

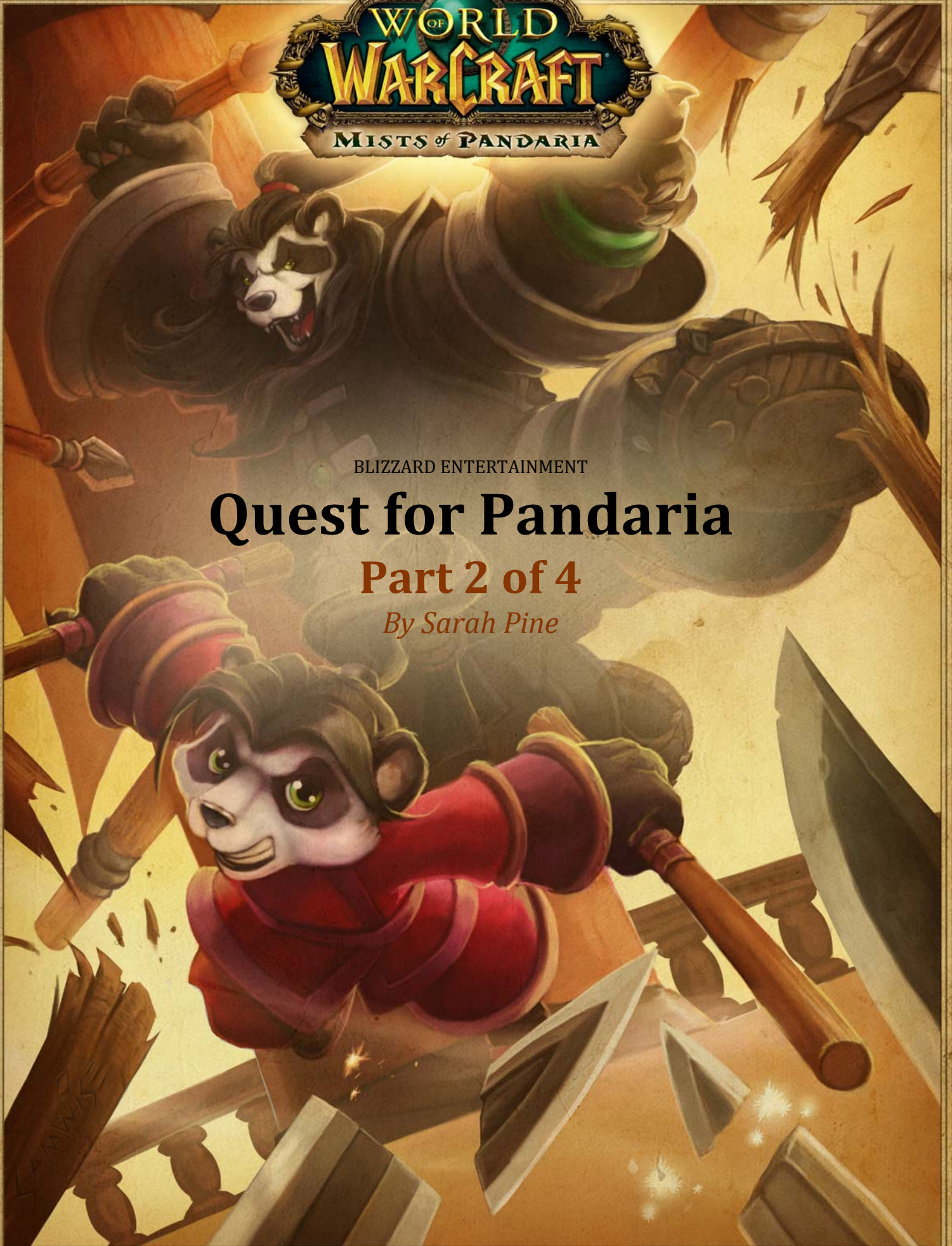
WORLD  
WARCRAFT  
MISTS OF PANDARIA

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# Quest for Pandaria

Part 2 of 4

*By Sarah Pine*



## Quest for Pandaria: Part 2

"Let me get this straight. You're telling me that I can't speak to King Magni because he's turned into a rock?"

Standing before the Council of Three Hammers in the throne room of the sprawling, subterranean dwarven city of Ironforge, Li Li Stormstout drew herself up as tall as she could, gripped her staff tightly, and jutted out her chin in her best attempt at an outraged expression.

"*Boulder-dash*," she said.

"It's th' truth!" the dwarf at the center of the stage answered her. "Ye can go down tae Old Ironforge an' see fer yerself! Me brother performed a ritual tae commune with th' earth nae long afore th' Cataclysm." Muradin Bronzebeard balled his fingers into a fist. "An' that was th' result."

"You're rather brazen to call the Council of Three Hammers liars," Moira Thaurissan added in a deliberately silky voice. "If your behavior is indicative of your people, well, I can't say I'm disappointed that I haven't met them before now."

"The feeling's mutual, lady," Li Li muttered under her breath. Audibly, she addressed all three members of the council. "What I'm hearing is that you can't help me."

Muradin shook his head. "I'm afraid we canna. Whatever Magni may have once promised ye, he canna confirm it, an' th' council is divided about ye."

"All right, then. I guess I'll be going now." Li Li turned to leave.



"Manners, manners, young lady," Moira reminded her. Li Li paused a moment, then, in one smooth motion, whirled around, folding one arm across her belly and pitching forward in an exaggerated bow.

"O great Council of Three Hammers, your maneuvering is deserving of the highest acclaim! You have proven to be no less than the proverbial hard place to King Magni's literal rock, and I do feel so honored to find myself in between the two."

