

Can't code, ain't British.

This has been edited by Tomon and Morde24. One of them pointed out a lot of small mistakes, the other several larger ones, including one major one which changed several of my plans going forward. Ah, well, such is life. Still, I hope you enjoy this chapter regardless.

Chapter 3: Travels and Deceptions Revealed

"Heh," Harry mumbled as he pushed through a low-hanging bit of foliage, holding the branch for Shy-rotam behind him. Tyrande, of course was ahead of him. She moved with a sort of stuttering gait, halting for a moment of observation and then moving quickly from one position to another. As she seemed to grow used to the jungle around them, her movements became surer, faster. *Like she's learning what she can and shouldn't filter out, what is dangerous and not. Puts her way above me in this kind of place.* Harry had only rarely operated in a jungle, and those moments were very much smash and flash rather than simply moving through.

"What 'heh', that sound means you saw something funny right? What's funny?" Shy-rotam questioned.

"Oh, it just occurred to me. I mean, we really are an odd bunch aren't we?" Harry waited for the frostsaber to cock her head to one side and make an agreeing sort of rumble before going on. "I mean, if you list us off, a tiger, a Kaldorei, a human, and a snake it sounds like the start of a joke. Preferably one told while drinking."

As Shy-rotam looked quizzical once more, and Quetzal thoughtful, Tyrande's chuckle reached him, and she turned enough for Harry to see her ears twitching up and down in a gesture of good humor. "Indeed. We made quite the impression on my people back there. I wonder, now that I am not around, how they are going to speak about you and Quetzal."

"Bah, they would probably be too busy mentioning my magnificence to..." Shy-rotam paused in her speech, leaning down and sniffing at a vine hanging from a tree. Then she yelped and leaped away as what she had been sitting at moved, a large serpentine head appeared, shifting down from above them to stare speculatively at Shy-rotam then around at the others. "This is not what I expected, when I felt something sitting on my tail," the snake hissed calmly.

"No doubt," Harry replied politely, although he was inwardly amused. *Looks as if my Nature Magic is still having an effect. I rather think he'd be attacking Shy-Rotam right now if not for that. and maybe recognizing Tyrande as a Kaldorei. I'm still uncertain on where the Kaldorei's ability to blend into nature finishes and Nature Magic begins.*

The snake's eyes widened and nodded to him. "A speaker, I've never heard the like. Fascinating." Yet despite the interest plain in his tone, the snake slowly retreated back up into the tree line, leaving the others there.

“First rule of this jungle I think,” Harry snorted, patting Shy-rotam on the head as she moved over to Tyrande. “Just because something is hanging from a tree, does not mean it is an actual vine.”

Quetzal on the other hand stared at where the other snake had disappeared. “That was rather rude.” With that he raised his head up into the foliage, and began to hiss at the other snake, his voice obscured by the foliage as Harry followed Sandra and Tyrande.

Despite Shy-Rotam’s inquisitiveness, the unusual quartet made good time. Unlike the boars back in Ashenvale, most of the predators in this jungle seemed to at least recognize Quetzal as a larger alpha predator. Only a few panthers and one tiger attempted to bother them, and Shy-rotam got some good wrestling practice in with the tiger before Harry ran it off. The panthers were simply good eating.

Tyrande however, warned Harry that his anti-bug charms and wards were the real reason this was so easy. “In this jungle especially, mosquitos and other bugs can be just as deadly as the predators. For which I thank you very much, Harry.”

“Find us something beyond panther to eat, and we’ll call it even,” Harry answered with a laugh. Tyrande however took it seriously and later that night, was able to come up with a few fish from a river they had to cross.

Soon after, hills bled into mountains, as the jungle around them grew denser, not thinner. There seemed to be a belt that extended almost entirely around the mountain consisting of extremely dense foliage, fed by several small rivers, each of them winding down from the mountains. Those rivers were spread out enough that the area didn’t become a swamp, but the density of the jungle definitely increased with the access to water. This forced the group to go around a few areas where trees were just growing too tightly together, or up and through the foliage above.

Other times, Harry just had to stop and take in the view. Tyrande noticed that he seemed fascinated by waterfalls. Once as she was fishing Harry just stood watching the waterfall for an hour with a smile on his face. For her part, Tyrande would admit to some delight at the sight of the mountain rising above them.

Of course, as they slowed, they were also attacked more often. The largest such attack was from giant bugs that looked almost like rhinoceros beetles. They were too large for the anti-bug charm to keep away, and they came out from all around them as the group made their way through a band of dense foliage made of trees that almost looked like Baobab trees crossed with oak.

Caught off guard, Tyrande decided she couldn’t get enough space to use her bow, and instead stayed where she was her lips thinning in revulsion. “Harry, if you could...”

