



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS OF PANDARIA



BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Quest for Pandaria

Part 1 of 4

By Sarah Pine



Quest for Pandaria: Part 1

"... And just as the tram started up an incline, that ugly green goblin jumped at me!" Li Li Stormstout curled her fingers near her face in her best, most exaggerated impression of a snarling goblin. She leaned in toward the group of other young pandaren splayed along the hillside, keen for their attention.

One youngster rolled onto her back, snoring loudly. Drool dribbled out of the corner of her mouth, matting the white fur on her cheek. Another lifted his head, the black rings around his eyes briefly appearing over the top of his book before dropping out of sight again. Somebody else yawned conspicuously. All around Li Li, boredom shone in the expression of every pandaren cub near enough to hear her. Even her own brother, Shisai, was determinedly ignoring her, picking stalks of grass and tying them in knots.

"—But I kicked that goblin straight in the chest, so he flew out of the car, right into a wall. And he *exploded!* Kaboom!"

Someone coughed.

"Okay, his potion exploded," Li Li amended, raising her voice, "but it was *really exciting!*"

"Yeah, we know, Li Li," said a cub absently drawing curlicues along the ground with his finger. "You've told us a bazillion times."

"Chen, why don't *you* tell us a story?" another cub begged.

"Hmm?" Chen looked up from where he sat organizing a set of earthenware mugs on a blanket beneath the boughs of a large magnolia tree. Its branches filtered the afternoon light into golden splotches that dappled a large gathering of picnicking pandaren. On this warm, perfect day, nearly everyone had decided to pass the time by climbing to the top

slope of Shen-zin Su's mighty shell and basking in the sun's glory.

"I want to hear about the time you got into a drinking contest with four dwarves at Aerie Peak!"

"Hey, I was talking to all you!" Li Li interjected, clearly annoyed. "When I was in Ironforge, I got to meet King Magni, and—"

The cub rolled his eyes. "Li Li, you never shut up about King Magni! We're asking *Chen!*"

Li Li huffed, glaring, and opened her mouth to retort.

"Hey, now, Li Li has plenty of good stories of her own," Chen called. "You got one thing wrong, though, little Pandowan." He gave them all a conspiratorial wink. "It wasn't four dwarves. It was *five*." The other cubs laughed appreciatively, but Li Li scowled. Chen didn't seem to notice, for he continued, "And speaking of drinking, you're completely distracting me from my manners."

"I'm really very sorry that the beer isn't better," Chen apologized to a group of adult pandaren as he filled the mugs. "Unfortunately there isn't a diversity of brewing ingredients on the Great Turtle."

"I'm sure it's still delicious, Chen," answered one of the Elders, graciously accepting her drink. "It's been wonderful to have our foremost brewmaster back! We've all missed you."

"You're too kind," he said, grinning.

"Chen, come on, tell us a *story!*" a cub cried.

"In a minute. Let me finish serving your parents, first. Then I'll get you kids some tea and we can talk stories."

"I was almost eaten by an ogre once," Li Li said. "That was pretty scary."

"*We know, Li Li!* Will you be quiet already?" another cub yelled. "Chen's got lots of stories we *haven't* heard."

"Well, all right, then!" Li Li threw up her arms. "Keep bugging my uncle, I guess." She looked toward Chen expectantly, hoping he would defer to her storytelling, but he had moved off to a different part of the hill, absorbed in a conversation. She changed tactics. "Or, maybe *you* can tell me some of *your* stories. You know, about your days spent picking flowers on the hill and flunking calligraphy class? I can't imagine anything more exciting!"

Several of the cubs protested angrily and opened their mouths to escalate the bickering.

"Hey, cubs!" came Chen's timely interruption. "Who wants tea?"

A chorus of "Me, me!" rang at him in response, and Li Li found herself ignored as Chen's offer drew the others' attention away from her. She took the opportunity to abandon the hillside. Once out of sight from the picnickers, she exhaled and looked up at the sky. Puffy white clouds stole lazily across it, periodically blocking the sun and revealing it again to flood the landscape with light.

She continued to trudge along, venting her frustration by kicking loose pebbles on the path and following them as they bounced down the slope in front of her. Ever since she had returned from her travels with Strongbo, life had become increasingly dull. Her father, Chon Po, had been alternately relieved and furious to see her again, and the extremes of that particular emotional seesaw had only been exacerbated once Chen had explained the full details of Bo's fate.

Li Li's heart weighed heavily in her chest at any thought of Bo. Chen repeatedly assured her

that Bo's death was not her fault, and on a purely intellectual level Li Li understood that. But the cruel, quiet voice at the back of her mind never truly let her forget that had she never decided to leave the Great Turtle, Shen-zin Su, Bo would likely still be alive.

Li Li returned to the present, away from her guilt, and she realized that she had automatically taken the path toward the Great Library. She gazed at the elegant temple that housed it, and her spirits lifted. The library had always been her place of refuge, where she could go to lose herself in the pages of a book or letter, and doing just that was precisely what she needed right now. She eagerly trotted through the open front doors.

