

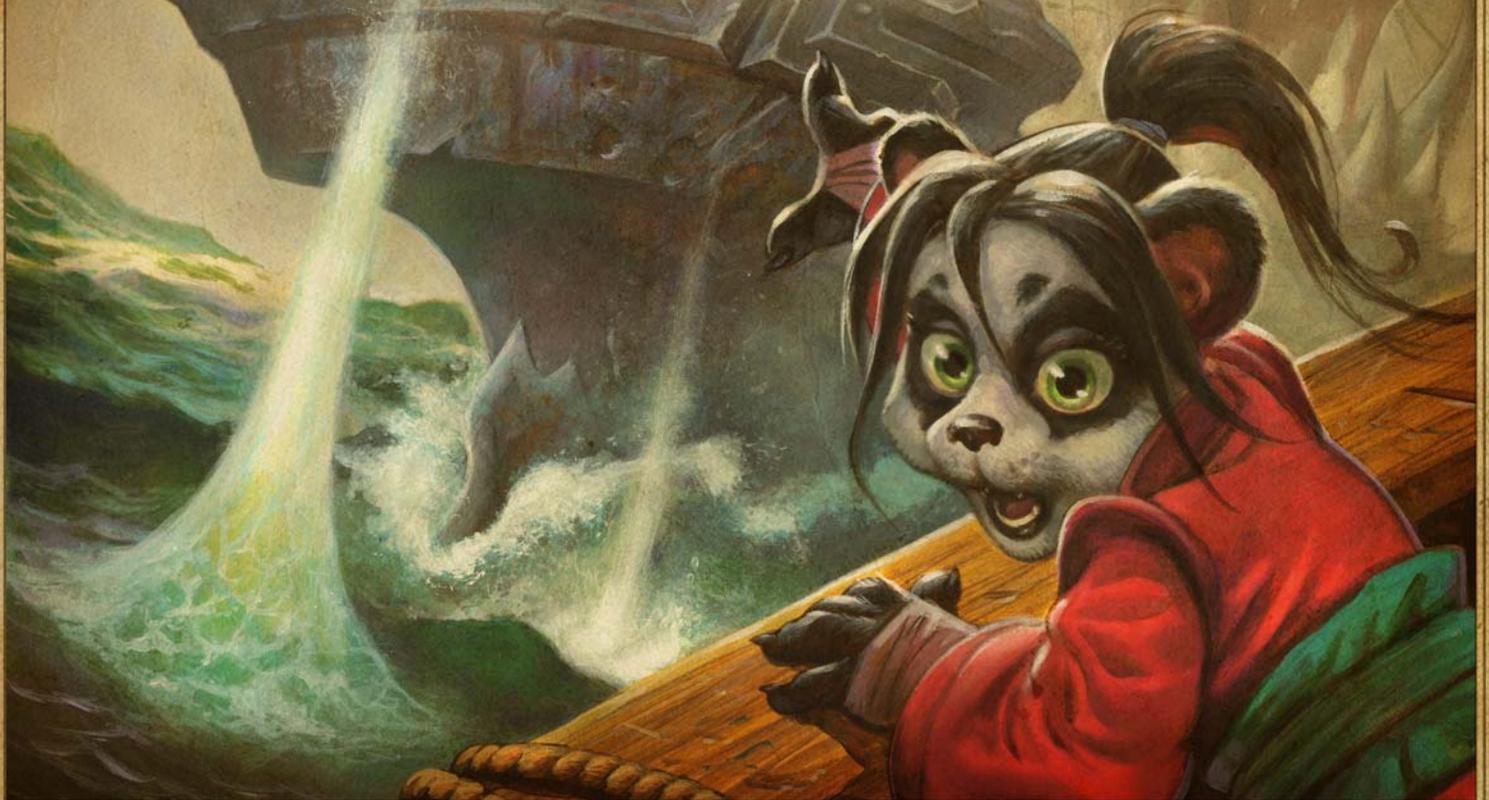
WORLD  
WARCRAFT  
MISTS of PANDARIA

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# Quest for Pandaria

## Part 4 of 4

*By Sarah Pine*



## **Quest for Pandaria: Part 4**

Beyond the prow of the sturdy tol'vir sailing vessel, the blue sea stretched endlessly. The afternoon sun blazed a trail on the water's surface, sparkling like a gem. Li Li leaned into the wind, the salty smell reminding her of warm days on the beaches of Shen-zin Su. Chen sat against the stern, one paw resting lightly on the tiller. Since leaving Uldum, they had charted a course southeast.

Li Li turned to her uncle. "Aren't you excited?" she called. "Finally, we're really on our way! Even the pearl's cooperating. I've checked it three times, and it always shows me sailing." She laughed and punched one fist in the air. "Next stop: Pandaria!"

Neither of them wanted to ruin the good mood, so they both ignored that the pearl had yet to show them how to penetrate the mists hiding their people's fabled homeland. It was best to cross that bridge when they came to it.

As darkness fell, Li Li took the first watch. The night was crystal clear, the stars white pinpricks against the velveteen sky. Azeroth's twin moons shone ghostly bright, floating above the eastern horizon. Li Li curled her legs under her and pulled a blanket around her shoulders to stave off the chilly ocean air. Her eyelids began to droop as she was lulled by the boat's steady rocking and the sound of water against the hull. She decided there was no point fighting exhaustion, and closed her eyes to sleep.

The sudden impact of being thrown onto her face woke her violently. Stunned, Li Li lay where she had fallen, her limbs askew.

Chen shook her. "Li Li, get up!"

The boat heaved again, and he stumbled to his knees.

"There's a storm coming," Chen said. "We should reef the sail. I've already secured our things." In the darkness, Li Li couldn't make out his expression, but anxiety tinged his voice. Though well built, the Ramkahen craft was small and would be at the mercy of bad weather on the open sea.

Once more, the boat rocked wildly. The swells had grown large enough to be dangerous. Li Li grimaced and sat up. To the southwest she could see where approaching clouds blotted out the stars, occasional flashes of lightning streaking to the ocean's surface.

"Okay," she told Chen. "Let's go."

The storm rolled in on a stiff, howling wind, driving cold sheets of rain before it. Swollen waves churned around the pandaren, threatening to swallow their boat. Chen and Li Li worked tirelessly to guide the tol'vir craft along troughs parallel to the swells, sailing a treacherous obstacle course.

A lightning bolt tore through the sky, exploding into the water alongside the vessel and missing the mast by sheer providence. The crash of thunder was like cannon fire. Li Li shuddered. That was too close.

The boat jolted up. Li Li and Chen had misjudged their course and hit the side of a wave. The craft tipped, forced up into a steep angle like a cart banking on a turn. Chen grabbed the nearest rope, hanging on for his life as his feet slipped on the slick wooden deck. Behind him, he heard Li Li cry out. His heart leapt into his throat.

"Li Li!" he roared, scrambling to steady himself. She too was clinging desperately to a line, and Chen prayed it wouldn't tear out of her paws. He couldn't let go of his own rope until the boat was righted. The wave rolled on endlessly, the little tol'vir craft teetering dangerously close to capsizing.

At last the slope of the swell passed, and the vessel began to steady. As the starboard side leaned back toward level, Chen regained his footing and turned to help his niece. Li Li reached toward him, but the boat jerked, slamming her against the gunwale. Chen screamed her name and stretched his arm out as far as he could.

"Li Li!"

It was too late, and there was nothing he could do. Her eyes fluttered; her grip on consciousness wavered, and the rope slipped through Li Li's limp fingers as she tumbled into the water.

"*Li Li!*" Chen cried a third time, but the waves crashed between his niece and the boat, and when the swell receded, Chen could no longer see her.

\* \* \*

On Shen-zin Su, the sky showed no trace of bad weather. The sun had sunk beneath the horizon, the last vestiges of light slowly fading to indigo. In the center of the island, just outside the Great Library, Chon Po stood clutching two sheets of paper.

That library was his daughter's favorite place. Crammed among the stacks of books and letters, Li Li had read for hours, devouring every bit of information she could find. This pastime had made her a dreamer and put grandiose ideas into her head, but it had also given her passion and drive.