Harry was already falling back, casting a series of spells on the ground, turning the ground into a series of spikes. Then he conjured lances of fire and sent them lashing out against each of the giant beetles that got passed Tyrande. Not that there were many of those. Tyrande was a whirlwind, a metal-tipped dervish, her double-bladed moonglaive going in every direction, slicing and dicing the beetles coming toward her. Every so often she would also lash out with a kick. Once, she struck one of them in the face so hard that its horn shattered, and it flew backwards.

Quetzal was there a second later hissing and chomping down on the beetles one after another, his bulk creating a wall to one side of Tyrande. The next second a glue-creating spell flashed out from Harry, blocking some of the beetles from getting out of their holes. With that done, the battle wound down almost at once, with Tyrande slicing the last few beetles who could get out of their nest.

"Well, that was odd," Harry muttered, while Quetzal and Shy-rotam both tried to eat a beetle, only to stop and share a look of pure animal disgust. "Why did they attack us when the other predators didn't? Heck, not even the boars we've seen signs of haven't and I would have assumed they were the stupidest bunch around."

"Because these are rhinoceros ants. They are like ants in that the hive matters, not the individual, despite the fact they share some physical traits to beetles of various types all mixed together." Tyrande shook her head, remembering some tales mariners and others who had been to Northrend. A few had mentioned that they had run into bugs of similar size. and while there was a place for all creatures in nature, Tyrande had to admit that bugs beyond a certain size gave her the chills. "Can we move on? Swiftly, if you please."

Harry looked at her and saw Tyrande's hands on her weapon gripping so tightly her knuckles had whitened, and her ears were almost flat against her skull. "Huh, um, of course. You heard the lady, Quetzal, let us get moving."

Both animals were more than willing to do so, and Tyrande led them off at a fair clip.

The next incident that interrupted their travel wasn't dangerous, instead it was hilarious for Tyrande and the two animals. They had broken off early that night, as they seemed to be coming out of the thick band of jungle, and Tyrande had to find some signs of the trail which would take them up into the Highmountain range to the Highmountain Tauren clans. Harry, who much preferred to sleep at night despite months travelling with Kaldorei, had decided to take a nap. Quetzal had curled up nearby, while Shy-rotam had, obviously, gone with Tyrande.

When the two of them came back, Tyrande paused, staring, holding Shy-rotam back from charging forward as she bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Harry, you seem to have had some nighttime visitors."

Both Harry and Quetzal woke up at that but hearing no warning or concern in the woman's voice, neither moved quickly. Instead, Harry simply opened his eyes and found himself

staring at a large owl, who had perched directly in front of him. It turned its head in a full circle, hooting at him, then leaning forward to headbutt Harry gently, before flapping its large wings and powering up into the nighttime sky.

If it had only been the one owl, it might have been poignant or perhaps just funny, but it wasn't. Several other raptors had landed down and around Harry. One large falcon, another bird that looked like a small Roc rather than anything Harry had seen before, and several different types of owls looked up at Harry as he began to stir. Then one after another, they all took to the air. Some circled him once, while the others nipped at fingers or hair before winging their way off.

"Well that was quite interesting. I think you have solid foundation in Nature Magic already from that little display," Tyrande mused, releasing a small giggle as she did.

"Or birds just love me," Harry retorted, rolling his eyes a second later at the unintentional double entendre. *Not that anyone else would understand it.*

"Hehe, come," Tyrande chuckled, gesturing Harry to his feet. "I would like us to put a few more miles between us and the edge of the jungle before bedding down for the morning."

"Why, are you afraid of more giant bugs coming after us?" Snorting, Harry got to his feet only for Tyrande to glare him into silence, annoyed that Harry had noticed her aversion.

Early the next night, they began to see snow on the mountain above them. The mountains here were not quite as rocky as the mountains of Wintersong, and they had quite a bit of trees and other growth. But this was now starting to be obscured by snow on the ground, and their breath came out now in puffs of air.

The night after they first spotted snow on the ground the travelers stopped early enough for Harry to throw up a full defensive array around them, while Tyrande set up their tents. Even after days in the jungle Harry still wasn't certain he liked the tent he had, he wanted to really do something especially special with the tent, but the small one man tents of the Kaldorei just didn't cut it for him. It was all right for now, and he was going to use it to experiment, but he surely wasn't going to use it as a final product. "So, who is going to cook tonight?"

"Hehe, as if you've cooked for us even once when you didn't have to," Harry teased. Tyrande was actually a good campout type cook, but it was also fact that she had rarely had to make a meal for herself in several thousand years. She was somewhat out of practice, and with Harry's skill in that area, Tyrande had yet to rediscover the skill.

Tyrande nodded with no sense of shame or apology visible. "True. I'll make us a fire pit then."

"Thank you. As for the meal, I think I'll just make us sandwiches. The bread we brought with us from the settlement won't last much longer the way we are going through it. That and a

thick stew from the last of the panther meat.” With that, Harry started to pull out his supplies, while Tyrande sat next to him, the work around the camp done and began to chop up ingredients for him in companionable silence.