Inside, the comforting, familiar scent of ink and parchment put her at ease. Li Li pulled a thick atlas and a stack of wrinkled, dog-eared letters from the shelves and plopped into an overstuffed chair. Setting the scrolls onto the nearby reading table, she let the book in her lap fall open at random.

The Swamp of Sorrows sprawled across the page, illustrated in elegant green and brown inks. The map was ancient and Li Li knew it practically by heart, having long since copied most of it, and many others, into her personal journal at home. Li Li leaned across the reading table, rifling through the papers she'd left there until she found what she sought.

The letter from Chen detailed his exploration of the land that had formerly been the southern region of the Swamp of Sorrows, now called the Blasted Lands. In recent times, foul magic had seeped through a rift between worlds and withered the lush growth, leaving only barren red earth in its wake. The text explained that the rift had been opened by an immensely powerful mage named Medivh, who had help from orcs on the other world. The letter did not elaborate on the topic beyond that, and the library held no other mention of the Blasted Lands or Medivh. He must have been born long after the point when Li Li's fellows on Shen-zin Su had abandoned their legacy of daring exploration. Li Li wondered what a modern map of the swamp would look like. Chen's letters were several years outdated, and his return had meant that there wouldn't be any more updates from the

outside world.

Halfheartedly Li Li leafed through the letters again, but their words no longer enticed her. They remained static, the ink slowly fading on the fixed records of what Chen had once seen. Li Li knew that beyond their isolated life on the Wandering Isle, the world was still changing without them.

She scowled as she stuffed everything back onto the shelves. It felt as though she'd been starved, then sat in front of a banquet only to have it whisked away from beneath her after the first bite. The world was so much bigger and more beautiful than any words or maps could convey, and she had barely scratched its surface. There was nothing for her here on Shen-zin Su.

* * *

"Tonight we have a real treat! Spinach and carrot soup with chicken stock, steamed spiced fish, and rice, of course," Chon Po announced cheerfully to Li Li, Shisai, and Chen as he set dinner on the table. "Tell me how the soup is especially; it's a new recipe."

"It sounds delicious, Po," Chen said. "Thanks for inviting me over."

Chon Po beamed proudly at his dinner creations and took his seat at the table. "Did you all enjoy the day?" he asked. "The weather was beautiful. I wish I could have made it to the picnic."

"We know you're busy, Papa," Shisai answered, serving himself a pile of fish. "It was a lot of fun, though!"

"It was okay." Li Li shrugged.

Shisai rolled his eyes. "You're just mad that no one wanted to hear *your* stories," he teased. "Chen's are better anyway, aren't they, Uncle Chen?"

"Err..." Chen stammered, helping himself to some soup. Li Li glared at her brother as she aggressively shoveled rice into her mouth.

"Uncle Chen told us about the time he nearly killed the great beastmaster REXXAR!" Shisai continued, ignoring both Chen's and Li Li's discomfort.

"What?" Chon Po's eyebrows arched up almost into his hairline. "That seems like an unnecessarily violent thing to tell children, Chen."

"Um, well, that's kind of blowing it out of proportion, Po." Chen scratched the back of his head. "That's the point of the story, actually. What happened is that he drank some of my beer, and it was so strong he accused me of trying to kill him!" He laughed awkwardly. "See? It's, uh, it's funny..."

Chon Po remained stony-faced.

"But that's not how it ended!" Shisai insisted. "Didn't you two go on to Theramore to fight Admiral Proudmoore and—"

"That's enough!" Chon Po interrupted his son. He turned an angry gaze to his brother. "You have to think about the kind of example you're setting, Chen! Look at what happened to Li Li when all she had to go on were letters!"

"Nothing *happened* to me, Papa," Li Li muttered. "I'm right here, you know. And I can *hear you*."

"That kind of talk has serious consequences, Chen."

"Hey, look at me! Oh, wait, you can't, because I'm Li Li Stormstout, the magical invisible pandaren!"

"Li Li never would have dreamed up such nonsense on her own," Chon Po continued, "not without—"

"'Nonsense'? What are you talking about? It's not *nonsense*! There's a whole, huge world out there, and every last stinking pandaren on this floating island is too busy hiding their fat heads under a shell, like Shen-zin Su during a big storm, to care about it!"

"Panhahen 'on't haff shells, Li Li," Shisai mumbled through a mouthful of food.

"It's a metaphor, you half-wit."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Shisai! And don't call your brother names, Li Li!"

Li Li glanced at her father and brother. "I can't believe you aren't even the least bit curious. About the people in the world? About their cities, their lands?"

"Not really, if it involves nearly getting eaten by an ogre like you said, Li Li." Shisai swallowed noisily. "I mean, Uncle Chen's stories are cool and everything, but—"

"Boy, this fish you made is sure delicious, Po. Thanks a bunch for dinner!" Chen said loudly.

"*Eaten by an ogre*?" Chon Po jumped out of his seat. "Are you making things up to scare your brother?" He leaned forward on his paws, staring intently at his daughter.