Moira's cry of indignation was partially drowned by Falstad Wildhammer's roar of appreciative laughter, and by the time Muradin managed to shout them both down from bickering, Li Li had long since left the room.

\* \* \*

The Stonefire Tavern better exemplified the dwarves' anticipated hospitality than the throne room had. Cheerfully chattering patrons filled the tables, laughing and sharing drinks. Nonetheless, Li Li preferred to sit alone in the back. Though she was somewhat of a curiosity, the others left her to sulk into her pint of ale.

"Guess it was dumb of me to send the Crane off on his merry way before I talked to the council," she muttered. "Though I wasn't exactly expecting the king of Ironforge to have turned into a *rock*."

She slurped her beer, nodding approvingly, and leaned onto her elbow, absently tracing patterns on the hardwood table. Lost in her own thoughts, she didn't hear the steps approaching from behind until a shadow fell across her.

Li Li didn't look up. "Scram, will you? I'm busy."

A familiar chuckle responded to her. "Too busy to share a drink with your uncle? That's a shame."

Li Li jumped up and spun on her heel. Chen stood in front of her, a rucksack across his back and his staff in hand.

"Uncle Chen!" She threw her arms around him. "Er, sorry about being rude."

Chen laughed, giving her an affectionate squeeze, and took a seat across from her. "No problem. I bet you can guess why I'm here."

Li Li sighed and sat down. "Papa sent you to bring me home."

"He did, but I'm not going to. I read your letter, and it has also been noted that the pearl Wanyo brought back is missing."

Li Li tried, and failed, to control the sheepish look on her face. Chen raised an eyebrow.

"Well?"

Knowing she was caught, Li Li took a deep breath and explained what she had seen in the pearl before she left on her journey to Ironforge.

Chen sipped his drink thoughtfully. "I was pretty sure you had decided to try to find Pandaria, considering that we once spoke about it. This pearl thing actually granted you a vision?"

Li Li nodded enthusiastically. "That's why I took it. It wouldn't have shown me the vision for no reason!"

Chen glanced at her sideways. "I *don't* entirely trust some random magic pearl that Wanyo got from a murloc, but I *do* trust your judgment, Li Li."

"No doubts about it, Uncle Chen!"

"Okay. So, what are we going to do now?"

Li Li fidgeted in her seat. "Well, things didn't turn out quite the way I wanted, and I, uh, didn't really have a back-up plan."

Chen grinned. "You said the pearl grants visions, didn't you?"

The heel of Li Li's palm made a satisfying *whack* as she slammed it into her forehead. "Of *course*. Why didn't I think of that sooner?" She drained the last of her ale and jumped up. "Come on; the pearl's in the room I rented."

\* \* \*

Li Li sat on the edge of her bed, holding the large gem between her hands and letting its soothing glow lull her into a trance. She blinked, closing her eyes to the pearl's pale sheen, then opening them to find herself standing on the edge of a dock, staring out at a bright blue sea. A large island rose from the middle of the natural harbor, a battered granite statue of a one-armed goblin on its crest. Li Li turned in a circle on the spot, taking in her surroundings. Ramshackle wooden jetties and houses were arranged in a U shape around the bay. In the spaces between the buildings, Li Li caught sight of deep green palm fronds and other dense jungle foliage.

"What did you see?"

Chen's voice returned Li Li to the physical reality of the Ironforge apartment. She set the pearl back in her travel sack next to the bed, carefully hiding it from view with folds of cloth.

"Booty Bay," she answered.

"What?" Chen sat down beside her. "Are you sure? Wouldn't it be easier to just travel out of Stormwind?"

"Yeah, it would, but I was clearly in Booty Bay." She groaned and flopped onto her back, flinging one arm across her face. "Booty Bay is *forever* away!"

Chen made clucking noises to himself, staring at the far wall. After a few moments, he clapped his hands together and jumped up.

"Come on, Li Li. Looks like we've got some walking to do. Life is an adventure, remember?"

Li Li lifted her arm just a smidgeon to peek at Chen. His eyes twinkled down at her impishly, and she had the sudden urge to kick his feet out from under him. Not that she had much hope of catching him unawares, but it was a momentarily satisfying thought.

"All right, all right." She sat up. "Let's get going."

\* \* \*

They took the Deeprun Tram south to Stormwind City, the reverse trip of what Li Li had done with Bo on her first journey through Azeroth. She found herself unable to be quite as excited for the ride this time, feeling Bo's loss keenly as she revisited the places they'd been. On the tram, the two of them had battled a goblin who was later revealed to be working for the same naga-and-orc team that would be responsible for Bo's death. In hindsight, Li Li wished she had better recognized the danger posed to her and Bo. Maybe things would have turned out differently.

Li Li forced her mind away from those thoughts. There was no point dwelling on the things that couldn't be changed.

Stormwind, on the other hand, *had* changed, more than she ever could have anticipated. In addition to the new construction in the Dwarven District, where the tram arrived, she could see charred rooftops, burned-out buildings, and crumbled stone battlements along the tallest towers. Telltale signs of severe fire damage were all over the city. Chen pulled aside an idle merchant to ask about what had happened.

The merchant furrowed his brows at them.

"Deathwing," he said.

Chen pressed him for information. "Deathwing, the great dragon?"

"Yeah." The merchant shrugged. "I'd never heard of him, but I guess he'd been hiding. That's what the educated folk have been saying, at least. Anyway, he came back, burned up the Park, wrecked half the city." He shuddered at the memory. "Scariest day of my life, seeing that huge beast in the sky, raining fire on us. Thought the world was coming to an end."