That silence continued for a time, then Harry chuckled, looking at Tyrande as she concentrated on making sure each of the chunks of meat for the stew were precisely equal. His chuckle however, caused her ears to cock towards him as she asked, “What are you chuckling at now?”

“Oh, just thinking about how the other Kaldorei would react to this scene. Tyrande Whisperwind, the high priestess of Elune, the millennias-old, respected leader of the Kaldorei, hero of the War of the Ancients, and the War of the Satyrs. Here she is, my sous chef. How many of them would die of apoplexy I wonder?”

Divining the meaning of ‘sous’ from her current task and the sentence as being that of assistant, Tyrande rolled her eyes. “It is my connection to Elune, and my training under Cenarius, that makes me as good as I am in matters of war and statecraft. Anyone else could have done the same thing if they had that connection and knowledge.”

“I doubt it,” Harry said seriously, and Tyrande looked up at him, her eyes narrowing slightly as her ears flicked in confusion. “While I understand where you’re coming from and even agree that setting you on a pedestal for your abilities is wrong but your decisions and your choices are important and worth respect. Not everyone could have chosen to throw in their lot with Stormrage and his brother. Not everyone could have decided to keep on leading your people alone when he retreated into the Emerald Dream.”

“It was not a retreat, Lady Ysera needed his aid. He and the other Druids serve a purpose there, holding back the corruption of the Old Gods in that realm,” Tyrande protested, shaking her head. “You should know that given your own training under Shan’dor Cenarius.”

“I understand that, but he still left you with all aspects of leadership afterwards.”

“...That I cannot argue,” Tyrande admitted ruefully. Nor would she have. Tyrande had never, in several thousand years as leader of her people, seen it as aught but a burden. She would have been much happier leading just the church of Elune, if that.

“Exactly. So taking up that mantle is something that is worthy of praise, even if you deny it.”

“Enough about me,” Tyrande said, motioning to her work. “I am done here, and I think you are done with the stew correct? So let it simmer and show me more about your runes and wards.”

Harry nodded affably, and the two of them spent some time on that before the stew was ready. After dinner, Tyrande once more took up the task of teaching Harry proper

swordsmanship, as much as she could given the difference in Harry's weapon and the double-bladed Moonglaive, exchanging japes and mild taunts as they did.

A day later, snow was now the predominant feature as they made their way up the mountain. The going was slow, as the trail wasn't obvious, and Tyrande had to backtrack several times to find the trail, looking for small stone beads left embedded in the rock or bits of leather and bronze torques which the Tauren used to denote the trail.

As night fell, they continued on, but Tyrande was now moving far slower, looking around them and frowning thoughtfully, something niggling at her senses. Watching her from behind, Harry smirked. "You haven't lost the trail again, have you?"

"I don't believe so but I... AMBUGGH!!!" A large stone spear slammed into her side, hurling Tyrande backwards, losing her weapon in the process. It wasn't able to break through her armor, but it still hurt like blazes, and her gasping shout of ambush became a high-pitched howl of pain.

From all around the quartet all enemies popping out all around them as if some wizard had transfigured the landscape around them. The only warning had been when one of them had shifted his arm into a throwing position, the slight movement having caught Tyrande's eyes.

The attackers were about as tall as Harry, but thick of body, their skin a mix of gray, black and white, wearing long loincloths and heavy but not very well made armor that only covered their stomachs. Their legs were short and stumpy, and their arms were both longer and much more powerfully built than either human or Kaldorei, with spikes of bone or something similar sticking out on their arms and from the back of the head and shoulders. The head was hunched forward from the shoulders, with long ears, and a jaw that jutted forward, with long fangs sticking up from the lower jaw.

For weapons, many had large spears, like the one that had caught Tyrande. At their side, they wore large, stone clubs, marked with large metal spikes sticking out of the sides as a secondary weapon. They had no bows, swords or anything else.

Harry was completely blindsided by the attack and nearly took an axe to the face, which cut across his head, and nearly dumped him to the ground, blood in his eyes and pain wracking his head. A hasty Incendio lit up his attacker like a torch, and Harry used the now screaming and writhing monster as a shield to back away, cursing angrily as he wiped at the blood on his face.

Blood in your eyes was a surefire way to get killed in a fight. This was one of the oldest rules of combat regardless of weapon type or age, and as more blood fell into his eyes, Harry hastily applied a Episkey spell to his face, healing the wound as The wound taken care of, Harry wiped the remaining blood from his face, looking around hastily.

Nearby, Shy-rotam was busy tearing one of the creatures into shreds with some difficulty. The creature's protrusions seemed to be almost rocklike and the creature used them very well. This attacker was also fighting back with claw and fang.

On the other hand, Quetzal was making hash of most of the attackers, smashing into and through the center of the ambush area, thrashing his bulk from side to side. His much greater size allowed him to bite through one of the creatures and crush several more, although their clubs seemed to be doing a bit of damage even as he crushed them under his bulk.