"Don't worry, Po." Mei placed her paw upon his forearm, an encouraging smile on her face. "Just send them along."

Chen's and Li Li's latest letters had arrived the day before, sailing in on a current of magic, an old pandaren trick whose origins had long since faded from memory. Chon Po had stayed up the entire night, penning his replies.

Taking a deep breath, Po nodded. With great care, he folded the papers into the shape of a bird—a great albatross, he decided—to carry the messages across the ocean. When he finished, he held the figure up and blew on it gently, scattering across it a pinch of the same enchanted powder Li Li always had with her. In a burst of color, the paper bird flexed its wings and took to the air. It was hard to let it go.

Chon Po watched until all sign of the bird was lost against the clear sky, hoping that the letters would safely reach his daughter and brother.

\* \* \*

The sea had turned into a living creature, a force of will. Waves curled around Li Li like grasping fingers, tossing her head over heels. She was a good swimmer, and she fought back, gasping for air when she managed to breach the surface, kicking and pawing at the water, trying to stay afloat. But the current yanked her away. She struggled, and the cycle repeated. It wasn't long before she started to tire.

Her muscles burned. Her limbs grew sluggish. As the initial rush of energy that fueled her efforts waned, her determination began to give way to panic.

*I am going to drown.*

The realization hit her as hard as the waves she battled. Chen was gone; who knew how far away she had already been carried from the boat? Land was days away. The storm was unstoppable, immune to reason or strength.

Instinct compelled her to reach toward the surface, to fight for survival, even as she understood in her bones that there was nothing to be done. Despair flooded through her, salty and bitter as the ocean itself.

*This is what it was like, wasn't it, Mama?* Li Li's eyes stung with seawater and tears. She willed herself to be brave, to accept her fate, but her terror would not be denied.

*Mama!* Internally she screamed, unable to speak. *Mama, Mama!*

The ocean spat her skyward, and she bobbed on the crest of a swell. She gasped for air again, clinging to every precious second as the wave began to break. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of something different from the endless water: a dark, solid shape. She turned her head, trying to see, and slammed into something hard and even less yielding than the sea. Her head connected painfully with the object, and the world went black.

\* \* \*

"... Never seen one. I would remember."

"I did, once, in Ashenvale, many years ago now."

"She might be a Horde spy."

"It is possible, I suppose."

Li Li tried to open her eyes, but they felt as if they'd been glued shut. She started to roll over, but her entire body ached in protest. Groaning, she sank back into a soft mass of blankets and pillows.

It occurred to her that, somehow, she was alive.

Her eyes flew open. A painful burst of white light dazzled her, and she squeezed them closed again.

"Atropa, she is awake, by Elune! The captain—"

"On it," the other voice replied.

Li Li squinted tentatively and found herself staring into a ruddy, purple-toned face framed by shoulder-length dark violet hair. The woman's eyes had no pupils and glowed a soft silver. A night elf.

"Goodness, we thought you would sleep for hours more, at least," the night elf said. "There must be water around here somewhere."

The face disappeared. Li Li reached behind her head to touch a particularly sore spot, her fingers brushing a wad of cotton bandages. Even the delicate pressure sent needles of pain through the back of her skull. She winced and pulled her paw away.

"Here, let me help you," the night elf said, encircling one lean arm around Li Li's waist. The woman propped up the pillows behind the young pandaren and handed her a cup of water. Li Li drank it gratefully, draining it in one gulp, and held it out for more. When she was satisfied, Li Li looked from side to side, mindful of her sore neck.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You are aboard the Alliance ship *Elwynn*," the elf replied. "You are one lucky individual." She shook her head. "I was on watch and happened to spot you as you crashed into the hull during the storm. A shaman asked a water elemental to lift you out."

Li Li leaned back against the pillows, heart racing.

"I'm not dead," she said.

"No, fortunately," the elf responded. "What is your name?"

"I'm Li Li Stormstout. Who are you?"

"My name is Lintharel," said the night elf. "I am a druid, and a kaldorei in service of the Alliance."

The cabin door opened, and a grizzled human man stepped into the room, followed by another night elf woman. She looked almost identical to Lintharel, right down to the raindrop-shaped violet tattoos across her face. They were clearly sisters.

"I'm Marco Heller, the captain of this ship," the man declared as soon as he had crossed the threshold. "I have some questions for you."

"Already?" Lintharel said, brows creasing. "I thought you just wanted to know when she was awake. She is still injured!"

"Why don't you step out and fetch some more bandages, then?" Captain Heller asked, though his tone conveyed the request as an order. "You may accompany her if you like, Atropa."

"I am not going anywhere," Atropa replied, crossing her arms. Lintharel threw a frustrated glance at the captain before leaving. Li Li could hear her steps receding down the hallway.

The captain pulled up a chair next to Li Li's bed and sat in it, watching her intently. After a moment's silence, he unleashed a barrage of questions. "Who are you? Where are you from? What are you doing in these waters?"

"I'm Li Li Stormstout. I'm a pandaren of the Wandering Isle. I was sailing with my uncle when the storm hit. I was washed overboard!" The questions grated on Li Li's nerves.

"What's going on here, anyway?"

Captain Heller's eyes glittered dangerously.

"I'm wondering if you're a Horde spy."

"What?" Li Li smarted at the accusation. "That's ridiculous! My uncle and I were friends of King Magni Bronzebeard himself! You eat a puffer fish or something else that filled your head with air?"

Captain Heller frowned but said nothing.

Li Li continued, "If I were a Horde spy, I wouldn't have tried to board your ship by throwing myself into the ocean in the middle of a storm and praying that I happened to run into you. That's just stupid."

"Not even if you'd been sailing well within sight of us for two days?"

"I—what?" Li Li blinked in surprise. "There's a *Horde* ship too?"

The captain ignored Li Li's question. He turned to Atropa, who seemed to have melted into a corner of the room. "What's your opinion?" he asked her.

"I believe she is telling the truth," Atropa answered, her glowing eyes narrowing slightly.  
"She is legitimately ignorant."

"Oh, *thanks*," Li Li retorted. "Real nice of you, lady."

"I agree with you, Atropa," the captain replied, standing. He looked down at Li Li. "You are a guest on this ship, here by the grace of me and the people of the Alliance. If it comes to it, you may be required to fight alongside us. Do you have a problem with that?"

"I'm not afraid of battle," Li Li said, glaring back at him defiantly.

"Good." Captain Heller left without another word, Atropa following.

Li Li lay back down in bed, exhausted. She missed Chen and desperately hoped that he had come through the storm unscathed. But even if he had, he likely believed her dead. Li Li's heart ached. She wished there were a way to send him a message, but her pouch of enchanted powder had been stored on the tol'vir boat. There was nothing she could do for the moment, so she closed her eyes and went to sleep.

\* \* \*

The storm had left a clear, breezy day in its wake, and the expanse of ocean surrounding the little boat was calm. Chen could enjoy none of it. Li Li was gone, all trace of her erased. The only reminder he had of her existence was her belongings, stored in the compartment below the deck. His chest felt as if a hole had been punched through it.

He sat staring into the distance and seeing nothing. In his lap he cradled the pearl, the first thing he had sought once the storm had passed. All it showed him were her last moments, replayed in an endless loop. He could no longer stand to look.

Exhaustion would destroy him sooner or later if he did not rest, but when he closed his eyes, the vision of Li Li being swept into the sea only intensified. In his ears echoed the memory of his voice screaming helplessly, as if he could bargain with the ocean to return her to him.

It was this uncharacteristic despondence that allowed the warship to overtake him from behind, unnoticed until the rush of water being displaced grew too noisy for him to ignore. Chen turned in his seat. At any other time he would have been on his feet, ready to negotiate or do battle. Now, however, he did not care. Nothing mattered anymore.

The ship drew alongside him. Chen caught glimpses of red sails with black markings rising above the deck, and he hurriedly crammed the pearl into his haversack.

"Ahoy!" a voice boomed across the water. "To the passenger in the unknown craft: your presence here is unaccounted for. Prepare to be detained and questioned by the Horde!"

\* \* \*

Chen sat in a cabin across from the warship's captain, a burly orc named Aldrek. He crossed his scarred green arms and looked Chen up and down with a keen eye.