"Thanks," Chen said. He bought a bauble, grateful for the merchant's time.

"I know you read about dragons in my journals, Li Li," Chen told her as the two of them walked away. "We had those horrible waves a while back on Shen-zin Su. That must have been around the time that Deathwing returned to the world." He looked up at the sky, and Li Li wondered if he half expected to see the legendary former Aspect pass overhead.

Li Li nodded. She did know a little bit about the dragons, but Chen clearly knew more, and the news of Deathwing seemed to worry him very much.

They stayed a few days in Stormwind, stocking up on supplies for their journey. It was a long road south, and there wouldn't be any major cities until they reached Booty Bay itself. Once they had everything they needed, they set out on the open road, leaving the bustle of the city behind them.

Though Stormwind's damage had been extensive, Elwynn Forest seemed largely unchanged, and nothing really stood out to Li Li as unusual for the route they traveled. Stranglethorn Vale, however, was another matter entirely. As they tramped along the jungle's narrow but well-worn trail, the signs of Deathwing's return were all around them, from corrupted patches of forest to newly founded settlements of both the Alliance and Horde. In some places the road grew truly treacherous. Booty Bay, by the time they arrived, was a more than welcome sight. Run by the Steamwheedle Cartel, the small city perched over the tip of the Cape of Stranglethorn with the unmatched defiance of the terminally down-and-out. All manner of brutal cutthroats and wide-eyed adventurers sought out Booty Bay as a place to make their fortunes or just escape the strict law enforcement of the larger cities. Li Li and Chen stepped onto its rickety wooden walkways with both relief and delight.

"As much as I love life on the road, it'll be good to have a bed underneath me tonight." Chen sighed happily. Li Li knew that Booty Bay was one of his favorite places on Azeroth.



"The road in *this* part of the world could use some improvement," Li Li huffed. "Would it have killed them to put up a sign? 'Warning: Path ahead disappears into a giant whirlpool of death!'"

Chen quickly sobered.

"Deathwing really did shatter the earth."

"Booty Bay seems intact, though."

"I think it would take more than a few giant whirlpools of death for the goblins to give up on this place." Chen winked, smiling again. "Come on, Li Li. There's a mug of terrible goblin grog with my name on it."

\* \* \*

The Salty Sailor Tavern would never catch any architect's eye, except perhaps as a textbook example of disrepair. The dilapidated old hovel had an unfinished, haphazard air about it, its additional floors and bedrooms simply tacked on whenever the steady stream of visitors had exceeded the existing structure's capacity. In Booty Bay, safety and stability were generally not a proprietor's highest concerns—buyer beware, after all.

So, while the infamous pub might be a less-than-ideal destination for the honest tourist, it was a perfect haven for the downtrodden, petty criminals, gallivanting sailors, or otherwise slightly off-kilter members of society. There were plenty of places where one could hide unseen, and observe.

Doing just that was one of Catelyn's favorite pastimes. From her vantage point on the mezzanine-style second floor, she could easily watch the comings and goings of all the tavern's patrons, with an eye toward any opportunities that might present themselves.

Unusual people found their way to Booty Bay. Nonetheless, Catelyn was genuinely surprised to see two pandaren walk through the front door and slap some coins down on the counter for Skindle. She had heard of their kind but had never seen any up close, and something about them piqued Catelyn's interest. Their staves and haversacks clearly marked them as travelers. She watched them carry their pints of ale to an empty table in the corner of the bar, and started to edge along the stairs, eager to discover more about the two fascinating strangers.

\* \* \*

Chen gently rolled the metallic mug between his palms, watching the beer swirl.

"It's definitely as bad as I remember," he commented.

"Pandaren brew beer to have an effect like gunpowder," Li Li said, "but I'm pretty sure the goblins brew it *with* gunpowder."

Chen tapped his chin, looking thoughtful.

"Li Li, do you remember anything else you've heard about the pearl?"

Li Li paused, her own mug halfway to her mouth.

"I told you and Papa everything the naga told me, and what Wanyo said confirmed it."

"So you *were* eavesdropping on that meeting."

Li Li glared. "That was a dirty trick!"

Chen laughed. "You did that all by yourself, Li Li." He wagged a reproachful finger at her, but his eyes twinkled.

"Fine, yes, I did listen in," she huffed. "So what?"

"I just wonder about the pearl. We don't know anything about it other than the fact that some naga was desperate to get her hands on it and it grants visions, yet here we are, following its direction."

Li Li understood what Chen was saying, yet her instincts were to trust the pearl.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I guess it's possible the pearl is dangerous. But it doesn't *feel* evil. Nothing about it's spooky."

"There is something to be said about trusting your instincts when it comes to magic. Still, the naga aren't generally a kind and considerate bunch. If a naga wanted it, it's likely that it's got some destructive capabilities." Seeing the expression on Li Li's face, he added, "I'm just trying to look out for you, like Po asked me to."

Li Li set her mug down on the table somewhat harder than normal and frowned at the wall. Chen pushed the topic gently.

"You still upset, Li Li?"

"I'm not going to fall into the bay and drown or something."

Chen decided he would rather not have an argument with his niece.

"I know you're tough, and I know you're not a child. Your father is worried for you, that's all."

"He doesn't even like it when we go out on the fishing boats. Too afraid of what happened to Mama, I guess. But if it were up to him, I'd be sitting at home all the time, gardening and cooking and not doing anything interesting ever." Li Li leaned forward, toward Chen. "The pearl gave *me* a vision. It's my task, and when I've accomplished it, Papa will have to admit he was wrong to try to hold me back!"