Tyrande, had leapt upwards, and managed to use a minor blessing on her weapon to pull it into her hand, before landing in among the spear-throwers, laying about her with the moonglaive again. There were over fifteen of the spear throwers who had come out from their hiding position and yet, they were far too slow to catch Tyrande, who was able to slip this way and that around them. In contrast, her precise strikes hit ears, eyes, throat and joints. The ears especially were a weak point. Not only was it exceedingly painful to have an ear sliced off, stabbing through them into the Dogbars' heads proved that their skulls were a bit weaker there. The attackers were slowly being sliced apart, though they weren't going down quickly.

Yet watching that, Harry felt that Tyrande would probably win that small portion of the battlefield. But that was as far as Harry could see before three of the attackers were on him again, having moved around their burning companion. One of his eyes was still caked with dried blood, but Harry had his sword in one hand, and a cutting spell from his off-hand, slicing all three into ribbons. *No natural magical resistance, that's good to know.*

With that done, Harry wiped his remaining eye free, then turned to the others close by, overpowering his spells somewhat, but Harry felt he could be forgiven. It'd been a very long time since he'd been ambushed like that, and he cursed himself for not having realized what Tyrande's caution could mean. *Just because were supposed to be heading up into Tauren territory doesn't mean there aren't any other intelligent enemies around. You got too used to fighting stupid opponents Harry,* he remonstrated with himself.

The same thoughts were going through Tyrande's head as she cut down the last of the attackers, recognizing them as Drogbar. Native to the Broken Isle, they were known to be harshly territorial, but also intelligent, and the last time Tyrande had seen, a report on them had indicated they had maintained a peace with the Tauren who were their only real neighbors.

As the last of the attackers fell to a spell from Harry, he moved over to Tyrande, already casting a healing spell for bruises on her before doing the same to Shy-Rotam, who had taken a hit to the side and was limping. "So, any idea what this was about? And how the hell did they..."

Quetzal however was already moving, heading to where one of the attackers had appeared from. A quick flick of his head toppled over what had looked like a rock but instead was a foxhole, covered by a stone made of wood and lattice. "That's honestly impressive. So they weren't waiting here for us specifically though, this kind of thing would take time," the

snake observed, once more reminding Tyrande that, despite his lack of proper morals and his somewhat one-track mind occasionally, the snake had a very good mind.

Now healed, the others moved around, kicking off other places. This revealed more foxholes, and two tunnels leading into the mountain. "What the heck are these creatures?"

"Drogbars. They are an intelligent subterranean species native to the Broken Isles. They're not usually all that violent. Territorial yes, if we were near one of the main entrance ways to their territory, I could see them becoming very aggressive, but laying anlike this outside their tunnels, that I cannot see," Tyrande mused. "And when I last sent an ambassador to Highmountain, his report stated that the Tauren were allied to Drogbars, or at least neutral."

"Unless something is changed in the last... well how long ago was it since you saw that report?" Harry questioned, only half-jokingly. With how long the Kaldorei lived it wouldn't surprise him if they didn't understand how quickly such things could change for other races. "I thought you said that you send off an ambassador every time a new High Chief is chosen."

"I do, but that is a rote response. Relations between us Kaldorei and the Highmountain tribes have been extremely cordial since the War of the Ancients. But the Tauren have always had those among them who are eager to wander, eager to explore. Indeed, they enshrine that concept in their Trials of Adulthood. In contrast, my own people have always concentrated inward. Rare is the Kaldorei who ventures out beyond our settlements in Ashenvale, and fewer still who leave our woods. So we have been cordial but distant with the Highmountain clans."

"Uhuh," Harry drawled. "And again, how long ago did you send your ambassador here?"

"Why it hasn't even been a century, no more than eighty years or so. Surely... oh dear," Tyrande fell silent pensively admitting that Harry had a point. "It is always hard to remember that other races tend to change more quickly than my own."

"So either something has changed, which given my luck is probably what has happened, or this group just didn't like how we looked," Harry quipped, groaning a little inside. A tribe or race suddenly attacking strangers on sight where before they had been somewhat peaceable? *That spells trouble, and where there is trouble, usually I'm forced to wade into it.*

Tyrande snorted a little, sending him a brief wink. "Well, let us hope that it isn't your normal what did you call it, Potter luck?" Then, when Harry just groaned even more theatrically, she let loose a laugh. "Then yes, let us hope that is not your normal Potter luck. Or if it is, it is a problem that we can solve relatively quickly."

"Well, setting aside my ability to attract magic like the shore attracts the tide, let's move on. I think putting some distance between us and this battlefield might be a good idea."

"I agree with that idea, although would either of you object to me gorging myself on all of these Drogbar? They are completely unknown to me, and I am wondering if they are tasty," Quetzal asked, with Shy-rotam also looking interested, going over to one of the courses and sniffing at it delicately. However, the looks both animals got from the two-legged members of their party had them backing off, although Quetzal made snide remarks about, "I still do not understand why you are so against such things. If you kill something, you should be allowed to eat it."

