

HORLEY



WORLD
WARCRAFT
MISTS of PANDARIA

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Over Water

by Ryan Quinn

No matter how many times you do it, it's never any easier. Every day, wearing the same muddy clothes. Waiting for hours for a bunch of them to charge you, growling like wolves the whole time. Swinging your sword until you can't feel your shoulders anymore. Just as scared you're going to cut yourself or one of your own guys as you are to feel a knife in your spine. Ending up with blood and sweat all over you and not knowing who it belongs to, and going back to whatever hole you've dug to sleep in, and trying to figure out who's dead and who's alive. Then somebody shakes you awake, and you do it again. Sometimes you have to march first.

The kid had looked back at Tarlo with the dumbest gawp. Someone had probably convinced him that the war was over and the Alliance had won.

Sure, they were better off than the other side. Orgrimmar breached, the chief orc in irons, the Horde down and licking their wounds.

So what? Pandaria had been ravaged, to exactly no one's surprise. Now that their local menaces had been run off, the natives were quick to spout gratitude, but Tarlo knew they were only being polite. There was no way to have armies fight in your home without hating the people who started it.

And the Horde wasn't destroyed, just routed. There was a new warchief now, and there'd be a new war once he got settled in. Whoever thought a cannibal troll would lead the Horde to an era of peace and understanding hadn't seen much of the Zandalari.

Yeah, they'd won.

Tarlo Mondan had been at the Pandaren campaign from the first call for volunteers, and he'd been in plenty more battles before that. Orcs, moldering undead, twisted horn-heads that wore human skulls—he'd fought them all and lived.

What'd he gotten out of it? Enough scars to make him shave his scalp? Some pillage put away in a bank? No children, no wife, no home he built himself, no paintings on the wall. Not much to go out on. They were sailing home on the *Patron's Pride*, but it could have been any other fat ship full of loot and new recruits. They'd stand in the first clean uniforms they'd worn in months, get cheap medals around their necks, and then do... what? Wait for the next call to arms?

Better the kid figure it out now. Sooner was better than later, alone with some brain-dead Horde ox barreling down on him. At least he could quit while he was young.

Of course, the kid never did. He had that same idiot's gawp on his face when the third big wave of the night belched over the deck of their ship.

It knocked Tarlo to his knees. White, foamy water washed over everything, got in his mouth, and stung his busted gums, but he squinted and focused on the kid.

The sail was flipping, near ripped in half. Men were yelling to be heard over the din, screaming, picking themselves up. The *Patron's Pride* was lurching, and Tarlo's stomach seized up in his guts and stayed there while he ran for the kid.

Tarlo was halfway across the deck when he realized why the kid's face hadn't changed: he was slumped up against the side of the ship, little ocean washes pushing him back and forth. Tan, waterlogged wood splinters were all over his clothes, pooling in the water around him. His formerly blue tunic had been bled through and was sickly purple. Probably a cannon had slid over and crushed him. Maybe a spar had cracked his skull. Maybe—

While Tarlo was speculating, another wave turned the ship sideways. His feet left the ground, and he was ripped off the deck. He saw seawater everywhere under him for an instant. Just a few hours ago, he'd been pissing in it.

Tarlo smashed into the ocean back-first, the air already halfway out of his lungs, the churning of the water tugging his limbs left and right like doll parts. Sinking him.

No.

It was piercingly cold, like being hit with a spear out of nowhere. His fingers curled involuntarily. It hurt to open his eyes.

No.

Down. His body spun over and over. The water was punching him everywhere at once. His arms and legs flailed out.

Tarlo was being pulled farther under, it felt like. He was painfully aware of his lungs throbbing, trying to expand. They would pop, and water would come flooding in. There was no knowing when. He bit his lips closed, thrashed, was wreathed in his own bubbles.

His lungs burned hotter, harder. The veins in his neck pulsed, tensed like rigging.

His chest was giving in. His body was a puppet. Maybe his legs had been broken; they were hardly moving.

Everything seemed heavy. Was he drowning? How terribly appropriate that he'd die here, after surviving a dozen battles, a few seconds from his ship.

He had to open his mouth. Something hit him hard out of nowhere, and his mouth opened itself.

He sucked in brine and hot salt. Because of the pain, it just felt right to breathe back in. He hated himself even as he was doing it.

Air. He snorted air and water and snot, and Tarlo realized that his head was above the surface. He was breathing. His back and sides were on fire, and his arms were sore, but he saw straight for the first time in an eternity, and there was light gleaming from the twin moons up above. Tarlo bobbed against something behind him. Rocks. Sharp. He pushed against them with his legs and gasped in another breath.

Tarlo coughed red, salt bile into his mouth. It hurt—a good sign. He was alive.

In the distance, he could see the *Patron's Pride*, beaten, sails wrapping, shakily drifting away. He wouldn't expect them to come back in this storm. He wouldn't have come back. Better one man overboard than a hundred.

The water was freezing. At first, the waves had nudged him painfully against the rocks, but they clearly wanted to lift him up and smash him down. Tarlo tried not to think about his back and failed. Hopefully it was just a strain. He didn't even want to reach his arms around to touch it.

Churning water was rising up everywhere around him. How long did he have? He looked up again, glanced around for the *Patron's Pride*, and saw a tiny hump of a wave growing in the distance. It probably wouldn't be as big as the one that had set a ship of the Alliance to chaos, but it was big enough to do for him alone.

Tarlo sucked in his breath and shivered. The waves kept coming. If it wasn't this one, it'd be the next. His breathing was ragged.

As the nearest wave slunk down, preparing to rear again, he noticed something climbing its crest. Wreckage? It looked like a long plank.

If he could reach it after the wave bottomed, maybe...

The wave crashed down, and he was pelted with spray and pressed backward again. Tarlo wanted to scream as the rocks scraped his back, but he shoved against them. He felt as though he was barely moving, but he was somehow getting closer to the plank, to his salvation. How was it still above water after that last crash?