"What are you doing in these waters? Solo sailors don't venture out this way," the orc barked.

Chen rubbed his face wearily. He had no energy for an interrogation. He wanted to end this ordeal quickly.

"My name is Chen Stormstout," he said. "I am a pandaren of the Wandering Isle. I was out sailing with my niece when we were caught in the storm last night and blown off course.

My..." Chen's throat constricted and he struggled to control his voice. "My niece was lost at sea."

The captain did not reply.

"I know why you're questioning me. I am not an Alliance spy. I fought alongside Thrall, Cairne, and Vol'jin against Grand Admiral Proudmoore at Theramore, years ago. If you have anyone on board who participated in that battle, they may be able to corroborate me."

"One of our shaman, Karrig, fought at Theramore," Aldrek said. He nodded toward one of his guards. "Fetch him so we can hear what he has to say."

Aldrek leveled his gaze at Chen for a while before speaking again.

"I'll say this for you: if you're a spy, you've done a mighty fine job preparing yourself to look like an overextended sailor halfway to madness from exhaustion." He grinned widely, showing off his impressive tusks.

The guard returned, accompanied by a hunched, middle-aged orc whose long black hair was tied up in a braided topknot.

"Ah, Karrig!" Aldrek clapped his hands together. "This individual claims to have fought at Theramore against Grand Admiral Proudmoore. Do you recognize him?"

"There was a pandaren who joined us for that battle," Karrig said. "Name was Stormshout or something."

"Stormstout," Chen corrected. He glanced at Captain Aldrek, who laughed.

"Seems like you're off the hook," the captain said. "The Horde owes you a debt of friendship!" Aldrek snapped his fingers at the guard.

"Send for Nita," Aldrek told him. Turning back to Chen, he added, "She's a druid. Big tauren lady. She'll fix you up in no time. Welcome aboard the *Warchief's Fist*!" Aldrek slapped Chen on the back, but the pandaren barely responded. All he could think of was Li Li, his whole body numb to everything around him.

\* \* \*

Once she felt well enough to walk around, Li Li set about asking everyone aboard the Alliance ship *Elwynn* if they had seen the tol'vir boat. Nobody had. Dejected, she leaned against a railing on the deck and stared at the great Horde warship sailing ahead of them off the starboard bow. She wondered if there was any way for her to make contact with that vessel, to see if anyone had spotted Chen, though attempting to communicate with the Horde wouldn't do much to disprove Captain Heller's initial suspicion that she was a spy. She frowned. Unless she and Chen had been blown very far off course, the ships were in waters off the coast of Tanaris, which were neutral. Both the Horde and Alliance should be able to sail through without incident. What had the captain so on edge?

Li Li racked her brain, trying to concoct a plan that would allow her to get a message to the Horde ship without being thrown overboard. No strokes of brilliance were forthcoming, so she gave up and descended belowdecks, where she found a few of the crew seated around a table, playing cards. Among them she recognized the night elf twins Lintharel and Atropa. Li Li grabbed an empty chair and plunked down with them.

"Deal me in," Li Li announced. Atropa side-eyed her, but Lintharel laughed and obliged.

"It is easiest to learn as you go," she said. She nodded to the other players, a pair of dwarves.

"This is Li Li, the unexpected passenger we picked up the other night."

"Aye, th' not-spy!" One of the dwarves smiled. "I'm Trialin," she said, "an' this is me brother, Baenan."

"Yer *big* brother!" Baenan amended. "And th' ship's foremost paladin o' th' Light, at yer service!" He puffed out his chest with pride.

"Ah, stuff it, ye braggart," Trialin told him, rolling her eyes.

"I'm stuck at the sibling table," Li Li joked, "without my own brother. The one time he'd be useful, too..." She felt a sharp pang in her heart when she thought of Shisai. She wondered how he was getting along back home on Shen-zin Su. *Does he miss me?*

"Not a sibling table," Lintharel said, smiling. She indicated Atropa and herself. "We are not sisters."

"Oh." That took Li Li by surprise.

"But they sure look alike," Trialin reassured the pandaren. "Most folks make that mistake."

"Tharel is the closest thing to family I have left, anyway," Atropa said. Lintharel's smile turned wistful.

"Are we playin' cards or what?" Baenan thumped his fist on the table, which snapped both kaldorei out of their melancholy. Li Li squinted at her hand, pretending she knew what she was doing. Lintharel explained the rules as they went, and though Li Li wasn't very good, after a few rounds she was no longer losing every single time.

"So," Li Li said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Uh, what's with that Horde ship? I thought the waters near Tanaris were neutral. Why is it such a big deal that it's here?"

Li Li's companions glanced at one another, and she realized she'd asked a loaded question. She had hoped to bring up the possibility of contacting the Horde ship for information on Chen. Clearly, that would be a poor idea. Eventually Atropa filled the silence.

"Technically, you are correct," she said, plucking a card from her hand and discarding it.

"But...?" Li Li pressed her.

"*But* recent events have given us reason to be suspicious of *any* Horde presence outside their own territory," Atropa replied.

"They're too bloody close tae Theramore," Baenan muttered. "If they want us tae leave them alone, they need tae go back where they belong. None o' them can be trusted."

"I worked side by side with many members of the Horde in Mount Hyjal," Lintharel said quietly. "Archdruid Hamuul Runetotem is a tauren, and one of the greatest leaders of the Cenarion Circle. You cannot judge an entire people by the actions of a few."

Baenan shook his head. "Lass, I wish I could agree with ye. Th' Cenarion Circle druids can be an exception, as can th' shaman o' th' Earthen Ring. But look at yerself: ye came back from Hyjal an' returned tae servin' th' Alliance. Yer Horde friends have done th' same. They're yer enemies now, and ye are theirs."

Lintharel's hands tightened around her cards. "I serve the Alliance because it is High Priestess Tyrande and Archdruid Malfurion's will, and I am loyal to them." She frowned. "But the divisions between the Horde and Alliance are false ones."

"False divisions enforced with real guns an' blades!" Baenan snorted. "Warchief Hellscream wants nae peace. Look at yer own home in Ashenvale! He's a menace, an' yer druid friends are complicit in his reign." He slapped his cards down on the table; he was the winner this round. "Ain't nothin' an' no one trustworthy in th' Horde, an' ye need tae accept that."

\* \* \*

The slant of the light streaming in from the infirmary's porthole told Chen it was late morning. Physically he felt refreshed, but his spirit remained weary. He had lost many loved ones over the years. Some deaths hit harder than others.

Chen had always seen Li Li as the daughter he'd never had, the only other member of his family who was like him. He pressed the heels of his paws into his eyes, tears leaving wet rivulets down the fur of his face.

"Goodness, is there not enough water at sea? Must you feel obliged to create still more of it?"

Chen sat up abruptly. A bored-looking blood elf lounged against the infirmary wall, arms crossed.

"This is what I have been reduced to, it seems," the elf lamented. "Babysitting inpatients."

Anger was a safe refuge from sorrow. The tide of rage that swept over Chen propelled him off the cot and across the room. Chen had a lot of experience at being intimidating.

"I would watch my mouth if I were you," he snarled. "I doubt you've ever fought one of my people, and trust me, you don't want to."

Before the elf had a chance to reply, someone else entered the room. It was the shaman, Karrig. He carried a tall staff and thumped it angrily on the floor.

"Talithar!" he yelled. "You can't go two hours without trouble. Get out of here, you wretched elf."

The elf, Talithar, shot Karrig a look of purest loathing, but said nothing and departed the infirmary, handsome head held high.

"Snot-nosed little bastard," Karrig muttered. "A hero of the Horde like you should be treated with respect!" He smiled generously at Chen. "It's certainly an honor to have you aboard."

"Er, thank you," Chen replied, not entirely comfortable with the way Karrig had called him a hero. Chen's own memories of Theramore painted the situation in a more complex light.

"I'm here to collect you," Karrig told him. "Captain Aldrek wants a word."

Chen nodded and followed him back to the captain's quarters, where Aldrek sat on the far side of a rough-hewn desk, steeping his fingers.

"Karrig has spoken much about your exploits at Theramore, all those years ago," Aldrek said. "I am convinced that our interception of you is a sign from the spirits."

