

Pandaria Chronicle, Part 1

Sowing the Seeds

When first we came to Pandaria some weeks ago now with hope in our heart for some measure of coin to pay off our wedding, I cannot have possibly expected the trouble we would soon find ourselves thrust into. Lula landed the plane in the heartland of that storied land, by a river that meandered through much of its core and rushed off into so many waterfalls to the south. With a map I learned this was the Valley of the Four Winds- somewhere I'd not had much familiarity with in truth. Before, we'd only visited the eastern and northern stretches of the continent. 'Twas all new to me, for certain.

Too late was it at the start for us to head into town and look for much work, so we decided to camp by the river's edge and await the coming morn. A rather foolish place to set up a tent, perhaps, and Lula devised a method of warning us if the river's height would grow whilst we slept. She found a strange rock or mineral which I have just had to ask her how to spell- 'tis called Cesium, apparently, though by my books I knew it as Saltblast. It explodes in contact with water, and we slept easy knowing we would certainly hear it should we be about to be swept away.

Thankfully though, our preparations were for naught, and we went into a town built on Half a Hill, or so I was told at the time, to look for a way of earning coin. Great did the harvests grow so little need of farmhands did they have but as I find farms oft do they had an infestation. In Pandaria they do not deal with slugs nor aphids, no. They have a beast known as a Virmen- a strange mammalian creature with features of rats and rabbits both, though oft growing to the size of a dwarf. Lula knew of them, though, and thought these pests should not be routed so easily. Their minds hold the spark of intelligence- enough one could communicate- and Wisdom shows itself when one stays their blade to speak to their would-be foes instead.

Lula expertly demonstrated her diplomacy skills here, truly a running theme for the entirety of our escapades here. We tracked the Virmen to their lair and found them not chaotic and ravenous, but instead very much organised. They wore the helmets and banners of Alliance soldiers and called themselves by ranks and roles. We spoke to their 'Captain', and it is worth remembering this Virmen was at least thrice my height, who bade us that they were known as the "Bun-Hundred and Bun Mulchmunchers Company". Truly, this must sound unbelievable but this is the very reason I write this, so it may be chronicled. The Mulchmunchers believed they were in fact at war with the Farmers of Halfhill, for battles were won by the application and acquisition of resources and if a soldier were not at battle then they must be dead. Lula, and with me all but along for the ride, went to Halfhill to find some way of appeasing both parties.

Once again in the town, we found one of their elders. We found her very unwelcome. Lula had decided to present herself as an Alliance officer at first to see if she could convince the elder into believing this story about the Virmen, to add credibility to it, but all this did was remind her of poor memories. Pandaren had been welcome to join the Alliance and Horde during its initial discovery, but all the elders saw was their children being galvanised to fight in a war against their own siblings and cousins. It took much convincing from Lula- even an admission of the faults of the Alliance- until this elder could even agree to anything.

By that point, as I watched the two of them argue, the elder used the issue of Virmen as a proxy for her hatred of the factions. Truly, she didn't care what happened to the Virmen and likely could have agreed with us to begin under other circumstances. But it was as the Virmen wore the very insignias that reminded her of the loss of her grandchildren that caused those old wounds to feel all too painful. Lula's words are ever cutting though, and with a keen mind I think she saw this. Lula bade the halfhill elder to see things in another light- choose not to kill the Virmen but find a way for them to help in farming, whether that be by digging tunnels or tilling the fields, and embody the very ideals that the Alliance falsely claimed to hold true out of spite for them. This, in the end, convinced the elder. It is strange that hate should be what gives way to a more loving world, but better that than these two parties continue to harry each other unto the end of time. When all was said and done, Lula was able to formally disband the Mulchmuncher Virmen and have them join the farmers under their banner instead.

For our efforts in essentially dealing with the loss of their crops, even if it was in a way that was unexpected, we were rewarded a welcome sum of coin we could put towards the wedding funds. Upon deciding where to go next, it was decided we would travel south. The charismatic Hozen cook of Halfhill's tavern had noted his people came from an island which was the world's southernmost. He had not heard from them in some time, and feared the worst. We promised him we would investigate, and bring back good news one way or another.

Pandaria Chronicle, Part 2

The Cost of Freedom

We flew to the south the very next day to a claggy, humid region right on the southern coast of the continent. A vast forest lined with tens of rivers eventually breaking away to untouched sands, though perched on the corner of the lands' eastern peninsula was a curious sight. A crumbling Alliance fort and seemingly the only sign of civilisation.