He realized then that the plank was coming toward him. He could see it sharply in the moonlight as it punched through a rising wave, landing square in the middle of his sight. It was getting bigger. Closer. A ship?

A craft, at any rate. Tarlo watched as the speck of plank in his vision became a long wooden skiff with nets trailing alongside it.

The pilots of the boat were big, thick-necked. They hunched forward, and oars, tiny like batons in their fists, flashed again and again into the water.

Orcs. There were three, Tarlo understood as they got closer. He wished he had his sword.

An ocean surge smashed the craft on its right side, and the three forms deftly switched positions, standing up straight and pounding their oars into the sea like spear butts to try to keep their boat from listing. Tarlo held his chattering teeth and breath, and pondered. Better to freeze to death, or drown, or be captured by...

No, not orcs. Their faces and hands were covered in fur, and they were soaked entirely through it. Even their eyes looked sodden. They'd wrapped gray-and-brown cloaks double around themselves, resembling bundles of wet rags, and their shaggy-furred paws clung to the side of their boat.

Pandaren?

One huge figure had its wide mouth open, but it did not appear to be saying anything. Just... shouting. A wave surged behind the boat, and it was pulled backward, its aft lifted treacherously upward. The shouting figure raised one paw, making a sign as the craft was sucked out of control. Its mouth did not close.

Was it... cheering?

The pandaren skiff rode the top of the wave for a few seconds before it slapped down, and Tarlo was staring at the craft not fifteen feet away. The three sailors were completely drenched, but the big one held out a meaty paw, pointing at Tarlo. Its mouth was still open. Behind the boat, another wave grew, soon to seek the rocks.

Tarlo kicked his legs and swam for his life.

He was shivering and retching as the three figures heaved him into the boat, but Tarlo choked down the salt spew when they started moving. Against the rising waves, the pandaren were a force.

They shouted inarticulately, two quick hollers and then one, chanting as a wave rose and cheering when they came out of it no more than soaked, slapping each other on the back and yelling as if they hadn't been moments away from dying. Every time the ship went through a wall of water, Tarlo knew he'd be in the ocean any second... and then the chants would resume, and the boat would leap against the waves. Water roiled everywhere as though giant unseen hands were smacking the ocean, and still the pandaren continued on. Then there were no more waves; there was only cheering.

Tarlo had stopped counting the swells that almost flipped their boat and had just let himself lie on his back. It didn't feel as if he'd broken anything bad. Maybe cracked a rib? His side was tender, but sitting hurt less than he'd thought it would, so he huddled into the extra cloak the pandaren had wrapped around him. The sky was no less grim, the rain was pounding, and their tiny boat shifted precariously almost without warning, but the waves were... calmer. He couldn't see the *Patron's Pride* anywhere, but far in the distance, he saw rocky, dark juts of cliffsides, probably the ones the men on board had expected to round before the storm.

Looking around the boat, Tarlo felt as though he'd just woken up. He was safe. Safer. "You... thanks," he mumbled.

One of the pandaren, the big one who hadn't stopped yelling, did stop long enough to grunt assent. Another—small and stocky, with a thick jaw—scooped water out of the boat's belly with a mug. The third, with its hood up over its ears, worked two oars with an alternating twirl, its back propped up against what looked to be a beer keg half the size of a man. The pandaren didn't turn or cease rowing as it spoke, and its words were barely audible over the ceaseless rain.

"You are... Alliance?" Accented Common. Husky, grating voice. A male?

"Yeah." Tarlo paused. "Where are we... where are you taking this boat?"

The boat coasted for a second as the pandaren stopped rowing. He turned to look at Tarlo, golden eyes bright under his hood, like a startled animal. His flimsy beard, two long furry whiskers, twitched.

"Fishing."

Tarlo was as dry as he was going to get: not at all. He pulled another blanket over his head as the oars were put up and the pandaren idled about, letting their boat get tossed by the waves.

The cliffs were even farther away. Tarlo could barely see them. He couldn't imagine where the *Patron's Pride* might be, if it wasn't a wreck. Lightning popped in the sky.

The pandaren were busy chattering, wrangling lines, checking nets for holes, applying bait to hooks. The big yelling one had unstoppered the keg and was filling mugs two at a time.

"Look, I'm grateful," he said to the big pandaren, "but could you let me off near those cliffs we passed?"

"Cousin Shi Ga is preparing his cast. Would you like a drink?"

Her—*her*—voice was surprisingly soft. Tarlo almost couldn't believe that what he was hearing came out of the same bellowing maw he'd heard earlier.

He found himself accepting a foamy mug of ale pressed into his hands. His teeth chattered around a few gulps. It was warm... but not in a bad way.

"Uh, thanks. Tarlo," he said, pointing at himself.

"I am Mei Pa. It is good to share a drink with you, Tarlo. This is my brother, Kuo." Her open palm gestured toward the stocky pandaren with the big face.

Kuo, who had his brawny paw looped through the handles of two mugs while he straightened the boat's nets, nodded back.

"Kuo was just telling us about the time he caught a lungfish off the coast of the Jade Forest. Do you fish, Tarlo?"

Tarlo did not. Fishing was about as boring as it got. You sat, you waited, you watched, and you waited some more. People fished in the laziest, clearest conditions imaginable, and then they called themselves fishermen like it was a big deal. Anyone could be a fisherman in springtime. Fishing during a rainstorm, in a tiny boat in the middle of the ocean while you froze to death—that wasn't boring; it was idiotic.

"I'm not really much of a fisherman," he said.

"But you do tell stories, surely."

"Stories? Yeah, sure. I have a few."

Immediately, Mei Pa and Shi Ga focused their intense eyes on him. They'd clamped on to the idea so fast, and it might help coax the pandaren into taking him somewhere drier if they felt some common ground...

Tarlo cleared his throat.