"No!" Li Li shouted, indignant. "I'm not making anything up! I mean, well... I *was* held captive by this ogre, I told you, though maybe 'almost eaten' was a *tiny* exaggeration—"

"ENOUGH!" Chon Po roared. "Listen to you! Going off in one breath about how 'nothing happened' to you, and then casually reminding us that an *ogre* held you captive! And you *still* insist on waxing poetic about the amazing *outside world*? Didn't you learn *anything* from Bo's death?"

Everybody, even Shisai, froze. Li Li dropped her head and stared at her plate, squinting up her eyes as a lance of guilt knifed her straight through the heart.

"That wasn't her fault, Po," Chen said quietly.

"No," Chon Po conceded, his gaze fixed on Li Li, "but if she had never run off, it never would have happened."

Tears stung the corners of Li Li's eyes. How many times had she thought that herself? She clenched her teeth in humiliated fury. *I will not cry. I will not cry. I will not...*

"Chon Po, weren't *you* the one who sent Bo after Li Li?"

"*What are you trying to say, Chen?*"

Chen sighed. "Only that speculating on what-ifs is a waste of time. Li Li couldn't have predicted the future any more than you."

"Couldn't I?" Chon Po turned his rage upon his brother. "Has *anything* like that ever happened to us here on Shen-zin Su? Our home is the safest—"

"Yes," Chen interrupted firmly. "To Xiu Li."

At the mention of Li Li and Shisai's mother, the atmosphere around the table grew even

more uncomfortable. Chon Po bowed his head, nearly shaking with anger.

"And," Chen went on relentlessly, "Wanyo's been missing for a long time. He too is likely dead."

"What," Chon Po snarled, lifting his head to face Chen, "is the point of this?"

"The fishing boats go out. Not all of them come back. Like Wanyo, like... like your wife, or any number of our fellows, Po. Risks will always exist, no matter where we are. You can't control that."

Slowly, silently, Chon Po sat down in his chair, clearly seething.

"Papa," Li Li ventured, "I want to see the world. I'll be careful—"

"*You're a damn fool for even considering it!*" Chon Po slammed his fist on the table, rattling the ceramic dishes. "The world is a dangerous place, as your *dear uncle Chen* just saw fit to remind us. You're a *child*. Do you want to end up like Bo? Or your mother?"

"Chon Po!" Chen reprimanded him sharply, but by the time the words left his mouth, Li Li had already run from the room, choking back a sob. Up the stairs, they heard a door slam.

Chen gazed evenly at Chon Po across the table, who folded his arms defiantly across his chest. The stubborn set of his jaw practically dared Chen to challenge him.

"A word, dear brother, if you will?" Chen asked as politely as he could muster, gesturing toward the more isolated kitchen.

"Fine." Chon Po stood roughly and marched into the other room, Chen following close behind.

Left alone at the table, Shisai fished a piece of carrot from his soup and slowly chewed. He glanced toward the kitchen, then toward the staircase, and swallowed.

"Well, *this* is awkward," he announced to the room at large, and helped himself to seconds.

* * *

Chen almost pushed Chon Po out the back door, onto the covered porch behind the house.

"You are being entirely unfair to Li Li," he said. "It's not *evil* for her to want to travel."

"It's dangerous!" Chon Po snapped. "More dangerous than staying here, regardless of what you say! Xiu Li and Wanyo may be gone, but those were accidents. Bo was killed outright! Do you want Li Li to get killed too?"

"Stop bringing that up like it's an inevitability! It was nothing she could have foreseen! The attackers were searching for that Pearl of Pandaria, or whatever it was they thought Wanyo had found, and they assumed Li Li would know where it was simply because she was pandaren! As for the orc, it was me he was after, and if I'd found Bo and Li Li sooner..."

"All your story proves is that, to our enemies, *any* pandaren is fair game." Chon Po paced back and forth under the outdoor lanterns, their orange light exaggerating the infuriated expression on his face. "Li Li is safer here than anywhere else!"

Chen shook his head.

"You can't force her to stay if she doesn't want to; she's already proven that once. You can't protect her forever, and trying to do so will only sabotage your cause."

"Well, I suppose you know how to raise my children better than I do!" Chon Po mocked.

"No, Chon Po, I'm just saying I know how she feels. Nothing *our* parents could have said or done when I was her age would have changed my mind, so what makes you think that anything you can do will change *hers*? She'll make her own choices."

"Her own, *bad* choices. Recklessly running off into danger, abandoning her family, shirking all her responsibilities..." Chon Po began ticking off the litany of Li Li's wrongdoings on his fingers, one by one. "Forcing us to rely on sporadic letters just to know whether she's alive or dead—"

Chen furrowed his eyebrows.

"Never settling down with a proper family of her own—"

"Po, how do you know she won't do that someday?" Chen asked, mystified.

Chon Po seemed not to have heard him.

