bag, and set out looking for clues of the *Twilight's Hammer*.

The camps within the immediate vicinity of Cenarion Hold were indeed ravaged. What had originally been big organized settlements were now just various looted boxes, abandoned tents and torn battle worn clothing. The sand had however covered most of it, and it looked like it had been quite some time since anyone had been there, Twilight- or Cenarion-member alike. It had been an optimistic guess, as he originally underestimated just how throughout the Cenarion forces still were in there patrolling. Tanek decided to venture south, towards the Scarab Gate - the entrance into Ahn'Qiraj. He searched different camps without luck as he snuck south, but none of them contained anything of interest.

The sun had already begun to descend as he noticed yet another Twilight camp in the distance. He hadn't seen any sign of Cenarion patrols this long south, but sadly not any Twilight as well. The camp at the first glimpse looked ravaged like all the others, but something was different. The larger amount of floating rock was indeed strange, but such was the nature of the area simply when in the southern regions of Silithus. Tanek turned and looked at the towering stone in the middle of the encampment, which had been placed as a kind of fountain. A similar structure was present at all the camps he had seen, but this one... hummed. He crept closer, and even though he had expected to find some kind of activity, something as this was unexpected. Suddenly, he noticed motion in the corner of his eye. Spinning around he noticed a shadow hiding behind a stone a few yards away. The figure obviously noticed that he had been spotted, and begun running for the hills. Tanek was quick, and threw a bolt of lightning in his back. The figure screamed in agony and instantly fell to the ground. Within seconds Tanek was over him.

"Foolish tauren... I'll tell you nothing!" the figure growled, fighting to recover from the shock.

"I'm not here to hurt or kill you... unless you force me." Tanek answered with determined voice, which caused the figure to get a strange grimace. His hood still covered his face, making it impossible for Tanek to make out which race the figure actually was.

"I've seen many ill attempts of spies during my time... All have perished, or killed in person by our masters" he replied, obviously not convinced yet. Preparing for the worst, Tanek stretched out a hand, offering the figure a chance to get on his feet. He knew that he had the upper hand, but did not want to make it too obvious. He was not going to *force* information out of the figure.

"My intentions may probably seem strange and unrealistic at first to you, but in order to show my good intentions, I'll tell you exactly why I'm here..." Tanek added, as the figure hesitated.

"Very well tauren... speak." the figure replied, grabbed his hand, and rose to his full height. His tone was less offensive now, but still distrusting. Even though he knew the risks, Tanek told about his visions and his faltering connection to the elements. The hooded figure seemed increasingly interested in his story, but seemed to miss something to be entirely convinced.

"A fine tale, tauren... but why should I believe it?" he added, some moments after Tanek had finished.

"Because *Skaldrenox* was the one calling me..." Tanek responded, hoping that the name would trigger a notable response. He was correct; the hooded figure seemed to skip a breath, but quickly regained his focus. He fixed his eyes and stared at Tanek with a piercing gaze.

"Very well, either you did your research extremely well, or you really *are* speaking the truth." the hooded figure added, pulling the hood back, revealing the tattooed bald face of a human, and added "We'll let Skaldrenox *himself* decide which is the case." with a twisted smile.

Moments later, they stood in the camp, close to a large floating stone. Tanek remained silent, and observed the hooded figure at work. He pulled back his sleeves, revealing tattooed arms as well. On his right hand, Tanek noticed a ring... the exact same ring from his dream. He gasped silently, which the Twilight human thankfully didn't notice. He had kneeled in front of the stone, and began drawing marks on the stone-monument that carried the floating stone, while chanting a something in a language not of Azeroth. The stone started glowing, and before Tanek knew it, the fiery figure of Skaldrenox had emerged beside the human. Tanek took a small step back, and prepared himself for the worst. The cultist turned towards Skaldrenox, bowed and spoke.

"Master... I've called you to test this tau --" he started, but was interrupted by Skaldrenox' monstrous voice.