"Well, when I was serving in the wetlands a few years back, we found this old town. There were, ah, I think, eight of us in the company. Old broken-down fort, probably dwarf-made from a long time ago. We'd found it on a scouting mission and started checking the interior, but I guess the Horde had gotten the tip, because before too long there were two whole warbands outside the gates, looking for a way in. They completely surrounded the place. There was no way we were gonna get through them without getting spotted. Tons of 'em. Bloody ugly bastards. Giant axes, swords, everything."

Mei Pa's huge brow furrowed.

"So Griley had this great idea: we pulled down all the stone tapestries and carvings off the wall, grabbed up a few of the rugs that weren't rotting, and we piled them all in the front courtyard, ripped a few up to look like they'd been left behind by looters. We tossed a couple coins in the mix, because orcs just can't resist a junk pile if it looks like it's got coppers in it."

The pandaren were really into the story. Shi Ga had put down his fishing rod and shifted his seat to watch Tarlo tell the tale.

"Then we put about a half-dozen charges in the loot pile, you know, buried underneath all the stuff. And we hid. When the orcs came in, I was sweating like crazy. No lie. I wasn't sure if they'd go for it.

"They argued about it for a little while, but eventually they sent a few goblins—you know, little green guys with the ears—over to go rooting through. We waited while more of them got halfway deep in the pile, you know, six, eight, ten... and BAM! Took care of probably twenty of them, and most of the portcullis and front wall too. Loudest thing I ever heard in my life. While they were spinning their dumb heads around to figure out what happened, we tossed our ropes over the west gate and snuck out."

Done. It seemed that Kuo had been holding his breath. "And?" he said.

"Huh?" Tarlo asked.

Mei Pa butted in. "What my brother wonders about, I believe, is the moral of your story." Her face looked small and strange.

Moral? "Well, we baited them. We outsmarted them. And we got away. None of our guys even got hurt. It was near ten to one!" Tarlo was starting to turn red.

"I... see." Mei Pa certainly appeared upset.

"We were at *war*, you know." Tarlo was raising his voice, but the pandaren had turned away, fiddling with their gear, re-looping lines, and gazing out into the stormy black. The boat was swaying madly, but it wasn't moving anywhere. This was awkward.

"What are you doing out in the ocean during a storm, anyway?" Tarlo asked, aware of the absurdity of questioning the people who'd saved his life. "It's pretty clear you weren't looking for our ship."

"May I answer your question with a story of my own, Tarlo?" came Mei Pa's soft response, not unkind. Tarlo nodded. Why not? He was going to get rained on either way.

Many, many years past, not too far from here, there was a tiny village called Za Xiang. The pandaren who lived there were ancestral fishers, and they filled their bellies with the fruits of the ocean. They depended almost wholly on it; there was not a farmer or hunter among them. But they were happy and healthy, until one day, an unnatural famine found their village, and fish disappeared from the sea near their homes. They drank rain and beer and ate tree nuts, but soon their stores ran out, and the fish had not returned. And they suffered.

After weeks of hunger and rationing, the villagers fell into hopelessness. They sent runners to the capital to ask for food, and while they waited, families began to abandon Za Xiang in droves. Pandaren sat on the docks for hours on end, hoping to catch something, but they failed to get the bite of even a single fish on their lines, and they always returned to their houses empty-pawed. Except for a young boy named Xun, aged about twelve.

Xun was stubborn. He swore that he would fish without stopping until he had enough to feed not just his family, but the entire village as well. Unfortunately, he did not know the first thing about fishing. So he waited by the docks, calling to the fish, looking for them above the water. He had a stick with some string tied to it, but as his neighbors had taken to eating most of their bait themselves, he had nothing to use as a lure. So Xun decided to play a trick on the fish: he polished stones until they were shiny, and he skipped them over the water, hoping that fish would leap out after them. They did not.

He threw stones for a whole week, disregarding sleep, before he gave up. Next Xun tried to coax the fish out of the water. He stuck his mouth in the ocean and told jokes to the

fish in their native tongue. But fish do not share our sense of humor, and if any of these heard the sound of Xun's voice, none came to the surface to greet him.

After three more days of this, it seemed as though there were no fish in the sea at all, and Xun grew angry. He cast his stones aside and waded out into the ocean until it was cold, he was treading water, and the shore and his home were very small behind him.

He held his breath and ducked down in the ocean. He began to look for the fish with his eyes open and stinging so he could catch them with his paws. And down under the mud, he spotted a tiny brown fish, covered by the seafloor as if it was hiding. Xun was quick, and he swam to grab it up, but as he approached it, a massive, dark shadow blocked out the sunlight from above. He saw a giant, hungry snake's mouth dart past him and bite onto the fish.

The monster that stole Xun's fish was huge and ropy like an eel, but it was scrunched up as though it could not fully stretch itself out. Its stomach was bulging and distended, and living fish were impaled on its silver teeth. Xun realized that this monster had been eating all of Za Xiang's fish, and that was why nobody, not even the town's greatest fishers, had been able to catch any.

The creature's mouth could fit Xun's whole body inside. It was so big that just being in the water with it made Xun scared, but he was too angry to go home. He swam after the monster, his arms and legs paddling in the same rhythm as its fins, and he wiggled through the ocean, copying its movements.

Holding his breath as tightly as he could, Xun went directly for the beast's open maw. He reached his arm between teeth with gaps so wide he could fit a paw through them, and he pulled one fish free. Then Xun let go of his breath and shot up to the surface before the creature could get its jaws around him.

He took the fish straight to his house, dropped it on the table, and told his parents and brothers and sisters that they did not have to leave; they just had to find a new way to fish, and they could feed everyone.

Xun had found, as all who set out to fish must, that the best fishing was not passive.

Tarlo had to look down and bury his lips in his beer to keep from smirking, despite the pain in his back and the rain and the cold and everything else these mad panda-people seemed to ignore.

Of course a pandaren boy had swum out into the middle of the ocean, and he was so fast that he pulled a fish out of some big eel's mouth, got away without being eaten, and saved his starving village. Sure.