"Not bothering to come to her own brother's wedding—"

"Who is Shisai marrying? You aren't making any sense..." Chen trailed off, mid-sentence, as the realization hit him. He stared over the porch railing, off into the night, mind suddenly blank as a number of things clicked into place. Oblivious, Chon Po kept listing Li Li's perceived transgressions.

"This is about me," Chen said softly. "Isn't it, Chon Po?"

Chon Po abruptly became silent, frozen in place, and would not meet Chen's eyes. Moments ticked agonizingly by as Chen steeled himself for a verbal barrage that his brother had likely been stewing on for years.

"This conversation is *over*."

Chon Po stomped back into the house and slammed the door shut behind him.

* * *

Sleep did not come easily to Li Li that night. She tossed and turned, each of her father's barbed words tugging relentlessly on her consciousness. Finally, as the lightening sky announced the dawn's approach, she gave up, climbed out of bed, and dressed.

On her dresser sat a small clay pot similar to the kind Bo had once filled with water and hung from the ends of the training staves that she used for practicing her balance and stances. She turned it over in her paws, feeling its familiar weight, and tucked it into her sash as she crept out of the house.

At this hour, Shen-zin Su was so still Li Li thought she could hear the dewdrops splash beneath her feet. In the dim light, spider webs stretched between the tree branches like brittle, shining lace. As Li Li walked she bent to pluck little clumps of colorful flowers from the cracks in the paving stones, gathering the blossoms into two ragged bouquets.

At the end of the trail, protected by walls and the proud lion Guardian, the glorious Wood of Staves spread out before her. Any pandaren who wished to enter the beautiful copse had to best the Guardian in single combat, something Li Li had achieved years ago. The Guardian inclined his head to her, and she bowed respectfully back as he stepped aside to let her pass. Li Li hadn't been to the wood in a long time, but it was as pristine as ever, meticulously tended by a small army of gardeners. Shortly after sunrise they would arrive to sweep away any debris that had strayed across the shrines during the night, but for now she was alone, and glad of it.

Xiu Li, Li Li and Shisai's mother, had drowned in a fishing accident when they were barely more than newborns. Li Li didn't have many memories of her mother, and though she rarely felt the loss directly, at times the lack ached keenly in her heart. She knelt in front of the Stormstout family shrine, laying one of the small bouquets across the altar.

"Mama, I miss you so much." Li Li's breath puffed in the morning air. "Papa doesn't understand; he never will. And Uncle Chen doesn't want to make Papa angry." She hesitated, almost afraid to speak aloud, though the wood was quite deserted. "You'd understand, wouldn't you, Mama? I can't stay here forever. I just can't."

Li Li rocked back onto the grass and hugged her thighs to her chest. She bowed her head into her knees in quiet contemplation, listening to the birds trilling their first morning songs from the branches of the great tree at the top of the hill. Before her legs got too stiff, she rose to her feet, paid her respects a final time, and continued through the rows of memorials to her next destination.

Strongbo's family shrine was up the hill, under the tree's glorious spreading boughs. A lump hardened at the back of Li Li's throat, her father's words returning with painful clarity.

"Didn't you learn anything from Bo's death?"

She placed the little clay pot in front of the shrine and arranged the second bouquet of flowers in it, again sinking to her knees.

"If I could bring you back, Bo, I would. Or I would have done something different. I would have gone someplace that awful naga and her orc brute couldn't have found us.

"But I wouldn't have not left in the first place."

At this admission, a tear slipped from Li Li's eye and ran down her cheek, matting her fur.

"I had to go. Just staying here makes me crazy. Maybe that makes me a bad person. Papa seems to think so. But I'm more afraid of what would happen to me if I tried to stay than I am of whatever might happen to me out there. I hope that's not a slight to your memory, Bo. I only want to do what's right for me. I am so sorry." Her words choked against her constricted throat. "I never wanted anyone to get hurt." She bowed her head as she had at her mother's shrine, and recited a prayer for the dead.

"I wish you peace," she finished, and stood. She looked up at the sky, rosy gold with the dawn, the sun's orange rim just cresting the eastern horizon. Li Li brushed off the hem of her shift, staring at her feet. Her heart still ached, and she had no desire to return home. It was early yet, but there was a good chance that Chen might be awake by now.

* * *

He answered his door on the fourth knock.

"Li Li?" He blinked in surprise. "Come in! Let me get you some breakfast."

Li Li followed him into the little cottage and took a seat at the kitchen table while he busied himself getting their meal ready.

"Sorry to bug you so early, Uncle Chen."

"Not at all!" he called, his voice muffled behind a cabinet door. "I was just setting up my latest brewing project. Sadly not a lot of varied stuff I can use here, but we'll see how it turns out."

Li Li sat in silence, absently fiddling with her sleeves as Chen prepared porridge on the stovetop.

"Are you still upset about last night?" Chen asked, stirring the porridge with a long stick.

"I never wanted anything to happen to Bo," she mumbled, staring at the table.

"I know, Li Li. Your father knows it too. He's just..."

A big jerk." Li Li snorted.

