

The Kun-Lai Couple



A Roguish Start

Hilda's Origin Story



>Gilneas, akin to early nineteenth century London but with all the Azeroth magic and advancements in tech and culture. During the events of Warcraft 2 and Warcraft 3.

>Hilda's parents are a fan of Greymane. They supported his idea to make a giant wall. The country was great without the Alliance and there was no need to be expansionist when life was already top titty.

>Mother was an ambassador to the rare interactions with the outside world.

>Father was a naval militia lieutenant who reported straight to Greymane.

>Third War rolls around. Massive regret starts to stem. MGilneasGA status revoked. Who would wanna live in Gilneas anymore?

>The Gilnean-deployed worgen affliction against the undead scourge assault backfired.

>Gilneas City itself slowly became the subject to the affliction and civil war as the outskirts became untraversable.

>At this point, Hilda was well into her teenage years. Learning the ins and outs of politics, courtship, subtlety, and Gilnean traditions.

>Her mom eventually shows a recent bite. From a Worgen. She wasn't careful enough when returning from an ambassador meeting.

>Hilda backs away, mortified. After hearing rumors of crazed, rabid worgens in the city, she thought it was all over.

>But then her mother reveals that everything is actually fine.

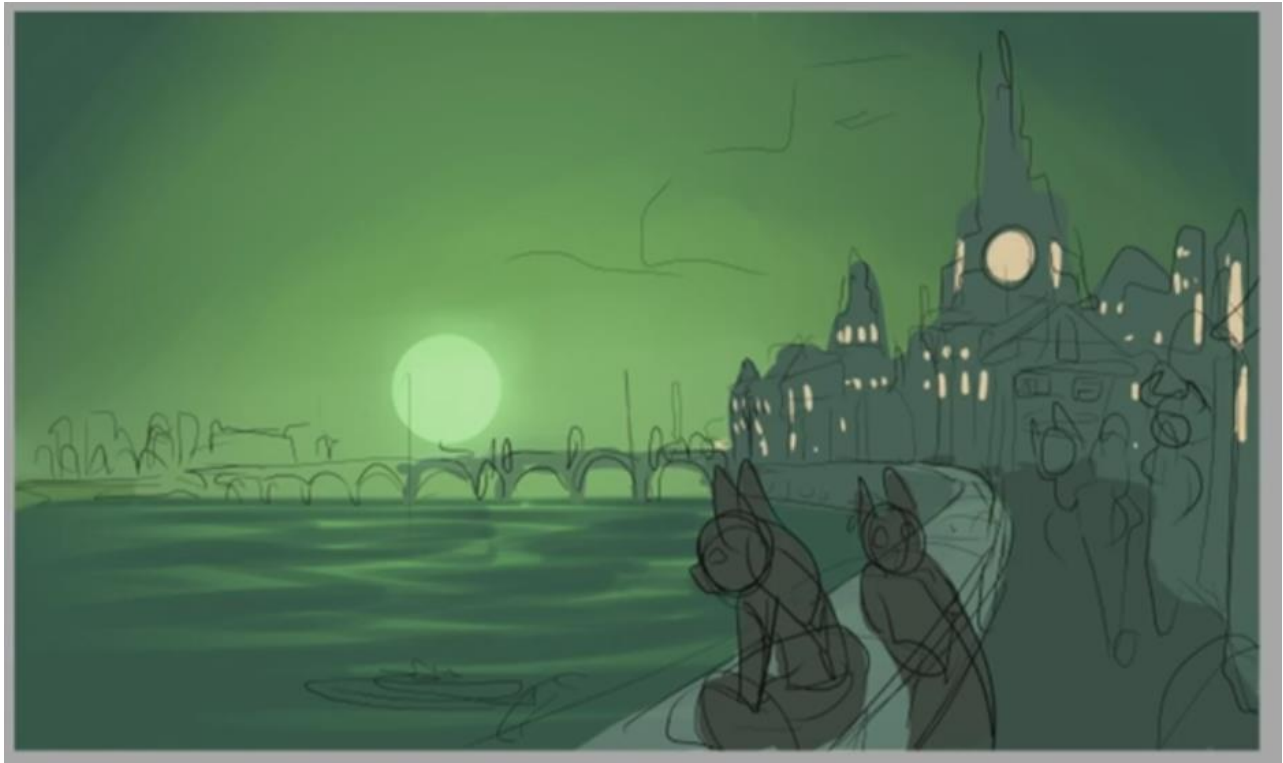
>Dad doesn't know.

>Transforming into her worgen form, Hilda's mother proved that nothing was lost. It was more like a twisted blessing that could be ignored and hidden.

>She was still mum.

>After that, Hilda saw her mom in worgen form only once more. It was a secret between the two of them.

>Mom would sometimes allude to the cool things she can do in worgen form and the subtle inhuman strength she's gained.



- >Hilda started dreaming about the outside world. The places beyond the wall. If her mom could turn into a monster and still be as badass as she was, then clearly she wasn't a monster and there's plenty out there to discover.
- >Heck, if her mom was an ambassador seeing all that's out there, maybe it's not a pipe dream?
- >Maybe all this noble stuff is just pish posh.
- >That's when the peak of the civil war exploded.
- >Walls went unwatched.
- >Townfolk fought their friends.
- >Worgen invaded.
- >Hilda's manor, her home, was breached by looters.
- >Her dad was somewhere else in the city at Greymane's side.
- >She followed her mom to the underground tunnel leading outside to the cliff their estate was placed upon.
- >The rain outside the rocky, slippery cavern walls splashed on large furred silhouettes.
- >A duo of Worgen.
- >Suddenly and silently, a trio. The third being her mom. The last time she saw her. In her worgen form with pupils illuminated by the curse and full moon. Maddened and fighting off the duo to save her daughter.
- >Terrified, Hilda scraped out of the rockface and into the rain, but not before her ankle was caught by claws.
- >She didn't even feel the pain. Just the hot blood as teeth ever so slightly bit into her leg.
- >Glancing back, Hilda saw that it would have been worse if mom didn't clasp the attacker's snout to prevent the entire leg from being gashed.
- >The bite didn't last long.
- >Mom manhandled the biter's body in between her and the other worgen.

- >Amidst a lightning flash, the biter's jaw and snout was used as leverage to split apart his entire throat.
- >The fight continued as Hilda hopped forward to the peninsula.
- >Hops led into a slip. Which became a mudslide into the below brush and foliage.
- >The young noble's vision swayed. Weird haziness stemmed from her leg. Thunder rolled by, lulling her to unconsciousness.



- >She awoke to the same moon. But it was so much closer to the shoreline.
- >Climbing up the rockface only awarded her with the gruesome sight of a worgen who's neck was ripped in half.
- >No sign of her mom or the other attacker in the manor either which was entirely wrecked by the looters.
- >She took a letter opener as a knife and some stuff from her room.
- >At least her leg wasn't bleeding.
- >Morning rolled around and the city was still in heightened conflict.
- >Hilda eventually found plenty of Gilnean refugees that escaped the madness. A convoy formed to make the long trek to Stormwind, mostly by boat, especially now that Arthas took Lordaeron.
- >Maybe mom would be on one of those?
- >Hilda joined the exodus full of hope but the worgen affliction residing within her body began to take its toll as neither disparate group met along the way showed any signs of her parents.
- >She constantly felt cold and kinda sick.
- >Then she could smell everything. Like, every little thing.
- >By the time they reached Menethil Harbor, the bite marks on her leg got just a bit hairy.
- >In fact, she was growing hair way faster and had to settle with pigtails to even manage it.
- >Her body ached and the convoy was getting annoyed by her insistence to plop down on the wagons.

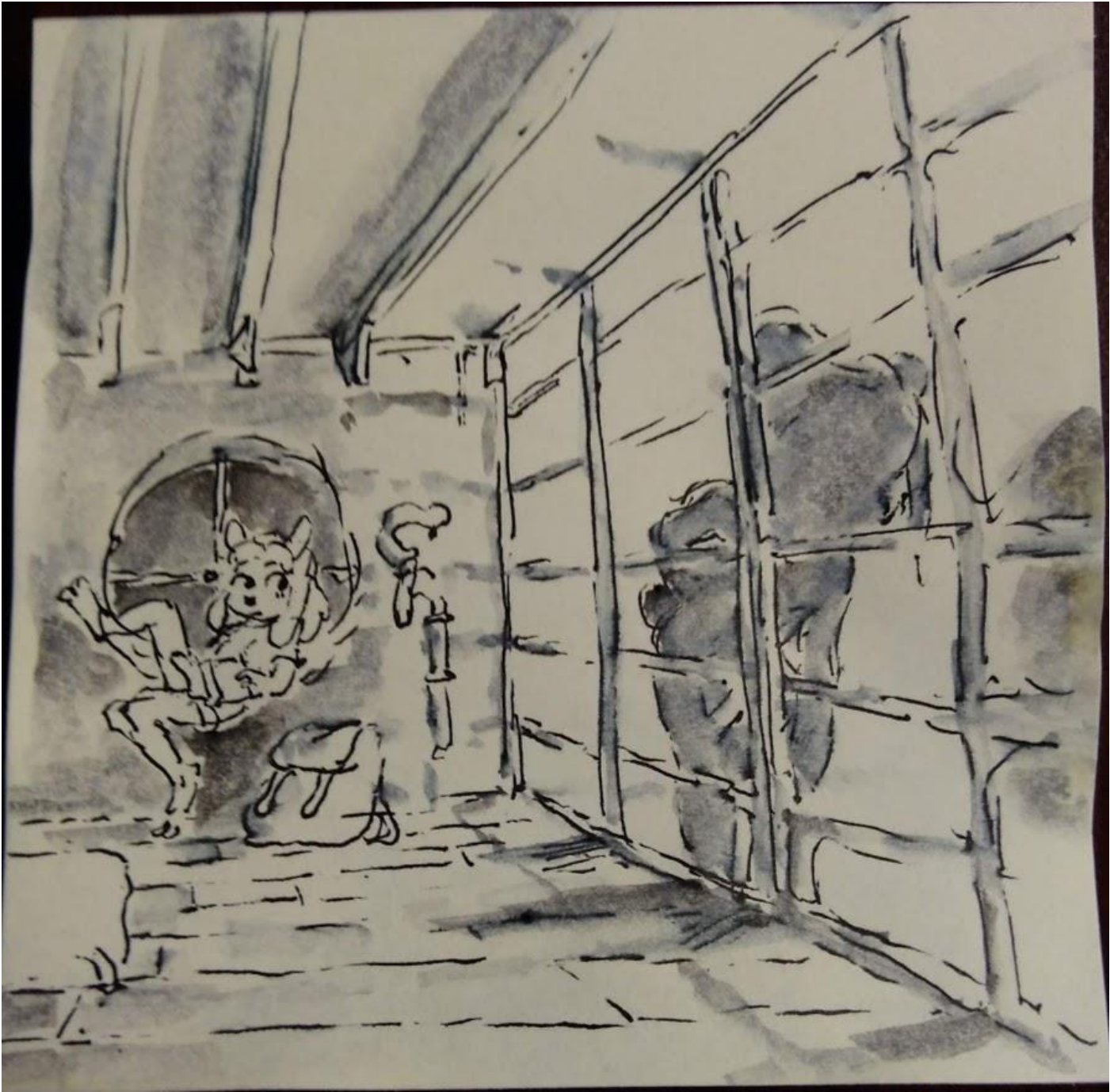
- >Eventually, Ironforge's Deeprun Tram caused more dizziness. The flashing lights causing the corner of her vision to create glimpses of her smiling mom.
- >Disjointed conversations with the friends she made along the journey eventually raised enough suspicion to where she dodged any interactions.
- >She practically screamed back at responses, frustrated about the lack of baths and food.
- >The mixture of tension, anger, and fright caused her to split from the convoys as soon as Old Town crowded her view.
- >A bump splays her backpack onto the stone tiles.
- >Annoyance spikes to scared alertness as a worgen scoffs at the minor inconvenience and goes along his way.

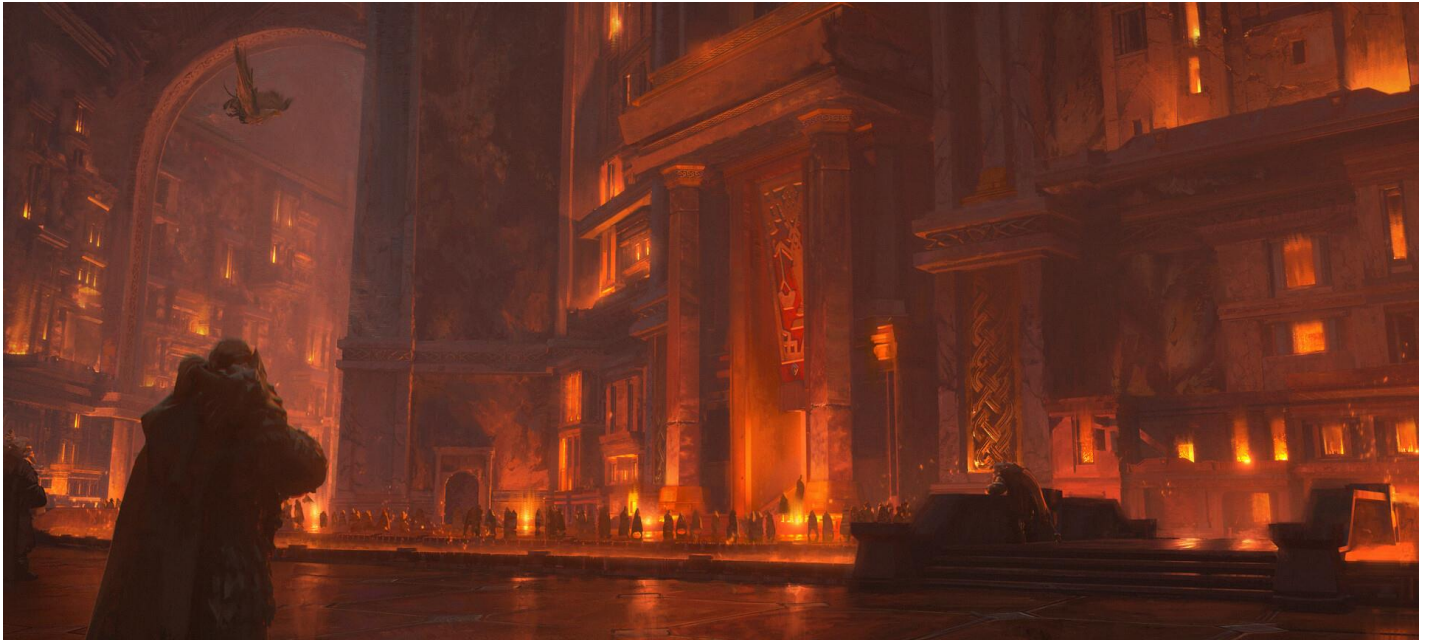


- >It didn't make sense.
- >That's a worgen. And no one's attacking him. He's wearing clothes. What's going on? Where's mom?
- >None of it made sense. Everyone was so loud. So she ran into the most quiet place. A giant cathedral.
- >The ache in her leg, which she had forgotten for days until now, finally subsided.
- >Silently, and without pain, she transformed into what her friends see her as now.
- >She hid the form. First attempting to plead with those that looked like Stormwind nobles. Wouldn't they know about her family? She's a noble too.

- >Apparently her previous status mattered little to those outside Gilneas. In fact, it hurt more than helped as outsiders viewed the previously isolated city slightly traitorous.
- >As the Cataclysm passed and more worgen became broadly accepted into society, she thought it was more appropriate to stay in that form.
- >She didn't know what to do with her new body. Sure she had stories and hints about her mom's worgen form but this is real. And alone.
- >Though, the glimmers of her mum never stopped. Hilda knew she was out there somewhere.

Prologue





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It takes a minute for your newly heightened eyesight to adjust to Ironforge's Stonefire Tavern brightly lit restaurant. Some dwarven patrons glance back at your illuminated gaze, first thrown off by your appearance but relax once they realize you're not a beast. Or at least not a hostile one. As they go back to the gambling and storytelling with ale-a-plenty, you affix on the giant hog stuffed with an apple smack dab in the middle of the venue. Drool drips off a fang as you watch the broth seep down the tender meat. Your gaze is broken by a bouncer who grunts at you to buzz off. Not wanting to make your face known here like you did in Stormwind just yet, you do just that.