What Tarlo said was, "Huh. Interesting story."

Mei Pa smiled at him as if she could see into his mind. "It is just a story, Tarlo, and only part of one at that. But I believe it is an important one."

These pandaren were inclusive. They hadn't only saved his life and told him a tale; they'd given him a tiny, crooked fishing pole and some bait, the way you might give a kid a wooden sword to play fight with. He'd been swishing his line in the water with one hand while Mei Pa had gone on and on. Fishing. Right. Dangling a string in the ocean to keep his mind off the shivering, more like. Nothing to show for an hour of waiting and listening. No bites at all.

Now that she was quiet, Tarlo turned both his legs toward the sea, staring intently. Why *hadn't* he caught anything after that long? Kuo and Shi Ga were hoisting up nets flush with smelly gold fish.

"Don't worry, Tarlo. Sometimes, the fish simply do not come. It has very little to do with you."

Tarlo jerked the toy pole out of the water, looked over at her, and grunted nonchalantly as he dropped it on the deck. The pandaren were done, so he was done. They could get going. Within a few minutes, the boat was moving again.

Tarlo looked up at the sky. The rain was pelting harder now. His blankets had long since ceased to do anything but keep the wet and cold close to him. He tried to think of the last time he'd seen those cliffs. That had been, what, four, five hours ago? It was still dark.

"Are we headed anywhere toward land?" he asked nobody in particular.

"There's good fishing left," was Shi Ga's raspy response. Lightning flashed in the sky, and the clouds seemed to open up anew.

Tarlo would much rather die for his own mistake than for somebody else's bad judgment, so he looked out over the water, peering for something he could swim for, even hurt as he was. Driftwood, a hunk of coral—anything. But all he saw were curtains of rain so thick they pushed his eyelids into a squint.

No, he saw something else. There, a bit below the surface, was a sinuous shape, oily black and moving. Tarlo thought he spied a fin, but it was cutting through the water too deep to tell. Their boat rocked lightly, and Tarlo grabbed for the side. *It's the storm shaking us. Not... whatever that is.*

"Hey—" he started to say, but Kuo and Shi Ga had pulled their oars out of the ocean. The boat made a slow, languid drift to stillness, and the force of the rain hit them top-on.

"Don't disturb the surface," Shi Ga whispered in his pipe-smoker's voice. "It will pass."

Tarlo watched the inky form looping around and around in perfect circles below, and he wasn't so sure. His neck itched, and he wanted to cough out whatever was building up in his throat, but he wouldn't make a sound he didn't have to with that thing underneath.

Kuo had no such scruples. "Tarlo, shall I continue Xun's story? Now seems an excellent time." His fat paws shoved another beer over. Pouring rainwater slopped froth over the top of the mug.

Crazy.

Xun's catch was not enough to feed the whole village of Za Xiang. It was not enough to feed even his family, though they diced it up and made soup from the fins and chewed the scales besides. But it meant something. If an amateur could catch fish, why couldn't masters who had been fishing all their lives? Villagers took to casting through the day and night, so many that the tiny docks could not fit them, and they crowded each other and tangled their lines. Those who were unable to fish began to build up the pier so there would be room for the whole village to stand side by side with their poles above the water.

But even all working together, the villagers barely ate. One or two fish were plucked out daily, and pandaren would stand in the center of town and carve off bites, cooking them and sharing them in a line. The rumblings of their stomachs echoed off the ocean. They lost weight from their backs and arms and faces, looked gaunt, and walked around sleepless. The sea seemed empty.

Xun was unhappy. His village had worked hard for food once again, but he knew the monster he had encountered was waiting below, eating all the fish and making sure his family and friends would be hungry forever. He had not told anyone about the beast he had seen for fear that the villagers would be too scared to fish. Instead, he took a canoe in the night and set out on the ocean. Onto the boat he had piled empty casks and cooking pots, which weighed him down terribly. He paddled by sweeping a spear through the water, as most of the wood for oars had long since gone to building the docks. It took him half a day to get out of sight of land. The wind whipped up, and he was cold for want of a coat. No one could call Xun wise.

Once he could no longer see his home, Xun began to yell and scream and beat the water with his spear. He took the heavy pots and barrels he had brought, lifted them overhead, and flung them into the sea with all his might. Some pushed through the water to hit the bottom and kicked up great clouds of dirt, sounding like giant feet stomping on the seafloor. He beat the ocean all night and near to morning until, with his keen eyes, he

thought he spotted the eel monster wriggling its way up toward him, making waves as it went.

Xun grabbed his spear, ready to strike the thing as soon as it reached his boat, when behind it he saw more shapes drawing closer. Some were the same size as the great eel; some were even larger. There were beaked maws, massive shells, finned tails. Each creature was bigger than a family home in Za Xiang, and Xun's trap had brought them.

Xun was overwhelmed with shock, and before he could even think about what to do, they reached his boat and pulled it apart with their jaws. Xun rolled into the cold ocean, flopping about in a pool of beasts.

Hunger drew them toward him with gnashing teeth, and Xun swept his tiny spear left and right and kicked his feet so quickly that he rose out of the water like a leaping fish. The creatures grew increasingly agitated every time their jaws closed on empty air, and they bit at each other as often as at him. Seizing the opportunity, Xun stabbed at one with his spear, but the iron split in four directions like the peel around a banana.

The frenzy continued, and the sun came up and went down again, and Xun was growing tired. Five of the mighty beasts surrounded him, lashing out to keep the others from eating him first. Then one of the great rocky turtles flapped its fins beneath him and yawned its snaky mouth wide like an open door lying on the ground, and Xun found himself rushing downward with torrents of seawater. His sight went black as he was sucked directly into its jaws.

"And what am I supposed to learn from that, Kuo?" Tarlo blurted, keeping his eyes off the water. "Don't take a tiny boat into the middle of the ocean? Because it doesn't seem like the three of you are following the lesson."