Lula landed us there and almost immediately we were 'accosted'. I say so, though it was perhaps by the laziest, least refined guardsman I had ever met. He ordered us to leave, though upon my status I demanded we meet their commanding officer for no other reason than that he could give us information on the region and perhaps tell us of the status of the hozen.

The commander of the base was a Dwarf more on the portly side. His grey hairs seemed to imply a more weathered visage, though it was clear to me he spent far longer waiting for action than he did participating in it. He told us of the current situation in this land. Lion's Landing was the name of this base and it was the primary Alliance power in the region. Domination Point, on the other side of the region, was the Horde's equivalent power. They were both taken and built up during the coming of the Alliance and the Horde to Pandaria nearly a decade ago, but since the most recent war tensions remain high. The land is still resource-rich, but with no war and an uneasy peace they could scarcely afford to keep the fortress manned for fear of it appearing as an implication of a rearmament effort to the Horde and therefore as a provocation of war.

Bureaucracy aside, they were bound, and they could do very little to help us and had very little information on the rest of the region. Were a scout discovered, it could be seen by the Horde that they were surveying the region and it could be argued by a warmonger that the scout was intended to identify weaknesses in their defences and so on and so forth. It was all so frustrating. Excuses upon excuses for doing all too little, and I think Lula saw this too. For her, it seemed so strange why there could be no communication at all. Perhaps these parties did not want their stalemate to end no matter their whining.

It was at the bases' barracks, just before we left, that we met a rather unpleasant individual called Camden. Usually I would not choose to chronicle or remember someone so low that they could be equivalent to the scum under my kitchen sink, but unfortunately she is important to telling this story. Suffice it to say, she blustered about being the most senior member of the rest of the useless soldiers here under the commander and conveniently knew nothing of any particular interest. We heard a commotion at Lion's Landing's gates, and Camden was too lazy to come, so Lula and I went alone.

At the gates we met a Tauren called Ahote. We didn't question much about who he was admittedly, yet he did seem to be the only person who knew aught of the plight of the Hozen. It seemed the reason why none had heard of them was because they had been enslaved.

Some months prior to our arrival, a group of serpentine humanoids known as the Saurok had made their way to the home of the Hozen and enslaved them to be used to dig their gold. These Saurok had an obsession with gold greater than any goblin I knew, and worshipped an individual called 'The Gilded One'. Whoever had the most gold, or appeared to have the most gold, and clad themselves in the most gaudy attire became their leader. They were exacting and cruel and entirely unworthy of respect as opponents at all. Lula, Ahote and I worked to break many Hozen free of their bonds, though Ahote later left under circumstances I would be rather happy to not regale.

'Twas during one of these times that Lula once again donned Alliance armour and used it as a way to terrify the Saurok into believing an overwhelming force would come to crush them if they did not free their slaves. Lula was as incandescent as ever, though the world saw it not this way. The next day our paths had to part- I had to save another group of Hozen, whilst Lula left to reply to a missive from Lion's Landing that could surely not be ignored.

I only heard later what had happened to Lula. She was summoned to the Commander's office and berated, defamed, screamed at. Her brief moment wearing Alliance armour standing up for the slaves they should have been protecting had apparently caused such an incident that the Horde had demanded answers. So these armies were so incapable of communication and understanding for years since the war's end that any sign of anyone stepping beyond their borders was strictly disallowed, yet apparently it was possible to begin with if all it took was a simple letter to open channels between them?

Lula was forced to 'make up for her mistakes' after having been threatened by the Commander to just turn her over to the Horde. She went with that other soldier, Camden, to meet a delegate from the Horde base. There, Lula was ridiculed and spat upon and laughed at. They claimed she must have been insane or mentally unwell, and mocked her for her actions, claiming no responsibility and avoiding further incident merely by stating Lula had nothing to do with them. But these soldiers found it too fun, to kick my wife onto the sands, to laugh at her expense, that they all but forgot the conflict for a moment while Lula sobbed at the torment they subjected her to.

They were lucky I was not there.

I found Lula drenched by seawater and her own tears that day, and brought her back to our camp. She was nigh inconsolable. For all my strength I could do little but hold her. For all my anger it would do little to assuage her sorrow. For all my impetus to go and strike them down, it would help us not. The atmosphere around our adventures changed at this point. There was little enjoyment or relief. No matter how many days we wallowed, mired and begrimed in our own depression, it didn't abate. But we did have a duty to do, and with little fanfare we did it.