It's hard to tell if your new nose is the cause of why you solely smell barbeque as you saunter through the halls of the rocky fortress' interior. Ultimately, it's your ears that steal your attention as they perk up to a giddy dwarf laughing uncontrollably. A frustrated ponytailed Pandaren was just exiting the throne room where the clamor was coming from. You tracked her from the nearby shadows as she stomped up to a nonchalant bread vendor.

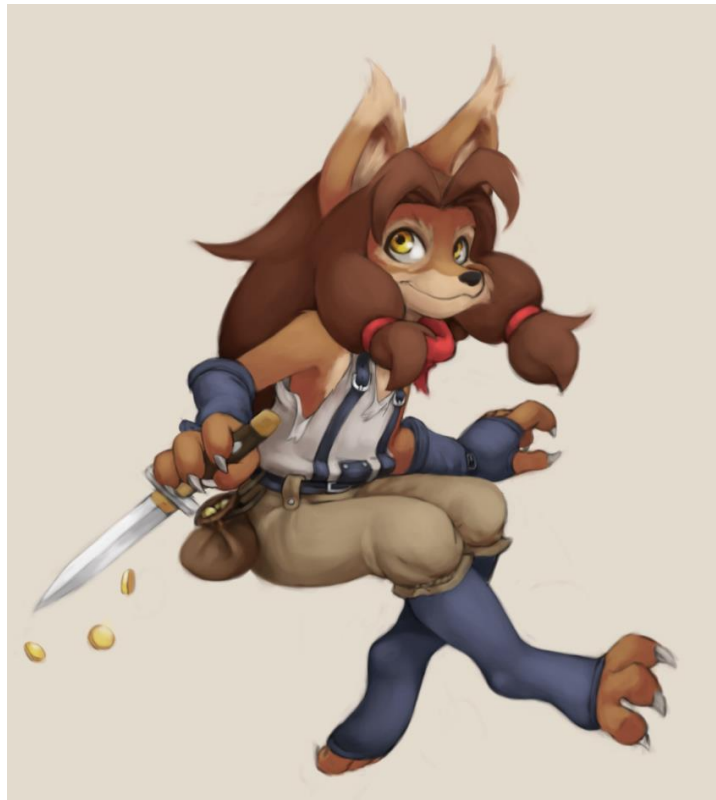
You've never seen her race before but heard they're pretty lazy. Lazy enough to buy food without even haggling against the ridiculous price. Realizing this as a chance to finally nab some food, you trail behind her to a corridor. She couldn't be any older than you so it feels like it'd be a piece of cake to swipe that sandwich off her satchel right... now! You barely miss the swipe and instead have your paw caught by hers. However, without a word, she hands you the food.

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Lightning awakes and invades your vision accompanied by a low rumble from a distant thunderstorm. The rest of your shoulder slips off the large bed followed by a tumble onto the creaky wooden floor of your tavern room. "Oowwwkay..." comes out as more of a groan from the dream induced stupor. Muscle memory kicks in to drag yourself on over to the windowsill. The midnight moon greets you behind a misty drizzle amidst the city's market district. Three days and three sleepless nights.

"Why can't tonight just be normal?". Your whisper draws out into a foggy Fall exhale. Nothing of recent has been normal. Not even Azeroth. Everything from the Legion invasion, to the Fourth War, and all the way to the events surrounding the Shadowlands pushed the world to madness. Honestly, the possibilities of the Shadowlands is what made you start looking for Mum again.



Boralus hasn't been what you hoped though. Especially after hearing rumors of how some Gilnean refugees found their way here during the downfall years ago.

That's not to say that Kul Tiras is entirely written off but if Mum and Dad aren't here then why would they be on this isle at all? The constant inquiring and scouting has been exhausting. Well, more disappointing than tiring.

At least being here has been a bit of a refresher. The sounds emanating from this naval port town have reminded you of what was once home in Gilneas City. Memories from years long gone came flooding back into your cursed worgen mind on the first day. The mewling of seagulls triggered moments of when Mother called "[Hilda! Dinner's on the table. You're going to adore this recipe I picked up at Menethil Harbor!](#)" Somehow the architecture helps shape in her nearly forgotten facial features too. It's got the militaristic Alliance vibe but nothing like what Menethil had. More like the isolated freebooter practicality from Gilneas. Simple but charming and ruthless at the same time. Just like her.



While sitting wedged between the only windowsill, your thoughts lock onto the spiraling high clocktower. The top of which is barely visible past the overhang shielding you from getting wet. The hands ticked around this third night amongst the moonlit birds who couldn't care any less about your series of awful dreams. The first night's was unsurprisingly the typical flashback to the night you last saw Mum. Of course it had its own new flavor of terror too. The second was just a surreal moment waking up in that Stormwind Cathedral after transforming into a worgen for the first time all scared, confused, and alone. This third one though, that was weird. You were taken back to Ironforge a few years back when you had nothing but a 'borrowed' luggage bag and a cubby in the Forlorn Cavern.



The streets below and around that clocktower manage to still drone with sailors going about their chores, distracting you from the past.

>"Come on! Give it up!"

Someone's grunts actually wakes you up over the hustle and bustle of distant fishermen. It came from the front entrance of the tavern but on the other side. Sleep definitely isn't happening so you decide instead to put on your boots and slide off the window onto the tiled roof. Your roguish footing is enough to prevent a slip but your fear of heights doesn't make climbing down a stack of crates into the alleyway any easier. A better angle into the well lit street reveals the duo of fishermen staring back over their shoulders, clearly confused at what was happening to the tavern's mailbox.

>"Just. Gimme. My. Stuff!"

You round the corner to see a girl give one final yank on a box, finally freeing it from the mailbox's clutches but causing her to fall back toward moist bricks. Though, instead of falling, she twirls around into a pirouette and holds the package high.

>"Finally!" The same pandaren from your dream turns to to face you. "Man, how do they even fit anything in these?"



"Magic, probably." You remember the ponytail and outfit. It's definitely her. "Weird question. Were you in Ironforge a few years ago?"

>"You'll have to be a bit more descriptive but yeah. Guessing you were too?"

"Yup. You gave me lunch or something like that. Kinda hard to remember." Your awkward chuckle extends past her deepening gaze.

>"Wait... Was it a sandwich? Are you that worgen??" Her hand tightens on the bottom of a staff behind her back.

"Yeah? Name's Hilda and I just wanna say thanks. Uhh." Her glowing amber eyes peer intensely into yours through sparse droplets. "You good?"

>"I don't need to crack open my journal to remember you tried to steal that from me."

"Hold up. Steal?" The embarrassing recollection hits you as hard as the Deeprun Tram. That dream was a lie. You actually did try to steal her food. And she laid you flat on the ground back then with a leg sweep. "Oh my gods. I did. Look, that was a different time. And it was more of a pickpocket. Totally different."

>"Then what do you want?" With those eyes, she must see as well in the dark as you can. This must be what it's like to be on the other end of the same snarl you've done to so many others.

"Nothing! Really this time. I actually just came to see if you needed help. It can get kinda sketchy around here."

>"Uh huh." She noticeably relaxes. "What's with that by the way? And where can I even get a room around here? This town's been super weird."

"You need a room? I got one. I owe you, so we can share. Can't sleep anyway so the bed's yours if you want it."

>"Well if this is the inn anyway, sure. But don't try anything."

Guiding your new skeptical roommate past the mailbox through the tavern's door treated you both to a vacant bar.

"It's up a couple floors." You gesture toward the torchlit stairs and answer her other question. "So you just got here, huh? Boralus is in a bit of a lockdown. No one comes in and out. Sooo how did you get in?"



>"Hitched a ride on an Alliance cargo ship but they didn't mention any lockdown. What's going on? Can I even get a boat to Pandaria?"

"Probably not. Town criers have been yelling about some Horde raiding party doing strafing runs on patrols in the mainland. Apparently it's gonna be shut down by a secured convoy but who knows if that'll work out."

>"Great. Awesome. Could have just went to Booty Bay..."

After reaching the third floor's hallway, you point out the bathhouse. "The spa is this door. Er, it's more of a big bathroom. And right next door is my room!"

The door opens to a modest setup with all of your rogue gear spread across the dresser, bed, and table.

>"Not bad." The Pandaren plops her ornate package down next to the door and lays her satchel, staff, and backpack on the table.

Noticing the tension release from her shoulders, you instinctually take your spot back on the windowsill. "So what's your name? You going back home?"

>"Oh. Yeah, sorry. Li Li Stormstout. Pandaria is more like a second home but yes. My family's waiting on me at our brewery."

"Stormstout... Like Chen Stormstout? The guy who helped fight off the Legion?"

>"My Uncle can be cool like that sometimes. But I was there too."

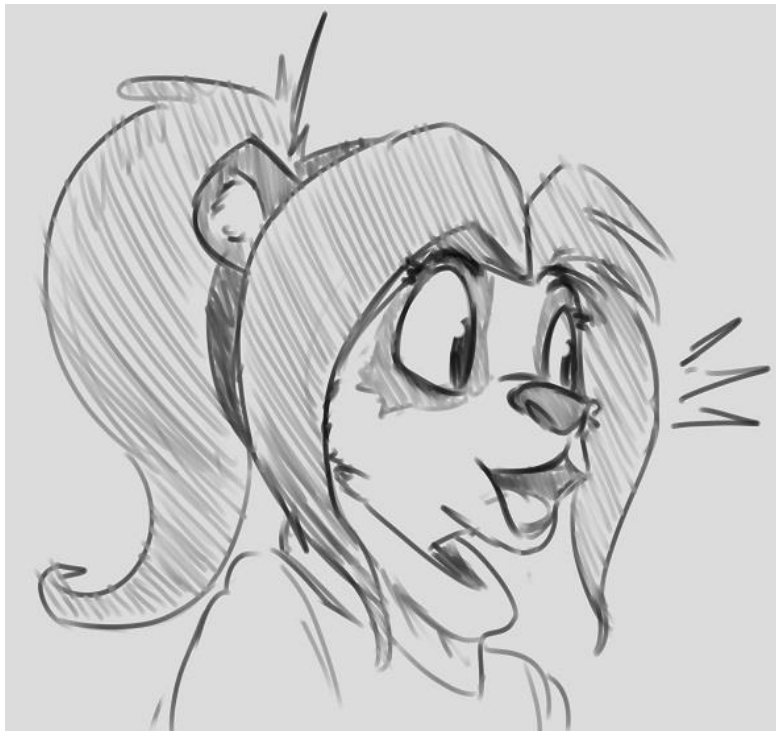
"Pfft. Sure."

>"What, you don't believe me? Here." Li Li tosses you a book from her satchel. "Read up while I get all this sea salt off me."

"Li Li's Travel Journal? Aren't we a little old for a journal?"

>"Just read it. Don't steal it. I know where you live." She leaves her sandals, grabs her backpack, and patters down the hallway into the bathhouse.

The room adjacent to your window view lights up with candles. Feeling awkward about watching Li Li's shadowed silhouette strip and climb into the wooden tub, you peruse the journal.



"No way..." The first glances at short titles brush off as comedy at first. 'Pearl of Pandaria' and 'That Time I Fought Off a God' make you giggle. However, as the hour rolled on, flipping through the pages left you in disbelief. The stories are far too detailed to be made up. She really did find Pandaria with her Uncle. She's fought off notorious pirates, helped the Grandmaster, and recently reclaimed Kun-Lai Summit from a mogu invasion. Saying she's been around is an understatement.

Your periphery notices the other room's lighting shift as the candles waver from Li Li splashing out of the tub. Her drenched silhouette reappears. Knowing full well of how creepy it may look, you peer your head to get a better look at her shadow. She's way thinner than you thought a Pandaren should be. But it's obvious how fit she is. Guess it makes sense if she has to survive mantid attacks.

Thuds signal her return. You shift onto the bed, sitting up against the wall. "Man. I thought going to the Darkmoon Faire was a journey. You've done incredible things, Li Li. But who's this Bo you kept mentioning? Is he your boyfriend?"

>"My old teacher. And a better friend." She swipes the journal back and neatly packs her gear into the dresser. Her sleepwear is basically what she was wearing before. Less straps and pockets but somehow more baggy over her poofed-out fur.

>"Want some tea?" Li Li asks as she places a couple cups on the table and fills them from a goofy looking jug.

"Sure?"

>"You said you couldn't sleep. This'll help."

"It's still warm??" You mention as you drink what ends up tasting like a sweet herbal potion.

>"Magic, probably." She jokes with your accent just as you had said it earlier but with her own off-tone Pandaren accent.

>"So what about you? I gave you my entire journal. What's your story?"

"Uh. Haha. You know... Just a worgen. Not as fun."

>"Okay cool, but for real though."



You shift your weight around on the mattress, trying to avert your gaze into the tea which is working wonders at making you tired. "I lived in Gilneas City. You know about it?"

>"Heard it didn't go so well. How'd you end up at Ironforge?" Her genuine interest catches you off guard.

"Stormwind wasn't working out. Figured maybe my parents would be somewhere else."

>"Ah. Gotchya." The silence is quickly interrupted. "You know, I lost my Momma too."

"Wait, what? I thought you said you were going to see family in Pandaria?"

>"Yup. But she's not there. She's not around anymore." Her expression stoops for a second before her expression lights up again. "But it sounds like you need a vacation! Wanna come with me?"

"To Pandaria?" You think for a few minutes as Li Li's nonchalant yet sincere demeanor stashes away the travelling mugs. The distant thunder rolls over this sudden invite to uplift your recent decision to scour the world for Mother. There's no reason to suspect that your parents would be in Pandaria. But what if they were? It could make sense if they thought you were dead. Would a parent bail to the corners of the world if they lost everything? Sure it's a longshot but at least now you have another friend that'll help keep your cool over this damn curse eating away at your sanity. Worse case scenario, you're just a travelling partner for an attractive legendary monk. Easy money.

>"Trust me." She plops onto the bed. "You'll love the Stormstout Brewery. Ever since each side of my family got back together, we've been doing this annual ceremony. Lots of beer. It's not like I'm gonna show you off as a circus freak. I mean yeah most of them haven't seen a worgen but still."

"I'll think about it. Figure it out in the morning." You push off the wall with your back and start to get off the bed.

>"We can share. It's yours after all."

"Like I said, can't sleep. I'll just patch some holes in my gear. Don't mind me."



>"Nope. Not gonna let you run away with all my stuff in the middle of the night. Plus that tea will knock you out right quick."

Did she really just drug you? Sure enough your eyes manage to get a welcome heaviness. Li Li shoves herself to the wallside of the bed and pats the other pillow for you.

"Do you feel proud or somethin' about tricking a thief?"

>"Not a drug. Just some good old Mistweaved tea."

You shrug and get under the covers next to her. Before you even know it, you can't tell how much time passed. Li Li's so still. You turn to find her untied hair splayed out on the pillow.

"Never shared a bed. This is weird."

>"Is it? Maybe if you make it." She murmurs past a yawn. "Had to with my brother back on Shen-zin Su. You won't even notice I'm here."

"You have a brother?"

>"Shisai. We're chill. We were in the same room until Pop added onto the house. Well, it's more like a treehouse than a room but it was mine. Still is!"

The reminder of family stings a little but the prospect of what it would be like having a brother distances the hurt. Your slowing mind brings up a certain warlock you met at the Darkmoon Faire. Though, he's more of a friend with benefits thing instead of a brother.

Comfort finally takes its toll as you close your eyes.