"Why?" Chen asked. Something about Aldrek's tone made him uneasy.

"Because I believe that you can help our cause," the orc captain answered. "Once we get rid of the Alliance vessel tailing us..."

"I don't see what I can do about that, Captain," Chen said politely. Aldrek looked surprised.

"Oh no! No, don't worry about them," he said. "We've decided to open communication with them for now." He waved his hand dismissively. "I've got more long-term ideas for you."

"Pardon me?"

Aldrek leaned toward Chen.

"See, our mission here is purely reconnaissance, but—"

"Reconnaissance for what, exactly?" Chen interrupted him. Both Aldrek and Karrig smiled.

"That, I can't tell you. Not yet. But, as a soldier of the Horde in the first battle at Theramore, I imagine you'd be honored to serve in a *second* as well."

Aldrek sat back and let what he'd said sink in. Chen fought hard to keep his expression neutral.

"That... that would be quite an experience indeed," he said. "Is that what you're planning?"

Aldrek tapped the side of his nose and grinned slyly. "No. We're purely reconnaissance, right?"

"Right," Chen replied, remembering to wink at the captain. "Just... scouting."

Aldrek nodded. "Scouting, yes. We intend to help the Alliance ship understand that."

"As you know," Karrig cut in, "the acquisition of resources has been a struggle ever since the Horde arrived in Kalimdor. It's not easy to support a major city in the middle of the desert."

"I am aware of some of Orgrimmar's troubles," Chen said.

"Then you understand our imperative!" Aldrek slammed his fist into the palm of his other hand. "We must secure adequate resources for our families, for our children. Orgrimmar can never be jeopardized."

Chen decided not to say anything further. What Aldrek and Karrig were telling him was unnerving, as was the fervent gleam in their eyes when they spoke of Orgrimmar and its future.

Taking his silence for assent, Captain Aldrek relaxed in his chair. "I am deeply honored to have you aboard my ship, Chen Stormstout," he said. "I am certain that you will prove a valuable ally to the Horde. You have my full permission to go anywhere on this ship. You are dismissed."

"Thank you, Captain," Chen said, and saluted.

\* \* \*

Chen made his way to the galley, wanting a stiff drink and a hot meal. He was fairly certain that Aldrek and Karrig had revealed the Horde's intent to invade Theramore. He had no desire to think about it. The food on the ship was decent, at least.

He looked up as someone joined him at his table, sitting on the bench across from him. It was Nita, the tauren who had taken care of him the night before. She smiled, thick braids framing her kind face. She folded her great three-fingered hands in front of her on the table.

"How are you feeling today, Chen Stormstout?" she asked.

"Quite well, thanks to your skills," he told her. "You are a very talented druid."

She beamed at him. "Thank you," she said. "I am sorry I could not be there for you this morning. Unfortunately I had other duties to tend. Did Talithar direct you here for a meal?"

"Er, no," Chen said. "He, ah, he wasn't all that polite, really."

Nita looked chagrined. "I apologize for him," she said. "He's one of the ship's magi, and a troubled soul. He's made enemies out of most of the crew." She sighed heavily. "I asked him to aid you because I thought a little interaction with someone from outside our ship might be good for him. I suppose I was wrong."

"It's not your fault he can't behave himself," Chen told her. "But it's nice of you to be concerned about him."

"It's my duty to concern myself about others," she said, smiling again. "I am a healer, for one, and for another, we are all children of the Earth Mother. We are stronger united than divided." She paused, her brows furrowing. "I think our captain forgets that, sometimes."

\* \* \*

Aboard the *Elwynn*, Captain Heller had called for an all-hands meeting on deck. The captain faced the gathered personnel from atop the bridge.

"As many of you know," he announced, "I have been in contact with the leadership of the Horde vessel."

Li Li's heart leaped. If Heller was speaking with the Horde ship, she could ask him about Chen.

"Their presence here is worrying," the captain continued, "and we cannot leave them unmonitored. To my surprise, they say they understand and would like to work with us to reach a peaceful resolution."

The crowd murmured, many neighbors whispering to each other.

"Their captain has agreed to send a diplomatic messenger to us, on the condition that we send one as well. I support this course of action, and thus I require a volunteer. This individual must be brave and ready to speak on behalf of the Alliance. I shouldn't need to tell you that it could be dangerous. Still, if we can convince them to return to Durotar, it will be a victory for the Alliance indeed! Who will serve this cause?"

A number of hands rose with a smattering of affirmative cries, but one figure strode forth fearlessly, climbing halfway up the stairs to where the captain stood, and proudly drawing himself to his full, four-foot height. It was Baenan the dwarf. Li Li heard Lintharel's sharp intake of breath next to her.

"I will go! As a paladin o' th' Light, I gladly offer me service tae th' cause o' th' Alliance!"

Captain Heller nodded. "Very well. I will let them know that we have selected a messenger, and arrange the trade."

The captain signaled to a draenei mage standing near him, who sent a series of colored bolts of magic into the air, spelling out runes in a shower of light. After a long pause, Li Li could see a similar display originating from the Horde warship's deck.

"The exchange will take place in half an hour!" Captain Heller declared. He turned to Baenan. "Come with me. I will brief you on your assignment."

Baenan saluted fiercely. Li Li pushed forward through the crowd. Catching sight of her, Heller paused.

"Yes?" he asked brusquely.

"Um, I have a question, sir," Li Li said as politely as she could muster. "I've been trying to find out if anyone has seen my uncle since the storm. I was wondering if the Horde ship had mentioned anything about another pandaren. Or a small boat nearby."

Captain Heller narrowed his eyes, but Li Li stood firm. Her request was entirely innocent.

"There was no message about that," Heller finally replied, "but you are welcome to ask the Horde diplomat yourself, when they have arrived."

"Thank you, Captain," Li Li said. She nodded at Baenan. "Good luck," she told him. He nodded back, his face set in determination, and then fell into stride beside Heller. The two of them disappeared belowdecks along with a few guards.

The rest of the crew began to disperse, and Li Li glimpsed Trialin not far away. The dwarf lifted her chin with pride for her brother, but her cheeks were very pale. Lintharel stood next to Li Li, the night elf's jaw clenched and face pinched. The druid looked toward the sky, then closed her silvery, ethereal eyes.

"Can you feel the change in the air?" she asked. "It will storm again tonight."

\* \* \*

"You're certain you wish to risk it?" Aldrek evaluated his volunteer diplomat, none other than the druid Nita.

"I've worked with members of the Alliance as part of the Cenarion Circle," Nita replied.  
"That history will put them at ease."

Aldrek rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Fine. Can you row yourself over?"

Nita could have taken the shape of a bird and flown herself over, but the Alliance was sending a boat, so it was better to reciprocate in kind.

"Yes," she answered.

Chen had been awarded a place of pride, standing close to Karrig and Captain Aldrek, and he'd watched as Nita had calmly stepped forward to offer herself as a messenger to the Alliance. He thought of her earlier words: *We are all children of the Earth Mother*. There was no better candidate for a mission to defuse the tension between the ships.

As Nita prepared her small boat, Aldrek guided the great warship toward the Alliance vessel. For the messengers to easily cross the gap, both vessels would have to pull quite close together—well within firing range. Chen shifted nervously and tried not to be negative, but he couldn't help but remember what Aldrek had implied about Theramore. What was the Horde planning? How much did the Alliance know? Was this situation truly a result of a chance meeting at sea, or had the Alliance tracked them down? Or had the Horde lured them somehow?

The *Warchief's Fist* drew parallel to the *Elwynn*. Two sailors helped Nita lower her boat into the sea, and she set off, oars steadily rising and falling with each pull of her arms.

\* \* \*

The messengers passed each other somewhere in the middle of the space between the ships. Baenan spared a glance at the broad-shouldered tauren as he glided by her, noting

her dress as typical of a druid. His heart lifted. Tauren tended to be more sensible than orcs, and druids often worked cross-faction. Perhaps there was hope for this mission.

When he reached his destination, Horde sailors stood ready to receive him. As they raised his boat from the water, he gazed back toward the *Elwynn*, elegantly outlined in orange-gold by the sinking afternoon sun. He sent a prayer to the Light that he would return there safely.

