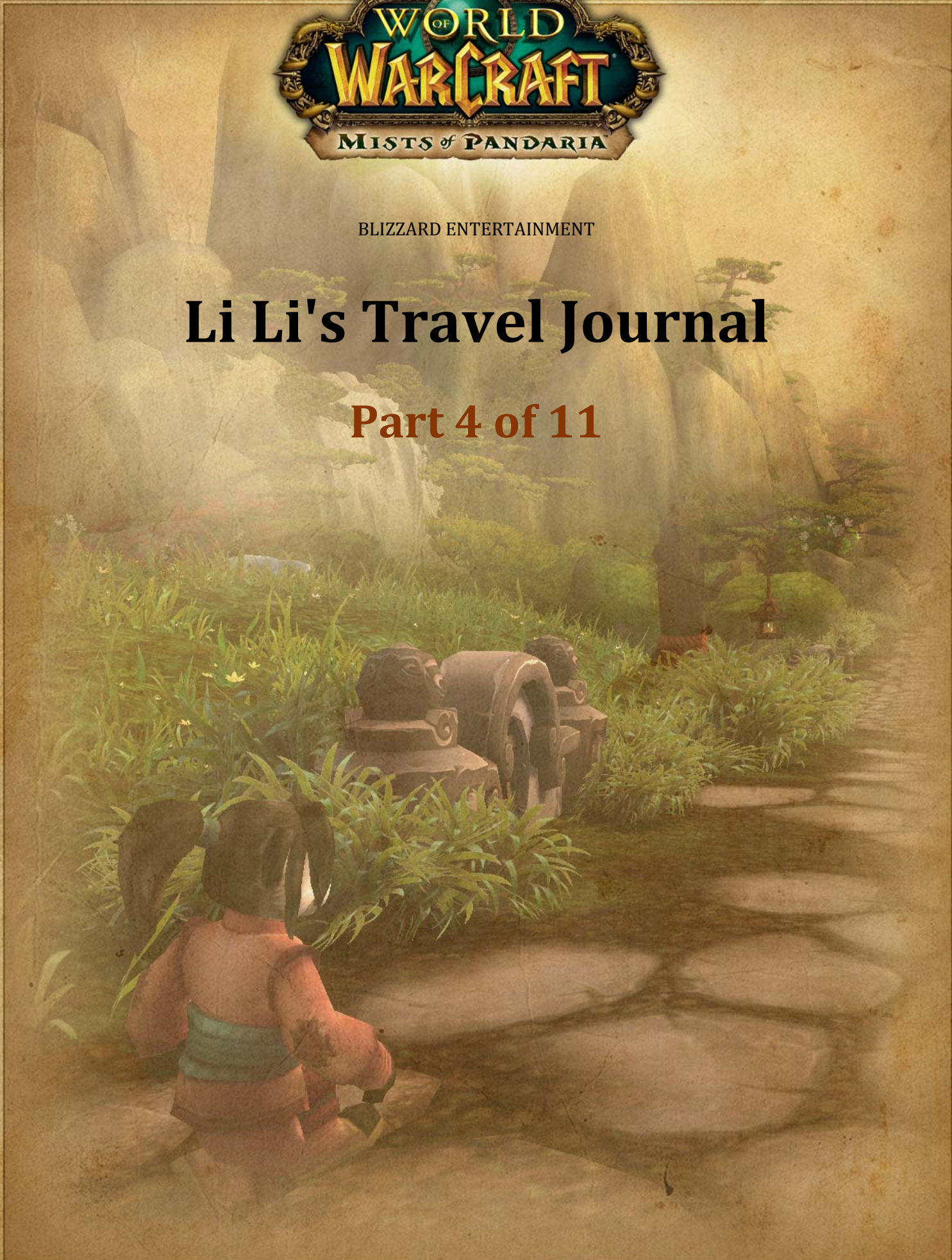




BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

Li Li's Travel Journal

Part 4 of 11



Entry Four: The Forbidden Forest

Loaded up with supplies from the Dai-Lo Farmstead, I prepared for my trek into the deadliest place on the Wandering Isle: Pei-Wu Forest!

The woods are dangerous—forbidden to almost all pandaren—and I knew sneaking in would be tricky. Hills and steep, rocky mountains surround the dense bamboo forest, and the only real path leading inside is blocked off by two massive gates. These sturdy barriers are located outside Mandori Village, where I've lived my whole life. That might sound convenient, but pandaren are always in the area, so it's hard to get over the walls undetected.