Kuo looked back, somewhat surprised. "Oh, no, no. Xun learned that, no matter the size of the fish you see, there is always one bigger. But I am not finished."

It was cold and full of seawater and echoes inside the throat of the beast. Xun could not see a thing with the darkness and the creature's mouth pressing upon him, and the water slowed his punches against its innards. Its iron jaws remained stubbornly shut.

Xun knew he could not fight his way out. But he also knew that the creature was waiting for a morsel. So he held what little breath remained to him, gathered it up in his mouth, and pulled it back inside his lungs. He puffed his cheeks and clenched his chest and pushed himself against the wall of the great beast's throat while it swam around and around, lashing with its tongue at Xun and trying to pull him farther down into its stomach. Xun was tired and afraid, but he clamped his eyes closed and waited.

A few days later, when most of the villagers of Za Xiang had gathered at the docks, struggling to fish, an old pandaren was walking the beaches, looking for stray wood and seaweed. Great was his surprise when he thought he spotted a house on the beachfront, but greater still it was when he approached and saw that the "house" was a dragon turtle, with a lean, long head like a snake's and a shell that extended all around its body, even on its belly.

It took the whole village, pulling and straining, to haul the creature farther up the beach. The villagers brought hammers to crack the shell and swung them into the night, and the ringing resounded over the hunger in their bellies. Once the shell was broken, they found soft spots to cut away the turtle's meat, and there was enough to feed everyone.

The loud hammer swings had awoken Xun, and when the villagers cut the beast's belly open, he crawled out, to the joy of his family and all of Za Xiang. The beast had been almost as stubborn as Xun. It would not open its mouth to let go of its prey. Inside its gullet, Xun had held his breath so long that the creature drowned, but it did not sink because of the mighty whirls of air in Xun's lungs.

Xun told the villagers that they had nothing to fear and that they could fish anything from the sea, from small minnows to enormous beasts. They cooked the meat of the dragon turtle, and they were full for the first time in a long while.

Tarlo realized that, with the story done, he was conscious of the mechanical sound of rain on waves, roaring and calming over, over, and over. He was even more conscious of his fear; his hands were gnarled into tight claws around an oar, and they wouldn't uncramp.

The big shape underwater had hovered, no longer circling, for what seemed like an eternity. Likely ready to strike, Tarlo figured. Shi Ga had been looking over the side at it for the duration of the tale, rainwater cascading off his hood and whisker-beard, which resembled nothing so much as twin rat-tails attached to his chin.

Then, abruptly, the shape had receded, getting smaller and smaller until Tarlo couldn't see it anymore. None of the pandaren said anything, but within a few minutes their oars were back in the water.

It was probably just a shark anyway. The biggest thing he had to worry about was the cold. Tarlo was shivering through the storm so much that his bones felt like icicles. He could barely keep his hands still. The pandaren helped him pull off a soaking cloak and throw on two others plucked from an iron lockbox, and they poured more beer. Maybe they'd hit land soon, and he could really be sure he'd survived.

But in the meantime the boat was moving, and curiosity, dumb and directionless as it often was, got the better of Tarlo. This kid Xun set out to save his village, lucked into the exact right place, fought giant toothy fish without getting hurt at all. And in one fell swoop, he solved everybody's problems, washed up on the beach near his house, and life was back to normal? Yeah.

He tapped Kuo on the shoulder.

"So, that's it? He finds some big creatures, gets swallowed by one of them, miraculously survives, and when it washes up, *that* saves his village from starving?"

Kuo shook his head. "There is more to Xun's story, of course."

"Sure there is," Tarlo bit back. "There's always more when you're making it up as you go along. It must be nice not to have to limit yourself to things that actually happened. How long did Xun hold his breath for? Two days?"

Tarlo expected Kuo's face to register some kind of hurt, but it looked like he was smiling, albeit a soggy-furred smile.

"It is good of you to remember his name. Shi Ga is best at telling the rest of the story, so I will let him continue."

Kuo and Mei Pa moved to take the oars, and Shi Ga sat against the bench next to Tarlo, looking up at him as the boat drifted on toward no landmark or purpose that he could see. Shi Ga's eyes were as bright as ever, and his raspy voice made Tarlo bend down, begrudgingly, to hear him clearly.

"Much time had passed since Xun saved his people, and with the passage of time always comes change..."

For many years, Xun fed his village. The people of Za Xiang ate of dragon turtles and great eight-eyed squid and mighty eels. None ate more than Xun himself, and he drank the oil of the beasts as well. As he grew into an adult, he became taller and stronger, until his head could be seen above the tops of the village homes. When he walked, it was with straightness and solidness as though he were an oak tree.

As male pandaren did when they lived near the cold ocean winds, Xun grew a long beard, and it caught the salt of the sea and was ragged like the hide of a wild animal. His eyes became red and bloodshot, and his pupils constricted like a fish's, and it was said that he could see for a league underwater.

When Xun wore his shirts into the ocean, the seawater would tremble at his presence and flee into his clothes, making them soggy and damp for days. He began to leave his great shirts, which had to be made by a dozen village tailors, on the beach to dry, and they were crusty and stiff with brine, and cubs would trip over them. Worse, when he turned in his sleep, his broad shoulders would knock his house down, and so Xun took to walking around shirtless and sleeping upon the pier to spare the village the burdens of his size.

Grown, Xun began to catch the grand beasts of the sea by himself. He was stung and bitten many times over, and he bore the white scars like a perfect forest upon his chest and jaw. A colossal shark with a tooth in its mouth for every living soul on Pandaria once clamped its maw upon Xun's ear. Unable to dislodge it, he walked the ocean floor back to land and lifted the beast out of the water, where it could not breathe, and dragged it onto the beach, which made the rivers that still flow inland near Za Xiang. When the villagers cut the shark off of Xun, part of his ear went with it. What remained was like cured leather, and Xun's family brought him a great ring the size of a cub's hoop to wear through it.