\* \* \*

Li Li waited at the front of the crew, determined to be among the first to greet the diplomat so she could ask after her uncle. As the great tauren climbed onto the deck, Li Li took a few eager steps forward.

"Welcome aboard!" Captain Heller stated enthusiastically, extending his hand. Nita shook it warmly, and the gathered sailors inclined their heads in acknowledgement.

"Thank you, Captain," she replied. "I hope that we can reach a mutually satisfying agreement." She scanned the crowd, and as her eyes fell on Li Li, the tauren's brows shot upward.

Li Li couldn't help herself. "You recognize me!" she cried happily. "Er, I mean, my kind! My uncle Chen—you've seen him?"

"Yes, we picked him up in his boat the morning after the storm," Nita said. She smiled. "He'll be overjoyed to learn you are safe."

"Thank you, thank you so much," Li Li said, her throat constricting with emotion. She hadn't realized how worried she'd been until she had confirmation of Chen's safety. She and her uncle would soon be reunited.

"Come this way." Captain Heller stepped in front of Li Li. He pointed toward the captain's quarters. "We shall discuss our goals to reach a compromise."

Nita followed Captain Heller courteously, her powerful hooves ringing against the wooden deck with each step. As they passed Li Li, the captain shot her an unkind glare. Li Li watched the two disappear belowdecks, then glanced over toward the Horde ship, noting that Baenan's craft had already been pulled aboard. The discussions were underway.

\* \* \*

Baenan almost feared that his pounding heart would be audible to everyone in the captain's quarters. Steadying himself, he gazed around the room jammed full of orcs, trolls, a tauren, two goblins (arguing over who got to stand on the captain's desk), and a moldering, putrid Forsaken. There was also one of those pandaren folks, he noticed with a start—like the girl on the *Elwynn*. He creased his brows. The girl had said she'd been traveling with her uncle. Could this be he? And if so, why was he here with the Horde?

Baenan looked at Captain Aldrek, who parted his lips in a wide, predatory grin.

"Now," the captain began smoothly, "let's discuss this matter like reasonable people."

Baenan swallowed and managed to find his voice. "As ye know, we're concerned about th' presence o' Horde warships this far south—"

"These *are* neutral waters," Aldrek countered.

"That is th' truth," Baenan replied, "but ye had tae sail through Theramore's territory tae get here, which—"

"How do you know we didn't come from Grom'gol Base Camp in Stranglethorn?" Aldrek interrupted.

"Did ye?" Baenan asked bluntly.

That caught Aldrek off guard, and he hesitated long enough to make the answer obvious. His smile grew harder. "We are here on the warchief's orders, on *reconnaissance*," he said, his voice carrying a warning.

"Look," Baenan responded, "I'm a dwarf. Me people are a straightforward bunch. Ye say ye're here on reconnaissance. Well, ye may be, but we got no way o' knowin' that. We just want our holdings in Theramore tae be safe. Let us escort ye back tae Durotar's waters. That's me captain's offer."

Captain Aldrek burst out laughing. Baenan's heart sank.

"And that's precisely the offer I'm rejecting," the orc said. He snapped his fingers at a guard.

"This dwarf is our prisoner."

Baenan's first instinct was to fight for his freedom, but that was clearly a bad idea. He was outnumbered, and he had been disarmed when he had embarked on the *Warchief's Fist*.

"I knew ye were a bunch o' lyin' cowards," he muttered, which earned him a cuff on the head from another orc.

"And yet you chose to trust us," Aldrek said, his face smug. "Lock him up in the bilge and find someone to watch him. Call all hands on deck. While the Alliance thinks we're still negotiating, prepare the cannons."

As Baenan was marched out of the room, it took Chen every ounce of willpower he possessed to maintain an unaffected expression. He had nearly leaped to the dwarf's defense, but had quickly reconsidered. He wanted to find out more about what was going on. Much as it pained him, he had to wait until the time was right to act.

\* \* \*

Nita faced Captain Heller in his quarters. Several naval officers, their hands clasped formally behind their backs, flanked the negotiators.

"Captain," she began, "I'd like to offer a full explanation of our ship's movements—"

"Nita," Heller interrupted her, "I'm not interested in the how or why of the Horde's movements. I just want your people to get out."

"These waters are neutral," she countered. "We have as much right to be here as you do."

"That may be true," Heller continued, unmoved, "but you pose a threat. I will not be satisfied that the threat is contained until your ship is back in Durotar, where it belongs."

"I can relay that to my captain, if you wish," Nita said tentatively.

"No, I think we will communicate with him directly," said Heller. "You will stay here as collateral to make sure our message is properly heard."

Nita's mouth dropped open. "What? You are holding me prisoner?"

"I do what I must," Captain Heller said. "Seize her."

Four officers grabbed her arms. "This is outrageous!" she cried as she struggled against her captors. "I am a druid of the Cenarion Circle! I have worked alongside Malfurion Stormrage himself!"

"How nice," Captain Heller replied. "If I ever meet him, I shall be sure to tell him that I know you."

\* \* \*

Bound uncomfortably in the bilge of the *Warchief's Fist*, Baenan could hear distant rumblings that sounded like the march of feet and the rolling into place of heavy cannons. The filthy orc captain was preparing to launch an attack against the *Elwynn*, and Baenan couldn't do anything to stop it. There was nothing worse than helplessness. He raged at the Horde.

Captain Aldrek hadn't left Baenan alone in his prison. A haughty blood elf, Talithar, stood guard, looking decidedly bored. Baenan hated him with every fiber of his very being.

"Ye worthless Horde," Baenan snarled. "Captain Heller will sink ye tae th' bottom o' th' sea as snacks fer th' naga."

"And you with us, if he succeeds," Talithar replied. "Tragic, really. In order for you to live, your friends have to lose."

"If I die, I'll die happy, knowin' ye're goin' with me," Baenan retorted.

"How very noble of you to feel that way."

Baenan spat on the floor near the elf's feet. "Ye blood elves wouldn't know nobility if ye had th' definition tattooed on yer foreheads. Pathetic, slaving magic addicts, ye even sold out yer own people!"

Talithar's face whitened, giving Baenan the satisfaction of having hit a nerve. He realized it was unwise to bait his jailor, but he was too angry to care.

"Aye," he pressed, "I've met high elves in me life. I know what ye did tae them. I come from Loch Modan; I've heard th' stories from th' Farstrider lass there—"

In a surprising display of raw physical strength, Talithar crossed the room in a single stride and lifted Baenan clean off his feet, slamming him into the wall. He held Baenan there at the blood elf's own height, almost twice that of the dwarf's, and stared him dead in the eye.

"Do not ever—*ever*—mention her in my presence." Talithar's voice was calm, but had a menacing undercurrent that made Baenan's hair stand on end. He'd intended to upset the elf, but the depth of Talithar's reaction was shocking. Still, the Horde had taken Baenan captive and denied him the chance to fight with weapons, so he battled with words. And this mage was a symbol of everything he despised.

"I see ye know Vyrin Swiftwind," Baenan said, purely out of spite. "Someone special tae ye? Well, she hates yer kind now, an' everything ye stand fer!"

Talithar threw Baenan to the floor. The dwarf landed painfully on his shoulder, bracing himself for the mage's wrath, but Talithar possessed a surprising amount of restraint and took no further action.

Baenan managed to push himself into a sitting position. His shoulder throbbed, but it was worth it to have provoked the blood elf. Talithar's head was bowed, and his fists were clenched and white at the knuckles. He looked up, and Baenan's mouth fell open.

Talithar's face was streaked with tears.

"A wife does tend to be someone special to her husband." His voice was thick with rage, humiliation, and despair. He reached into the front of his robe and wrenched a thin gold chain from around his neck, hurling it at Baenan's feet. The necklace boasted no beads or pendant, just two exquisitely crafted rings, a man's and a woman's, high elven in design.

"You think I do not know what I am? We sin'dorei were given a choice: our integrity or our well-being. As if that were any kind of choice at all. I chose my well-being. My wife chose her integrity."