"... stubborn," Chen said diplomatically, thinking of his own conversation with Chon Po on the porch.

"I don't *like* displeasing my father," Li Li admitted as Chen set a bowl in front of her and sat down across the table. "But I'm miserable here. And"—her voice grew louder—"life is an adventure! Or, well, it should be. It's not." She faltered and jammed a spoon into her breakfast. "Not here, anyway."

Chen patted her shoulder. "It's okay, Li Li."

"Come with me, Uncle Chen."

"What?"

"Remember when we talked about having our own adventures together? Let's do that! I'd be safe with you; Papa knows it. Let's go see the world!"

Chen opened his mouth, then hesitated. Li Li's eager eyes searched his face, but as the seconds passed, she began to realize that the response she'd hoped for was not the one she was going to get.

"You agree with Papa, don't you?"

"It's not that," Chen said. "I think you both have reasonable concerns. But, as for me..." He looked around at his little house—at the pans hanging from above the stove; the shelves full of dishes, scrolls, and decorations; the comfortable furniture—and he smiled. "I'm happy being here. I spent so much of my life on the road, with no home of my own. This is new. *This* is an adventure to me now."

"You have *got* to be kidding." Li Li gulped a mouthful of her porridge, then shoved the bowl away, meal half finished. Here was the one person around who understood her, and he had given up. She had been betrayed.

"I know you don't see things like I do, Li Li. You're still young—"

"*Ugh*, now you really *do* sound like Papa. Since when did the great adventurer Chen Stormstout get so *boring*?" She flung the last word at him like an accusation.

"Things change, Li Li." Everything about his demeanor oozed an infuriatingly calm patience. "I've done my traveling. I'm ready for something different."

"Well, I haven't done mine," she shot back, "and if you and Papa have your way, I never will! I'll just grow old and decrepit and spend all day making tea and commenting on the weather, and my life will be a *waste*!"

"Li Li, you know that's not true."

"Don't talk to me. You're on *his* side!" Li Li jumped up from the table and stormed out of the house. Chen leaned his cheek against the heel of his paw, half-smiling, as he watched her go.

"We Stormstouts," he said to himself, "we're a hardheaded bunch."

* * *

Plunk. The stone hit the ocean's surface with a hefty splash. *Plunk. Plunk. Plunk.* She hurled more of them into the water, but the satisfaction they brought was fleeting. Defeated, she sat down in a huff.

This was one of her favorite spots on all of Shen-zin Su. Right at the front of his shell, Li Li could dangle her legs above the place where the wide stretch of his neck disappeared into the water, and look out toward the distant blue-gray line of the horizon, where the sea blurred into the sky. Once upon a time, famed traveler Liu Lang had founded the settlement on Shen-zin Su to carry the bravest and most daring of the pandaren across Azeroth as they sought adventure and knowledge. But curiosity had long since turned to complacency, leaving those days lost to the annals of history.

"I hate this," Li Li announced. "When I was traveling, before Bo and I ran into trouble, it just felt *right*. I can't accomplish anything, stuck here. Er, no offense, of course, Shen-zin Su." Li Li patted the edge of the turtle's shell comfortingly. "But there's so much more out there!

"Seeing Stormwind and Ironforge—I'd never have been able to imagine them, not with all the maps or letters in the world. King Magni was so kind to me! He showed me his home. I wish I had something to show him in return, but I don't. Chen's decided *this* is home. Good for him. Sorry, Shen-zin Su. I love you, but this has never really felt like home. Is there a place somewhere that I could ever call home?"

Li Li didn't particularly expect an answer to her question, so when she heard the Great Turtle rumble, blowing bubbles out into the ocean ahead of her, she was momentarily taken aback. She wondered briefly if Shen-zin Su's noisemaking had been an actual attempt at communication, before deciding that it had simply been a coincidence.

"I do wish I could talk to you." Li Li sighed. "You'd probably be more help than my family." Dejected, she dropped her chin to her chest and folded her paws in her lap.

The ground beneath her shifted violently, throwing her onto her side and bruising her shoulder. Startled, Li Li tried to sit up, but the Great Turtle shuddered anew and tossed her onto her back. Li Li pressed herself into the ground, heart racing, as Shen-zin Su pitched and heaved like a boat in a storm. She was catapulted forward onto the lip of the shell, and she grabbed wildly for a handhold, scrambling for stability. Below her the water slowly parted, falling in cascades away from Shen-zin Su's mighty neck as the turtle raised his enormous head.

Beneath her, Li Li felt the turtle collect himself like a yak about to jump a fence. A great rumbling began deep in the back of his throat; she could feel it more than she could hear it, rattling her eardrums. With a great surge of force, Shen-zin Su... coughed.

Li Li could have sworn that was exactly what happened. The Great Turtle made a sound like a low, deep foghorn, and the sudden movement slammed her once more into the shell. Stars exploded across her vision as her head cracked against the ground. Clutching her temples, she at last managed to roll away from the edge. The shaking began to abate, mellowing into an exaggerated rocking, and eventually, Shen-zin Su stilled.