"Fathers can be especially frustrating that way, can't they?"

Chen and Li Li both looked over toward the source of the new voice. The speaker held her hands up disarmingly.

"Sorry for interrupting. It's a crowded tavern, and I just couldn't help but overhear." She pulled an empty chair underneath her and sat down by Li Li. A pale human woman, she dropped her bag on the ground next to the table, crossed one ankle over her knee with an easy grace, and draped an arm across the back of her seat.

"My name's Catelyn," she introduced herself. "Round these parts they call me Catelyn the Blade." She pushed a lock of reddish-brown hair behind her ear. "It's a bit dramatic, I admit, but it's got a certain ring to it, don't you think?"

"It gives you an edge," Li Li said. Catelyn laughed.

"You're pretty clever!" She grinned. "I overheard you talking. To be honest, I spoke up without thinking. Your story sounds so familiar."

"Familiar?"

"I went through something similar," Catelyn said, looking toward the ceiling. She tapped one hand against her crossed leg. "My father is a stuffy old scholar, and wanted me to be the same. I couldn't stand that life, and he couldn't stand the thought of me doing anything other than what he wanted. So I left. It was years ago, and it was the best decision I ever made."

"I'm sorry you never managed to come to terms with your father," Chen said politely.

Catelyn shrugged. "It's his own fault, really. If he'd been willing to listen to me, I wouldn't have had to leave behind his back." She glanced sidelong at Li Li and reached down to scratch her calf below the table. Li Li was staring intently into her ale, eyebrows furrowed in thought.

"Hey," Catelyn said to her, voice softening. "I'm sorry if I spoke where I shouldn't have. Just wanted to offer you a bit of encouragement. You've got to be your own person, live your own life! If your father can't understand that, it's not your problem."

"He likes to make it my problem," Li Li muttered. Chen narrowed his eyes.

"He'll come around, Li Li," he said.

"Maybe he will; maybe he won't," Catelyn replied. "Mine never did. But I don't regret my choices." She stood up, grabbing her bag. "I doubt you would either. Enjoy Booty Bay." She gave them a casual wave and sauntered off into the tavern's crowd.



"How's that for unsolicited advice?" Chen commented, watching her go.

Li Li fidgeted in her seat, then drained her mug of ale and made a face at the taste. "She gets it, though. She's been through the same as me."

Chen shot her a look. "I suppose. Let's go upstairs."

Li Li grabbed her staff and slung her rucksack over one shoulder, following Chen up the stairs. Their room was on the second floor, the small, lopsided window managing to make even the spectacular view of the bay seem cheap.

Li Li sunk onto one of the rickety old beds, feeling the boards creak beneath her. A long nap would do her good.

She pulled her pack toward her, wanting a change of clothing. The top of it was curiously flat, as if it was missing something. Heart suddenly racing, she threw open the flap and yanked out the cloak she normally used to shield the pearl. It draped across her hands, empty. Hoping beyond hope, one by one she scattered the contents of her bag around her, not wanting to believe what she knew to be true.

"Uncle Chen!" she yelled, outraged. "The pearl! The pearl is gone! That lady—that smarmy human lady—what was her name? Cathy the Cutthroat?"

"You mean Catelyn the Blade?"

"Yeah, her! She stole it!"

They rushed back down to the bar, a sickening feeling gnawing in the pit of Li Li's stomach. She and Chen searched the crowd with growing urgency. Li Li understood that the likelihood of Catelyn having remained in the tavern was next to nothing, but she refused to give up and continued to circle the perimeter of the room. On her third pass, the innkeeper, a chubby old green goblin named Skindle, eyed her sidelong as he counted coins under the countertop.

"Whatcha looking for, kid?"

Chen cut in before Li Li could answer.

"Hey," he said. "You see us talking to a lady just now? Brunette, about thirty, calls herself Catelyn the Blade. We need to find her."

Skindle tugged at the lobe of one of his oversized ears, and Chen tossed a couple coins onto the counter. The innkeeper grinned broadly and pocketed them.

"Catelyn's with the Blackwater Raiders, working for the Steamwheedle Cartel. She captains a raider ship, the *Neptulon's Bride*." Seeing the look on Li Li's face, Skindle added, "Don't go asking for trouble. She's the best knife fighter in Booty Bay. Anyone with half a brain stays on her good side, and I mean *anyone*."

"Thanks for the advice." Chen threw another coin Skindle's way.

"Hey, no problem." Skindle held the rim of the gold piece against his temple and winked. "Money talks, if you know how to listen."

"Let's go," Chen murmured to Li Li, striding out of the tavern.

\* \* \*

They headed straight to the docks. It wasn't hard to find the *Neptulon's Bride*, and Li Li and Chen were soon approaching a familiar figure, who was directing the loading of cargo onto the deck of the sturdy, wooden-hulled collier. The two pandaren climbed aboard to face Catelyn.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" She wore a self-satisfied smirk as she jauntily rested her hands against her hips, her demeanor a far cry from the disarming friendliness she'd adopted earlier.

"I think you can guess why we've come," Chen said.

"Thieving scumbag!" Li Li snarled. "You stole our pearl!"

"Now, there's no need for name-calling," Catelyn responded, wagging a finger. "You're right. I grabbed it. You should be more careful when you discuss your rare magic artifacts in public, especially in this part of the world.