And all of the people of the village stopped fishing, because they did not need to.

Xun was happy to take care of everything. But as old age came to him, he began to worry. Fish had remained scarce in the seas around Za Xiang, and he had not seen more than a few at once since he was a boy. The appetite of the villagers, who ate of the mighty beasts Xun caught, had only increased, but no other pandaren grew like Xun, and none could haul up the fauna of the sea as he did. He feared that when he passed on, the people of the village would lose their ocean to the beasts and be forced to leave their homes or starve.

A wise pandaren might have suggested that Xun lead his village across the land in search of a new life. Surely a hero of Xun's size and strength, who had done so many things, could become an accomplished hunter or win a place for his family and friends in a large city.

But Xun was not wise. He was stubborn, and he loved his home, so he resolved instead that he would feed Za Xiang forever.

In his nights resting upon the pier, he had heard old fishers talk, pandaren who had been gray-haired when he was a boy. They had repeated one tale so many times that it had stuck in Xun's mind: the story of a nameless monster, vast like the sea itself. It was a thousand feet wide, bigger than any beast ever brought up onto land.

The first time Xun heard the story, the creature was an immense shark with rows upon rows of champing teeth. When they told it again, it was more like a jellyfish the color of glass, covered in stingers.

Xun did not see these two differing accounts as a sign of falsehood in the story. Regardless of which one was true, he reasoned, the beast was always big enough for everyone to share, and there were salt and smoke aplenty to dry its pieces for quite a while. Its fins or tentacles would flavor a rich soup; its belly would be equally suited to fresh steaks or long-lasting jerky. It could be diced, fried, peppered, stuffed, marinated, tossed with greens, filleted, grilled, skewered. They would eat of this catch for months. Years. Generations.

Another commonality in all of the stories of this gargantuan creature was that it lived deep, deep in the ocean, deeper than any pandaren had ever gone. So Xun spent hours filling his lungs with breath, sitting atop the highest hill near his village and swallowing the gusts of wind that blew into his mouth. He tied weighty barrels to his feet so that he would sink to the seafloor. As he waded out into the ocean, the riptide formed by his heavy strides brought sandbars to the surface, and the seagulls that had nested in his beard flew together toward the sky like a white arrow. The villagers had grown used to this sight, and they waved to the gulls as though they were Xun himself.

The boat had idled again, and without really planning on it, Tarlo found himself with his fishing pole in the water, mind drifting. Mei Pa and Kuo had done likewise, casting multiple times before they were satisfied, then sitting still as statues while the rain ran off of them.

When Tarlo started in the service, he'd been young and dumb too. He just *knew* that fighting for the Alliance could lead somewhere other than to another fight, to more ragged, empty bodies looking identical in the ground. But when you were young and dumb, you could *know* something without it being true. There was always going to be a new enemy or a prize that two people wanted but couldn't share. People who warred made generations who warred. Death led to more death. All that.

So why hadn't he quit the army, gone home?

He stopped. It was the strangest thing, but Tarlo swore he'd felt a tug on the line. Maybe he was shaking from the cold... but then, no, he felt it again. He grabbed the pole with both hands, and Shi Ga suddenly shut up, pausing his story to watch Tarlo fish. "Carefully, now..."

With as much caution as he could muster, Tarlo slowly rose to his feet. He tightened his grip underneath the pole as though he were holding a spear. A tug again, then another, and he wrenched sharply upward as—

—an empty hook leapt from beneath the waves and slapped Tarlo on the shoulder, the wet cord winding around his ear.

The bastard fish had taken his bait straight off the line. Maybe two of them, working together, had split it in half and carried it away. He was almost mad enough to go in the water after it, but then he saw Shi Ga's inscrutable, furry face. Could a pandaren smirk?

"Yeah. Go on," Tarlo snarled.

Xun sank below the waves. He sank for longer than he could measure, a thousand times his height through the depths. The water grew colder, and the fish scarcer, and the sea darker all around him as far as he could see.

He had swum beneath the ocean before, but never where there was no movement from the waves, and the rock walls loomed around him like a canyon. Even with water

filling his ears, they felt pinched from somewhere deep in his head. Soon the insides of his ears blew apart, and blood rushed out of them. The sea's salt stung him, but he did not retreat from the depths.

Xun descended into the dim until his eyes were no good; he could not see the tiniest hint of light from above, or any farther than his paws in front of his face. He did not see the nebulous creatures, vast as whales, which passed him in the dark, and when he brushed up against their scaly hides, they did not notice, so large were they.

He drifted until he slept and awoke after a full night's rest, still sinking. A faint heat warmed the water from below him, and he swam down faster until his paws touched black-blue dust. Beneath him yawned an enormous trench, a split in the rocky seafloor, and as he let his weights loose and pulled himself through, he was sure that he was headed close to the center of Azeroth.

Inside the trench, Xun felt water rushing past, and in his broken ears he heard the echoes of his movements cast wide. He knew the cave was so big it was a sea unto itself, and the walls were so far apart it would take an hour to swim between them.

He sat and let his eyes adjust to the darkness close to the floor of the world, and soon he began to see faint outlines, shapes that wavered, and the overhang of a broad rock alcove. Before the alcove were vast ridges, and Xun was certain that inside he would find the home of the great nameless beast, for he had seen no deeper spot in all the ocean.

But the small mountain around the cave seemed strange. It was the pale yellow-white of an earthworm, not the brown-blue of undersea rock. Even in the darkness, Xun could make out its color clearly. He was puzzled.

Then the mountain's gills fluttered, and showers of stone came off of it, and Xun knew it was alive.

It was as large as Xun's village, and the heat it emanated was strong enough to warm the trench at the depths of the ocean. It shifted, as Xun's presence had woken it from where

it lay, and Xun could see hundreds of tentacles nested under its body as if it were the stem of a great tree. They were tipped with fat, barbed stingers the size of a grown adult.