Part One: Smoke, Sushi, and Subterfuge



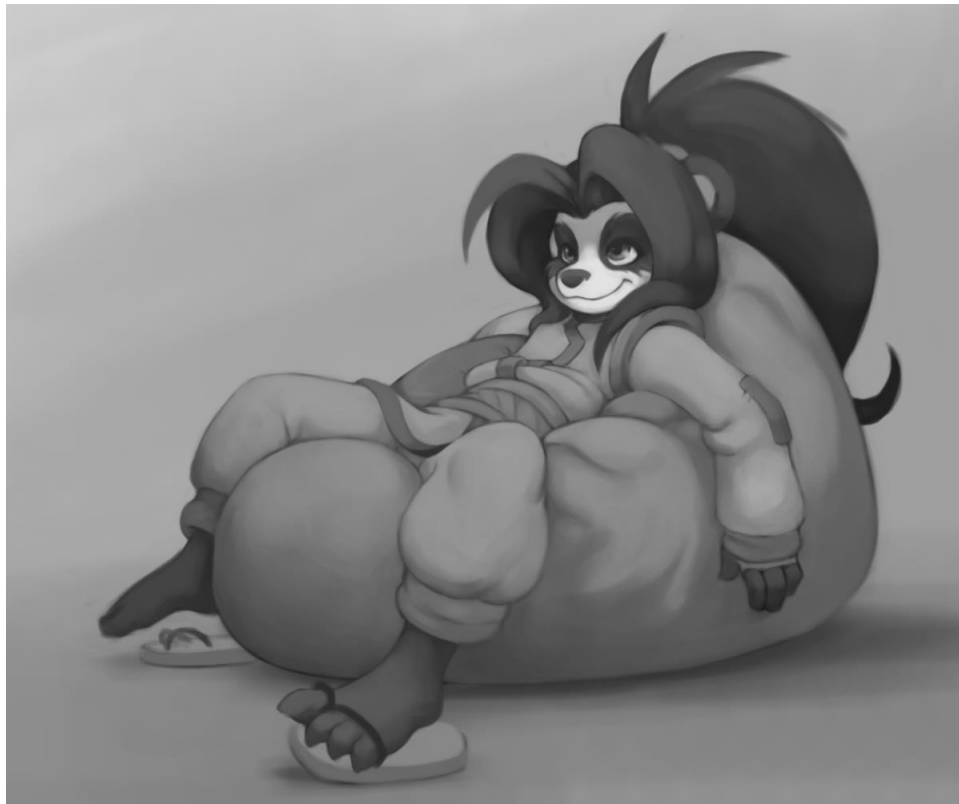


Morning greets you with a particularly loud thunk. Sunrays invade your vision as they flutter between an orange cloudy morning. Your face-down muzzle tingles as all 5 senses wake up. The first thing you notice is the scent of bamboo radiating from this jet black hair spread out on the pillow. The second is your distance to the nearby girl, rather, the lack of any personal bubble. Your mind races catching up to the fact that you shared the bed and apparently now the same pillow. A rush of embarrassment and blood heads to your cheeks after realizing you're basically hugging your new pandaren friend.

Your arm rises up and down as it drapes over Li Li's gently breathing chest, signaling that she's thankfully still asleep. Lifting your rested head to meet hers confirmed it. You take a moment to note the color pattern on her face and how the black splotches around her eyes strike a balance between intimidating and mystical.

Thinking of how pervy you'd seem if those eyes opened to meet your yellow ones makes you try and shift back to the other side of the bed. Your legs, however, are interlocked against one of hers. You find your raised knees are resting on her thigh. Unlatching and distancing yourself signals yet another tingle, this time to a slight slick spot beneath your underwear.

A reluctant slip of your paw under the sheets against your fur comes back with a reassuring result. You're not that wet. Though, none of this makes sense. There's no way you're this touch deprived. It's probably not time to be heated. Heck, you can't even remember if you had a wet dream. Well, at least it wasn't a nightmare.



Another loud bang of metal against wood signals that the day at the docks has long been kickstarted with the distant droning of deckhands long into their tasks. The sound is followed by a rustling of sheets and a cute groan. Li Li's outline under the sheets catches slivers of light coming from the familiar window.

>"Morning." Li Li yawns into her pillow against clumps of her hair. "Did the tea work out?"

"Hey. Yeah I got some sleep. Thanks."

>"Man it's been forever since I've been in a bed. This is nice." The pandaren returns a smug gaze while she clutches the sheets. Thankfully your fur covers what would otherwise be a red face as you realize your paw is still slipped under your pants. You yee it out just as she rolls into all of the covers over against the wall.

>"Hehe do I look like a sushi roll?" She rhetorically asks with a smile that is barely visible through her shielding hair.

"I wasn't gonna say it but it's more like a hot dog."

>"Meh. Close enough." She concedes while following you out of bed. The panda reserves the mirror to put her ponytail together and then hastily throws off her shirt to get ready for the day. You turn around and do the same.

"So what kind of shampoo are you using to smell like bamboo?"

>"You like it? I somehow still had some left from the last time I was on Shen-zin Su. Oh crap is it too strong? Your nose is probably stronger than mine."

"Nono it's great but I'm going to ignore how that kind of stuff can get mass produced on the back of a giant turtle." You peek your head over behind your shoulder, curious to see her color patterns on her bare back. Looks like the white from her midriff bleeds back around to end as a teardrop surrounded by black above her snub of a tail.

That's when you realize that her bare back was just that. Straight up nothing as she grabs her salmon colored tunic. "You don't wear a bra!?"



>"What?" Li Li spins around alarmed by your blurt with her arm covering her chest, catching you looking. "Oh, geeze don't yell like that. Sounded like you were talking to someone else."

"Sorry sorry!" You rush through putting your arms through your simple white shirt to hide your own brown bra that camouflages over the same colored fur. "I don't know why I looked."

>"Why not?" She asks as she goes back to packing her pajamas away. "We're both girls anyway."

"Why does that matter!?" The Gilnean noble in you forces your head to avert your gaze from her petite chest.

>"Oh. Sorry I guess that's weird for you? Culture diffs, yeh know?" She goes back to throwing the rest of her gear together on the dresser. "But yeah I don't really need one. And it can get in the way sometimes when I'm fighting."

You swallow down the butterflies in your throat and make the finishing touches on your braided pigtails. "Makes sense. I think."

>"Same thing with sleeves but it's pretty cold out. Why do you wear a bra though? It's not like you need one."

"I uhh.." You shove the rest of your daily tools into a belt and pockets in a fluster.

>"Oh I get it! You're probably bigger in human form. Wow that would suck having to buy two different pairs of clothes every time you switch. So that's why you have it all baggy in the first place right?"

"You're right on the dot." She's not, you think, as it never crossed your mind. You don't really need a bra with this fur and with how small you are anyway. It's just been habit from before you transformed into a worgen.

You walk behind Li Li and talk at her reflection. "Anyway, decided I'm gonna go to Pandaria with you."

>"Good choice! Let's go!" She jumps up and throws the rest of her lightweight gear over her leather padded armor.

"Just like that? No 'why' or 'how'?"

>"Figuring it all out as you go makes for the best adventures." Li Li lectures as she goes to grab the door then slams her toe into a package. "Ow! Oh hey! My box!"



"Smart to leave it by the door. But what is it?"

>"It's a care package from my brother. Check it out!"

"How did he know to send it here?"

>"Message scroll, duh. They move fast." She boasts as the box is slammed with a pomf onto the bedraggled... bed.

>"Aww." Li Li clutches what seems like a coin bag to her chest. "Shisai actually sent some good shimmerweed this time. But what's this..." You twist around over her shoulder just in time to see her shove something under the sheets. "C-cool more shampoo. I was just running out haha."

"What a bro. But why a flower? You gonna make more tea?"

>"The shimmerweed? Nah I'll show you later. It has to do with this little guy!" Li Li grabs what looks like a sculpted rock from the box. "Isn't he cute? He's a brew spirit from my grandma. But Shisai taught him a thing or two."

"Is it dead? He's not moving."

>"He's just sleeping." Li Li takes one more hurried step to the door. "Anyway let's go."

You follow her out the door and lock the room then skip down the stairs to take in the free smells coming from the kitchen. Despite how the fishy marina feels industrial, this market district inn has a homey vibe. You order some hashbrowns to go for you and your friend.

>"So what's the plan." The short wait for the food is cut off by her question which was aimed at the wall-hung map. She takes her finger-food and downs it in one bite.

"I thought you said to wing it."

>"Every journey starts with a map and food. We have both now. So what are you thinking? How do we get out of Boralus?"



"Honestly? No idea. Need to see how the city's doing. Should be pretty obvious once we get out. And I just happen to know the perfect spot to get this place's pulse. There's a clocktower right in the middle of the main courtyard. It overlooks the docks so we can see all the commotion. Not sure how good your hearing is. But I can usually hear all the way out to the ocean if I try hard enough." You brag as you show off your floppy ears with a shake of your head. "Plus it's usually crowded enough to where I can pick a couple pockets."

>"I'm down for all of the above but the stealing. I have enough money for both of us."

"Oh." You raise your paws up as your ears humbly droop down. "I didn't mean you had to pay for me."

>"Just think of it as **payback for the bed**." She twirls around past you through the door leading to the streets as a couple new human patrons just enter. Those travelers look back, commenting on their concern seeing such a young pandaren in a military zone. Their conversation doubles after they move aside to let you slip in between them.

Your eyes adjust to the cloudy late dawn. Next to you, a postman is shoving letters into the mailbox you met Li Li at. Your friend double checks her satchel's straps and covers her brow with a paw to stare up at the clocktower. A quick tug on her arm with a smile is enough to encourage her to follow you.

The sheer volume of people trading in the streets and bumping into you dies down a tad once you find a familiar chain of alleyways leading to the heart of the market district.

>"It's kinda strange." Li Li comments beside you while squeezing between some crates and jumping over sewer grates. "Last night made it seem like this city has nothing to offer."

"It's not that bad."

>"That's what I'm saying. The guards are friendly enough and all the locals are trying to brush off the tension."



"Yeah... the guards are fun." You chuckle a bit as you finally reach the courtyard. You gesture at Li Li to look past all the booths of traders. Your finger leads toward the sole female human guard posted at the entrance of the clocktower.

>"So what, we're distracting her or something?"

"I did at first. But she caught me. She still let me in though after I played dumb." You simply walk up with Li Li in tow to the guard.

"Heyyy Cynthia!"

>>"It's Claudia." Her crossed arms braces her relaxed pose as she leans back against the cobblestone wall of the tower. The greatsword sheathed on her back clanks as she turns to look down at you.

"Right. So is the lockdown over yet?"

>>"I got a better question, little wolf. Are you deaf?" Her gauntlet points on over to the town crier as he makes a pass through the main street. His overbearing hollering drones on about curfew timings and regulations.

>"Nice ears you got there, Hilda." Li Li laughs over the announcement.

>>"And this panda is your friend?"

"Yup! So how's about it? Another day of me in the scaffolding and I'll letcha know if I see anything out of the ordinary?"

>>"This'll be the last time. Only because that swine of a Horde raiding party was stopped yesterday. The lockdown's still in effect for today for any remnants." The guard begrudgingly unlocks the tower door and nudges your hip into the doorway with the side of her boot. "Don't break anything." Li Li follows in.

The base of the tower itself couldn't be bigger than your tavern room but it's enough to comfortably fit the generous scaffolding and ladders. You grab the rungs of one ladder that leads to the middle of the tower.

>"What a thrill." Li Li comments as she climbs up behind you. "Seeing a city from a birds eye view is always awesome."



You could barely hear her over the gnomish gears and gadgets ticking around you as you reach a maintenance platform riddled with wrenches and repair tools. The steel and brass glitter off of the sunlight shining in through a doorway leading to an adjacent comfortable balcony which is free from noises coming from the contraptions. "This is probably some gunnery spot in case this place was ever under attack. It's even got chairs!" You plop down on one and get a slight shock when Li Li giddily bounces to the blocky stone railing circling the elevated overhang out toward the ocean.

>"Woahhh this is almost like a lighthouse. Look at the view!" Her reaction was the complete opposite of your initial height-fearing impression.

"Yeah but there's not much of a point to be up here anymore. If the lockdown is still on then we don't have any options in the way of a boat going to Pandaria."

>"True but we can at least break Brewie out." Li Li slings the satchel off her waist and opens it up to grab the handheld brewery spirit.

"You named him Brewie?"

>"What else were we gonna call him? Come on little fry, wake up." Li Li coos him alive with some gestures of her paw. As if out of nowhere, mist begins to draw from the humidity around the balcony to her clawed fingertips as they stretch out and make waves along his body. With a snap, all of the mist seeps into his nose, eyes, and ears which then all light up with a subtle brown glow.

You quirk a brow as Brewie starts to hover in Li Li's hand, giving a low toned song almost as if welcoming Li Li to his own little world.

>"I got a present for you bud." The panda takes out that flower she had back in the tavern. "Let me know how it tastes!" She places it in front of his mouth which he takes with his small hands and starts chewing on.

"So shimmerweed is just food for him?"



>"Mostly. He likes anything you can brew into beer or tea. But that's not all it's good for. Have you ever smoked it before?"

"Who would smoke that?? Sounds gross."

>"So that's a no. We'll go easy then. At least that'll make it last for the rest of our travel to home."

You notice some smoke coming out of the brewery spirit's head as his energetic little form starts dancing in the palm of her paw.

>"This might feel cold at first. Er, you do wanna try it right?"

"Why not?"

Li Li's paw waves around again, tracing the smoke emanating from the spirit and mixing it into new mist she formed from the air. Something about how her focused control on the stream along with her free form magic entrances you. That is, until she redirects her attention on your face and guides the smoke near your barely open mouth.

>"Lemme see those wolf teeth." You open up as the smoke seeps into your mouth and down your throat.

"Uhh.. What did you even-" You're cut off by a couple coughs as a cold sensation fills your lungs.

>"Quit talking." Li Li crouches down next to your chair and places a couple fingers on your chest as she palms your sternum. "Sorry if I touch anywhere unexpected. I don't really know worgen anatomy."

Your eyes dart between looking at her, the clouds, the spirit, and your shirt as she traces around your breasts. You can feel the fog immediately begin to warm up as the sensation is guided by her fingers. More than that though, you feel lightweight and relaxed. The spirit chirps in a higher tone this time and pokes at Li Li's wrist.

>"Oops. He's eating through it fast. You feeling okay?" She averts her gaze from your clothes.

"Feeling pretty great. I think it worked?" If anything, you're glad that she stopped because the tickling of her nails was dangerously close to getting yourself excited through your shirt.



>"Sorry it's not a lot, Brewie. We have to save the rest for the trip." She places the spirit on the railing and leans up against it while weaving the smoke into her own mouth like this is nothing new to her.

You watch as she bends her back around to get a decent enough of an angle around the tower to gaze at the distant archipelago backdrop of Kul Tiras' mounds and mountains. Perched on the railing, Brewie chirps a few doots to the crowd below and comedically mimics the movement of deckhands at the harbor, exaggerating their tasks.

"My first time in Kul Tiras and I'm leaving so soon. That's hard to say when there's so much to discover out there." It strikes then and there that you feel different about Li Li while her beautiful ponytail flows in the shoreline ocean breeze. She has no real reason to bring you along for an adventure. Yet here you are.

>"Brewie's adorable, right? I can tell he's super happy to be away from the chaos that is my family's place."

"Chaos? What are you getting me into?" You notice her getting a bit fidgety.

>"Nothing! You'll see. It'll be great. Hey is it okay if I head back to the room? I forgot something."

"Go ahead. I'll be right behind you. When's this wear off?"

>"For you? Give it a good half hour. Bring me some food on the way back!" She tosses you a few coins of silver from her satchel, scoops up Brewie, and goes back into the ticking clocktower to slide down the ladder.



You spend some time looking at the clouds, the same view Li Li had earlier, and the commotion of the marina. Your thoughts run a whole lot slower but that doesn't stop you from planning out what you'd need to do to make up for the money Li Li would be spending to keep you as a travel partner. The occasional pickpocket will help but there's gotta be something more. Which reminds you that she never said what she wanted to eat. The sushi here has been a banger and she was just talking about it sooo... time to go!

Just as you roll out of the chair onto all fours to stretch your legs against the railing, you notice a note on the ground squished beneath the foot of your chair.

You free the mini folded scroll and open it up.

Hey Little Sis. I hope Kul Tiras isn't as dangerous as it sounds. Sucks you have to spend a few days stuck there. I packed up Brewie for your downtime but I need him back. There should be enough buds for the trip. P.S. I met some gnomish traders in Halfhill. Bought this toy off them. Don't worry, it's not used... I think. Hopefully it fits and works out for you. Had to guess on the size so I just went with mine.

How cute, you think, that she was too embarrassed to show you a toy she got. Must have been that thing she threw under the covers. Probably some of that cultural difference again. Brother seems cool though.

Feeling normal enough, you climb down the ladder and open the door to the courtyard outside of the tower.

>>"Got anything to report?"

"Gah! Oh, Catherine. Nope! Nothing out of the ordinary."

>>"Last time, it's Claudia. And that was your last time in there. Now get going. Your panda friend went that way." She points toward the streets leading back to the tavern then continues to lean on the hilt of her now unsheathed greatsword stabbed into the ground.