"I know it wasn't the nicest thing for me to do, but a girl's got bills to pay, and the Steamwheedle Cartel isn't the most forgiving of lenders; get my drift? I'm a sporting type, though, and I liked the looks of you two from the moment I set eyes on you, so I'll tell you what. This ship here?" Catelyn gestured around her. "Your pearl is somewhere on board. If you can find it, you can have it." Her grin widened. "But I'll warn you, my crew has a bit of a violent streak, and they don't take kindly to strangers."

It seemed as if, all at once, Li Li and Chen were surrounded by dangerous smiles, men and women who, a moment before, had been working quite innocently. Suddenly weaponry grew from their fists like claws. Chen grimaced, and Li Li hefted her staff in her hand.

"You're either very courageous or very stupid," Catelyn commented.

"You've never fought pandaren before, have you?" Li Li said.

Catelyn unsheathed her own weapon, a dagger as long as her forearm.

"I doubt you're much different from the rest," she answered.

Li Li lunged at Catelyn, while Chen leaped to stave off the oncoming crew. Catelyn parried Li Li's staff expertly with her dagger, then thrust it at the pandaren's belly. Li Li deflected it with a kick to Catelyn's wrist that sent the dagger spinning out of her hand. Li Li saw Catelyn's eyes momentarily widen in surprise. The pirate captain knew what she was up against now.

Catelyn dove to the deck and somersaulted toward her lost blade. Li Li followed her, flinging a pinch of enchanted dust at another pirate, who had jumped across the dock from the neighboring ship. The dust turned into a small swarm of angry, tiny birds pecking at his eyes, and he swore as he stumbled, catching his shoulder on the rigging.

Chen's staff twirled around him at lightning speed, catching the clumsier sailors unawares and sending them sprawling. One particularly burly orc took a kick straight to the sternum and lost his balance, tumbling over the railing to the dock below. Chen couldn't help but grin. He'd been in worse scrapes during his lifetime.

Somewhere off in the distance, a loud bell started clanging. Li Li sincerely hoped it wasn't a call for reinforcements.

"*Buccaneers!*" one of the crewmen shouted. "Bloodsail Buccaneers! We're being attacked!"

"You were already being attacked!" Li Li yelled, and thumped her staff against another pirate's chest.

Despite this assertion, the entire crew instantly forgot about her and Chen, running to take up their places within the ship. Li Li whirled around, craning her neck to see what was going on. Swarming out from every hiding place imaginable around the dock, armed pirates wearing distinctive bright-red shirts were ambushing Booty Bay's goblin bruisers and bounding toward the Raiders' ships.

"Cut the lines!" Catelyn's voice roared above everyone else's. "Get us out of here as fast as possible! The rest of you, defend the ship! The cargo must be protected!"

A Bloodsail Buccaneer vaulted over the gunwale onto the *Neptulon's Bride* right in front of Li Li, swinging his cutlass. She landed a kick against his ribs that flipped his legs over his head, dumping him back onto the dock. All around her, the Raiders under Catelyn's command were sawing through ropes or doing their best to repel their rival pirates. The bruisers on the pier tried to hinder the Buccaneers, but they too had been taken by surprise. Chen appeared at Li Li's side.

"We should leave while we can, Li Li."

"I won't go without the pearl!" she snapped. "It's somewhere on this ship! We have to find it!"

The collier lurched beneath them. Catelyn's crew had freed it from the moorings and was doing its best to push the great cargo ship out into the bay. Oars extended from openings on the ship's sides, and Li Li realized there must be more of the crew belowdecks than she originally thought. In fits and starts, the *Neptulon's Bride* began to draw away from the dock at Booty Bay.



"Go, go!" Catelyn screamed. She still battled one of the Bloodsail Buccaneers, parrying his sword with her dagger. After a moment's struggle she managed to kick him over the side of the boat, and he splashed into the bay below. She ran toward the helm, taking her place to pilot the ship. Other crew members were unfurling the sails, preparing to make a quick dash out of port.

The wind picked up as they left the shelter of the bay, and the Cape of Stranglethorn's long spit came into view. The oars disappeared back belowdecks; the sails swelled and began to carry the ship more steadily. Li Li wasn't quite sure whether to be relieved or anxious. On the one hand, she and Chen had safely evaded a skirmish between two rival pirate factions. On the other, the two of them were now trapped on Catelyn's ship, with nowhere to go but into the sea. As Booty Bay shrank rapidly behind them, Li Li wondered how long it would take Catelyn and the crew to decide to turn on her and Chen again, since the ambush's more imminent danger had passed.

Catelyn hollered a phrase so vulgar that even Li Li blushed.

Floating in the waters outside Booty Bay—just out of range of the harbor's protective cannons, clearly lying in wait—were no fewer than three fully rigged ships, sails broadly striped in black and red, flying the colors of the Bloodsail Buccaneers. Catelyn swore again, and other members of her crew joined her. Chen shifted uneasily from foot to foot. The *Neptulon's Bride* had sailed straight into a trap.

"Prep the cannons!" Catelyn yelled. "All hands to defense! We're in for the fight of our lives!"

"So are we," Chen said grimly.

As soon as they drifted into range, the Buccaneers fired. Most of the shots fell short, but a few crashed into the *Bride*. The deck heaved upon impact, sending enormous splinters of wood hurtling through the air. Li Li and Chen threw themselves down, covering their heads with their arms.

"It's so maddening," Li Li snarled, "to watch them attack and not be able to fight back."

Chen nodded. "Battles at sea are terrible that way."