Its maw was a shoal or coral reef, and the sharks that wriggled between its teeth, feeding off of the remains of its meals, were big enough to overturn a boat with one nudge of their snouts. Its slick skin was covered in wavering spines that undulated in the dark water. As the creature rose and shook strata of earth off itself, the odor of its breath flooded the ocean with ages upon ages of death and decomposition, and Xun was tired for the first time in a while.

His once-grand eyes and ears underserved him in the murk; by the coarseness of his drifting beard, he felt the undeniable pang of age. He had not enjoyed fresh air or cool wind for days. Compared to the creature in his way, Xun did not seem small; he *was* small, as a cub before the sun.

Xun's bare fist connected directly with one of the great teeth. Cracks shot up its base. Another punch surged through the water, and the tooth shattered, sending fragments ricocheting through the thing's mouth like flung harpoons. No fewer than four sharks ingesting the nameless creature's plaque were sucked noisily into its gullet as though through an unseen whirlpool.

Xun lowered his head and kept swinging. With a horrific creak that he could hear in the stubs of his ears, six more teeth spiraled out into the sea. They rocketed upward, gathering kelp, fish, and whales as they went. When the teeth finally burst to the surface, covered in impaled plant and animal life, they resembled nothing so much as tree-sized seafood skewers.

The thing brought its jaws together then, and Xun pressed his feet in the quicksand of its gums and lifted, trying to prevent it from closing its maw on him. His wrists twisted around in agony, and his bones ground down to powder, but he kept the creature's mouth wedged open. It was relentless and sent its underbelly tentacles snaking between its own teeth, wending around Xun's throat and pulling at his limbs and stabbing him over and over in his guts.

Their stings were awful, leaving sucking red puncture wounds in his hide, but their poison was worse. Xun felt his blood burn in his body. He could not move his arms to protect himself, as the terrible jaws might slam shut on him, and so he bit down hard on one of the tentacles and kept biting until it wriggled loose. He closed his fingers around the retreating limb and was yanked free into the open ocean.

The sharks that had made their home in the thing's mouth clung to Xun's arms and legs, but their bites bled some of the poison from him, so he held them close like shields to block writhing tentacles from stabbing at his eyes. All the while, he swam up over the thing's mouth and began to pummel the top of its head. The spines on its skin stood up as though the creature were a great pufferfish, and Xun's flesh parted like cloth whenever he landed a punch, but he did not stop. His strikes were the crack of thunder across open earth, muddled in the deep. The creature's spines broke away, and its meat sizzled with the force of each swing, but it remained as silent as a squid.

For days they fought without rest: Xun striking at its head or belly and pulling away when the tentacles drew too near, the thing drawing Xun closer to its maw or crushing his bones. Such was the fury of their battle that waves broke on the shore near Za Xiang, climbing so high that the villagers feared for their lives. The pier cracked and was swept out into the ocean, and people fled into their houses.

Eventually, Xun began to flag. The poison ate at his heart, making his arms harder and harder to swing. The dozen tentacles that remained enfolded him, wrapping again and again around his waist and legs, squeezing. Xun knew he could not find the force to punch them away.

Before they constricted his arms, he crunched his fingers into two of the wavering tentacles, planted his legs into the ground, and hefted. Xun felt his insides snap like a ribbon.

The titanic body surged through the water, leagues tall, dangling above its tentacles as though it were a kite on a string. Xun pulled with all he could muster, and he brought the

mountain-sized mass down against the seafloor with a crash he could not hear. Coarse gray earth and dust sped from the impact for miles.

Wasting no time, Xun wrapped the great tentacles double around his wrists and tried to heave the creature forward. He had lifted it once; now he had only to swim it up to the surface. He tugged, waiting for some sense of give from the enormous carcass.

But it did not move.

Xun's vision was a pinprick; his movements were mud; his lungs yearned for air. He would recover, then, and try one more time. Barely aware of his own echoing heartbeat, he dragged himself into the alcove that had been blocked by the thing's bulk.

In the dark, a school of tiny fish swept around his head. Their wavering fins were minute, their scales like pale gold.

Over his ruined condition, pity awoke in Xun—pity for the golden fish that had been kept here, but pity for their captor as well. The big beast had eaten most of the smaller fish in the sea and then herded the rest for itself. Famine had come to his home only because of another's hunger.

It had grown harder and harder for Xun to remember anything, but his goal was paramount. He would rest, and then he would try to lift the thing again. He lay down on the seafloor, brightly colored fish swarming about him, and let go of just a bit of his breath in a thousand bubbles.

Xun wondered if he had truly found the deepest part of the sea. He wondered about the truth of the stories, and as he wondered, his spirit began to leave him. Before his eyes finally closed, he watched the fish swim out of the cave, up and away, into the wider ocean.

Shi Ga stood up. Probably, Tarlo figured, because the story was over. Yet the pandaren had more to say.

"When Xun fought, the people of Za Xiang saw only the waves. But fishing is not simply what you see above the water, but what goes on beneath, what the fish sees. The experience is a struggle, for life and for death, even if it does not appear so to your eyes."

Tarlo nodded. "And what about the fish in the cave?"

"Xun did not know it, but those fish," Shi Ga rasped, "were the ancestors of the golden carp. They swam into waters free of danger, and they multiplied. Today, they are one of the most common fish in our ocean, eaten by young and old, great and small."

Tarlo looked over at a catch bucket on the boat. Two gold-scaled fish swirled around inside. Okay. He could see a point, or the outline of one, now. Xun saved his village by accidentally finding a new food source. A neat little story, albeit with a few holes.

"If Xun died in that cave, how'd you hear so much about the fight?" Tarlo asked, too softly to be heard clearly in the rain. He felt bad pointing it out. Obviously, the story was pretty dear to these pandaren. Xun was probably somebody's great-great-grandfather who'd been a big deal in his day.