Krasarang had left a poor taste for both of us. We saved the Hozen when neither the Alliance or Horde bothered nor cared beyond their petty little conflicts. Lula dressed herself in gold-painted armour and usurped the Saurok's current leader, then ordered the rest to leave. As their new Gilded One, Lula lead them to a quiet cove far away from civilisation, such that they'd hurt no more in their greedy search.

None more were hurt, and the Hozen now-free handed us the gold they dug in thanks. But it was no victory. We had come seeking to help and though we did, we left with far less than we would hope. We bid the south behind and went back to Halfhill, desperate for adventures perhaps less cruel. It was a shame we did not find any.

Pandaria Chronicle, Part 3

Black Hearts on White Banners

Lula and I soon returned to Halfhill. We'd intended to stay for some time at the inn, until we found a curious message. Obviously we hadn't stuck our noses where they did not belong enough on that adventure so far. A bird, which we had noticed spying on us throughout our travels in Pandaria, held in its mouth a letter. Lula clambered on the roof to chase it down and snatched the letter, only to find it written in gnomish. It was some strange writings we couldn't understand, though we did spy a figure watching us in the distance. Following this thread, we soon found him,

Hiding in the bushes like some sort of cowardly vole we found the man who had watched us. He claimed to be a member of the Shado-pan and decided that we, while he draped himself in secrecy, could be of use due to what was solely Lula's effort in decoding the message. We agreed, though begrudgingly, knowing these sorts of shadowy organisations ne'er get involved unless something dire is afoot. I squeezed a name out of him, though he fully admitted to it having been invented. He called himself Jun.

Not entirely trusting his motives, we followed him to the eastern corner of the valley next to a gargantuan wall stretching across its border. I'm certain he thought he was betraying some level of trust to us by telling us of the situation, though I did rather find it concerning we presumably earned such trust due to our previous efforts... which means he was certainly watching us to know of them. Alas, 'twas not much we could do of it then. At least he was open enough to tell us of the situation wholly and not expect us to follow along blindly.

For ten thousand years, as things always seem to happen that long ago, a race of insectoids known as the Mantid began harrying the people of Pandaria. Every one hundred years... as if these numbers weren't confusing enough... every one hundred years their Empress would spawn a new brood and their young would fly into battle, either being slaughtered or coming back stronger. The Shado-pan had been formed in part to help defend against these cycles of war, but the past wars had left the Mantid so broken they had a choice. The Shado-pan were currently in talks with them to establish a peace between the two of them- and Jun wanted to ensure nothing would interrupt this. The peace talks between the Shado-pan and Mantid were entirely unprecedented and entirely fragile. Seeing our ability to make peace in Halfhill and Krasarang, Jun asked for our help to ensure peace here too. I was dubious, unsure of Jun's concerns, yet Lula as always is a beacon of hope and was determined to help, so we ultimately agreed.

Our first mission I can only imagine was a test. We were told a group of Alliance soldiers had somehow made their way to the Mantid lands and were told to keep them away from interfering with the uneasy peace. Naturally, we flew out there and found it was Camden and her cronies- the very same that had so cruelly tormented Lula just some days prior. Though I had no idea why they'd care to trapse all the way to that blighted land, I honestly cared little. I had a score to settle with her.

Camden tried her old tricks again, to slander my wife's name to my very face, calling her pathetic and weak and abusive to me for dragging me along on her 'manic induced fantasies'.

She said we should never have been involved in Krasarang and did not care for the Hozen Lula had saved, stating her own safety and status was worth more than a hundred Hozen. She truly did not care, but clearly found much satisfaction in ripping Lula to pieces in front of me.

I wouldn't stand by.

I grabbed Camden by the neck and threw her down into the dirt so that she would feel as weak and powerless as Lula did, scouring her character with the most venomous words I could think of and it could never have been enough. It was not honourable or noble or Knightly and I fully admit that, and some part of me yearns that I did not follow my own virtues of Love and Wisdom in that moment. But I'd do it again. Who else would stand up for Lula when the world beats her down?

I threatened Camden that a reckoning would be unleashed upon her if she interfered with the Mantid peace and told her she was a coward and did not honour the banners she flew, that she was a pitiable wretch so reprehensible she could only feed off her own hatred like a parasite. She scurried off into the dirt again like the rat she is, and Lula and I had enough. We were paid for this by the Shado-pan, though clearly my methods weren't necessarily appeasing to Jun. I frankly do not care.