"YOU ALLOWED A SIMPLE *SPY* TO WITNESS THE SUMMONING, LET ALONE LIVE AFTER INTRUDING THE CAMPS?!" the voice boomed, threatening to rip Tanek's head apart by the sheer volume and force of the words. The cultist was obviously shocked, and confused, but then quickly turned towards Tanek with a furious look upon his face upon his face, the rage and disappointment all too obvious.

"Perhaps you would like the honor of incinerating him yourself, my lord..?" he asked, his time with less certainty in his voice. Skaldrenox cackled madly and raised his palms against Tanek.

"YOUR TIME HAS COME...!" he yelled, as the very same pillars of cracking flame shot directly towards Tanek.

"NOOOO --" Tanek screamed and closed his eyes, but the sound was quickly deafened by the fire. The pain was indescribable, but for some reason, he didn't die. He felt a strange *sensation* of raw power, and suddenly his scream could be heard again, but it had an inhuman force behind it. He opened his eyes, and stared directly into the eyes of the human cultist, which looked like he had seen a ghost. Tanek's gaze ate

itself into his, as he focused all his remaining energy on the cultist. As quickly as the pain had hit him, he now felt nothing, and fell to his knees, exhausted like he had never felt it before. He passed out.

“Arise...” came a deep voice from above. Tanek slowly opened his eyes, and saw the fiery being of Skaldrenox looming over him. While he should have been scared beyond his imagination, he felt calm. “Arise Tanek *Volcanohorn!*” the voice boomed again. Catching Tanek’s empty gaze, he looked at a small burning pile of ... something. It didn’t take Tanek long to realize that it was the sad remains of the cultist, who had been the unlucky victim of his fiery wrath. It took him some time to realize that Skaldrenox had called him not only as his name, but also a title, of sorts.

“Do not worry about him, Tanek Volcanohorn, he have served his purpose. We have more important matters to discuss.” Skaldrenox continued, smiling ever so grimly. Tanek slowly arose and faced him, looking confused.

“What happened?” he asked with a distant voice, “Why am I still alive?”. Skaldrenox’ smile widened. “I think you know. *The Master* have heard your call, and answered it. No longer shall you be a slave of fear and *ask* for help of the fire. No Tanek, the fire – all of the elements – will *obey* you, if you pledge your loyalty to the Master. That is the reward he gives to devotion.” he said, and pointed at the smoldering pile. “You know what’s in that pile, Tanek. Take it, and seize your destiny!”.

Tanek knew. It was the ring. Not wasting a second, he strode to the ash-pile, and reached down. An inch before the ring, his fingers stopped as he was reminded of the dream.

“*Crog, this is for you. For a better future and vengeance against those who made you suffer.*” he thought, closed his eyes and gripped the ring tight. Nothing happened. He looked over at Skaldrenox, who still had the wide grim smile on his face.

“The first true power you must learn, is overcoming fear of the unknown, even though the outcome might *seem* logical to you. The ring is nothing more than a metal circle with a gem – a signet. It has no magical power. It is the faith behind the wielder that gives it its might.” Skaldrenox explained, and continued.

“I must however warn you. Our ways have never been understood correctly, and this is why you must never speak of this incident to anyone you know at this moment. You’ll be executed on sight, should your people know what you have experienced today”. Tanek nodded. He had no intentions of returning to a normal life in Thunder Bluff anymore. It was too late for that. His call lied here, with the Twilight’s Hammer. “What should I do to prove my worth... to the Master?” he said, bowing to Skaldrenox.

“Our operations here have, as you without doubt realized, failed. There is nothing to obtain. The master we served here died long ago, defeated.” he paused, staring at Tanek.

“Travel to Northrend. Seek out *Jedoga Shadowseeker*. She will show you on your path...”

With that, Skaldrenox disappeared as quickly as he had originally appeared, and Tanek was left in the darkness, clutching the ring. With newfound determination, he strode from the camp, convinced that whatever awaited him at Northrend, would be the solution. He slowly smiled. Soon, his new legacy would become reality. Soon, the elements would bow to the will of *Tanek Volcanohorn...*