Catelyn and her crew managed at last to return with their own volley of cannon fire, and even landed a few good blows, but their opponents were sailing straight toward them. By the time the crew reloaded the guns, the *Bride* would be swamped with Bloodsail Buccaneers.

"To arms!" Catelyn cried as the enemy ships started to near the *Bride*. "Let's give them a fight they won't soon forget!"

The oncoming Bloodsail ships violently jostled the *Neptulon's Bride* as they slid alongside it, members of their crews swinging from the rigging, brandishing all manner of bladed weapons. The *Bride's* crew fought ferociously, but it was badly outnumbered.

Catelyn battled two opponents at once: an angry goblin missing a chunk from his ear, and a tall, lithe night elven woman sporting a dagger nearly as long as Catelyn's own. They forced her down the deck until she was back-to-back with Li Li, who quickly sidestepped and swept the night elf's feet out from underneath her with her staff. The elf face-planted onto the deck, her nose spouting blood.

"Betcha feel bad about taking my pearl now," Li Li said.

"Not really," Catelyn answered coolly, disemboweling a Bloodsail gnome who had been foolhardy enough to leap at her. "If you hadn't come searching for me, I would have two fewer crew fighting by my side."

Li Li wanted to retort, but the Buccaneers were closing in, and all her concentration had to be spent on the battle. She kicked, ducked, and used her staff to overturn and incapacitate her enemies. She threw enchanted dust every which way, and swarms of bees, tiny birds, and biting gnats distracted and harassed the attacking pirates, but the Buccaneers' onslaught never stopped. There were so many of them, and someone else was always waiting to take the place of whoever had just fallen.

Slowly, Li Li realized she was losing ground. She and Chen pressed shoulder to shoulder, fighting together even as they knew they were being overwhelmed. All the crew of the *Neptulon's Bride* was clumped alongside Catelyn, Li Li, and Chen in the center of the deck. They pointed their weapons outward, sweating, breath heaving, blood dripping from their wounds, and surrounded on all sides. Li Li gritted her teeth. The real fight had only begun.

A steady, rhythmic clomp across the wooden slats of the deck broke the pre-carnage silence. A captain's hat bobbed above the Bloodsail Buccaneers, its bearer a full head taller than anyone else around him. He pushed through to the front of the crowd, and Li Li got a clear look at him. He was an enormous draenei, his cloven hooves as big around as dinner plates. His facial tendrils spilled over the front of his red overcoat like the tentacles of a slimy blue octopus. A patch covered his right eye, and in his left hand he clutched the biggest cutlass Li Li had ever seen.

"Your journals said that the draenei were a peaceful, spiritual people!" Li Li hissed to Chen.

"I must have missed this guy," Chen whispered back.

"Well, well." The draenei's distinctive accent rolled smugly off his tongue. "I knew someone from the Raiders would get tangled in my net if I played it just right. How fortunate for me that the famed Catelyn Runeweaver—oh, come now, don't give me that look; that's your name, isn't it?—how fortunate that it should be you."

"That name sounds familiar," Chen muttered. "Where have I heard it before?"

"You're awfully special to Baron Revilgaz, Catelyn, you being quite the renowned duelist," the draenei captain continued. "Though I do understand you're in a bit of financial trouble at the moment. I might be able to help you with that."

"I'd rather be gutted for debt by the cartel than ever throw my lot in with you," Catelyn snarled. "Who the hell are you, anyway? I know every Bloodsail from here to Ratchet."

The draenei captain swept the hat from his head with an overdramatic flourish.

"I am Captain Koslov, and as you have correctly guessed, I am a new face along the chain of command. Judging by my success here today, a far more effective one than my predecessors as well."

A blinding flash of indigo-tinted light flared in the distance, back toward Booty Bay. Captain Koslov whipped around, facing the light's source, but nothing more occurred. He harrumphed and turned to Catelyn once again.

"You and everyone else on this boat have a choice," Koslov continued. "Surrender or die. Simple, no?"

"You haven't won yet," Catelyn snapped, shifting her weight and brandishing her dagger.

"I see you have chosen to die," Koslov answered, smirking. He raised his arm to give the signal to attack.

All around the ship, sounds like gunshots filled the air, popping and cracking. Everyone scrambled to take cover. The *Neptulon's Bride* began to shake as the hull rose from the water. Li Li lost her footing and slid gracelessly along the deck as the ship tilted, tripping over an unconscious Buccaneer as she did so. She slammed into the gunwale and caught herself, climbing to her feet as the ship steadied.

A great patch of the surrounding sea, encompassing the *Neptulon's Bride* and all three of the Bloodsail Buccaneers' ships, had turned to ice.

Li Li blinked. She could still see the coast of Stranglethorn off to the east. It was a jungle, covered in palm trees and thick growth. These were tropical waters.

"*What is going on here?*" Captain Koslov bellowed.

"That's what I want to know," Li Li muttered to herself.

"What's going on is that you are about to surrender," a male voice boomed.

Everyone looked around, puzzled.

Running nimbly atop the ice, four individuals in violet robes approached the ships. Led by a middle-aged human man with reddish-brown hair and pale skin, they easily climbed over the rail of the *Neptulon's Bride* to stand on the deck.

"Who are *you*?" Koslov asked, fuming.

"*Father?*" If the tone of a voice could alter reality, the disbelief in Catelyn's would have made the new arrivals simply vanish from existence.

The foremost of the magi cracked the barest of smiles.



"Ah ha, you must be Ansirem Runeweaver." Captain Koslov sneered. "What a touching family reunion. I'm afraid you'll just get to die together. *Kill them!*"

"Oh, I sincerely doubt that," Ansirem said.