\* \* \*

Chen hurried toward the lowest reaches of the *Warchief's Fist* as fast as he could. Escaping the watchful eye of Captain Aldrek had been hard, and then he'd had the additional difficulty of locating his weapons. He was lucky—his tol'vir sailboat had been pulled aboard and stowed with the lifeboats, and the crew had left his things untouched. Even the pearl was where he had stored it, safe inside his traveling pack. One benefit of Aldrek's admiration of him, Chen supposed.

The entrance to the bilge had been barred. Chen took a deep breath and kicked down the door, rushing inside and swinging his staff. It whistled through the air harmlessly. Chen stopped, reevaluating the situation. Baenan, the dwarven ambassador, was sitting miserably on the floor with his limbs tied. Sitting equally miserably against the wall was Talithar, the assigned guard.

Chen lowered his staff. One eye on Talithar, he addressed Baenan.

"I've come to help you escape," he said. "Talithar, I'm warning you—"

The elf surprised him with a short, bitter laugh. "I am not going to stop you. Just get out of here."

Talithar's attitude puzzled Chen, but he wasn't about to question it. Quickly he knelt by Baenan's side, retrieving a knife to cut his bonds. The dwarf looked up at him gratefully.

"Ye're one o' them pandaren folk," he said, rubbing his wrists. "Thank ye fer savin' me."

"Are you familiar with my people?" Chen asked, sawing through the ropes around Baenan's legs.

"Nae very," the dwarf answered. "But we did pick up a pandaren girl in th' storm just th' other day..."

Chen grabbed Baenan by the front of his shirt and hauled him to his feet. "Li Li?!" the pandaren cried frantically. "Was her name Li Li?"

"Aye!" Baenan confirmed, agitated at having been aggressively lifted into the air for the second time in half an hour. "Li Li's her name! Said she was washed overboard in th' storm."

"She's alive," Chen said weakly, releasing Baenan. His paws shook. "My niece is alive."

"Alive an' well aboard th' *Elwynn*," Baenan said.

"Then we haven't a moment to spare," Chen declared. "Aldrek is preparing for war up there. Let's go."

Chen turned to leave, but the dwarf hesitated, reaching down to retrieve a shiny object from the floor. To Chen's shock, Baenan offered it to Talithar.

"This is yers," the dwarf said awkwardly. "Ye should have it back. And"—Baenan paused—"I'm sorry fer what I told ye. It was cruel o' me."

Chen blinked. Clearly, he had missed something.

"No," Talithar said softly. He reached out and caressed the two rings, then withdrew his hand. "You were right. Vyrin left me for a reason. I made my choice. It had its consequences."

"Aye, but..." Baenan hesitated again. "There's something else. She used tae talk about ye. I mean, I didn't know it was ye in particular, but she did mention she had been married. She never told me why she left her husband.

"She doesn't hate ye," Baenan said. "I know she's angry, but she does miss ye."

Talithar's expression had gone through several permutations while Baenan spoke, and settled at last on wistful melancholy. Still, he did not take the necklace.

"Keep it," Talithar said. "But do me a favor, please."

Baenan nodded cautiously.

"When you return to Loch Modan, take the rings to her. Tell her I miss her, and that I never stopped loving her."

"I will," Baenan said. "I promise."

Talithar stood up. "You will only have one chance to escape," he told Chen and Baenan. "If you are caught, you will be executed on the spot. I will do what I can to distract the sailors."

"Thank you," Chen said. "Truly."

Talithar smiled, though the sadness didn't leave his eyes. "Get going."

\* \* \*

With the sunset, a bank of clouds had rolled in from the south and the air had gone chill. Li Li shivered as she stood on the deck of the *Elwynn*, anxiously awaiting the outcome of the diplomatic meeting. Lintharel had disappeared, melting away as night elves were wont to do. Next to Li Li, Trialin chewed on the side of her finger, no doubt concerned for her brother. Li Li desperately hoped that all would go well. The entire situation could be resolved peacefully if the two sides were willing to set aside their pride. Such a simple thing, and yet so difficult to achieve.

At last, Captain Heller and Nita reappeared on deck. Li Li stood on the tips of her toes, straining for a view. Her heart sank. Nita's great hands were bound behind her. The guards' solemn expressions indicated a failure to come to terms.

Captain Heller brandished his sword.

"This creature," he announced, pointing to Nita with the blade, "attacked me and my officers the moment we were isolated from the rest of the crew! We subdued her, and now she must be dealt with!"

"You lie! I did nothing of the sort!" Nita countered angrily, earning herself a backhand from one of the taller officers.

"Silence, Horde scum!" Heller ordered.

A series of sharp bangs and flashes interrupted the captain. Magic streaked from the deck of the Horde ship, the runes brightly illuminating the darkening sky.

A cry rose from one of the magi. "They're demanding surrender, or Baenan dies!"

Heller let out a snarl of fury and cursed. "We will never surrender!" he yelled, as if the *Warchief's Fist* could actually hear him.

Trialin covered her mouth with her hands, suppressing a sob. Li Li put her arm around the dwarf's shoulders.

Heller faced Nita. "You." He signaled to his men, who shoved the tauren forward. "If Baenan's life is forfeit, then so is yours. Blood for blood." He raised his sword.

Seeming to appear out of nowhere, Lintharel stepped between Nita and the captain, spreading her arms wide.

"No," the night elf said.

Captain Heller's face twisted in anger. He did not lower his sword.

"Lintharel?" Nita said softly. Li Li cocked her head to the side. How did this tauren know Lintharel's name?

"Get out of the way, night elf," Captain Heller said.

"At Mount Hyjal I fought by Nita's side," Lintharel declared. "I have known few comrades more honorable or courageous. She has done nothing wrong. Let her go."

"Her people have taken Baenan prisoner," Heller said through gritted teeth.

"As you have done to her," Lintharel pointed out. "If the Horde intended to hold Baenan from the start, then they are willing to sacrifice her. They had to have known how you would react to their ultimatum. She is as much a victim as Baenan."

"Stand down, night elf! That is an order!"

"Or did you also intend to detain the Horde messenger," Lintharel continued, lifting her chin, "equally condemning Baenan to death?"

"Shut your mouth!" Heller roared. The tip of his sword quivered inches from her throat. "You owe the Alliance a debt of service. To disobey me is treason."

"To betray a friend is an equal sin," she said. "To which do I owe the greater debt, Captain: a political allegiance, or a personal one?"

The question lingered like the note of a gong. Li Li's heart was in her mouth. The entire crew watched, still as death. No one even dared to breathe. Every sound was magnified: the waves slapping the wooden hull, the rigging jostling in a gust of wind. The gathering clouds had thickened, tingeing the dusk an eerie green.

All the fur on Li Li's neck and arms stood straight on end. The very air was charged, tensed to some intangible limit.

And Li Li understood.

Lintharel, standing between Nita and those who would harm her, was not as vulnerable as she seemed. She had been stalling, buying time.

Casting a spell.

The first of the raindrops fell from the sky.

"Lintharel," Captain Heller said in a voice deathly calm, "this is your last warning."

Li Li grabbed Trialin's wrist and took a step backward, away from the crowd. The dwarf, sensing Li Li's urgency, followed her lead and did not make a sound.

"I will not stand down," Lintharel said. Above her, the sky rumbled.

"So be it! Kill—"

The last half of Heller's command was lost in a roar of wind gusting ferociously from behind Lintharel, sending everyone who faced her stumbling backward. In the same instant a bolt of lightning seared the sky, hitting the *Elwynn's* main mast like a bomb, igniting the topsail in fireworks of sparks. Splinters of wood the size of daggers rained upon the deck. Li Li and Trialin dove behind a secured crate, the night illuminated in flames.

Lintharel stepped into the now-cleared space before her, open arms no longer a gesture of sacrifice, but of power. Her eyes glowed like stars, white as the summoned lightning. The impossible wind swirled around her, tossing her hair, pulling at her leather kilt, but she was otherwise impervious to it. Li Li watched in awe. Lintharel looked like a goddess.

Free her," she commanded a sailor cowering on the deck. He nodded, eyes wide with fear, and began to crawl toward Nita.

Another explosion rocked the entire ship. Everyone stumbled. Somewhere, people were screaming, calling for water, for healers.

The *Warchief's Fist* had opened fire.