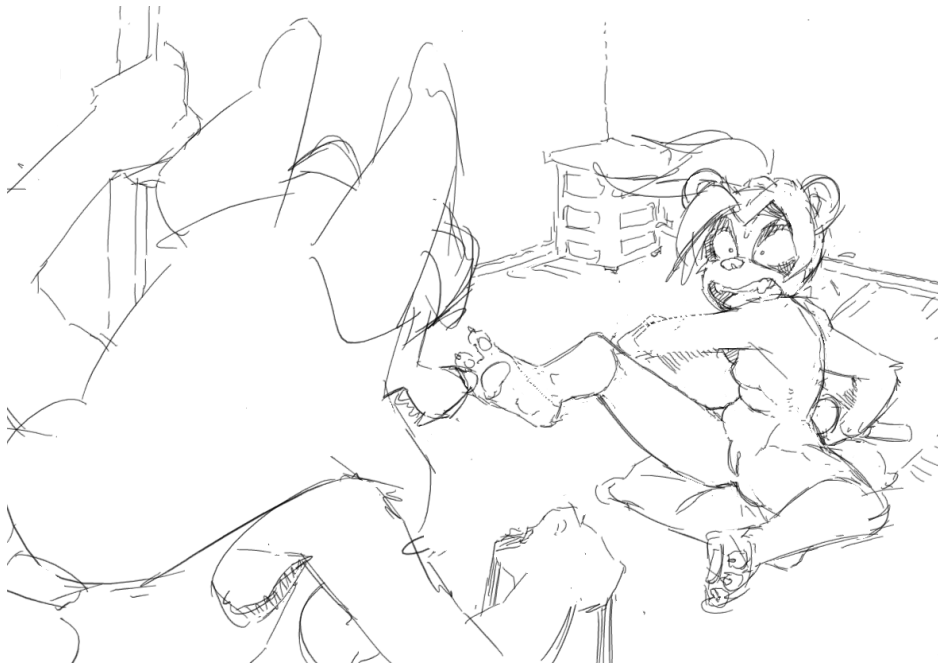
Not wanting to get on the bad side of the law in this city... yet, you don't even comment and follow the path. It seems business as usual around the district with repairs being made, drills being ran, and the locals having the occasional barter. What's not normal, however, is the shorter hooded figure down between the dark alley of two buildings. You

manage to squint down under the wheels of a passing cart to get a clear view of iridescent green irises peering back at your gaze. A blink later and the person is gone.

"Ooookey dokie. Way more high than I thought." Though, saying that doesn't keep the fur on the back of your neck from pricking up.

The fish vendor you've bought from a couple times now greets you with a wave. And with a wave later, you have sushi in a bag ready for eating at the cost of only a couple silver. Fish food was cheap in Gilneas too. Guess it makes sense with the water being right there and all.

You hurry to close the distance to the inn, waltz past the friendly barkeep with a nod, and climb up the stairs. Without even knocking, you rush through your shut door, sliding in as it swings open. Sushi in hand and with a dumb face, your muzzle lets out a yell "Sushi!!"



>"AHHH!" The high panda's disheveled ponytail whips up and stares you in the eyes.

"Ahhh!" Her raised footpaw slaps into a crisscrossed sitting position as she tries to catch her balance. She throws a dildo behind her back and grabs some sweatpants to cover herself. Your only gut instinct convinces you to throw the sushi at her and back out of the room while also slamming the door closed.

Just as you back up, you bump into someone else.

>>"AAH!"



"Ahhh!" Your backup gut instinct spikes up to flourish around and push the stranger up against the wall.

>>"Woah woah calm down!" A foreign and pompous accent fills your ears.

"Who are you!?" You seethe through your fangs at a pair of green eyes squinting back at yours from under this girl's hood. "Why are you following me?"

>>"Shh! Shut up and put me down!"

>"Gimme a second!" You hear Li Li banging around in the room.

>>"Look, I messed up." The girl admits with a cough as your forearm presses against her throat. "You weren't supposed to see me in the alley. I'm not creepy!"

"Fine, then what do you want?" You feign a relaxed voice and focus on her smell which is out of this world.

>>"I heard you in the clocktower. Don't ask how. Said you were going to Pandaria?"

The door busts open to a clearly embarrassed Li Li leaning against her staff in an awkward stance.

>"Who's this? I've never seen a human's eyes glow like that."

"We just met..."

>>"Name's Evelyn! The eyes are an... uh. An enchantment?"

>"Neat!" Li Li nudges you in the ribs to put her down. "We're going to Pandaria but do you two have a thing going on or something?"

You put her down off the wall and shove her hood back.

>>"Hey!" Evelyn slaps her arms onto her ears but entirely fails to hide how long and pointy they are.

"I knew she smelled off! She's a blood elf, Li Li."

>"So what?"

"So she could be a spy! We're in a naval Alliance city!"

>>"Rude. But I also don't blame you. Look I'm just here to make some money."

"By raiding, obviously."

>>"Oh that Horde group? They were pathetic. I was just hanging with them for a free ride. They're the ones that got caught yesterday. So do you want a ride to Pandaria or not?"

>"You can do that?" Li Li's spark of hope makes you feel a little guilty at being this aggressive.

>>"Totally. Definitely. I am a mage of the highest degree after all."



"Li Li, do you honestly trust a blood elf. A literal Horde mage. To make a portal to make your life easier?"

>"I mean come on Hilda she already said it's for the money. She's probably just wanting to go back home like me, right Evelyn?"

"Wow. How much did you smoke?" You tighten back your fingerless gloves so that Evelyn gets an obvious view of your claws. "She can portal home whenever she wants."

>>"You both seemed way more reasonable back in that tower." Evelyn takes off her golden embroidered cloak to reveal a skin tight black undersuit stereotypically made for blood elf mages. A red tabard doubles as a cover to what should be her pants as her stockings rise up past her knees just as far as her gloves cover up her arms up to her shoulders. Now that her cloak is off, you're surprised to see that most of what you thought was her bulky form was actually just her brunette hair which poofs all the way down to her pants... well, if she had any pants.

>"How much for the portal?" Li Li leads her by the hand into your room. "They're not really my thing because I like the journey, not the destination. But it's gonna take forever for us to get out of here."

"This is such a bad idea."

>>"Couple gold." Evelyn proposes as she recoils at the absolute state of your room. "Eugh."

"How about no gold and you teleport us there, with no problems, and I won't turn you into the guard."

>>"You know what? I'm suddenly feeling generous today. Sure. You got a deal. But only if I get your room for tonight."

>"We'll be gone so that's fine!"

With that, Evelyn starts an incantation on top of the rug in your room. You shove Li Li off to the side as she starts rapidly scooping up all her belongings, including the 'toy' into her backpack. "I don't like this, Li Li."

>"I know you're Alliance and all, Hilda, but what's the worst that can happen?"

The portal's creation finishes after arcane signs on the ground glitter to life.



>>"And boom!" A newly spawned spinning oval in the middle of the room mesmerizes Li Li as particles of purple energy bounce off the walls almost as if they were sparked off the hammering of a blacksmith's arcane embers.

>"See, you have nothing to worry about." Li Li points at the imagery in the portal's front warping profile. "That right there looks like the Jade Forest in Pandaria. I've been there sooo many times."

>>"You got one minute to decide!" Evelyn claims as she collapses onto your bed. For some reason that fires you up more than anything.

"If this is a trick I'm gonna claw you a new one." You keep one eye on Evelyn as you grab your own belongings and group up with Li Li in front of the portal.

>>"Twenty seconds!" She says with the smuggest smirk.

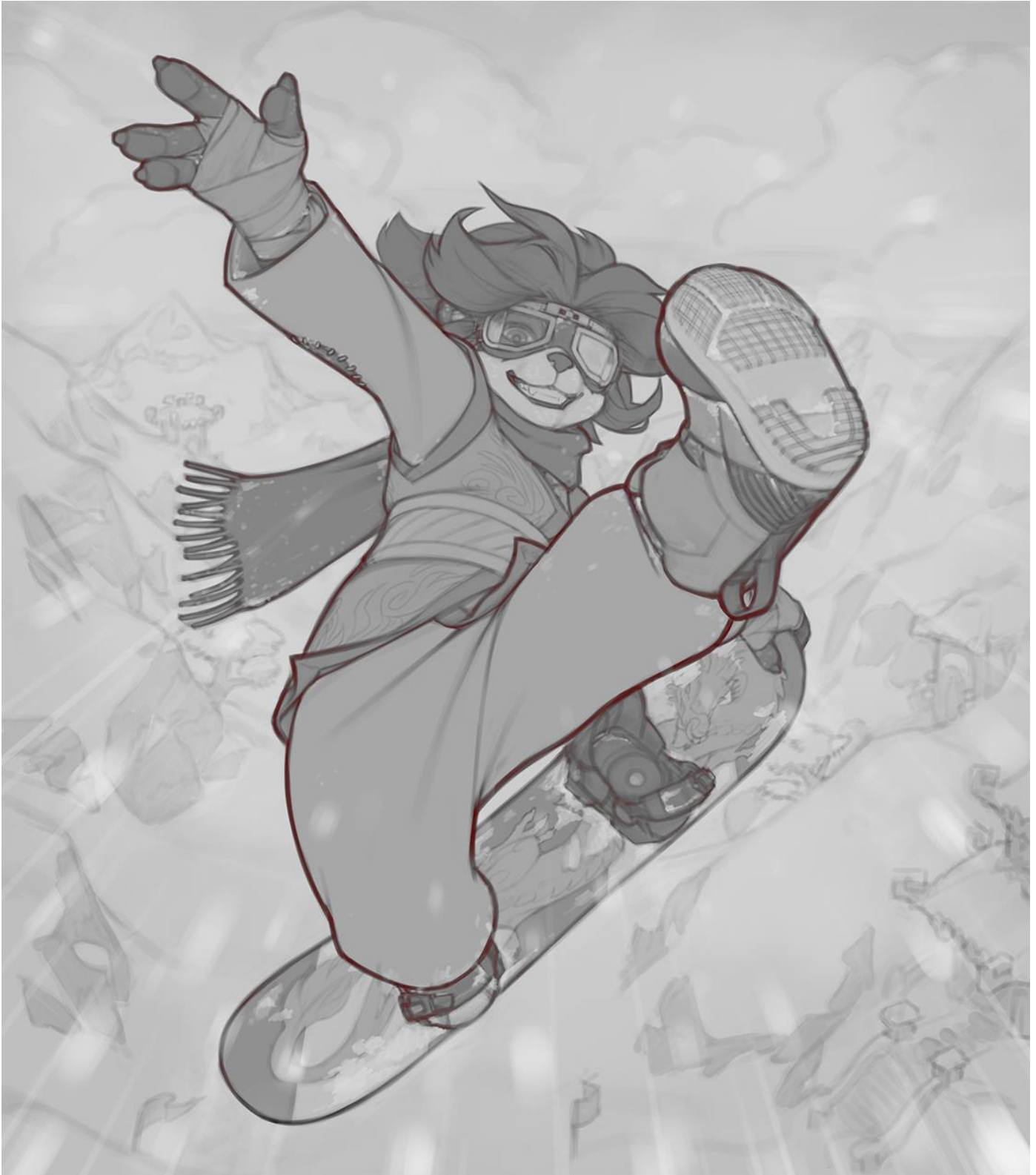
>"Got everything?" Li Li rushes you with an ecstatic expression.

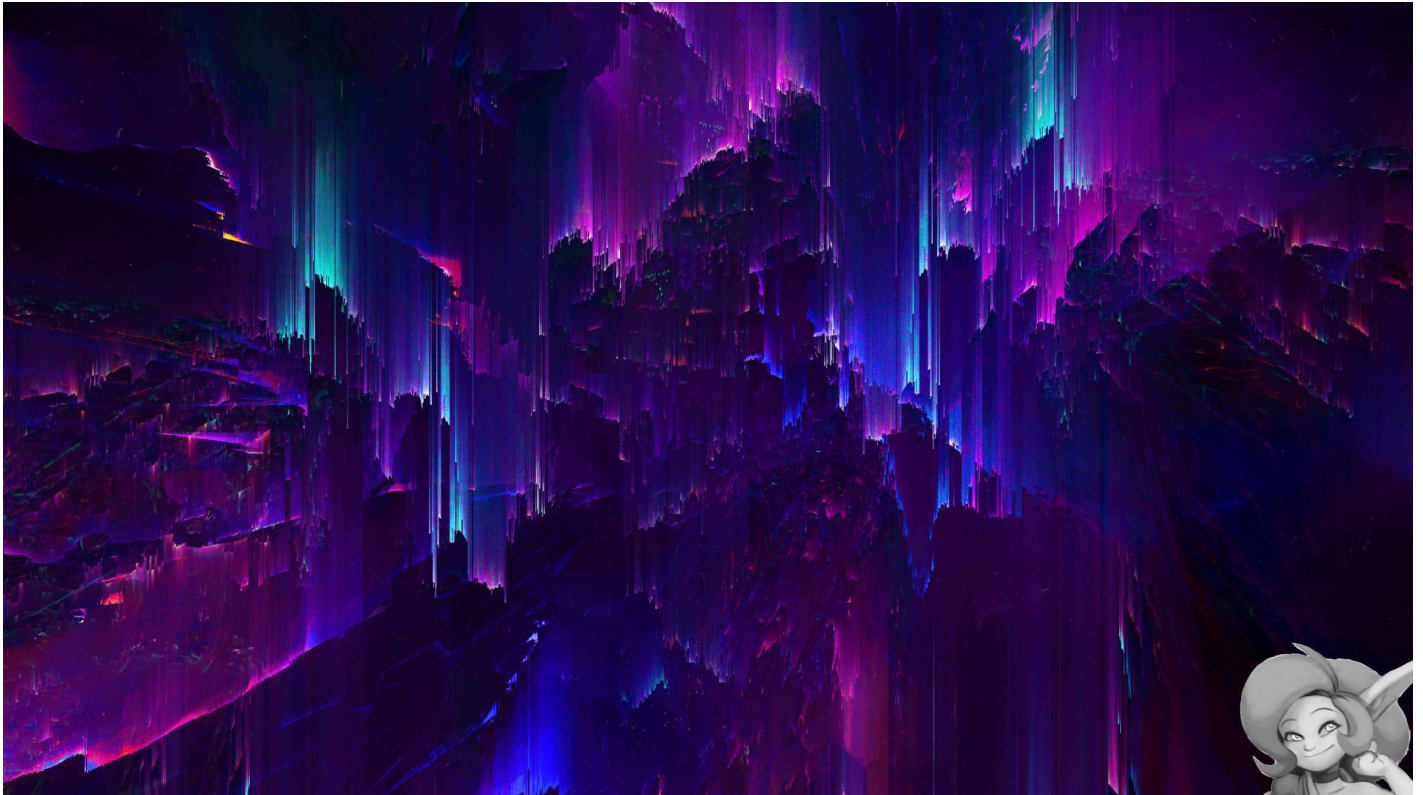
"Yup..."

>"Great let's go!" Your pandaren friend grabs your paw and jumps through the portal. Just as she enters you hear Evelyn's chuckle right as you follow Li Li through.

>>"Hahaha!! Suckers!!!"

Part Two: Snow and Serenity





Evelyn's laughs cut off after you become fully enveloped by the corridor of blue and purple particles. The very space you once occupied in the tavern is replaced by a blurry tunnel of arcane energy. Momentum suddenly jerks your body forward hard enough to worry about keeping hold of Li Li's hand. But you realize you aren't holding onto it anymore and she's nowhere to be seen. The rush of speed steadies at a pace where you can distinguish what might be up and down, only, you aren't standing on anything. An overwhelming feeling of weightlessness and vertigo overtakes your senses, especially after trying to exhale the breath you've been holding. Air doesn't come back through your lungs. The few seconds that pass feel like an eternity as you begin to panic. An ominous *whoomp!* rattles your eardrums after an unseen force hits your chest giving you a feeling that you slowed down by hitting a million pillows at once. Blinding whiteness fills an oval that you're quickly approaching. And just like that, the corridor pushes your body through that archway.