The Bloodsail Buccaneers charged.

To say it was a battle would be an exaggeration; the word that came to Li Li's mind was "rout." The four magi were untouchable. With flicks of their wrists, they sent flying bolts of arcane energy so pure that all the fur along Li Li's arms stood straight up on end.

The Buccaneers were unable to so much as lay a finger on any of the powerful magi. The pirates slammed into the deck and the masts, and were thrown over the railing to skid across the ice. The ones with any sense at all ran, slipping and sliding back to their own ships to cower belowdecks and wait out the storm. Around the *Neptulon's Bride* the sky resembled a spectacular fireworks display, colorful bursts of light exploding and showering upon anyone who dared attack Ansirem or his comrades.

Li Li leaned against a crate on the deck, content to sit back and watch the show. Now *this* was some magic!

Captain Koslov clearly had his wits about him, for he did not stick around very long once the magi had demonstrated their formidable command of the arcane. He vaulted over the gunwale, running across the ice, outraged at his loss.

When the last of the Buccaneers had scrambled back to their boats, the magi collectively lifted their hands, and the ice that trapped all four of the ships melted away. Li Li could see the Bloodsail Buccaneer crews scurrying around on the decks, hoisting the sails to put as much distance between them and the *Bride* as possible. As they went, a curious silence settled over the *Neptulon's Bride*, the surviving crew shaking their heads and regaining their bearings.

Catelyn Runeweaver faced her father and the coterie that had come with him: another human woman, a cheerful-looking female gnome, and a tall high elf man.

"I... ah..." Catelyn began. She sighed and started again. "Thanks. Um. For saving our lives."

"You don't have to thank me," Ansirem said. "I realize you don't much like to hear from me, but this time sounded bad, and I couldn't just stand aside and do nothing."

"How did you know?" Catelyn asked. "You don't live here."

At this, Ansirem grinned slyly. "Last I recalled, gold was the universal tongue of Booty Bay. I've got a few 'friends' who don't mind keeping me updated when something happens. I'd heard a trap was being set, but by the time I knew for certain, I was afraid I was too late."

Catelyn's eyebrows arched high on her forehead. "Oh, I *see*."

"I thought your name sounded familiar," Chen interrupted, approaching Catelyn and the magi. "I knew I'd heard of a Runeweaver somewhere." He eyed Ansirem up and down. "You're an archmage of the Kirin Tor, aren't you?"

Ansirem nodded. "Indeed I am." He tilted his head toward Chen. "I've read about your kind, but I must say I've never actually met a pandaren before. Are you a member of my daughter's crew?"

Chen grinned broadly, showing off his teeth. "No. But my niece and I *were* victims of her piracy."

Catelyn swallowed, the expression on her face an odd combination of caught-in-the-cookie-jar guilt and outright fury. Ansirem shot her a sharp glance.

"Catelyn—"

"Oh, by Neptulon *himself!*" she cried, throwing up her hands. "*This isn't happening.* I'm a *pirate*, Dad! I steal things sometimes! It comes with the job! And don't you *dare* look at me like that, as if everything *you've* ever done as an archmage has been *perfectly ethical.*"

Ansirem opened his mouth to protest, then promptly shut it again. The human woman of the group that had accompanied him stifled a laugh.

"Well, she's got you there, Ansirem," she said.

Ansirem sighed exaggeratedly. "I'll never hear the end of this, will I, Modera?"

"Not a chance!"

"Then, if I may," Ansirem replied, "I'm going to speculate that, in this particular instance, your thievery was related to this debt you owe the Steamwheedle Cartel for refusing to throw a fight."

"Hey, how did you—" Catelyn began, then stopped. "I'm not even going to ask. Yes. It is."

"I thought so." Ansirem reached into one of the wide sleeves of his robe and withdrew a large, shining jewel nearly the size of his fist. "This is an enchanted gem. I trust it should be worth enough to settle your debt?"

Catelyn's eyes rounded with greed. She extended her hand, palm open. "Absolutely. Enchanted gems are *very* sought after. What does it do?"

"It should aid the wearer in the casting of spells."

Catelyn narrowed her eyes. "'Should'?"

"The mage who made it was a student at the time, and admittedly, not the top of his class. He intended to use it to help him cheat his exams. He failed them anyway."

All three of Ansirem's companions burst out laughing. Catelyn looked suspicious.

"Did you confiscate this from one of your students?"

"*Hardly*," Modera said before Ansirem could speak. "Though I've no doubt his students have tried to use plenty like it."

Ansirem rolled his eyes.

"*You* made this, didn't you, Dad?" The realization dawned on Catelyn.

Ansirem cleared his throat, appearing somewhat embarrassed. "Yes. Well, as I said, it didn't help. Cheaters never prosper, and all. I had to learn magecraft the hard way."

In the exact same manner as her father had a moment before, Catelyn rolled her eyes.

"Is it even actually enchanted?"

"Oh, it is. Just not particularly well. It only works about half the time." Ansirem paused. "I suggest you leave that bit out when you sell it."

Still chuckling, Modera piped up, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Ansirem heaved an exaggerated sigh, then placed his hands on his daughter's shoulders.

"I won't pretend that I don't wish you'd choose a more... typical line of work," he said. His face softened. "But no matter what, you are my daughter, and I'll never forget that."

"Could you *be* any more sentimental?" Catelyn huffed, but she smiled.

Ansirem stepped back from Catelyn and began to cast a spell. With a final wave for his daughter, he and the other magi teleported away, and were gone.