The group of four, despite the protests from the giant snake, traveled for several miles after that point, calling a halt at around daybreak. Tyrande and Harry conferred at that point, and Harry agreed that they would start traveling again after only a short rest. Harry took the time to make a meal for the four of them, raw boar steaks for Shy-rotam and Quetzal, and a fillet of a fish that looked like tilapia, which Tyrande had caught the last time Harry was busy being entranced by a waterfall. After that, Harry put down wards and they all settled down for the morning.

When they woke up, Harry moved around, picking up the ward stones he had set out last night. As he did, Harry looked over his shoulder at Tyrande, who had slept in an upright position against a snow-laden tree instead of using her tent the day before. "So, do we assume that we're going to run into more of these Drogbar?"

"Almost certainly," Tyrande replied with a sigh. "Their territory is just below that of the Highmountain tribes, which means we'll be travelling through it for several days as we go higher up the mountain."

"In that case, I think from now on that we should all travel under some invisibility charms. I don't like being ambushed," he finished, with a tone of massive understatement that caused Tyrande to nod firmly in agreement.

With all four travelers under Invisibility spells or in Harry's case, his cloak, and Tyrande still acting as a scout, they found two similar ambushes, killing all involved. The fourth incident however was very different. The odd quartet had paused once more to let the two animals go off to hunt, which was much easier when they were invisible, something Shy-rotam had to be reminded several times was not permanent.

But instead of coming back looking like an overstuffed cushion several hours later, Quetzal came back within an hour, his voice mild but his words carrying a certain amount of import. "I haven't found any animal tracks yet, but I did run into something that might interest the two of you. I found what looked like a Tauren fighting off a war band of Drogbar."

Frowning faintly, Tyrande raised a special whistle to her lips. Moments later, Shy-rotam came up the mountainside towards them, bounding from boulder to boulder, her Invisibility in abeyance and blood on her jaws, a clear sign she'd had better luck than Quetzal. "show us where," she ordered.

Quetzal instantly turned and led them off, with Harry and the behind him, frowning as he created a spell chain in his mind.

The Tauren being attacked was a younger example of the species than the one Harry had met before. He lacked a beard, was thinner in the shoulders and shorter, but his horns were just as long, and he was fighting back hard. He had put himself in the space between a boulder and the mountainside, to protect his sides and back. This had allowed him to kill at least four of his attackers, and wound two more with his large axe.

However the band of seven Drogbar had grown in the time that it took Quetzal to get back to the others. There were now at least twenty of them, milling all around the field, waiting for their change to attack the Tauren. But only two, if they were very friendly, could attack him at a time. But just clanging at the battlefield, Harry knew that wouldn't last as several Drogbar were making their way up the hill around the stones defending the Tauren in order to attack from above.

Tyrande was about to race in, but Harry, gripped her arm. "Wait, look..." To one side of the ongoing battle was an open tunnel leading into the mountain, the same kind they had seen before. Here however the entrance was open, and as they watched, several more Drogbar came out. "Let me get into position to cast a spell into the tunnel to stop any reinforcements. Then we can attack from several directions at once."

With his own camouflage skills and Harry's spells, Quetzal moved into position directly above the ongoing battle. Meanwhile, Tyrande had laid out her arrows and crouched on a boulder well back of the battlefield, with Shy-rotam nearby, her tail flicking from one side to another eagerly as she waited for the battle to begin.

Soon Harry was in position and began to wave his hand through the air, moving it in the motion needed for the spell he was about to use, which wasn't a normal part of his repertoire. *Still, it works very well in enclosed spaces so...* "Niraasha ka dhuaan (Smoke of Despair)!" He shouted flicking his fingers forward into the tunnel.

From his hand erupted a gray, green cloud of smoke that quickly filled the tunnel, spreading down its length and into the faces of a half dozen Drogbar within. More shouted in the distance, but by that point the six initial victims were already on the ground twitching. The smoke acted both as a paralyzer and a poison for those who inhaled it. The spell, which Harry had learned from Padma Patil oddly enough, was one of the nastiest non-curses Harry had ever learned. The person would be first paralyzed, unable to flee the area as the poison, which was slower acting, went to work.

Even as Harry flung the camouflage entrance down over the tunnel, the Drogbar responded intelligently to this new attack. Five of them kept attacking the Tauren, while the rest turned, splitting into teams. Some of them charged forward, others stood where they were, spears cocked back to hurl forward.

The first two spears hurled crashed into a hasty Protego, before Harry went on the attack, transfiguring two lions to help him. Then Tyrande's arrows were flying, slamming into eyes, through ears, and open mouths among the spear throwers.

Again, the Droghbar didn't panic. Two of them bellowed commands, one of them dying to a bowel exploding curse a moment later, and the group moving to attack Harry turned around, charging towards Tyrande's position. The second leader died in turn from one of Tyrande's arrows. Both of them understood the same rule of war: when in battle kill the leaders first.