Cold air fills your nose and a pressure change slams into your perked ears. But the weightlessness doesn't go away. "Oh sh-!" Your forward descent into snowy ground is just about as high as the clocktower's balcony. You instinctually flail your arms down to try and land on all fours to somersault into something that hopefully won't hurt. But as the ground approaches, all that you manage to actually do is sink into the fluffy powder and flop onto your side. The padding helped but your whole body aches as you take a while to dig out of the couple feet of crunchy snow where you left an imprint. The portal that spit you out hovers far above a sparse spruce tree canopy. You stare at it hoping to see Li Li follow you out but it disappears in a circling, enclosing zip. "Li Li!! Where you at?" Taking in your surroundings gives you no sight of the green you saw in portal's entrance at all. This can't be the Jade Forest. All you see is mountains, slopes, rocks, and clouds. You yell out even louder, "That bloody bitch!"

>"Rude! I'm over here!" Reddish pants belonging to a leg sticks out of the snow near a distant pine tree.

You trudge over to Li Li and find her struggling to get out of the comet shaped imprint she plowed into the snow. "I meant Evelyn. You okay?"

>"My backpack's stuck in the- just get- yah!" The backpack and her satchel shoot out of the hole into your face. "Finally!" She climbs out to see her backpack strapped around your neck. "Oops. Sorry."

Your worry turns into anger and frustration. "I told you not to trust her. Now we're gonna freeze to death in Northrend!" You untangle the backpack and try to throw it back at her. Instead, your strength feels sapped and it ends up dropping at your feet.



>"Chill out... hehe get it? Because-. Anyway, Northrend would be way colder than this." She scoops up her scattered belongings and takes in the terrain. "Look, you're right. We got scammed. But I'm pretty sure this is Kun-Lai Summit. See those three peaks?" She points between a parting in the cloud layer below. "That's part of a ridge near the Shado-Pan Monastery. I know it doesn't look far away but it's probably a few miles. Hard to tell which side we're on though."

"Hold up. You've been up here?"

>"Plenty! Recently too but down in the valleys. Long story but mogu suck." She starts padding off the snow latched to your fur. "Don't wanna have that melting on you. Good thing I got lazy and didn't trim off these layers yet. Spring is around the corner but night is still dangerous up here." She looks where the sun is at. "It's still noon-ish, we're fine." The monk strolls up to the tree and gives two solid kicks to some low-hanging hefty branches, severing them entirely. "Here you go." She tosses one to you. "Walking stick!"

"We're gonna walk all the way to a monastery? In all of this?"

>"Well, maybe. Probably. Let's get to the top of this slope and figure that out."

You struggle to follow her up the powder but find better footing under the tree canopy where there's rocks and branches to leverage. "It's so quiet up here." You can hear your own heartbeat and the steadiness of Li Li's breath which contrasts your own heaving.

>"First time on a mountain?"

"Yeah but it's hard to-"

>>"Back!"

You nudge Li Li. "You hear that?"

>"Sure did." She hunkers down with you leaning against a nearby tree.

>>"Back beast!"

"Sounds like someone needs help?" You double up the pace behind your friend who is nearing the top of the slope.

>"It's gotta be just over this."



You crest the top to find a clear stone-paved road marked by pandaren styled braziers. Li Li slips out her ringed staff from behind her back and points up the road a bit to a towering collection of sacks and boxes being skulked by a yeti looking monster.

>"Oh that's not good."

>>"I'll burn you! Don't think this grummle won't do it!" The tower of containers skips back and forth waving a torch around in its hands. The attacking yeti roars and backs away from the fire.

"Wait that's a person?" You whisper to Li Li.

>"He's a grummle and that thing with the spikey mace is a yaungol. They're nasty. We gotta help him."

"I have this." You pull out your knife.

>"Isn't that just a letter opener? Whatever, it'll work. Can you sneak around behind it?"

"No problem." You slide down the slope a bit and use the surrounding pine trees to silently shift your way around the road's cliff edge.

>"Hey you two legged yak! Over here!" Glancing back, Li Li has crested the edge onto the road and is jumping up and down waving her staff above her head. "Fresh meat right here! With no boxes to gnaw around!"

Just as you get past the grummle's scuffle and pull up onto the road behind the yaungol, it charges forward, pushing the grummle aside onto his face. You leap over his fallen cargo and sprint after the chasing roar. Your adrenaline spikes seeing Li Li just stand there in a defensive stance playing chicken with the raised mace. You beg your legs to push faster but they won't listen so instead you flip the hilt of your knife and prepare to throw it at the back of the yaungol's head. Though, before skipping a step to throw it, you watch as Li Li springs up in a spin to bounce off the top of a nearby dimly lit brazier. She lands just mere strides in front of the beast and whacks her staff flat against the rocks, sending out an unnaturally powerful shockwave of force.

You pick up the pace again after seeing the yaungol get blown onto its back right in front of you.



>"Do it!" Li Li's chipper attitude is replaced entirely with purpose and confidence.

Just as the yaungol starts to recover from hitting the back of its head on the ground, you skid next his prone body and immediately shove your knife vertically up through the roof of its open, raging mouth. You yank your arm back just as its jaw clamps down to start choking on its own blood. The eyes of the beast roll back and it dies moments later from the fatal stab to its brain.

>"Wow, okay. You didn't have to be so gruesome about it." Li Li pokes the yaungol's chest then checks for a pulse.

"I didn't know what to do. I've never fought something this big." The adrenaline dies down, giving way to slight regret after realizing you nearly lost your arm there. Something about seeing Li Li being rushed at like that made you throw away all consideration about your own safety.

>>"Good fortune to our friends! You saved the wares." The grummle lifts himself back up with all of his gear.

>"Nahh we were just strolling by is all. Don't you guys usually travel by yak though? One of those would have taken care of that yaungol easy peasy." Li Li walks up to the incredibly small and stout... merchant?

>>"No no, our feet find good trails for now while yaks are busy in mating season. Even so, you deserve a reward of luckydo." He points to you. "You don't even have any while your friend has a whole pack!"

You throw your shaking paws up and decline. "I really don't need anything."

>>"Nonsense! Mmm here. Smell this." He sniffs around one of his loosened sacks and pulls out a fork. "Yes that should go well with your butter knife."

>"Pft-" A muffled giggle comes out from Li Li as she leans in to your ear and whispers "You literally can't decline a grummle. They get crazy upset."



"I will cherish this forever." You stash the fork in your friend's satchel and walk back to the dead monster to yank the knife out from its maw. The gray matter coating your Mum's weirdly sharp letter opener makes you more nauseous than you already felt.

>"So what trade route are you following here?" Li Li chats with the grummle as he strolls up next to you to inspect the yaungol for loot.

>>"Lost are you? And here I thought our pandaren friends had the lay of the land. Just up there across the mound on this road is the Peak of Serenity. You see?" He points up the road to a smoke stack that doesn't quite look like clouds.

>"How did I not recognize that?? I haven't been there since the Legion attack." Li Li rubs her eyes and gestures down the road the other way. "Which means this still leads to the Shado-Pan Monastery?"

>>"You have powerful guesses. It does! But I must be off." He slaps the yaungol's head. "This bad boy has enough meat to feed many families." You watch in awe as the grummle tosses the heavy mace onto the top of his stack of wares and straight up straps the dead beast to the back of his luggage using ropes. Somehow he still manages to squat up onto his legs after everything is carried on his back. "Your scent of good fortune has rubbed off on me. I thank you. Farewell!"

You take a moment to sit aside one of the nearby crackling braziers as his rattling and jingling fades off between the soft sounds of gusts. Li Li squats next to you and unfurls a scroll, revealing a map of Pandaria.

>"I really didn't think that slam was going to knock an entire yaungol back. Only seen my Uncle do it once. It must have been off balance. Thanks for the help though." She points on the northern edge of the map to a road surrounded by lakes. "Pretty sure we're right here. We can take a breather at the Peak and then make our way down."



"And we're ending up here?" You try and push the queasiness down and gesture at the spot on the map way down south in another province that says *My Brewery!!*.

>"Yup! I'm not entirely sure how we'll get down but we can figure that out once we get some lunch. You'll love the Peak of Serenity. It's where I learned how to-"

You cut Li Li off by flipping over onto your hands and knees to puke up the little bit of breakfast sushi you nabbed before abandoning it.

>"Woah!" She puts everything down and ties your dangling hair aside while rubbing your back so you can get it all out.

"My head..." You manage to cough out through the gagging. "Everything hurts."

>"Wait, what's the highest altitude you've ever been?" She gets out some water. "Drink."

"Dunno? Ironforge?"

>"That's not high at all. That might as well be sea level compared to this. You have altitude sickness. I've been up here enough times so I know how to deal with the change." She helps you stand up and pulls your arm around her shoulder. "Can you make it up this road? Serenity is just over the top."

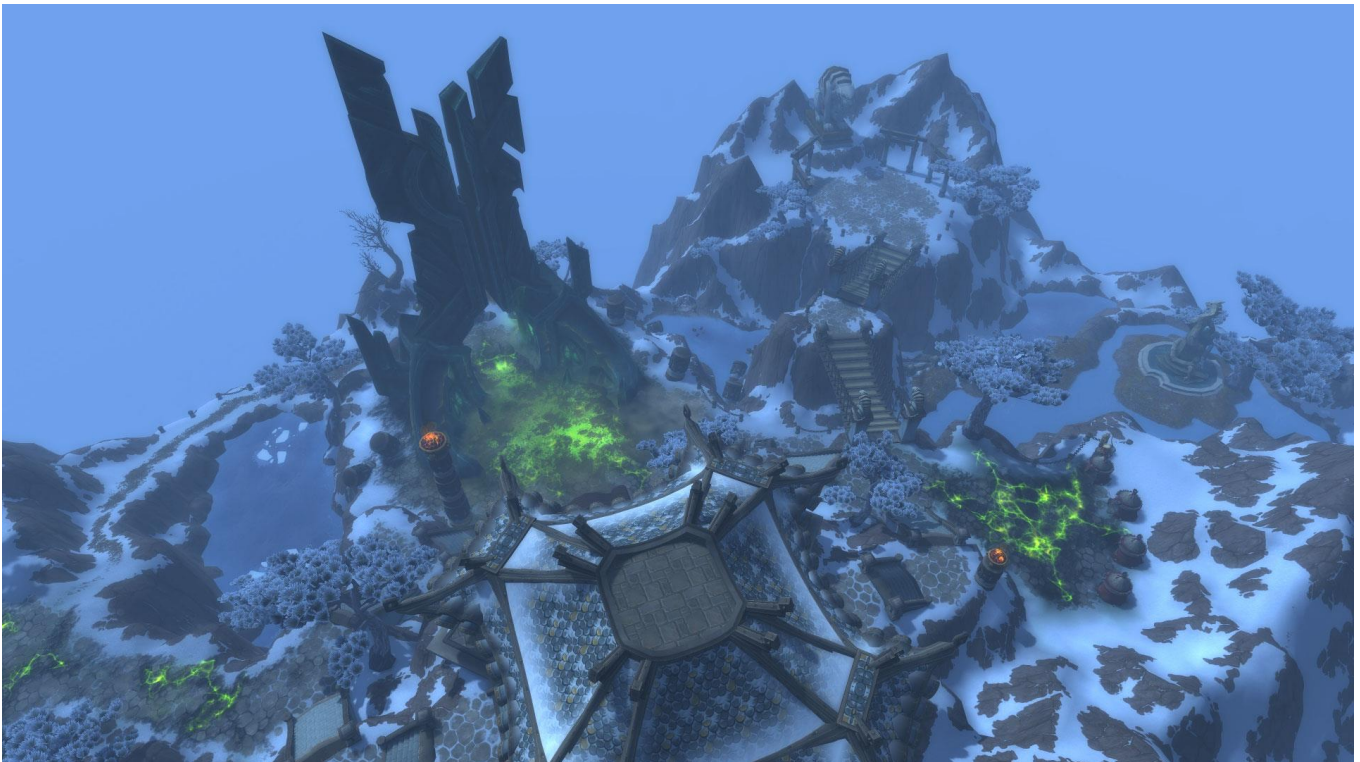
"Hehe I'll race yeh." The laughing spikes into a migraine.

>"Yeah you'll be fine, let's go."

The pace isn't awful but every breath feels like you aren't getting enough oxygen. The headache lulls a bit with Li Li taking some of the strain off of your legs. Though, despite her innate muscle, she's obviously struggling to support most of your weight combined with all of her gear. Thankfully, as you both reach the top, the cloud coverage dwindles to uncover a bridged entrance to what would have probably been a beautiful monastery. Instead, what lies before you is a perfectly serviceable giant building that makes for more of a patched outpost. Imposing high above even that is an intimidating alien monolith. "Legion."

>"So you've seen this before?"

"Have my fair share of invasion stories."



>"Hmm. Same. But I figured the monks would have made more progress than this." Li Li leads you past the entrance, surrounded by two tiger statues; one of which is missing a head. "I guess it's hard to rebuild when you're on the top of a mountain. All these scorch marks and meteor holes are years old." Her shoulders slouch as she helps skip you along the bridge. "Still never heard how those freaks managed to know about this place. Sorry you have to see it like this."

"Doesn't it seem abandoned to you? I don't see anyone." Your observation worsens after peeking inside the monastery itself to find it dark.

>"If no one's here then what was that grumple doing?" Li Li leans against an outdoor support pillar staring at the legion monolith that claimed this place's tranquility. "Welp. Guess we're walking down to the Shado- hold up. Who's that?" The hair on her wrist fluffs around the light flurry as she gestures to a figure next to an Ox looking statue.

Just after you locate the slim figure standing up, it poofs into a cloud of smoke. The cloud dissipates around a dragon that definitely wasn't there before. "Dragon!" You slouch down behind the door to the monastery. "What are you doing? Get down!"

>"See that color? It's bronze. That drake is nothing to be scared of." She starts waving it down. "I'm gonna ask for help." Then calls out to it, interrupting the flapping that it was doing to prepare for takeoff. "Hello!! Time drake!"

You cautiously follow Li Li and get less sketched out when the dragon turns and immediately poofs back down to the size of a human to approach the hustling panda.

>>"Greetings little one. I do not remember you supposedly being here. Though memory is a funny thing." The now female human peers back to see you approaching. "Nor your friend."

>"My name's Li Li and this is Hilda. We're uhh.. travelling. I guess. Can you tell us why no one's here? I thought that there was a plan to rebuild?"



>>"A Stormstout?" The disguised dragon shifts on her sandaled heels. "Interesting. I am Zidormi and as you are well aware, this land is corrupted. To a point that it was deemed to never provide serenity again."

>"Oh... But not everyone made it to the Temple on Shen-zin Su. Where'd they go?"

>>"They simply made the monastery further down the mountain their new home."

>"Huh. Guess I never asked around. But what about that grummle on the road?"

>>"I've asked for deliveries of their delicious food while spending my time here analyzing the past of this troubled place."

>"Oookay then." Li Li sheepishly looks back at you and the ominous human who has had this weird halo hovering above her head. "Do you think you could you take us down to the Shado-Pan?"

>>"Haha!" Her laughs of denial catch you off guard as it comes out as more of a bellowing roar. "I'd rather incur Chromie's wrath than be ridden. No. However, I can give you this." The magelike human lifts a chunk of her dress to her hip, covering an area like a matador while forming sand from nowhere. She whiffs her dress back down to uncover a rack that definitely wasn't there before holding a bunch of gear. "As I understand it, these objects used to belong to this place but were rudely taken away during the invasion. They are now yours."

>"Oh my gosh! It's the same snowboard! Hilda, check it out. I used to fly down these slopes on this thing when I was training up here. They kept telling me it was for the movesets I needed but it was totally just an excuse to have fun with the other masters around here." Your friend runs to the rack and inspects the goggles and snowboard.



>>"And you, cursed one, must be as troubled as this place's history." She waltzes up to you and crouches down to meet your gaze. Without a word, she sprinkles a handful of sand over your head and mutters something guttural. Probably draconic by how menacing it sounded. After a flare of gold in her eyes, she finishes messing up your hair and stands back up. She gives you a wink and you suddenly don't feel sick anymore. In fact you feel completely normal. "I do not know what you search for. But rest assured it is out there."

"Uh huh..."

>>"I have marked a route." She mentions with authority as she saunters away from both you and Li Li. "It should be clear of both beasts and hazards. It leads to the Shado-Pan Monastery. I will take my leave."

>"You're the best!" Li Li waves her off as the human once again transforms into her bronze drake form and flies off in a seemingly random direction, only to dissolve into a void of sand midair. Li Li goes back to strapping on a pair of furry but sturdy boots and shoving her sandals into her backpack. "Have you ever gone snowboarding, Hilda?"