All descended into chaos. Rain poured from the clouds. Some of the crew lunged to attack Lintharel and Nita, while others rushed to defend the ship. Above it all Captain Heller shouted orders, desperately attempting to regain control.

A volley of cannon shot replied to the Horde ship's blast, a few of the balls striking home. Li Li leaped from behind her hiding place, eyes fixed on the small crowd that battled the night elf and the tauren.

"Where are ye goin'?" Trialin called out.

"What they did to Nita is wrong," Li Li said defiantly. "I'm going to help her and Lintharel."

Li Li had feared that Trialin's rage for her brother would make her side with the other crew, but to her relief, the dwarf nodded.

"Aye," she said. "It's th' height o' cowardice tae attack a diplomat." She pulled a shortsword from her belt and tossed it to Li Li. "Ye'll need a weapon."

"Thanks," Li Li said. With a cry, the two threw themselves into the fray.

\* \* \*

Chen and Baenan rushed through the lower decks, trying to maintain as low a profile as possible. Baenan stuffed his beard into his shirt and used a helmet to cover his face in a shoddy attempt to disguise himself. The roughly sketched escape plan was to get to the tol'vir boat, launch it, and jump down. It was a long shot, but sticking around wasn't an option.

The ship shuddered, Alliance cannons hitting true. Chen found the ladder he sought, the one closest to the lifeboats, and shoved Baenan forward, scrambling up after him.

"That's the prisoner!" a voice yelled behind them. Chen recognized it as Karrig's. "You filthy traitor!" he screamed at Chen. "We trusted you! Kill them both!"

Chen risked a glance back down. He counted six crew, including Karrig. The pandaren swore. Fighting them would waste a lot of time.

"Go!" called another voice. Talithar came running into view and threw himself before the foot of the ladder below. "I will hold them off!"

The two fugitives didn't hesitate. Mouthing silent words of gratitude, Chen hauled himself up the rest of the ladder, and he and Baenan ran.

"You are a disgrace to the Horde, Talithar Swiftwind!" roared Karrig. "Backstabbing, worthless elf!"

"I fought for the Horde on the snowfields of Icecrown," Talithar replied calmly. "And I was proud to do so. But the Horde does not claim all of my loyalty."

"Get out of our way," Karrig snarled, "or die."

Talithar lifted both his hands, red balls of flame hovering above his palms. The harsh light brightly illuminated the contents of the hold. Lining the walls were barrels full of gunpowder, extra ammunition for the cannons.

"Oh," Talithar said, smiling peacefully, "I have made my choice."

\* \* \*

The fire had spread to the *Elwynn's* mainsail, the rain doing little to thwart it. A handful of sailors frantically worked a bucket brigade to contain the blaze, but their effort was futile. Eventually the entire ship would go up in flames.

"Nita," Lintharel cried, "you need to get out of here! Take one of your forms and escape!"

"You saved my life," the tauren replied. "I will not let you fight alone."

"She's not alone!" Li Li shouted, wedging herself between the two druids.

"Aye, we're here tae help ye!" Trialin called, expertly swinging two axes. Lintharel hurled bolts of yellow magic; Li Li parried sailors' weapons. The dwarf, night elf, and pandaren pushed their attackers aggressively, clearing a small space.

"Now's your chance!" Li Li yelled to Nita.

"I am forever in your debt!" Nita called back. In a single massive stride, she broke the line of sailors and hurled herself overboard. Moments later, a sleek sea lion disappeared beneath the waves.

Li Li's breath heaved. She gripped her sword tightly, standing shoulder to shoulder with Lintharel and Trialin. Rain pounded against her face and neck. Now that Nita was free, they too had to escape.

Trialin lifted an axe, nodding to the other two. *One*, she mouthed. *Two*—

A massive explosion rattled the *Elwynn* from bowsprit to stern. The ship shuddered violently, wooden hull groaning with the force of the blast. Every single person was thrown

to the deck. A plume of black smoke ballooned into the air, while globs of burning pitch fell from the sky, adding to the flames that already burned in the sails.

"By Elune and Ysera!" Lintharel cursed. Li Li rolled to one side, trying to see what had happened. Smoke poured from a gaping hole in the *Warchief's Fist*, where the explosion had taken place.

"Baenan," Trialin whispered next to Li Li. "Oh, Light, please let him be alive..."

Lintharel was the first to her feet, offering her hand to Li Li. Li Li reached out to take it, and caught a blur of movement from the corner of her eye. Captain Heller had snuck behind Lintharel, his sword drawn.

"Look out!" Li Li cried, but the warning came too late. Lintharel's body arched, her eyes widening with shock and pain, as the captain ran her clean through.

Lintharel hiccupped, the corners of her mouth reddening with blood. Her knees cracked against the wooden deck as she fell onto them and slumped over, gasping.

Heller withdrew his sword, the red on its silver blade already running in the downpour.

"The penalty for treason is death," he said quietly, and he raised his weapon to deal the final blow.

A shadow moved alongside him, unfolding into shape, and a curved, embossed blade pressed against Heller's throat.

His face bloated with rage. "Traitors!"

"Shut up." Atropa's eyes blazed murderously, twins of Lintharel's. "The penalty for harming my family is also death."

\* \* \*

Pouring rain greeted Baenan and Chen as they finally reached the main deck. Nobody seemed to notice them; everyone was too preoccupied with the battle. Across the water, the *Elwynn* was burning.

"We got tae get over there," Baenan declared. The pandaren and the dwarf sprinted toward the lifeboats. Chen could see his tol'vir craft among them.

Chen's feet were torn from the solid wood beneath them. The roar and heat of a great explosion engulfed him, throwing him and Baenan across the deck, where they crashed into the lifeboats.

The battle to retain consciousness was one Chen knew he could not afford to lose. Each joint aching, he forced himself onto his knees. A short distance away, Baenan lay face down, his helmet lost in the blast. Chen noticed his own staff rolling a few feet away, and he lunged to grab it, ignoring the pain in his legs. Nothing seemed broken, at least.

"Baenan!" He shook the dwarf sharply. "Now's our chance!"

"That damned fool blood elf!" Baenan groaned as Chen helped him to his feet. "We were in th' munitions hold!"

"He couldn't have survived that," Chen said heavily, surprised to feel a pang for someone he had threatened just that morning.

"Aye," Baenan replied. He looked up at Chen. "Th' entire ship'll sink in a matter o' minutes," the dwarf said. "Time tae go."

Flames licked out from the hole that had been blown in the *Warchief's Fist's* hull. The ship was taking on water fast and listing to one side, making it easier for Chen and Baenan to launch the tol'vir boat.

Talithar's explosion had disintegrated any semblance of order; the only thought on anyone's mind was escaping the ship alive. Chen grabbed an oar and paddled toward the *Elwynn*, its flaming sails a beacon in the storm.

As he pulled alongside the Alliance ship, a figure plummeted from the deck and crashed into the water, barely missing the small boat.

"That was Captain Heller!" Baenan exclaimed.

Chen eyed the body, which bobbed for a few moments before sinking beneath the waves. "His throat was cut."

They looked toward the deck from which Heller's corpse had fallen. Chen loosely lashed the tol'vir boat to the burning *Elwynn*, ready to make a quick escape later.

"You ready?" he asked Baenan.

"Aye," the dwarf replied, a gleam in his eye. "We're gettin' our families. Then we're gettin' out."

In unison, the two of them leapt the tol'vir boat's gunwale and rushed aboard the *Elwynn*.

\* \* \*

The rose-gold dawn illuminated only flotsam floating in the waves where the two ships had gone down. There was no one to see it; the survivors' lifeboats had all dispersed.

One small craft held four passengers, three of whom were crowded into the bow and stern to make room for the fourth, draped at the bottom.

"I've done everything I can," Baenan said miserably, shaking his head. Exhaustion made his face sag. "But I'm at me limit. I'm sorry."

Trialin put her hand on her brother's arm.

Atropa cradled Lintharel's head in her lap, stroking strands of hair behind the druid's long ears. She bowed her forehead to Lintharel's, tears sliding silently down her face.

Lintharel's eyes were closed, but she smiled weakly. She didn't speak, just squeezed Atropa's hand. All were silent, knowing it was only a matter of time.