To make matters worse, I saw Strongbo as I was searching for a secluded place to scale the first gate from. Why was he snooping around the village today of all days? He asked me what I'd been up to earlier at the Singing Pools. "Experiencing the beauty and splendor that is our home," was my answer—and it was true!

Even so, Strongbo just narrowed his eyes and scowled like usual. (I wonder if he knows how much he looks like a wrinkly mossback toad when he does that.) With Bo poking his fat nose around, I went home to lay low and get some rest until I knew the coast was clear. Before sunrise, I crept out into the quiet, empty streets and climbed over the two great gates with a yak-hair rope I'd picked up in Dai-Lo.

Soon the sun peeked over the horizon, but Pei-Wu's thick canopy blocked out almost all light. Fog hung low on the forest floor, making it even harder to see. But I could hear sounds all around me... a lot of them. The region is well known for its abundance of critters, but there's only one that strikes fear into the heart of every pandaren: the ferocious Pei-Wu tiger.

And one of them was hunting *me*. Wherever I walked, heavy footsteps followed in the distance. If I stopped, they stopped. If I moved, they moved. Then, all of a sudden, the beast rushed toward me, snorting and growling. I went into the stance of the sturdy ox to defend myself just as a giant form emerged from the mists—

It was *Strongbo*!

Why couldn't he mind his own business? Without a word, Bo took me back home, and then he woke up Pop and told him I'd snuck into the forbidden forest. My pop chewed me out for a good hour before he finally calmed down. As punishment, he decided I'd have to suffer through a full week of training at the Singing Pools... under Bo's watchful eye.

I tried to tell Pop what I'd been doing, that I'd been exploring the Great Turtle and writing about how wonderful the journey was. I thought it would make him happy, but he didn't seem to understand or care.

Pop said my punishment would begin the next day, which meant I had time to visit one more location. Still fuming about what had happened, I set out west until I reached a long, winding trail that led to the Wood of Staves—the final resting place of the Wandering Isle's Elder pandaren. A massive stone lion, the Guardian of the Elders, protects the entrance, and the mighty being won't let you through unless you've bested him in single combat. (I was one of the youngest pandaren ever to pass the test.)

Years ago, before he left the Great Turtle, Uncle Chen had told me that he often visited this part of the isle for inspiration. Back then I didn't understand why, but now I do. There's magic to this place. When someone is laid to rest there, their walking stick is planted into the ground, and the staff eventually grows into a wondrous tree. Well, after many generations, an entire forest has sprouted—an entire history of the isle's great pandaren.

Even my family has a spot there... but I'd rather not write about that. I didn't visit it that trip. After my argument with Pop, the last thing I needed was more heartache.

As I strolled through one of the oldest thickets in the area, I came across Elder Shaopai lighting incense on his family's shrine. He's a supremely wise pandaren from nearby Morning Breeze Village. The Elder has spent his whole life recording words of wisdom for the benefit of future generations.

Shaopai walked with me for a short time, pointing at trees and saying who they were in remembrance of. Before he left for his village, he said, "I can tell that you have much on your mind, little Stormstout. It's not my place to ask you about personal matters, but take this." The Elder gave me a smooth, round object just bigger than the size of my paw—a worry stone. "When life weighs heavy on your shoulders, the worry stone can lighten the load. Its magic is very powerful."

I'd always thought worry stones were useless trinkets, but if a genius like Shaopai believed they worked, that was good enough for me.

When I finally left the woods, an odd feeling came over me, and I haven't been able to shake it. I was thankful for Shaopai's gift and for having visited so many great places on the isle, but I wanted *more*. The Wandering Isle is a beautiful and enchanted land full of history and wonder. For me, though, it's home. I've seen it all. Meanwhile, there is a whole world out there waiting to be explored, and I'm afraid I won't ever get to experience it.

I spent the rest of the day in the Great Library, reading through Uncle Chen's letters again. I miss him. Pop says my uncle probably got himself killed on one of his "crazy" adventures, but I don't believe it. I know he's still out there somewhere, and I know he'll come back someday.

Until then, all I can do is keep the Wanderer's Way alive here on the Great Turtle. Uncle Chen would be proud of that... My ancestors would be proud of that. It's how we were always meant to live! As Liu Lang himself once said, "Every horizon is a treasure chest; every blank map, a story waiting to be told."

If only my pop understood that. No matter what he says, one day I will make my mark on the world.

And when I do, maybe Uncle Chen will be there at my side.