"Nope. But are we just going to ignore that a drake, a whole ass dragon, just turned back time to give us stuff and also fixed whatever altitude thing was wrong with me?"

>"Oh she took away your sickness? I wish I could learn that..."

You brush off the sand digging itself into your pigtails. "So what's the plan? We ride down? Why can't we just walk the road?"

>"Since you're feeling better, we're definitely snowboarding. It'll be faster." She pulls a hefty beanie down on your head big enough to wrap around most of your hair. "And wayyy more fun! Look over there." Li Li points to the entrance bridge

where you both entered from. A faint shimmer catches your attention as a circle of sand floats in midair. "Zidoomi what's-her-name made some checkpoints for us. That must be what she meant by the markers."



Li Li hands you the second half of the gear on the rack and guides you across the bridge to the checkpoint. She takes a second to marvel at the twinkling grain before poking it. On contact, the sand blows away in a *pop* and blows onto the headless tiger statue you saw when strolling in. Down the road, off to the side where you and Li Li climbed up, is another circle whisking around itself. You sit down on the bank and put on the boots, gloves, and goggles the same way that Li Li did. Staring down the mountainous slopes below freak you out a bit over how the sightlines disappear into the cloud coverage. "Alright, so again, I've never done this."

>"That's what I'm here for." Li Li double checks that you put everything on right and tosses your snowboard down into the snow next to your feet. "We'll take it easy. But without enough speed you're just gonna catch your edge and fall down anyway. See how the start of this route isn't that steep? The monks called this a bunny hill, never knew why. But watch my legs and how I twist my hip."

Li Li sits down next to you on the rocks to strap her boots into the spots on the board. Then she pulls herself up onto the snowbank. With a single hop she slaps the board onto the powder and verrrrrry slowly slides down the slope at an angle. She twists back to you and starts pointing out her positioning.

>"Imagine going tippy toe then transitioning into slamming down on your heels. If you do that with your knees bent and your legs pressing against the bindings you'll be able to turn." She seamlessly transitions from a left turn to a right one. She does it a couple more time then falls down with her knees dug into the snow. Calling back up, "Try it out!"

You do just that after taking some time to strap in the way she did. Then pull yourself up and immediately eat shit on the snowbank as your board slips out from under you.



>"That's good too! Get used to falling!"

"I'll kill you if you laugh!" You kick off and slap into the snow on top of the board. It starts sliding on its own but you stand straight with slightly bent knees and follow the path she carved. Letting the board do it's thing, you fall a couple times on your knees but the powdery mix keeps any fall more of a pillowy impact. Turning becomes more of a problem because you have to turn your back downhill. The hair on your neck stands up and you get paranoid over the speed you gain catching up to Li Li's spot. Before you slam into her you simply fall onto your back and use your gloves to stop yourself.

>"Honestly, that sucked." Li Li laughs and you punch her arm. "But it was way better than I was expecting. Must be your roguish charm."

"Charm?"

>"Er, skills. Something like that. But I'm starving so let's get down this mountain! I'll go ahead and stop at each checkpoint to make sure nothing weird is on the slope." She fistbumps your arm, humorously mimicking your punch. "Just keep doing that and yell if something goes wrong. Switch it up and turn more so you keep your speed down." She pulls herself up and starts sliding down to the next sand ring.

<https://youtu.be/3KiuTuUcpvE>

A little while passes by as you watch her weave in between trees. She's definitely done this a ton. Without the altitude messing you up, you can finally sit there and take in the silent sights once again. The clouds occasionally break below to give you an insane peek at what the entirety of Pandaria has to offer. Before you can get a good grasp of the beyond

orange and green vistas, you lose the view between the mist. Just as Li Li reaches the next checkpoint down the slope, you push on up and follow her trail. It takes you an embarrassingly long time to get down compared to her with all the falling and the times you catch the edge of the snowboard to flop on your stomach but you at least make it without breaking your wrist.

>"Nice!" Li Li's unstrapped snowboard is thrown into the snow before she slogs up to where you fell down to avoid running into her. "Good stuff, keep it up. Relax though, you're too stiff. Let the board do its thing but fight against it with your hips and heels or knees if you're about to hit a tree." She grabs her board and wipes off the snow while strapping back in. "Man I'm so glad to be up here again. Evelyn did us dirty but at least we get this." She turns back to you with a coy look. "You know, I grew out my fur one winter here with the other apprentices at the Peak to take this route naked."

"Good joke. It's way too cold for that." You stutter out a laugh thinking she's kidding. But as she jumps up back on the board and slowly glides away, she just keeps smiling at you and gives you a wink. Then in a flash she kicks off again but at a much faster pace. She gains speed and banks off into a turn past some trees where the shimmer of the next ring awaits. A cloud of snow shreds up as she makes an abrupt turn and jumps off a slight bump, grasping the bottom of her board and landing at a crouch stance to then stand up straight again. You try and catch up but a few tumbles later decide to just keep it slow and marvel at her freedom.

Imagining her doing this naked completely throws you off. So you shove off that picture and focus on at least making it down. It takes about an hour or so but the entire trip was filled with unforgettable views, the occasional cheer at Li Li's tricks, and a few close calls against trees. Just when your legs start cramping from the continuous bending and bumping, the final curve comes into view with one last humungous ring outlining a fortress filled with pandaren structures and a river that turns into a waterfall.



Back to what's straight ahead of you, Li Li is jumping up and down next to the checkpoint that she didn't yet touch. She calls at you to make the jump into the final ring. Ahead of you is a ramp that leads to doing just that. You straighten out of the turn and point the board dead center of the ramp going at a speed you're not comfortable with. You keep going though. Just before you hit the ramp Li Li's sounds of encouragement turn into hesitation.

>"Okay okay too fast!"

"What!?" You fly past her and lose your balance at the top of the ramp just as the ring of sand blows apart from you passing through it. Your board skips out from under as the snow below comes at you fast. You fall straight into the powder on your side and Li Li shreds to a halt down next to you. You pop up out of the tumble and cheer "That was awesome!!"

>"Not bad!" She unbinds and lifts you out.

A glance back at the ramp proves that you had no idea what was on the other side. You definitely took it too fast but it still felt good.

>"Well, we're here. Let's go get something to eat." Your pandaren friend pads off the snow from her gear and approaches the road leading up to the obviously guarded entrance to the monastery.

Part Three: Singers and Saunas





>"Wait is that..." Li Li swings out both of her arms to her sides, nearly slapping you with her board after you caught up to her striding to the burly armed Pandaren stationed at the post just outside the gates. "Wan is that you??"

>>"Well if it isn't the Wild Dog!" The old dude mimics Li Li's wide pose and catches her running embrace in a bear hug that lifts her well off the ground.

"Who are you calling a wild dog, fatso?" You put a paw on your hip and give him an offended stare wondering what the heck he's got with worgen.

>>"I think you're doing that yourself, lass. Who's your friend here, Li Li?"

>"Oh I never told you, Hilda! I have this weird other name around here." Li Li nudges Wan like a fake sparring partner that he's having absolutely no part in as she starts punching his chonky hip. "So I ran into a pair of brothers going to Zouchin Village and saved them from virmen. They wanted to pay me with kisses so I beat the crap out of them. Then Zouchin got attacked by trolls."

You transfer the baffled look to your friend. "How does that explain the name?"

>"Honestly? Don't know. The word just spread from there. What? I needed food, not a kiss! Like literally right now!" Her punches skip a beat as she looks past your gaze seeming like she made a mistake. "But yeah we'll be seeing those Stoneraker brothers at my brewery since they work there now." Her attention snaps back to hitting Wan but as soon as she picks up for another jab, he swipes a hold of her fisted paw.

>>"I never got the full story." In a flash, the guard shoves Li Li's fist back into her face causing her to reel back onto the ground. "Though I always assumed it was because you are an ambitious but terrible student. We knew you were coming. Scouted you from halfway down the mountain. You realize how dangerous it is here since we abandoned the peak, right?"



>Li Li pushes herself up into a crisscrossed stance. "Oh come on. How many times have I gone down that slope before? I woulda known if something was up. Plus I clearly saw your students in those trees. Seems like you're slacking on the lessons, Master Wan Snowdrift." She exaggerates that last part by scooping up some snow and throwing the powder toward him.

You can't tell if she's joking on that one because you for sure saw nothing in the trees.

>>"You're fortunate that Taran Zhu doesn't know you are here yet to catch that. I decided to keep it as a surprise for him after hearing you and your friend weren't being chased." He creaks open the large doors to the monastery. "Still, it was good to see someone coming down the slope again like that. It's been quite some time."

>Li Li gives him a high five then waves you on past the gates. "Thanks for telling me that the Peak of Serenity wasn't being rebuilt anymore by the way. Real useful information!"

You give Wan a shrug that hopefully came off as an apology. Passing by him lets you pick up on how scorched and scarred his face and exposed fur is, making you wonder how violent Pandaria has been. The thought immediately leaves your mind as you follow Li Li into the courtyard to be greeted by a stunning view. People of all ages litter what might as well be the most laid back fortress imaginable. Most are pandaren but you can assume all of them are monks sparring in distant combatant corners, meditating at shrines, and reading at gazebos under the waning sunlight. Li Li sits down at a bench under a pair of pink trees and just stares into your expression.

>"Culture shock? This is what I'm used to. Something tells me it's new for you."

A pair of students pass by with unfurled scrolls in their hands talking about different fighting styles. "It all looks so cold." You sit down next to Li Li aside from chunks of snow. "But somehow it feels unbelievable warm."



>"I guess it could seem magical. Like this cherry blossom tree." She places her whole palm against the trunk. "They don't bloom like this year-round anywhere else. But it doesn't stop here." Your friend takes in a full pass of the cliffs, paths, and forked river stream all surrounded by immense buildings. Something's on her mind but before you find time to ask, she jumps up and pulls your arm toward the closest structure near the gate. "I'll show you around later. Food's over here!"

A few monks passing by give you an intriguing look as she tugs you to an ornate set of double doors surrounded by lit braziers. "Hey, uh, why is everyone looking at me?"

>"Huh? Oh. Don't worry about them." You can tell she's driven by hunger. "It's not 'cuz you're a worgen. Probably. You just don't look like a monk."

The feeling of being out of place intensifies as she swings the door open to a boisterous cafeteria-like restaurant. Pandaren decorations lit by red, gold, and blue embellishments flood your vision. Strange string instruments played by a few musicians on a back-center stage strum amongst the dozens of loud conversations being had beside the humungous, openly rounded kitchen layout. Few acknowledge your existence as most people are either engaged or already drunk at the start of the night. You follow Li Li's movements to lay all the snowboarding gear under compartments near the entrance. She then picks a center-left table next to a fireplace adorned by gigantic horns.

>"You smell that?" She plops all her stuff down and immediately heads to a line to start slamming food down on a plate.

"I can't tell." An overload of aromas assault your nose but you assume it's all gotta be great.

>"You can't go wrong with anything here!" Li Li fist bumps one of the chefs adeptly slicing up fish meat right behind the counter. "Just pick what looks good. Oh, and as much as you want too!"



You look at the chef to confirm. His stone-faced nod is all you need to start loading up on soup, meat, and veggies with sauces you've never seen before. An intense emptiness in your stomach serves as a reminder that you didn't have a nibble of food left in your body since puking up lunch on the mountain. You match Li Li's speed as she scoops up a mug of what you guess is beer but you go for whatever looks like juice instead. Trailing her back to the table was nearly a disaster, having to deftly dodge a tumble as she got cut off a couple times by some other pandarens who recognized her.

>"Can't believe you're here too! Catch up later? Okay byeeee!" Li Li desperately rushes back to the table and collapses into the chair. It didn't even take her a heartbeat to start chugging soup out of a bowl.

Not to be beaten, you keep pace with her eating until you take a drink. Unexpected coughs make the liquid go down your windpipe. "Gah-good lord what is this??"

>Li Li catches the still rattling mug after you banged it back onto the table then takes a swig. "Beer!" She swaps your mug with hers.

Drinking it was your only option to stop the coughing. "It's... apple juice?" You burst out laughing. The embarrassing snorts slowly turn into sobs. You suddenly feel tears streaming down your cheeks. They catch you unprepared just as much as the lump in your throat despite not having taken another bite. Li Li's attention is split between eating her own fill and leaning back to watch the musicians play away. The thought of feeling safe and full finally hits you. You hadn't been in a buffet like this in years. Certainly not around friends either. You push the struggling happiness down with the next scoop of delicious noodles.

>"Look look!" Li Li makes sure you notice a gorgeously dressed pandaren taking the stage.



After making sure the last of the tears are padded down into your fur, you ask "Who's that?"

>"No idea. She's looks new around here. But look at her hair..."

She wasn't wrong. The newcomer probably put more work into the bundled hair decorations than the elaborate outfit. Just as you were about to comment on how you used to put in that much effort, the instruments slow down to a series of legatos. The pretty pandaren starts singing in a voice you never expected. Nor do you have anything to compare it to.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ose2eNONPdA&t=375s>

You can't pick up on the lyrics. It takes a couple verses to realize they're in a language you've never heard of. With the immediate hunger sated, you start to actually enjoy the food with Li Li instead of scarfing it down. "What's she saying?"

>"It's Pandaren. Well, old-old Pandaren."

"There's two? I've never even heard new-new Pandaren."

>"Hmm. Yeah, guess I haven't used it around you yet." Li Li rests her elbows on the table and cups her cheeks with her palms, looking you dead in the eye. What she says next comes out slow and methodical in another language.

You visibly perk your left ear trying to pick up on any of it. When she finishes you simply joke a response with "Moshi moshi?"

>"Not quite." She gives you a wink then stares back at the singer. "I just spoke modern Pandaren. There's a super old version of it that she's singing in. No one really knows it anymore. Well, most everyone. This song is something about seasons. I never really paid attention to all that. Wonder if she even knows..."

>"Oh! That reminds me!" She reaches into her backpack to grab a small linen sack. "Okay, so check out this flower that I found. When it sprouts it ends up looking like a lily." She busts out a nugget of a giant flower bud. "Hold onto it for a sec." The panda rushes up to a random waitress and grabs a steaming glass cup of water from her tray. Then she places it right in front of you. "Alright drop it in."

You plop it in. It floats on top for a minute. You both stare at it intently until it gradually spreads open to look like a lily flower.

>"And the best part is you can drink it!"

"Do you just go around drinking random flowers that you find?"

>"How else am I going to invent new brews when my Uncle gets too lazy? Guess what I named this one."

"Please don't tell me it's something dumb like Lily."

>"Li Li's Blooming Blossom."

You stare at her. She stares at you. You break a smirk first and she instantly starts laughing, dropping her face into the tabletop.



You just sit there with Li Li enjoying the company, noise, decor, and warmth of the fireplace on a rarely full belly. That is, until a massive figure appears from a shadowy corner that only you seemed to notice. He takes off his brimmed hat and beelines it straight to you. You try to get Li Li's attention with some glances but she's too entranced in the music and

trying to wave off the stares coming from other tables. The occasional sober monk rises from their chairs to give a quick bow in the way of the buff as fug guy waltzing between tables.

"Uhhh." You throw a pineapple chunk at Li Li, which she ignores. "UHHHH." The figure stops with crossed arms, towering right behind Li Li who's too busy making gestures at someone else. You lean back on the legs of your chair to get a better view of him, making sure the dude knows you have his full attention. The music dies down simply because the song seems to come to a proper end. The ensuing deafening silence of the restaurant comes after everyone inside, even the chefs, realize that this guy is here. Li Li finally picks up on the queue. Except it's too late. The figure takes his hat and drops it onto Li Li's head which completely obscures her head. You prepare for the worst by sliding your fingers along your sheathed knife.

>"Hmmm..." That's when Li Li flips around and stands up on her chair. Even then, she only ends up being half this person's height. She flips her head to the side, letting the hat slip off. "Taran!!!"

You finally relax after everyone in the building cheers a bunch of *Ayyy!s* and *Heyhey!!!s*. They all go back to drinking as Taran gives Li Li the same bear hug that Wan dished out. Her entire squeezed and suffocating body glances back to you with a look of *I've made a huge mistake*.

>>"Stormstout! Do you not realize your negligence? Wait until your Uncle hears how you never informed me of your arrival." He claims a seat, giving a thumbs up to the singer who nods with a smile and starts playing the next melody.

>"I was going to! I swear! And before you ask, this is Hilda. She's the coolest."