Droghbar charging toward Tyrande were met by Shy-rotam, while Quetzal charged down the slope above the Tauren's position. He battered several of the ones pinning the Tauren in place. He laughed, bellowing, "Hah, when I asked the ancient Spirits for aid, I didn't think it would come so quickly!"

Harry took a moment to quip "Ask and you shall receive," before launching a few more spells.

Without magic of their own, and caught between Harry and his companions, the Droghbar had no chance, and the battle was over quickly. None of them survived, the last of them collapsing from an axe strike from the Tauren, who stood up, bowing from the waist towards Tyrande as she moved forward, patting an exultant Shy-rotam on the head. "I thank you for your aid friends! These Droghbar would have overcome me soon. I am supposed to be on my Test of the spirit."

The young Tauren smiled then, and Harry decided that he would like this fellow. "As it is, I seem to have rather accidentally doubled down on my Test of Courage. Might I ask who was doing the magic, and where this giant snake comes from? I've never seen the like of you before," he added, addressing Quetzal. "Oh, and I am Pahr Fangstone, of the Highmountain tribe."

"Yes, I am rather magnificent," the snake answered, hissing in amusement. "Although I would dare say you have not met a Needlespine Shimmerback before."

The Tauren started but then seemed to take the snake speaking in stride. "All that and you are humble too."

"Can you tell us why they were attacking you? Indeed, why have Droghbar begun attacking like this at all?" Tyrande asked.

"Unfortunately, I have no idea on that score. I know that we have had troubles in Highmountain with them, but the fact they are attacking those entering their territory so far below our lands is news. Then again... none of those who have left Highmountain from my tribe have returned as of late, but those who return from their Trials do so at such sporadic rates normally that I don't think anyone has noticed."

As Pahr thought, he scowled. That should have been an odd expression on his somewhat bovine features. Yet like Kaldorei and humans and not like cows, the face of a Tauren had evolved as a means of communication, allowing for the same breath of expression as a human's. "If not for that fact I would have to wait another five years before retaking my Trials I would return now and warn the clans."

"There's no room in your... code of conduct I suppose. Sorry I am not certain of the right term to use, for an emergency like this?" Tyrande questioned.

"Unfortunately not. I must complete all the remaining Trials before I return, or else I will not be declared an adult. That would be a... problem," Pahr replied, looking away.

Tyrande was about to press for more, but Harry spoke up then, a wry expression on his face. "It's for a girl, right?" The young Tauren twitched, but that was enough of an answer, and Harry laughed. "And let me guess, she's got other suitors, some of whom have already finished their trials?"

"Yes, crush it, there are. And since she is from another clan in the first place, I have enough trouble without putting off my Trials further." Pahr spat out quickly, then seemed to gather his self-control a bit. "But who do I have the honor of addressing?"

"I'm Harry, and this is Tyrande," Harry answered, watching as his companion's name went over the youngster's head, much to his amusement and her quiet delight. "We were travelling up to Highmountain ourselves and are willing to warn them about how widespread the issue with the Drogbar is. But can you tell us more about the way up the mountain?"

Pahr nodded and while Harry healed his bruises and cuts spent a good forty minutes describing portions of the route to them while Quetzal went off to hunt once more and Harry used magic to bury the bodies of the dead. Enemies though they might be, he didn't want to leave their corpses out like this. Besides, they smelled.

Soon though, Pahr was on his way once more, waving farewell as he moved down the mountain, armed with the knowledge of where Harry and the others had run into the previous ambushes. Tyrande and Harry watched the young Tauren go, and then Tyrande let loose a laugh that was almost a giggle. "I see that young men are the same regardless of race. They will go to the ends of the earth to impress a girl."

"Heh, ah, yeah. That's probably a universal rule. Still, I hope he succeeds. I think I rather like that youngster," Harry answered, causing Tyrande to laugh even louder.

They traveled for another day and a half in this manner, half during the day, half during the night. The going was very difficult in parts as the granite bones of the mountain started to become more prevalent, and twice the four of them had to scale up large stone rungs carved out of rocks. Here Harry would have to levitate the animals or indeed all four of them up to

make progress. Nevertheless, it was a sign that someone used this path if only occasionally these days.

At one such point, Tyrande paused, then moved her foot to the side, crouching down quickly and lifting out of the patchy grass at her feet a small item. It looked like a large bracelet or a thigh strap of some kind. She held it out to Harry, who saw the middle of it was marked by a tiny copper medallion, where four lines marked out the image of a mountain. "I believe that these are markers indicating that we come in peace to the Highmountain tribes which Pahr told us about."

"Should I try a copying spell on that, or would that be a social faux pas?"

"A what? What language did you just use?" Tyrande questioned, laughing as the odd word rolled off Harry's mouth. Harry had been speaking Kaldor for weeks now, but just then, Harry had reverted to some other language, although Tyrande didn't think it was the language Harry called English.