Cautiously, Li Li pushed herself up on her arms, bracing for another anticipated quake. She pressed one paw against the sore spot where she'd hit her head. It throbbed painfully against her palm, and she knew she'd have a lump there by the end of the day. Grimacing, she wondered what could possibly have triggered the turtle's bizarre episode. Had Shen-zin Su accidentally swallowed a whale?

She stared out toward the water, gently massaging her head. Swirling, white-capped eddies lapped all around Shen-zin Su, evidence at least that she hadn't imagined everything. Carefully, she stood, her vision still swimming.

Li Li blinked, distrusting her eyes. Out to sea, a particular patch of white differed from the rest. It was too regular to be the foaming tip of a wave, but instead looked rather like the sail of a small fishing junk. Li Li squinted, trying to get a better view. She had not been deceived. The boat bobbed as it rode the surf, pandaren markings clearly visible on the prow.

The craft pulled slowly nearer. Its mast was broken, one side of the sail trailing uselessly, so the skipper doggedly paddled his limping vessel forward with an oar. A dozen yards or so from landfall he straightened, pushing his frayed straw hat from his forehead. He waved enthusiastically, calling out to Li Li across the water.

"Well, hello there! Strange to say, but it's been a long time since I last had a good look at the sun. The sky sure is blue! And everything smells so fresh, not like fish at all!"

The bizarre statement robbed Li Li of words. She furrowed her brows, perplexed, and watched silently as the boat glided the last few feet to shore and ran aground with a soft crunch. The fisherman leaped lightly over the gunwale and waved again, grinning widely. Li Li's jaw fell open in shock. She even momentarily forgot the thumping pain on the side of her head.

Wanyo, the long-lost fisherman, had returned.

* * *

"So, you've actually been *inside* of Shen-zin Su this whole time?"

"Yup!" Wanyo answered cheerily. "I got swallowed up. Never really felt the need to leave."

Li Li pressed her ear firmly against the side of the door—a little too firmly—and she winced

at the fresh pain that blossomed from the tender spot on her head. Reluctantly, she backed off a bit. She wouldn't be able to hear as much of the Elders' conversation with Wanyo, but it was better than giving herself a worse headache. Through the wooden door slats, Li Li heard someone make a clucking noise, and she could just imagine the stodgy old pandaren shaking their heads. She stifled a giggle.

"Well, regardless of that"—Li Li recognized her grandmother Mei's distinctive voice—"there is the question of what to do with this thing you've brought back."

"I dunno, really." Li Li could practically hear Wanyo shrug. "Maybe it's some sort of crystal ball. Always just showed me where to find the best fishing, which turns out was right where I was at, in the turtle!" He guffawed.

Someone else muttered something Li Li couldn't quite make out, but she thought it must have been snide, judging from the snorts and snickers that followed.

"It doesn't look anything like a crystal ball, or any other magic artifact I've ever seen." This voice belonged to Chon Po, and Li Li stiffened a bit, her heart suddenly hammering against her ribs. He'd be furious if he caught her eavesdropping on the meeting.

Chen spoke up next.

"If anything, it looks like a giant pearl." There was an edge to his words, and Li Li was certain she knew what was on her uncle's mind—the so-called Pearl of Pandaria, the item the naga siren Zhahara had once insisted was in Wanyo's possession. Had she been right?

"Got it off a murloc, would you believe?" Wanyo laughed again. "If it's a pearl, it's a magic pearl for sure, 'cause I ain't ever seen a pearl before that knows where the best fishing's at." He paused. "And, I mean, why else would that crazy naga lady've shown up soon as I had it?"

Li Li's eyes widened. That had to have been Zhahara.

"Crazy naga lady?" Chon Po asked. "Li Li did mention something along these lines to me once. Would you elaborate, Wanyo?"

"I was out at night, caught the murloc with the pearl in my fishing net. Little guy was on his last legs; he gave me the thing. As soon as I took it, the naga popped out of the water and called a lightning bolt down on me—broke my mast! I wasn't about to stick around, and I got some ocean friends of my own. Big fish helped me escape. Must have been one of the little ones I threw back years ago, returning the favor!"

"And that's when you got swallowed by Shen-zin Su?" Chen's voice that time.

"Yeah. I wasn't really paying attention to where I was going, just hoping to leave that scaly witch behind, and before I knew it, the fish ducked away and I found myself face to face with the Great Turtle, who didn't stop a minute but swallowed me right up."

"I have one more question for you, Wanyo," Chon Po said. "Why did you decide to leave your, uh, fishing spot today, after so long there?"

"Pearl thing told me to."

"What?"

"I looked into it this morning when I got up, just like I always did. Instead of showing me fishing, it showed me sailing back into town. Figured it was time to go, so I hopped into my boat, and Shen-zin Su spit me out."

Chon Po sighed so heavily Li Li could hear it clearly through the door. "All right, then, Wanyo. That's that, I suppose. We'll have to figure out what this thing really is at some

point. For now I say we keep it in the Great Library. Do you all agree?"