We stayed on the safe side of the wall that night, but something drew Lula and I into the darkness. Some sort of corruptive mass infected a patch of ground just before the wall. I took my silver, hoping it would purify the ground as it does shadows and other dark magic. But this was different, somehow. My silver turned black and I felt that same corruptive force wash over me, my feeble miniscule mind unable to stop its effects. My mind was whole but my body moved without my command- it told Lula that Camden was right, that she was cruel and heartless and hateable, that I didn't think she was worthy of me, that I didn't love her. I cannot write the details for they are too painful. I had hoped something like this would never happen to me again, or to Lula. Lula saved me from that corruption somehow, her words of kindness and love counteracting the hate that infested me, the Fear that I would induce in her. I apologised again and again for everything that I had said for it could never have been true, but it was a truly withering experience to have such blasphemy leave my own lips. But our torments would continue, both mentally and physically. The peace was important, with so many lives to save. We couldn't just leave them behind.

Our next mission from the Shado-pan was for us to meet with the Mantid themselves and receive some confirmation they still agreed to the peace talks. Fully focusing my mind on the mission, rather than the horrors of the days before, I found myself a little less willing to deal with the Shado-pan's trickery. I called Jun out, deriding him for what was clearly just a means of using us as a way to cut loose ends if something went wrong. We were disposable, and he did not disagree.

Lula still believed this was the best way to help, but I went in spite of the Shado-pan, intending to survive and succeed despite their duplicity. We went to the Mantid Palace, some horribly named Heart of Fear, where their Empress stayed. We were expected, what with the Shado-pan having arranged our arrival there. The Empress was more than willing to agree to the peace- for it was either that or the extinction of her entire people.

Her main commander did not agree. His duty was to ensure each new generation of Mantid battled fierce opponents so they could properly mature, and did not trust this peace would ensure that. I challenged him so that he could see the strength of our force of will, though Lula had to ensure it was seen purely as a demonstration rather than a duel to the death. The Mantid commander, filled by pride, tore out his own eyes for he believed he could still easily win even just by sound alone. His blows were immense, each like a mountain avalanche, and used the vibrations of his sword ringing on the ground to locate us. I guarded Lula the best I could, though was soon beaten. It was up to her to climb onto his back and unleash the charge of one of her energy cores just to render him unconscious. This battle was enough, thankfully, for I do not think we could have survived any longer against him. With his approval, the Empress could grant us her seal and her word that the peace would be under sufficient terms for their means. Another day passed and another mission was complete. One step closer to peace, though our bodies were beaten and broken. To think all this began just because we wanted to fund our wedding. If we could ensure peace for others, why could we not have peace ourselves?

Our next job came in a day or so later. Jun pulled us aside and gave us grave news. He'd found a ciphered message around the Shado-pan and, once deciphered, it spoke of assassinating the Mantid Empress during the peace talks. Lula spied the cipher as actually being written in Binary- some machine language. I queried perhaps some gnome was behind all this, but perhaps it was simply so obscure in Pandaria that none would know it regardless. Lula was the ticket to all of this, and finding more ciphered messages we all discovered a meeting was laid for that very night between the would-be conspirators. When there, Jun recognised who it was. Another Shado-pan he called Xun, who saw no one come to meet her and scribed another message before leaving. Jun's words ached like he knew her, but understanding the 'cost of peace' he meant to report Xun to the leader of the peace operations.. one Master Dai Lo (which I have no doubt was also a fake name) who would have her executed. Lula defied this- peace could not be wrought through murder and he was a hypocrite for even considering it. But Jun was inconsolable, and went on regardless. Ever prescient, Lula checked the final ciphered message and read that Xun reported to one 'Master'. Could it be, that the other conspirator was the very Master Dai Lo Jun just went to meet?

We chased Jun down and found a knife to his throat, held by a truly ancient looking Pandaren. This was undoubtedly Master Dai Lo, who spiralled into some villainous monologue about how the peace talks were all a set up for the Mantid to let their guard down so they could finally be exterminated in their entirety. Peace was a lie and it could never work, and perhaps he never wanted it to work. Only complete eradication of the Mantid could produce peace. Jun genuinely believed peace was possible, and so did Lula and I. Seeing no other option to break Master's hold, Lula pulled my gun from my holster and shot him in the arm. I took Jun under my shoulder and supported him, but before I knew it Lula and Dai Lo were at the edge of the watchtower. Willing to become a martyr, Dai Lo threw himself off the edge and even drove a knife into Lula's hand so she couldn't catch him. His death was seen by the other Shado-pan, and deemed us assassins instead. There was only one means of escape, and it was to head straight back into the Wastes with nothing more than the clothes on our backs.