"Well I wouldn't say that." You subtly cover your knife with your shirt.

>>"Do not think I failed to notice you were prepared to fight for your friend." He eyes exactly where your knife is under the table. "Keep that about yourself. It's a fine reason to fight." He reaches out a giant paw. "I am Taran Zhu. Leader of the Shado Pan."

"Hilda. Just... Hilda?" You go to shake his hand but realize it's completely useless. Your entire paw only matches a portion of his palm. He chuckles and holds out his pinkie which you shake instead.

>>"So, Wild Dog Li Li, you're supposed to be at your family's brewery. Has something happened?" He leans back toward the fireplace and seamlessly tacks on another log.

>"Kinda. But nothing bad. Just got a free trip here is all so I'm a bit early. Think of it as a vacation to my home away from home."

>>"Always glad to see a set of consequences leading you back here. Fortunately for you, your old room is open tonight because of the students' training session at the western garrison."

>"Oof, remember that all too well." Li Li rubs her shoulder and looks at you when she asks the next question. "Does, uh, that mean the onsen is open too?"

>>"I will ensure it. You are looking rough." His laughs are followed up by a poke on the back of Li Li's neck where the matted down fur hasn't dried off from the fire yet. "Enjoy the night." He picks up his hat from the table, gets up, and gives both her and you a nod.



>"Thank you Taran! Seriously, I'll never forget this." Li Li steps out of her chair and mentions you to do the same. You both bow at him before he moves closer to the stage to strike a conversation with another table.

You stressfully finish off the rest of your apple juice with a sigh. "He looked like he was about to murder you."

>"Who? Taran? Nooo." Your friend thinks for a second then corrects herself under her breath. "Well, when the Sha was a problem he could have. That's still a bad time for him. But he's gotten so much better. Trust me, he's amazing."

"You're not wrong. I wasn't expecting a free room tonight. Or a room at all. By the way, what's an onsen?"

>"Ah, it's like that bathhouse back in Boralus. But more of a hot spring. And we're absolutely using it." Li Li looks down at your empty plate with a smug look. "I'm stuffed."

"What about the gear?"

>"The snowboards? Eh. We'll have to donate them. Can't haul it around everywhere. But we can leave it over there for now since my old room is right here on the third floor." She points a finger up toward the ceiling.

After helping Li Li scoop up all her stuff, you exit the establishment much to the sadness of the folks that didn't get a chance to slip a word in with her. The sun is fading under the distant peaks and valleys, giving the entire sky a yellowish hue. But more importantly, the stars are starting to come out. They're brighter and clearer than ever without too many clouds being in the way. As Li Li beckons you to a far corner of the monastery, you find yourself being captivated by the simplistic yet rigorous lifestyle of the students, teachers, and regulars that reside here. You have a feeling that some of the monks seen meditating were probably from the Peak of Serenity.



The building Li Li leads you to is embedded in a cliff face next to a canal of rushing water. That canal joins up to the rest of the forked river heading off to the waterfall far on the other side of the monastery. You wouldn't really say the building is an entrance to a mountain but more like the combination of a house with the side of a cave. Passing through the bamboo door, you're immediately slapped with humidity and fog.

>"So, like I said, basically a hot spring. There's a few scattered around the training grounds but this one's my favorite."

You dart your eyes around what you can guess is a casual locker room. Nearly every wooden piece of furniture, compartment, and scone is designed to be fitted around the cavernous interior. The natural stone patterns merge into smooth marble which keeps the floor level. Li Li grabs shampoo from her backpack, among other things you can't pick out and stuffs them into a smaller satchel. That's when it hits you that you have no swimsuit. "So, wait. Is this a one pool kind of thing?"

>"Yup. You've never actually been to one? They're pretty great." Li Li perks up to see that you don't have anything to swap into. "Er. I mean, if that's fine with you. Here, let me get the pool all bubbly. You can just skinny dip. It sounded like we'll be the only ones and I promise I won't stare."

You turn around after realizing that Li Li was already stripping down and putting her clothes on racks. "Yeah cool okay sounds good." You take your sweet ass time taking off your snow boots until Li Li's feet patter away on the smooth flooring. You glance over just in time to catch her back passing through the silken drapery obfuscating the next room.

She wasn't wearing a top. Only long salmon colored shorts that stop just below her knees bumping against the satchel hanging off her bare shoulder.



Finally alone after what feels like forever, you take a deep breath and stand in front of a nearby tall mirror. A furred reflection that's not entirely your own stares back in the silence. Well, it is yourself, but it's not every day you manage to look at a mirror. Forcing a smile is all you can do to push into a reasonable headspace unfettered from dissociation. The fangs that appear beneath your radiating eyes, nearly the same color as Li Li's, don't help. So you give in with a sigh, shut your eyes, and spend a moment to shift into a human. The process has never been hard but it stings your muscles every time. Your jaw clenches down as every fiber of your being tenses up. Putting a paw onto the mirror to brace was a mistake as the claws end up scratching the glass while they turn to normal nails. The noticeable breeze coming from the cracked bamboo door where you entered signals that your transformation is done.

New hazel colored irises open to the familiar reflection of your actual freckled face. Though this time, underneath all the dirt built up over the past couple days, the smile is genuine. You wipe your face off with a nearby rag and almost recoil from how soft it is. Pandaren don't joke around with these hot springs. Disrobing the now even more baggy layers of

smoky smelling clothes from the tavern's fireplace was easy enough because of your shorter, slimmer, and lighter body. You didn't even have to deal with the linen wraps around your wrists and ankles since there's no fur to hold them in place. You check under each layer removed for any bruises and cuts, something you definitely don't get a chance to do enough under the fur. Surprisingly, nothing hurts despite all the sudden unexpected chaos in your life. Some chaffing on your shins from the snowboarding is the only thing out of place on your otherwise naked body.



While there's certainly less of it, your pigtailed hair stays the same. Their tips bounce against your small chest over to the cubby where your friend put her outfit. Trying to fold your stuff as neatly as she did was a miserable failure and for some reason her gear makes you think about how everything comes so natural to her. Even her own body. You still haven't made up your own mind on whether yours is twisted. But one thing you can convince yourself of is that this is supposed to be relaxing. So you take a deep breath, sit down on the bench again, and clench your nails into your knees while transforming back into a worgen. Afterwards, you wrap a towel grabbed from a rack around your monstrous body then walk past the curtain into the next room, diligently treading on your pawpads so that your claws don't make any noise against the mixture of wood, marble, and rock. You're welcomed by what feels more like a hollowed mountain rather than a room. The walls of which end high up around a naturally formed open skylight providing a view of the

emerging stars. Clouds of snow cover mounds of rounded rocks next to a wooden platform surrounded by cushioned seats, sconces, and braziers which houses a circular hole in the ground. Li Li is crouching next to the foamy bubbles in that hole, stirring her paw around in the steaming water. A small stream of alpine water flowing from a rocky wall seeps into the tub. You lean against one of the ornate support pillars while staring up at the mesmerizing ceiling and question "Why's the bubble bomb gotta smell like lavender?"

>"Wah!" Like deja vu, Li Li whips around in the middle of your sentence, shocked. "Geeze you're quiet. Didn't hear you come in."

"Sometimes I forget how sneaky I can be. My bad."



>"This was the only bubbly vial left." Li Li goes back to stirring the bubbles around, but this time with her legs after she dips them in the pool. "I have some incense I can bust out if you don't like it."

"Was kidding. It smells awesome." You sit down on the other side of the tub, submerging your legs in the same way while holding tight onto your towel. Your attention darts from looking at the scenery back to Li Li's bare chest as she brings her arms around the back of her head to untie her ponytail. After her hair loosens, her swim shorts sink down into the tub as she steps in. Your ears catch the smallest echo off the cavern as she murmurs a moan. She dunks her entire head under the bubbles and comes up drenched shortly after.

>"I've missed this so much..." She seems to sit down in the water, lean back against the edge, and rests her head with closed eyes.

You take the chance to strip off the towel and slip in naked. She wasn't wrong. The recent random mixture of stress and surprises flushes away from your mind as the water soaks around your skin. Your feet find that the center of the tub is far deeper than an outer platform rimming the inside that you can sit on without being under the bubbles. The smallest of currents pull at the fur around your ankles, letting you know that the tub is actually a system, but you're still not sure how it's so comfortably hot.

>"Oh yeah!" Li Li's voice lights up over the subtle popping of bubbles and crackling of fire. "I forgot to write today down." She turns around to kneel on the tub's inner rim to pull out the bulk of her satchel's contents; her journal and pen.

"Won't it get wet?"

>"Nah it's waterproof."

"What??"

>"Mystical Pandaren paper. I don't have to explain it."

"How's it all just one book if you're writing every day down?"

>"It's not. I just send it off to my Poppa after I run out of pages. He sends me a new ones."



"That's adorable." As if on queue, the monk's satchel on one of the cushioned seats next to the tub moves on its own. The tiny spirit Brewie peaks its head out of it and yawns with stretched arms.

>"Aww Brewie you're not supposed to be awake yet. But since you are..." Li Li reaches further beyond the tub, accidentally giving you a clear view of her baggy shorts that are clinging tight to her ass, and sits him down on a tiny table. After she goes back to writing, you grab a soap bottle and start scrubbing away at your arms. Bringing your paws to stomach makes you realize that you're terribly sensitive. The slightest touch further down around your lips bring back the horniness you shoved away back in Boralus. Brewie's waking movements lock onto your gaze. He looks tired but you are thankful you have someone to stare at other than Li Li as a distraction. Just after you get control of yourself, Li Li stashes the journal away once more and grabs a familiar small box out.

>"Alright buddy, here you go." More shimmerweed is plucked out from the box. This time much more than before at the clocktower. She lays it all in a pile on the cushion behind Brewie who giddily scarfs some of it down. "He'll be sizzling with that for a bit. Wanna get closer to him? I don't know if the smoke will make it over on the other side of the tub."

Your heartrate spikes for a second. "Sure." Is all you can squeak out of the situation. You make your way on over to her side by walking through the middle and sitting next to her floating strands of hair that she just began washing.

>"So, about the Brewery. There's not much to say about the festival since we only started it annually a few years ago."

"Lots of drinking?"

>"Too much. Even for me. But you'll be able to meet my family! My Uncle's a bit weird but you'll like him."

Her words remind you of the family parties you had in Gilneas. They weren't fun. It was mostly bureaucratic nonsense but your parents tried their best. Li Li shoves the soap away from her spotted eyes and peers at you with her iridescent eyes through the haze.

>"You're thinking too much."

"How can you tell?"

>"Because your hair is still tied." Li Li's comforting expression gets awkwardly close. "And because I read you at the clocktower. The tracing wasn't just for the smoke." She raises an eyebrow at Brewie who is on a twin peaks level of cloud nine right about now. The second hand shimmerweed contrasts with the lavender scent.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

>"Your chi is all messed up. But I can't tell what you're struggling with. All I know is that it's going to be fine." Li Li lifts into a kneeling position facing you with her bare (bear hehe) chest exposed. Only after she notices your timid reaction of staring downward into the bubbles off to the side does she remember to duck back down. "Sorry. All I'm saying is to relax." She brings her paws up to help undo your pigtails.

Just as she yanks the first band off to let the clump of hair spread out around your shoulder, you lunge forward to her face for a quick kiss. Your own eyes widen more than hers does then pull your head back and stare at her. "I-I! Why? You didn't see that." Li Li's smirk is barely visible through the steam. She goes back to undoing the second hairband despite your frozen body. After it's untied she gives you a kiss in return. This one is longer. She presses a paw under the water against your heart making you not only jump at the touch but also realize that it's racing.

>"Look, you probably don't hear this enough, but you're a good person. I don't need you to show me what your human form looks like to know that, even though I'm dying to know."

Your thoughts match the speed of your heart, trying to think of something to say as Li Li hoists herself in a sitting position on top the tub's ledge. You eventually land on one question. "Why did you let me tag along?"

>"On what?" Li Li asks while she shifts along the wood to sit behind you.

"This whole adventure. I straight up tried to steal from you the first time you met me." Your back rests on the side of the tub, you stare back into the torchlight dancing off the snowy cavern interior.

>"I just had a hunch is all." Li Li pins you in place as a pair of legs wrap around your shoulders to end up crisscrossed along your stomach. Her interlocked heels rest dangerously above your clit. A pop rings out as a trail of shampoo starts falling down into the water from the top of your head. She pushes a paw on the side of your head, letting you use her thigh as a pillow.

Paws starts lathering and washing your hair, transitioning from rubbing to scratching the soap in. One spot behind your ears spikes in pure ecstasy. "Ah~" You panic and cover your mouth, making Li Li halt.

>"Did you get hit there or something?"

"Nope! Just uhh, taking in the view is all. Those stars are crazy cool." She continues and you leverage the distraction to weave your paws under the water. With your eyes still closed, you start rubbing the sensitivity just beyond Li Li's crossed feet. Your ears involuntarily spasm every time she scratches that spot behind your ears. You never knew it existed. But it's sending you into a haze of feelings. Every prod of your finger along your slit causes the next scratch to intensify.

>"Your ears are twitching like crazy. You okay?" Li Li's soft voice pairs with the sincere sounding question. "Actually I always wondered if you hear better than I can. I mean it'd make sense since they're are bigger, right?"

"Doing fine..." You gain control of your breathing as the panda stops washing your hair. "My hearing? How am I supposed to even test that?"

>"Boo." You jump from the unexpectedly close noise whispered straight into your floppily perked ear. "Like that!" She chuckles. "Your hair's done."

And with that, you slide your back down into the water more to submerge your head. After all the soap spreads away, you rise back up into the same leg-locked trap. Except you've turned around into a kneeling position on the inner rim so that you can face Li Li who's now leaning back on her paws against the smoothed wooden ledge. Her still sopping wet and steaming body contrasts with the relatively colder air while her swim shorts drip off into the tub. Your knees become weirdly weak as you trace your gaze up the rest of her body.

>"Wait so I don't get to stare but you do? How's that fair?"

"That doesn't count anymore." You rest your muzzle against her groin, giving her a newly attentive startle. You nibble at the fabric and give it a slight tug, forcing it to slip down her waist a bit.

>"Woah." It's hard to tell if her dazed expression is from the growing cloud of shimmerweed or if she truly had no idea how horny she was making you. "Are you sure?"

"I think this is the only thing I can be sure of."

>"Then it's all you." The monk leans back on her cute butt and tugs at the waist of her swim shorts. She pushes them down to her knees, leans her body weight on her left paw sitting at an angle, and moves her right paw to slide aside the drenched hair out of your face.

You take care of sliding her pants off her legs and toss them next to Brewie who's still churning away, essentially hotboxing the onsen. Still kneeling, you position yourself right in between Li Li's legs. She had crossed them again, leaving you with the view of her thigh gap. You push her legs aside, uncrossing them so that her pussy spreads apart a bit on its own. Without a word, you give one lick from the bottom along the whole length. The taste is a mix between her own scent and the soapy lavender. After a few more, you look up at her slow breathing. She gives you a reassuring smile from above and rests her paw against the back of your head.

"Can you keep doing that thing behind my ears?"

>"Ohhh." Li Li coos. "That's why your ears were twitching..." Her hand caresses into your hair and inches closer and closer to that spot that was driving you mad. She starts scratching it which forces even more motivation to make her feel good in return. While your feet are hanging suspended in the middle of the pool behind you, you push Li Li's legs further apart with your paws, giving your muzzle more access to her puffy opening.

Your tongue goes back to work as you start eating her out. You hit a certain spot just before the tip of your tongue hits her clit. Her scratching skips a beat as a slight gasp fills the cavern. The paw on the back of your head pushes down causing your entire muzzle to get shoved into her groin. You keep licking and subtly sucking at whatever spots you think works for her. One of her fingers manage to keep scratching away at your other ear but it becomes erratic. Even though she can't get it right anymore, that's more to your advantage because you can focus solely on her while your own pussy stops aching for as much attention. Your eyes catch the tiny jiggle of her chest moving up and down at a quicker pace.

Your face is shoved in even harder as Li Li starts moaning harder. After a few more prodding licks, you suddenly panic and pull back to gasp for breath. The paw moves away from your head and the only thing you can see is the occasional pulsing of your friend's pussy. Her thirsty panting for air matches your own. "Sorry. Sorry I just couldn't breath."

>"F-fine it's fine. You're good. Ah~" She sits up and pokes at her pussy. A sticky strand leaves a string behind through the mist as she pulls away her short lived rubbing.