"Hmm." Shi Ga's response made it sound as if he was considering the question himself for the first time. Neither of the other two pandaren said anything; they just beat the sea with their oars. Shi Ga took up his own oar as the rain continued to cascade down.

They'd been paddling for hours. The sun hadn't risen, and Tarlo didn't think they were any closer to land. The three pandaren moved their oars in lockstep now; it seemed as if they were only traveling in a straight line, until Shi Ga sniffed the air and pulled his oar out of the water. The other two did likewise. "Ahhh," he said, taking a big breath as the boat wobbled.

"This is it."

Tarlo was already shivering, but when the waves whipped up, spraying ocean onto their laps, he forgot the cold entirely. Mei Pa had slid over to their iron lockbox, now situated in the middle of one of the boat's larger puddles.

What she carefully removed from the box seemed too big to have fit inside in the first place. It resembled a rusty boat chain with a hook, the kind a group of men would use to anchor a ship at harbor. Huge nets hung from it like the petals of a flower.

Mei Pa stood, perched like a ship's prow on the lip of their tiny boat, balancing as though she might fall over the side at any moment. Despite her size, the boat didn't rock at all. She began to cast with the chain, spinning it in a wide arc over her head, and Tarlo involuntarily ducked when it hit the water with a prodigious splash. Heaped coils of metal ran over her shoulder toward the bottom of the ocean.

Tarlo's head hurt.

Mei Pa remained intently focused on her task, staring at the waves for minutes. At one point, she tensed, and Tarlo was sure she was going to fall into the sea. But then she started pulling at the chain, and the first of the attached nets eased onto the deck. It was plump with bounty, glistening fish, gold and white and green, and Kuo and Shi Ga began to pluck them free, tossing them everywhere on the boat in a hurricane of marine life.

Lamely, Tarlo dunked his child's fishing line back in the water.

As the pandaren worked, he watched the beer mugs, the pots, the nets, and the bait buckets all spill over with wriggling fish. Fish were swimming around in the puddles under his feet. The boat was running out of places to put them. And the pandaren were pulling up more still: a squashed-faced, frowning brown fish with a tentacle above its head; an ebony-colored fish with steam coming off of it like a cooling lava rock; a small blue fish with a thin sheen of... ice... coating its body.

"Those... are really delicious," Mei Pa put in, pausing with the effort of holding the chain steady.

With another few filled nets on board, Mei Pa's arms began to sag on the chain. Kuo and Shi Ga had come over to help, and the three of them together were back to their call-and-response chants, yelling with the exertion of hauling the massive fishing line up.

Tired as he was, Tarlo had learned a long time ago that staying idle in the middle of a frenzy of activity was a good way to get yourself surprised, killed, or both in order. He thought about heading over to lend a hand, and—

His line jumped.

Tarlo wasn't going to lose this one. He shook off the hot jolt of shock and tensed his arms. The wind cooled urgent sweat on his face and neck.

Whatever had decided to take the bait dragged the line sharply to the left, and Tarlo felt himself giving way more slack than expected. Though his back ached, he bunched his shoulders and stood up while the line started moving again, seemingly controlled by the thing under the water. He wrenched in the opposite direction, but it was all he could do to keep the pole steady.

Tarlo was no stranger to a contest of strength. He'd clashed in close with bellowing tauren in full armor, had wrested clubs and swords from their grasp and pulled their pillar arms away from his throat. But this... this was something else. The creature he was fighting to bring up from the blue was swimming through molasses, covered in weights, arm-wrestling with him through a thin line tied to a clumsy reed. He yanked the line again, but trying to get his adversary closer to the surface, closer to the boat, or even moving in a straight path was a struggle.

He strained, red-faced, and his breath shot out in fits and starts. The tiny fishing pole bounced in Tarlo's hands, scraping back and forth at his palms, sending numbness shivering up his arms as though he were chopping at a castle wall with his sword. A clunking splash resounded behind him, and he started in surprise but didn't dare turn around.

The pole hooked downward, bending more spastically every moment. Tarlo pulled back, sucking in breath, rising up on his toes for any inch of leverage he could get. His line was so taut he could make out the fibers standing up on it for an awful second, and he knew something was going to give.

He just didn't expect it to be the fish. Without warning, the pressure on his arms let up, and the fish's golden scales glistened as Tarlo hefted it, thrashing, out of the water.

It was a lot smaller than it deserved to be. Smaller than the fight it'd given him, for certain.

The fish was barely distinguishable from the dozens of other golden carp that flopped and swam around their boat, and Tarlo didn't have to try hard to keep it from wriggling out of his hands.

All three pandaren were gripping the chain, moving in what seemed like choreographed time to lower it back down into their gigantic tackle box, but they stopped as one when they saw Tarlo holding his catch overhead, grinning as though he'd just won the war.

While they watched, he worked the hook out of the fish's fat-lipped mouth. He dropped the animal in a bucket of water in his corner of the craft and sat back.

One.

As they packed away the evening's catches, the rain finally began to calm to a drizzle. The droplets were smaller now, and Tarlo could actually wipe them from his eyes instead of simply squinting. He sat down next to Shi Ga.

What he had intended to say—a question—was, "Are you gonna head back to shore now?"

But what came out was a simple statement. "I think I understand why you wanted to tell me that story."

"Hmmm?" Shi Ga's eyebrow rose.

"To prove you're not crazy. But also... inspiration, right?"

Shi Ga smiled. "We only told you the story of Xun because it is a good story to share. But you may find more in the telling."

"And that's why you're out here? To catch fish and tell stories?"

"We continue Xun's work. Not just to feed ourselves and survive, but to find our own legacy. To... tell our own tales. Is that not why you came here?"

Tarlo pondered that. What had he expected to find on Pandaria? A cold death far from home? An end to the fighting? He certainly hadn't thought he'd catch dinner. Deep-sea storm fishing, you pulled up all kinds of things.

He hefted an oar and joined the pandaren in rowing, four in the water.