"Sorry. The English language occasionally picked up other words from other different languages and incorporated them into itself, and I sometimes forget I'm no longer speaking English. That means a social mistake or misstep, one that is embarrassing but not dangerous, at least usually," Harry explained.

That caused Tyrande to nod, and understanding his question now, shrugged her shoulders in one of those minute gestures that her people used. "I believe that having one of these with our party will be enough, so there is no need to copy it."

Harry held out a hand, and Tyrande handed torn strap of leather to him. Harry took it and after a moment tied it to Tyrande's upper arm, trying to ignore the fact that, like the Kaldorei he had come into physical contact with on the boat during sparring exercises, Tyrande's skin was inhumanly smooth, almost feeling like silk to the touch. "As the only one of us who is a recognized authority, I figure you should be the one to have this."

Tyrande shrugged and gestured. "In that case, let's keep going. We still have several hours under Elune's gaze."

Harry chuckled and then used the Leviosa spell to carry all four of them upwards once more. As she rose a few feet off the ground, joining Harry at his head height, Tyrande shook her head. "I still believe this is cheating. The Tauren rites of passage are supposed to be difficult. You shouldn't simply wave your hand and abrogate an arduous climb like this," she teased.

"Yeah, it's good neither of us are Tauren and need to pass those rites of passage to be considered an adult, isn't it?" Harry retorted.

Tyrande laughed, and the foursome continued to float up through the air. A second later, however, she had a brief second to thank Harry for using his magic on them as the group in the air came up to the end of the stone ladder, only to find themselves staring at a group of the same Drogbar who had attacked them before.

All of them had been prepared to attack the group as they made their way up the ladder but quickly changed targets, hurling their spears before the four in the air could try to dodge.

One spear struck Quetzal in the side, bouncing off his scales. The other struck Harry in the center of his chest, but Harry was still wearing the reinforced armor that he had been given by Tyrande, and although the blow bruised something fierce, it didn't penetrate. Tyrande, in turn, used her double-bladed staff to smash several spears out of the air as they came towards her and Shy-rotam, although one got through leaving a cut across her inner thigh.

At that point, the advantage switched to Harry and his companions. A Reducto spell sent at their feet caused the attackers to fly in every direction, and then Quetzal and Harry were down on the ground, with Tyrande and Shy-rotam landing nearby. Tyrande stumbled, her leg bleeding profusely, but still cut down one of Drogbar near her while Quetzal and Shy-rotam ran roughshod over the rest.

The battle ended soon after. Drogbar here didn't have the same numbers as the groups that had attacked Harry and Tyrande before, and the battlefield was certainly another compounding factor since it was all too easy to fall off the edge of the cliff, the trail here being narrow and moving along the side of a sheer cliff face rather than deeper into the mountain.

Standing over the body of the one Drogbar she had slain, Tyrande shook her head with an annoyed expression on her face as Harry knelt to one side, using the Episkey charm to heal her wound. While Harry was all business, the sight of the blood worried him enough to ignore the somewhat racy nature of where the wound was, Tyrande tried to ignore the feeling of Harry's finger on the inside of her thigh. *My word if this minor, innocent touch is having such an affect from someone giving me medical attention, it is a sign. I really should find Malfurion the next time I enter the Emerald Dream.*

"Yes, Harry, I do believe there is definitely something up with these Drogbar. You could have argued that we had made camp literally on top of one of their caves before the first attack. Here? This was a deliberate ambush set to keep any returning Tauren from being able to rejoin their tribe. Why? It isn't as if the Tauren would even carry anything Drogbar find valuable. And I refuse to believe that Drogbar are attacking solely for the delight of killing."

"Cutting the mountain off from the outside world, maybe? It's about the only reason I can think of. Although considering how tenuous the connection between the Kaldorei and the Tauren are already, I can't see a point to it," Harry confessed.

"But again, why? To take over the Highmountain territory for themselves?" Tyrande did not like it when beings acted against their nature, which felt like that to her. "What would they do with all that extra space? It isn't as if they even enjoy living on the surface rather than in caves. Nor do they have any need for the forest or farmland."

Harry shrugged as he stood up, advising, "Ignore it for now. We'll eventually find out one way or the other. Your wound's healed now. It will still sting for a while but shouldn't even leave a scar."

Her lips quirked into a worried frown at that, but Tyrande still nodded agreement, and the four of them began with their way. Soon, the path leading higher into the mountains narrowed so much that Harry had to shrink Quetzal down to just above shoulder height on Tyrande. Otherwise, Harry would've been forced to levitate him above the path for a time, which would've been humiliating for the large snake.

The air began to get cold that night, and Quetzal was once more extremely thankful for Harry's warming charms, swearing undying devotion and affection for his friend. "Just keep the warming charms coming!"

"I feel as if I have more to offer than just warming charms," Harry quipped.

Quetzal retorted, "Perhaps, but they are your most important feature."