We found some abandoned hovel to hide in and recover. I begged Lula to try and sleep, but she was so horrified and doubting of her own actions the hours before as she thought she could have saved Dai Lo that sleep was the farthest for what she could do. I waited for her to come to sleep, and eventually dozed off, but awoke to find her entirely missing.

Lula was nowhere to be found. It was as if, in my briefest dreamless slumber, she had just disappeared from the world. I pulled apart every part of the shack we stayed at to find her but there was nothing. Enraged and terrified I lost control, and Jun had to calm me and talk me through my emotions. He suggested that, if Lula had left due to her doubts over what she did with the Shado-pan, then she may well have returned to the source of those doubts. As much as I chastise Jun for his methods, I will never say he did not stand by me when we went to rescue Lula.

So we returned to the wall, and found a trail of Shado-pan, each corrupted with endless doubt - for their lives, for their duty, for their purpose. Was Lula the same? Could it have been the same black energy that affected me had affected Lula, but instead was only drawing on her doubts? I found her facing down Xun, the other assassin conspirator, and Lula's words dripped with a cruelty she never usually speaks with. Lula always tries to inspire people, to understand their hearts and minds and to make them feel better, but now she was only interested in demeaning Xun for her actions much in the same way she had been demeaned. She wanted Xun to doubt herself, doubt her skill, her aim, her righteousness. It might have worked in stopping the assassination, but it was not Lula speaking those words, I know it. My words gave Lula enough pause, just for a moment enough for Xun to escape, and though Lula tried to cause me to doubt too I would not leave her side. The peace talks would be held the next morning, and though the assassin was on the loose, I was determined to not lose anyone- not the chance of a better Pandaria, and not Lula either.

The time soon came. Lula and I went to the peace talks, and with Master Dai Lo gone, the Shado-pan representative became Xun. Lula demanded that I wouldn't interfere this time. Lula spoke to Xun and began inflicting her with doubt again, stating that the sweat on her palm would cause the poisoned knife under her sleeve to slip and miss. But something worse than we could have expected happened. That nascent doubt, the corruptive force that had infested Lula like it did me before, had found a better host to leech the doubts from. It passed from Lula to Xun, and ate away at her so desperately that Xun was willing to cut her own throat to stop it. As the true hero of this tale, Lula stepped forwards and begged Xun to stop, once again trying to bring an assassin back from the brink. No one's death could bring peace, not even her own. Lula took Xun's doubts and understood them, knowing all too well how people may never seem to agree to peace, how violence is always their first answer, and how hate is easier than love. But unlike Dai Lo, Xun wanted to believe. She thought exterminating the Mantid was the only thing that could bring peace after thousands of years of her ancestors dying to protect against them, but they had never got this far to peace either. Even if it broke in ten years, a hundred, a thousand... wasn't it better to try? Wasn't it their duty to those ancestors that died, not to prove they were too weak to finish the job, but to make good on their sacrifice for a safer world by ending the cycle through a way that they never had the chance to try before?

Doubt gave way to Hope, and it was Lula's hope that freed an assassin from the bonds of murder. It was never the way, and it never had to be. The talks continued, and though some tensions understandably remained, some conclusion was reached. Even if it broke. Even if it never came to be. We had done our duty, and given them a chance.

I believe Jun and Xun both left the Shado-pan after this, not able to forgive their own sins or trust the order they had been in for so long. But they seemed happy to give life another go, even if it meant not involving themselves in politics.

Lula and I both went home and were well pleased to be out of Pandaria. While we succeeded in our duty, we had only scraped together just enough for the wedding. It wasn't an easy adventure by any stretch. It was not enjoyable. Lula still has nightmares over what she experienced. I still hug her tighter still so that she may never have to feel like anyone hates her, and perhaps so that I may never feel like my own body will betray me into hurting her. As much as I'd like to claim our deeds in Pandaria were valorous and heroic, very little valour is to be found when all we are left with is a broken mirror. But if we must trade suffering for joy, I can only imagine our wedding will bring the greatest happiness anyone can experience.