A general murmur of assent followed Chon Po's question, and the Elders fell to discussing more mundane matters.

Li Li hastily scrambled away from the door and scurried outside, ducking along the hedgerow until she was far from the Temple of Five Dawns. Her mind raced, analyzing what she'd overheard. The giant, magic pearl—the Pearl of Pandaria? Li Li sat down against a tree and tapped her chin with her fingertip. Zhahara had claimed the pearl was a powerful, ancient artifact. Li Li had been sure it was a myth, and so had both her father and Chen. But now...

The shadows began to lengthen in the grass beside her. Li Li jumped up and hurried home. Her father couldn't suspect anything, so she had to act normal, but her mind whirred away, brimming with ideas.

* * *

Late that night, Li Li crept silently down the stairs of her house. She tiptoed through the hall and timidly shut the front door behind her as she stepped outside. All that mattered was getting to the pearl. She had to see it for herself.

The Great Library never officially closed, and the little magic lanterns lining the hallway obligingly lit for her as Li Li hurried by. She guessed the pearl would be showcased with all the library's best collections, and she set off toward the display room.

Sure enough, the pearl sat proudly on a wooden pedestal in the middle of the floor, protectively covered by a glass casing. Li Li carefully lifted it away, placing it to the side.

The pearl was even larger than Li Li would have guessed, nearly as big around as a melon.

Its opalescent sheen reflected the dim light in a kaleidoscope of muted pastel rainbows. Li Li stared, entranced by its unique beauty. Unable to resist, she placed her paws gently on either side of it and held it close to her face. The pearl was warm to the touch, and it hummed faintly with an energy all its own. As Wanyo had said, this thing was definitely magic.

"You showed Wanyo where to fish," she whispered at the pearl, "but what can you show me?"

As if on cue, the pearl started to shimmer softly, the colors reflected on the surface swirling together into a great pinwheeled vortex. Li Li's eyelids grew heavy, and she dropped them shut. When she opened them, she found herself surrounded by thick, silver-gray mist, no longer holding the pearl, feeling curiously as if she floated halfway between wakefulness and dreaming. Was this real?

The fog began to dissipate, fading away to reveal a bird's-eye view of rolling green pastures lined with beautiful, pink-blossomed trees. Li Li flailed in midair, fully expecting to plummet to the ground, but she did not. Gradually she calmed, and she craned her head to the left and right. Her heart raced with excitement; the pearl was granting her a vision.

The scene changed, focusing on a bustling town, streets filled with pandaren hawking wares and going about their daily lives. Li Li furrowed her brows; she didn't recognize anyone or anything there. Architecturally the buildings looked like the ones on Shen-zin Su, but something was off. The roads, the landscape, were all wrong. Similar, but wrong.

The view continued to pan around. Huge, dense forests of cypress and conifer blanketed the slopes of snow-capped mountains that climbed into the sky. Gulls and mergansers sped along the sandy shore where the land met the sea. Everywhere, Li Li saw the telltale signs of her people—from the great temples dominating the hillsides to the distinctive markers along the roads. This place, whatever it was, had been home to pandaren for a very long

time.

Li Li floated slowly upward, the silver mist billowing toward the center of the region, rolling in off the sea, thickening until it completely obscured the land below. Hanging in the sky, Li Li could see the sun setting on the western horizon, far beyond the edge of the fog, its red-gold light glittering off the ocean's surface. Stars already blazed in the east, and Azeroth's twin moons shone brightly, late in both their phases.

A geography lesson from years ago popped into her memory: great swaths of the southern ocean were virtually unnavigable, perpetually covered in thick mist. Shen-zin Su avoided those areas.

An unknown land of mountains, forests, and fields, hidden among the great mists of the South Seas, yet filled with her people?

Pandaria.

As soon as the thought dawned on her, the vision began to fade away, disintegrating rapidly before her very eyes. Li Li blinked, and the sky was gone, along with the floating sensation, and once again she found herself standing firmly in the Great Library, staring into the gleaming surface of the giant pearl she held between her paws.

Pandaria... the legendary homeland of her people, the place Liu Lang and his followers had once left behind in pursuit of a more thrilling life upon the back of Shen-zin Su. Did it really still exist? Most of the pandaren on the Great Turtle figured that Pandaria had long since been destroyed by war or succumbed to disease, or... something. Otherwise they would have *seen* it again by now, wouldn't they?

Li Li slowly turned the great pearl in her paws. The world held many secrets, and magic could do many things.

"I need to find it," she whispered. "That's why I saw the vision, isn't it? Wanyo didn't, and none of the Elders. Not even my father or Uncle Chen. Just me."

The colors on the pearl swirled again, and Li Li took that for a good omen.

"You'll have to come with me," she said, tucking the pearl under one arm. It was a bit unwieldy, but it was nothing she couldn't fit into a pouch or travel pack. Quickly, Li Li hurried back through the library, heading for home. She had so much to prepare, and time was short. Who knew how long she'd been in the vision?