"Did I do alright?" You sheepishly prod at your own opening under the water to check if you'd even be able to last a touch from her. The answer isn't as reassuring as you hoped.

>"I'm close. Way too close." She slips back into the water and pulls your arm with her to stand in the center of the pool.

She gives you the tightest hug you've ever embraced before. Entire minutes seem to pass as she shares your weight her own, desperate for the touch in the whisking water. Eventually, you're pulled apart. Li Li takes in every feature of your upper body that she can see for the first time. She gropes your breasts and goes in for a kiss. You don't know how to follow it up but you try the same while also reaching around to feel up her butt. The kiss turns into Li Li's tongue invading past your teeth. As soon as it touches your own tongue, you follow up with your own play past her buck teeth. Her breath becomes yours for a time until something slips into your pussy. Li Li pushes away and bends a bit down with an arm under the water. One of her fingers slowly slides upward into your vag while two others spread your lower lips apart. After you gasp, Li Li winks at you then steps closer into your body, giving you another hug.

>"This might feel weird at first." Her voice whispers into your right ear once again. You stand there leaving your own arms draped over her shoulders.

Her right paw cups your groin as the left one fondles your butt. One of her knees pushes in front of her wrist, giving you a place to put some of your weight. Over her shoulder, Brewie is passed out. The smoke completely covers the tub now. Despite how cloudy your mind has gotten, every sensation is intensified. Every breath that both you and Li Li take pushes your breasts into each other. It's easy to tell that every graze of your fur against her nipples makes her body crave more attention because you have the exact same thirst.

She starts methodically fingering you, paying special attention to the skin around your hood. Suddenly, the gestures change into strange tracing patterns. The pressure of the water shifts into a slipstream aimed specifically at your thigh gap.

>"I've been practicing this but let me know if it stings at all."

The water flow follows the minor movements of Li Li's wrist. A gush of water rushes past your opening providing a totally different tingle of warmth. You drop your head into Li Li's neck, taking in every scent of her slack hair. She keeps playing around with the water for a bit, squishing your lips together in tandem with the current and then letting the stream surge along your walls when she uses a couple fingers to spread it apart. The sensation is wild. You pull your head back to kiss Li Li once again but you can't suppress the building pressure of an oncoming orgasm. You go back to shoving your head into Li Li's neck, clenching your jaw as she picks up the pace. The rest of your weight falls on her shoulders and her supporting knee. She goes back and forth from slipping in a couple fingers to rubbing around your clit. The current starts to lose the rhythm as you seethe in through your teeth. All of a sudden, everything is cut off by a gasp.

>"Ow ow ow." Li Li pulls her knee back, causing you to fall into her as she takes a step back. You get back to your feet in a fluster and hold her arms to see if she's okay. That's when you see her massaging her wrist. "Sorry, that trick takes a lot out of me." She sucks off the fingers that were inserted into you with a smug look.

That's when you stare at her neck. It's bleeding. All the lewdness banishes from your thoughts and the edging, aching feeling starts to wear off. "Oh shit..." You notice the red on your left claw which pierced her skin. "Your neck!"

>"Hmm?" Her strained paw touches where you were holding onto her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I thought-"

>"Oh, I didn't even feel that." She says as she looks at the blood staining her pawpad. "I didn't know you were into that kinda stuff, Hilda." Before the blood drips into the pool, the monk cups her neck and a strange teal hue forms around the mist covering the onsen. As if it was weaved into waves around her neck, the teal light turns into a green glow under paw. As she moves it away, you see nothing but the little bit of blood that had already made its way down her shoulder. "Is it gone?"

You brush some of her hair aside to see that her neck was completely healed. "That's incredible."

>"So, how was it?" She crosses her arms.

"I need more." You go to kiss her again which she repays in kind. But it didn't last long as she moves to climb out of the water.

>"Same. But I doubt we have much longer here. I Honestly didn't think you'd want to do this. But I'm glad." She pulls herself up on out of the pool, staring back to giggle at your horny face once her entire rear splashes out in front of you.

You follow her out. "I thought you said it was all ours?"

>"I didn't mean for the whole night. And I don't know about you but I'm sweating."

"I thought it was just me. And a drink doesn't sound bad too."



>"I don't get why you were being so prude. You have an amazing body." The panda grabs a towel to dry you off instead of herself, taking special care not to rub anything too sensitive.

"I'm not as used to being so... care free? It feels good though. But yours is better. Normal. Natural."

>"Natural? You are what you are, Hilda." She grabs another towel to start drying herself off and gather her things after stuffing Brewie's sleepy form back in the satchel. With a few circular waves of her arms, Li Li diverts all the smoke high above into the air and streams it out through the cavern ceiling's hole.

>"Alright let's get to my room. I'll even let you sleep in it." She sticks her tongue out. "Here, take this." She skips over to a few silver hooded silk robes hung off a rack. "Putting my muggy clothes on is a hard pass."

You wrap yourself in the most comfy robe you've ever felt in your life and follow her out of the onsen, making sure to grab all of your belongings in the first room and hang them in a bag off your shoulder.

You both exit the house and follow the path back to the tavern which is somehow even more lively than when you left. Half way there, Li Li diverts off the path and jumps through the snow to a nearby snowman. She takes the carrot nose off and sticks it on the bottom part, making it look like a dick.

A few monk students on their way to the onsen ahead of you burst out laughing after seeing her do this then give you a nod. The overbearing steam from under your robe lets them know exactly where you came from.

After reaching the tavern, Li Li grabs your paw, shoves your hood up, and leads you through the doors once again where you notice that your snowboarding gear hasn't moved. She skirts along the edge of the establishment making sure to dodge anyone that would get in the way of the absolute thirst. Thinking of that, you snag the closest and largest mug off a tabletop. Some of it drips onto the floor as Li Li tugs you up the welcoming sight of stairs. A few flights up, past some of the most ambiantly pleasing lighting and practical decorations, she reaches a door.

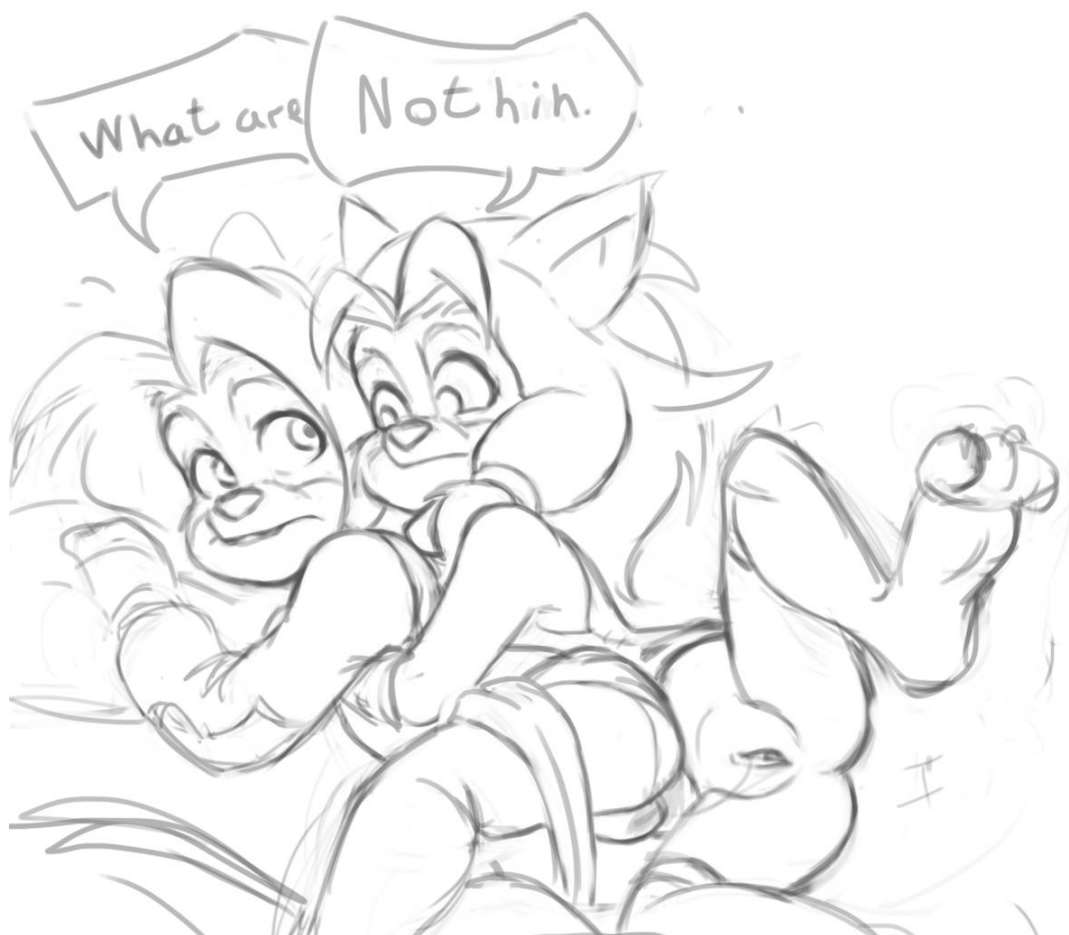
>"Welcome to my home away from home!" The entrance swings wide to a magnificent bedroom. The giant bed on the far wall is second only to the spacious interior filled with moonlight seeping in through a circular window. Carved wooden Pandaren furniture accompany a grounded table in the center of the room housed all sorts of weapons, Shado Pan outfits, flowers, wall scrolls, and textiles. The bed itself is overflowing with pillows. "This was my room when I was training here. But after a few favors here and there, I get first dibs on it when I come back! Otherwise, other students usually take it. But all my personal stuff's still here!" She grabs the nearest exotic flower and gives it a whiff. "Smell it!"

You do just that, slam the door shut, toss your gear aside, put the flower down, and chug half of whatever is in the mug while your free hand starts untying your robe. Li Li yanks the rest of the brew which she chugs way faster than you, picking up on how desperate you are to get back at it. With your robe slipping off your shoulders, barely hanging onto your body from your arms, you move to Li Li and start untying hers. She finishes off the mug and goes back to making out with you. In a twist, she turns you around as if in a dance and pushed you onto the bed. You fall onto it with a pomf and crawl with your elbows back toward all the pillows. She throws the robe aside and knees herself onto the bed following to a crawl above your prone body.



Without a word, she drops her stomach onto yours and gives you a smooch. Her head moves down to your cheek. Then your neck. Smooches follow her path as she pays special attention around your areolas with her fingers. They go even lower to your belly button. You gasp for air after you let out the breath you didn't know you were holding. You dig your claws into the covers when she reaches your pussy. One smooch is all it takes for you to spread your legs. She spreads them even further and wraps her arms around your thighs. Her tongue hovers just above your wetness. You look down at her and start fondling your own breasts. She keeps up the eye contact with every traveled inch of her mouth to your opening. Her hot breath somehow manages to make your nipples even harder. That's when her mouth lands and she starts lapping up some of your grool from bottom to top. Every lick makes you wish you could clench into the sheets even further. Your hips move on their own in tandem with Li Li's motions. It doesn't take long until you're on the edge again. "Wait wait wait!" You whisper out past the moans causing Li Li's matted maw to rise from your crotch.

You look at a string of lewdness trailing from Li Li's finger as she kneels into a sitting position. An obvious sign that she was playing with herself. You fight past the panting, the feeling of being high, and the buzz from the beer. Despite how weird it sounds in your head, an idea hits you to raise the top of your footpaw into her thigh. Li Li gives you a confused look but follows along as you start grinding your foot along her slit. She pushes her arms into the bed and starts grinding on it. Her drying hair falls backwards as she hangs her neck back. You take some time to grab a few pillows and toss it her way so she has more support to help grind on your foot.



She eventually stops and falls onto her chest next to you, breathing heavily. The exhaustion starts to kick in but you can tell she hasn't gotten off yet. So you take the lead, get up, and crawl down toward her legs. Once you're above her butt, you look down across the length of your body hovering over hers. Li Li shoves her face out of the covers and flips on over to look at the ceiling. Or what she thought was going to be the ceiling. She giggles at the drop of your lube seeping its way down toward her face. You take the chance to go down on her pussy again. She follows up after you sit yours on her face. The needy licking turns into you both straight up eating each other out. Li Li's claws dig into your legs as you dig yours into her thighs. You start quivering on top of her as a sudden orgasm hits hard.

It takes all of your willpower to keep going down on her instead of rising up to sit on her face. You ride out the wave of ecstasy that causes spikes of released pressure to pass through your curved spine. You can feel your toebeans splay out into the pillows near Li Li's head. Li Li's pants, squeaks, and contractions tell you that she's cumming too. You try and keep up some sort of rhythm but lose your mind in a haze of sheer selfless happiness. Eventually, your strength gives out and you crawl off of her and fall backwards on your side onto the other side of the bed so that you're face to face with your friend.

You slither on over to her breasts to start suckling on her perked nipples. At the same time, your paw finds its way back down to her still pulsating slit. Your fingers find their way into her sopping wet entrance, trying to get her to ride the orgasm onto a second. She pushes her hips into your paw and reaches over to kiss you through the desperation. The warmth and lavender of the onsen radiate along both your bodies as you keep up your journey of her walls. Somehow, you find the strength to lift yourself onto Li Li's chest. Her arms and legs wrap around your body, reacting to your fingering. It hits a spot that causes her claws to dig into your back. You can tell they're digging in deep past your fur but

you fight through the pain to give her one final deep kiss. She clutches into the embrace, cumming a second time. Her moans reverberate through your throat and her legs twitch around your hips. You keep supporting her grasp until she loosens up. Your hair splays out onto her face, obfuscating whether or not she's even still breathing.



You collapse to her side, completely spent, and fondle her breasts with an arm still splayed along her chest. Time drags on as you both regain some semblance of sanity.

"Hehe.. Nice mountain tops."

>"Ha.. ha.. good one."

"What? They're still bigger than mine."

>"Barely."

You flip on over and finally close your eyes. "Hey Li Li."

>"Yeah?"

"Thanks. For everything."

>"Hey I needed this too. Didn't even let me break out that toy you caught me with in Boralus. I even have this cool jade spirit I got in Gadgetzan that I was gonna break out-"

"No, I mean for trusting me. But also that sounds... fun? Next time for sure." It's strange. Even at the Darkmoon Faire, everything has always been about being selfish just to survive and deal with your own problems. But now, at least here with Li Li, you're able to be selfless and make someone happy for once. Your thoughts shut down after your eyes force themselves shut.

>"Get some sleep." Li Li quietly says as she turns over to cuddle. Her legs lock with yours as she tugs some covers over the both of your bodies. "We have a long day tomorrow. Hopefully with a hot air balloon."

You let out a noise that should have been more of an agreement. The last thing you see is some of her jet black hair tangle with your own brown strands. The candles lighting the room extinguish, probably from Li Li's magic. The panda shifts to spoon you and matches your breathing as you drift off into overwhelmingly comfortable darkness.

Epilogue

Stitched some of the new Avalanches for a theme covering Hilda and Li Li's shared lack of a mother figure since Mother's Day is around the corner. Go watch *Wolf Children*. And *Wolfwalkers* while you're at it.



Well, here it is. Li Li convinced me to keep a journal. So I guess I'll start it off by saying I hate heights. Yet here I am in this hot air balloon after a bomb ass breakfast in the Shado Pan Monastery. We managed to catch the ride just in time for the daily round trip supply run to some place called the Valley of the Four Winds. Luckily, Li Li's family brewery is there. I guess I'll explain why I'm going there later but seeing Pandaria from this high up has been incredibly awesome and the pilot guy is kinda cool too.---

>"Hilda?"

"What? I'm writing here."

>"Do you ever think about where your mom went?"

Your delayed response comes out quietly over the wind slapping against the balloon above. "Every day."

>"I don't remember much of mine. I was pretty young when she- well, yeah. But if Wanyo managed to survive in the mouth of a giant turtle for years then maybe she made it out somewhere?"

You choke back what would have been a stupid remark.

>"I know it sounds dumb but it helps me to try and talk to her. I mean I get I'm just talking to myself but have you ever done that?"

"No."

>"What would you say to her?"

"Seriously?"

>"Just try it. Who knows, feels like we're closer to the Shadowlands up here. Maybe she'll hear you?"

...

"Hey. I'm sorry I left so suddenly."

<https://files.catbox.moe/zjk6e2.webm>