None of them noticed the dark speck on the horizon, growing steadily larger as it approached, until a sharp cry startled them. A great brown bird circled above, its wingspan nearly as long as the lifeboat. It swooped down, alighting deftly on the wooden rim. With a glance around, it transformed.

It was Nita.

The tauren knelt beside Lintharel, careful not to upset the balance of the lifeboat. She spread her fingers over the night elf's midsection, covering the wound. A green glow bloomed from her palms, wreathing Lintharel in light.

Lintharel inhaled violently, gasping and coughing, and attempted to sit up. Both Atropa and Nita gently restrained her.

"Peace, my friend," the tauren said. "You will be well soon enough; there is no rush."

Lintharel reached out to take Nita's hand. "Thank you."

Atropa gripped Nita's broad forearm. Tears still gleamed in the night elf's eyes. "And I, too, thank you, so very much."

"It was the least I could do," Nita answered. "I have been scouring the ocean all night. There are many survivors, both Alliance and Horde. I will do my best to guide everyone to land."

"Once I have regained my strength, I will help," Lintharel said. She gave Atropa a reassuring smile. "It will not take long."

Before she left, Nita cast minor spells on Baenan, Trialin, and Atropa as well. Baenan sighed happily as the pain from his bruises melted away.

"Thank ye, Nita o' th' tauren," he said. He rubbed his chest, noting how it no longer ached at the touch. His fingers brushed a lump beneath his tunic.

"By Muradin's hammer!" he exclaimed, pulling out Talithar's necklace, both rings still threaded on the gold chain. "I fergot I had this."

"What is it?" Trialin asked.

"It was Talithar's," Baenan answered softly. "He was a blood elf on th' Horde ship. He saved me life. The rings were his and his wife's."

Nita furrowed her brows. "What?"

Baenan turned to his sister. "Trialin, do ye remember Vyrin Swiftwind, o' th' Farstrider Lodge?"

"Back in Loch Modan? O' course I do."

"Talithar was married to her," Baenan said.

"I... haven't seen him among the other boats," Nita said. Baenan shook his head.

"Ye won't." He closed his fist around the twin rings. "'Twas he that caused th' explosion on th' *Fist*, tae help me an' th' pandaren escape. He's dead."

"What are we goin' tae tell Vyrin?" said Trialin.

"That her husband died a hero." Baenan looked up fiercely. "Which way's fastest tae land? I got a message tae deliver."

"Head north and west," Nita said. "You're not far from Tanaris. I will return as soon as possible to aid you, if you need it. May the Earth Mother be with you all."

"And Elune with you," Atropa replied.

Nita spread her arms and became a bird, wheeling into the sky.

\* \* \*

Once again, the tol'vir sailboat bobbed beneath a sky strewn with stars. Chen clutched Li Li close to him. "I thought I had lost you, Li Li," he whispered. "I thought you were dead."

Li Li buried her face in her uncle's shoulder. "I thought I was too, actually," she replied, smiling weakly. Chen laughed a little, though it came out more like a cough.

Everything had been fire and chaos aboard the *Elwynn*. He and Baenan had instantly been separated. Chen's memories were a blur. He had called Li Li's name frantically, over and over, and then, like magic, there she had been, running from the flames, blood streaked across her face. They had jumped ship, back into their own sailboat, with only minutes to spare. As Chen and Li Li had rowed away, they had witnessed the last moments of both the *Warchief's Fist* and the *Elwynn*, their burning wreckages lighting the ocean with an orange glow.

The pandaren slept fitfully for the rest of the night. All the stress had caught up with them, and they lost track of time, passing in and out of consciousness.

\* \* \*

Li Li didn't know how many days had passed. Two? Three? They'd been plagued by thick cloud cover, which made it impossible to tell morning from evening. Only when the sky darkened for hours would it be certain that another day had ended. Uncle Chen lounged under the sail, asleep. He'd been injured in the explosion on the Horde ship, and would take days to heal.

Li Li rested her head against the mast. The sail hung limply in its rigging, but she couldn't bring herself to take it in. Everything—absolutely everything—had gone completely wrong. She kept reliving the moment of being washed overboard, or Captain Heller's sword sliding through Lintharel's body, or the warm splash of Heller's blood against her face as Atropa slit his throat. Li Li shuddered. Such awful memories, such horrible sights to have seen.

The crinkle of paper in the wind caught Li Li's attention, and she glanced up to find an elegantly folded albatross fluttering above her. She extended a palm, and the bird alighted upon it and immediately stilled, the magic that fueled its journey expended. Curious, Li Li undid the folds, smoothing the creases as best she could. Two letters had composed the albatross, one addressed to her, the other to Uncle Chen. With a start, Li Li realized that they were both from her father.

Not wanting to invade her uncle's privacy, Li Li refolded his letter and tucked it into his haversack. Her own missive, however, she read.

*My dear Li Li,*

*I have never been very good with words. Every time I try to speak with you, it seems nothing comes out the way that I wish, and we never understand each other or find common ground.*

*You are like your mother, and my brother, more than you are like me. You have your uncle's sense of wonder and your mother's fearlessness. That was one of the things I loved the most about her, though as someone who does not share that trait, it was terrifying for me to watch her walk straight into situations that I would have avoided at all costs. It is equally terrifying for me to watch you make similar decisions. I have, in the past, let that fear manifest as anger, which I now realize was wrong.*

*You are destined to make different choices in your life from the ones I have made in mine. It is high time I came to terms with this. No matter what happens, you will always be my daughter, and I will always be proud of you.*

*With love,  
Your father*

Li Li read the letter twice, three times, letting the words sink into her memory. She remembered wondering in Gadgetzan if she could ever be both true to herself and good enough for her father. Chen had assured her that she could, and he had been right. Li Li's eyes clouded with tears, and she blinked, but couldn't clear her blurry vision. She suddenly missed her father with a ferocity she never would have anticipated.

"Oh, Uncle Chen," she said miserably, "why did the pearl send me on this stupid journey? Let's go home. I just want to go *home*."

Chen sighed in his sleep. A tear slid down Li Li's cheek, already damp from the misty air. She closed her eyes and hugged her knees to her chest.

A great whooshing sound filled her ears, but she felt no wind. Looking up, Li Li stared into an endless fog swirling above her, spinning like a whirlpool. She leaned over and shook her uncle awake.

"What's going on?" he asked groggily.

"I don't know," she answered. "I've never seen anything like this."

The mists whirled faster and faster, making Li Li dizzy. Then, all at once, they disintegrated, leaving behind a stunning blue sky and the shining orb of the sun.

And before Li Li and Chen, stretching across the horizon like a jewel, was a land neither of them recognized.

"Look!" Li Li cried, pointing. "Uncle Chen... is that...?"

"It is!" Chen exclaimed. "It has to be!"

Li Li was already on her feet, pulling the sail taut. The breeze had picked up again, and they would easily be able to make landfall. Chen rushed to assist her, and together they guided their boat to shore.

\* \* \*

A suitable beach presented itself without much trouble, and the two pandaren dragged their craft onto the sand, paws shaking with excitement. Chen and Li Li scrambled to explore the landscape and quickly found a narrow but well-traveled road. From a carved wooden pole, a familiar-looking lantern swung gently in the breeze, as if welcoming them.

Chen nearly fell to his knees beside it. "This is pandaren made," he said weakly. "No doubt about it."

"We're here," Li Li said. "We actually made it. Pandaria."

They climbed a hill that overlooked the shore, and stood gazing out to sea. The day was clear, not a cloud in sight. The shining ocean stretched endlessly. Chen draped his arm across his niece's shoulder and squeezed it affectionately.

"Does this mean the spell is broken?" Li Li asked. "Have the mists been permanently lifted?"

"I... I'm not sure," Chen replied. "But I think so."

"So they'll come," she said. "Papa and Shisai and Granny Mei, and all our friends. They'll all come."

An image rose unbidden in Chen's mind. Two ships, side by side, engulfed in flames, cannons firing, sailors shouting, blades clashing. A scene from nights ago as he rushed

desperately to escape the *Warchief's Fist* and found no solace on the *Elwynn*. Chen's grip tightened on Li Li's shoulder.

"Not just our friends, Li Li," he said. "*Everyone.*"