Once, she had set out to find Chen, and she had succeeded, though it had come at the terrible price of Bo's life. Li Li's heart hammered in her chest. She would not repeat her mistakes. Her mission was clear.

* * *

Extra clothing, her journal of notes and copied maps, rations stolen from the kitchen, various knickknacks she thought would be useful, and lastly, the pearl. Li Li reverently wrapped it in a cloak and laid it on top of her other belongings in her traveling pack. That was everything she needed to get started on her journey. She strapped on a little pouch full of enchanted powder—it always came in handy—and surveyed her room one last time, deciding whether she had forgotten anything. Convinced that she had not, she went to the dresser and retrieved her crane whistle from the drawer, draping the cord around her neck along with the string of draenei beads Chen had given her as a gift. She rubbed both necklaces between her fingers, wishing herself luck.

"Only one more thing to do," she said softly.

Li Li had written a letter like this to her father once before, and the words came easily as

she drew the stylus across the page.

Dear Papa and Uncle Chen,

By the time you read this, I'll be on my way to Ironforge. Shen-zin Su is not the place for me.

I've told you this for years.

Uncle Chen, finding you was like solving a great mystery, but there is another one left—an even bigger one. Wanyo's pearl has shown me how to solve it, so that's what I'm going to do.

No one will get hurt this time, I promise. When I see you again, you won't believe what I'll have found!

—Li Li

* * *

Far from the center of town, Li Li raised the whistle to her lips and blew a sharp, clear note. She only had to wait a moment before she heard the quiet rustle of feathers, and her old friend the Crane landed before her. The great bird cocked his head to the side and evaluated her with a dark, fathomless eye. Li Li smiled sheepishly.

"You'd probably say the same thing as Papa right now. But I can't sit around waiting for the world to come to me. I've got work to do."

The Crane arched his neck and hooted at her, beating his wings and prancing from one lanky leg to the other.

"All right, go on and laugh." Li Li rolled her eyes. The Crane honked gleefully at her again and lowered himself to the ground, allowing her to climb upon his back with ease. When she had settled, he leaped straight up, taking to the sky with a powerful downstroke of his wings.

"Pandaria's to the south," Li Li called above the wind, her face pressed low against the base

of the Crane's neck, "hidden in a huge bank of mist."

The Crane pitched forward, nearly tossing Li Li into the ocean. "*Honk?*"

"What was that about, you crazy bird?" Li Li clutched at the Crane's feathers, her sore head aching again from the sudden movement. "Of course I don't expect you to take me the whole way! We'll need days' worth of supplies and food, for crying out loud."

The Crane seemed unconvinced. "Hooonk?"

"An airship!" Li Li grinned. "And I happen to know someone who let me use one before."

"Haaaaaaaank?"

"Ironforge! King Magni! Are you going to blab the entire time, or what? Get flying!"

* * *

"*This is your fault.*"

Chon Po brandished Li Li's letter in front of Chen's face like a dagger, eyes red with fury. Chen shifted from foot to foot.

"All her life, it's been '*Uncle Chen*' this and '*Uncle Chen*' that and '*Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful to see the world with Uncle Chen?*'" Chon Po paced the floorboards, rage pouring out of his very posture. "And *nothing* could sway her delusion. Oh *no*, Li Li only ever saw the *romance*. Thanks in no small part to your letters, *Brother.*"

Chen took a deep breath. Chon Po was beyond reason, so Chen silently let him rant with complete abandon, wondering how much of the tirade was meant for his daughter, and how

much was meant for his brother.

"... irresponsibly filling her head with false hopes. What does she possibly think she can find out there that we don't already have here?"

Decent brewing seasonings, for one, Chen found himself thinking, staring off at the far wall above his brother's head. He nearly cracked a grin. Suddenly Chon Po's furious face filled his vision, startling him.

"Don't you have *anything* to say for yourself?"

"Chon Po, I'm not sure what I *can* say. I didn't tell Li Li to go off anywhere."

"You may as well have!" Chon Po shouted. "You've been telling her just as much for years and years, if not in person! She idolizes you, and now she's gone on this damn foolhardy quest for whatever 'great mystery' she was talking about. It's your responsibility to bring her back from this"—he checked Li Li's letter again—"this Ironforge place."

Truth be told, Chen indeed worried for his niece. She *was* awfully young to be out on her own, and if his memory served, this "great mystery" they had once discussed was to find Pandaria itself, something he wasn't even sure was possible. Furthermore, she had taken the pearl, and a naga had already tried to hunt her down for that very item. The danger did seem palpable. Also, Stormwind pumpkins made for a fantastic ale.

"All right, Po, I'll go find her," Chen agreed. "But she's her own person. I'm not going to force her to come back."

Chon Po snorted. "She's a *child*, Chen."

Chen shook his head.

"Less so every day, Po. I'll be on my way as soon as possible."

"The quicker, the better." Chon Po crossed his arms. "Who *knows* what kind of trouble she's getting herself into this time?"