\* \* \*

Docked once more in Booty Bay, Li Li and Chen sat across from Catelyn in her quarters aboard the *Neptulon's Bride*. Catelyn pulled a box from a cabinet and held it out to Li Li.

"I believe this is yours. I'm sorry for—" Catelyn cut herself off and shook her head. "Damn. There's my old man getting to me." She sighed. "Well, I don't need it to pay my debt, so you can have it back."

Li Li coughed, and Chen crossed his arms.



"Okay, okay, I shouldn't have taken it in the first place. Good grief."

"That's better," Li Li said cheerfully, grabbing the box. She peeked inside, and the pearl shone quietly, cradled in velvet. Satisfied, Li Li placed it within her knapsack, where it belonged.

Catelyn looked mildly uncomfortable. "As repayment for me taking your pearl, and as thanks for helping me and my crew battle the Bloodsail Buccaneers, I have an offer for you.

"I know you two wish to travel south. The attack here at Booty Bay left things pretty disorganized, and it will be some time before private ships are available for charter again. I have to go to Gadgetzan to meet with a cartel representative to pay off my debt, and if you desire, I will take you with me free of charge. I have some connections there, and I could help you find someone willing to guide you."

"Not bad, not bad!" Li Li said. "Guess you really do feel guilty for swiping our stuff, huh?"

"Don't push it," Catelyn said flatly. "Well?"

"Sounds good to me," Li Li said. "I've never been to Gadgetzan. What do you think, Uncle Chen?"

"It's been a while since I've taken a ride on a pirate ship," said Chen. "I think I could stand for it again."

"The repairs should be finished in a day or two," Catelyn said. She stood, offering her hand to Li Li, who took it.

"See you then," Li Li said.

\* \* \*

Once under way, the journey to Gadgetzan proved remarkably uneventful. Li Li found herself somewhat restless to be at sea again, though life aboard the ship was very different from life on Shen-zin Su. Her mind kept drifting back to the scene she had witnessed between Ansirem Runeweaver and his estranged daughter. Li Li turned it over in her head continuously, her thoughts refusing to settle. It was enough to keep her distracted until Tanaris's sandy, desolate shore came to view.

As their destination drew ever nearer, Li Li made her way toward the ship's helm, where Catelyn had lashed the wheel in place, holding a steady course to Gadgetzan.

"We should be there by nightfall," Catelyn said as Li Li approached.

Li Li nodded. "Hey," she said. She hesitated, then continued. "I want to ask you something."

Catelyn looked at her curiously. "What?"

Li Li set her pack down and pulled the pearl from inside. "Hold this for a moment. Focus on it, and tell me what you see."

Catelyn seemed skeptical, but she agreed and took the pearl, cupping it with both hands as Li Li had done in the Royal Library back on Shen-zin Su. Catelyn's eyes became unfocused, and she stood stock-still on the gently rising and falling deck of her ship, staring into the surface of the pearl. After a minute or two had passed, she blinked and shook herself. She gazed over the top of Li Li's head, off into the distance, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"What did it show you?" Li Li asked, taking the pearl from Catelyn and carefully replacing it in the knapsack.

Catelyn eyed Li Li. "So, you knew it predicted the future?"

Li Li shrugged. "It grants visions. I'm not sure if they're true or not."

"I saw myself at the helm of a ship," Catelyn said. "Not too different from this one, really, except somehow I understood that she was mine. Legitimately mine," she added, looking back at Li Li. "Not the Blackwater Raiders', and not the Steamwheedle Cartel's." She was silent a moment. "My own ship," she said quietly, and didn't speak again, too lost in thought. Li Li picked up her pack and slung it over her shoulder. As she descended the steps, she glanced at Catelyn. The young woman smiled serenely, staring out across the azure sea.

\* \* \*

That evening, safe in Gadgetzan, Li Li and Chen settled into their hammocks at the inn. Li Li marveled at how long it was taking her to reacclimate to the feeling of walking on solid ground. Her legs felt rubbery, and everything was so still.

"You've been awfully quiet, Li Li," Chen said, looking over at her. "What's up?"

Li Li didn't answer right away. She lay down on the hammock and laced her fingers together behind her head.

"Uncle Chen, when those magi saved us from the Bloodsail Buccaneers, did it seem a bit odd to you?"

"What, that four powerful members of the Kirin Tor just happened to teleport to Booty Bay, hop onto our ship, and lay waste to our opponents? Not at all. I'm sure that's totally normal."

"Very funny," Li Li said. She could practically hear Chen's grin. "I meant when Catelyn's father told her that she'd always be his daughter and that he'd never forget that. No matter what."

"What about it, Li Li?" Chen's voice had quieted.

"Do you think..." Unexpectedly Li Li's throat constricted. "Do you think that was true?" Before Li Li could suppress it, another thought popped into her head. *Does my father think the same of me? Or does he think I'm completely hopeless?* She sat up suddenly and lost her balance, her hammock nearly dumping her to the floor.

Chen caught and steadied her, then kneeled, holding her upper arms. Li Li averted her eyes, wiping at their corners. "It's just dust," she mumbled.

"Li Li, look at me." She raised her head.

"I have no doubt about it at all," Chen said.

Tears spilled down Li Li's face as Chen hugged her close, leaving wet rivulets in the fur on her cheeks.

"Thanks, Uncle Chen," she whispered.

"Your father loves you like nothing else," Chen said. "I would bet my life on it."

Li Li nodded and buried her face in her uncle's shoulder as night fell softly across Gadgetzan and the desert of Tanaris.