However, after several hours more of upward movement marked by numerous stone ladders, the trail started to level out. Then it weirdly began to go down slightly. Then, even more shockingly, the area around them began to grow green again, despite how high up in the mountains they were.

It wasn't the green of the jungle or Ashenvale. Rather, it was the green of a northern woodland, much more like the Forbidden Forest or others Harry was used to in Britain or even further north. Regardless it was noticeably warmer than it had been. Not to the point of the jungle at the mountain base, but certainly far more than in the Wintersong mountain range where Tyrande and Harry had met.

At first, Harry didn't realize how this was happening or why. But soon, both he and Tyrande saw the reason as they continued down into what Harry could now see was a huge hidden valley that seemed to extend well out of sight in every direction. "Smoke?" Tyrande observed thoughtfully, "No, that is steam. My ambassador mentioned once that they had hot springs up here. I did not realize the full implications of that."

Harry nodded too, and the two of them led their animal companions toward the steam, finding that it was coming out of a crack in the mountainside. The steam filled the area around it with heat, reminding Harry of a science program he had seen once as a young boy in class about underwater volcanoes and air vents. Here the area around the air vent wasn't as hot as in

that example, but the cumulative effect of this air vent and others in the area meant that it was a good deal greener here in this area than anywhere else in the mountain.

In turn, this allowed for a real forest to grow up here, although the soil still wasn't nearly good enough for regular farming or anything like that. Not that Harry had gotten the impression the Tauren went into farming any more than the Kaldorei did.

The forest around them continued to change, spreading out as the mountain continued to slope downward. The going was now far easier than anywhere in the quartet's trek since the first ambush. And then as they were about to reach the floor of the valley, Tyrande saw a totem ahead of them on the slope.

Coming closer, Harry paused, staring at it while Tyrande also examined the totem in interest.

It looked like four large tree trunks had been cut down and then twined together somehow, left here so long that the oak had solidified into something that looked more like stone. Into the sides of these logs were carved several ancient Tauren faces, each of them so detailed that it was obvious that they were all individual people. Between these faces were animal figures. The image of an owl with its wings spread out grabbed Harry's attention the most.

While Harry had thought he would see something like this, having already likened what he had seen of the Tauren to Native Americans he'd read about in books as a child, the colors of the totem were well outside of his expectation. The faces were marked to almost look alive, whereas others were more of an image of what people thought the animal was like, rather than the reality. Many animals were colored true to life, and the bird at the top of one of the logs almost looked like it could just flap its wings and fly away. The others, the figures of the spirits of animals, were of a very different nature. They were more multicolored than would be found in nature. Their eyes were also normally larger and emphasized, which Harry pointed out.

Tyrande laughed quietly, moving up beside him, and when he turned to her, she reached forward, gently placing a finger underneath one of his eyes. "Surely Harry, your people have the same expression that my own and the Tauren do? The eyes are windows to the soul."

"We do, although I will admit that our artists rarely show that veneration to this extent," Harry agreed, and Tyrande pulled her finger away, shaking her head. It was evident that Harry had not heard some of the discussions about him the other Kaldorei, particularly the younger set, had when they were aboard the ship. Many of the young women had been quite taken by Harry's emerald eyes. And she had to agree with them to a certain extent. They did look indeed like the Emerald Dream given form.

Tyrande stepped back, gesturing to the four twined logs. "These, I believe, are supposed to represent the four tribes that make up the Highmountain nation. On this log, we have the

Rivermane tribe, those blue lines creating a wave-like motion paired with a blue dot under the wave. Their tribe made a name for themselves in the War of the Ancients by being very good marsh fighters and also helped to supply food to their own people and mine."

"Oh, so those designs between the various carvings have meaning too? I would have missed that," Harry confessed.

"Understandable, as I would have not known about them either if my ambassador had not included paintings of the various tribal markings in his report. Although I would guess that natives could tell us more." With that, Tyrande turned and looked out and further down the slope. "Is that not the case, good hunter?"

"I am not a hunter, Miss, but a watcher," a respectful voice came back, and from behind a final patch of snow built up around a tree, which Harry realized must have been fake, a male Tauren appeared, moving up the slope towards them. On his back, he had a large bow, paired with an equally large quiver full of arrows that were probably about as long as Harry's legs. At his side, he wore a small horn made of bone and a large dagger, which would've done for Harry as a short sword.

The Tauren himself was clad much like the other Tauren Harry had seen, leather wrappings around his thighs, paired with a wide belt and loincloth that covered everything the Tauren wanted to keep private. His shoulders had guards on them that spread down to cover his pectorals but left his stomach bare. Most of his clothing was simple brown and black, but there was a painted mark on either shoulder. On one shoulder was a mark that Harry realized matched one of the tribal markings on the totem, while the other held a large eye.

When the Tauren came close, he held out his hand and formally shook both Tyrande's and Harry's in turn. "Hail travelers and well met. I am Jorl Iceflow. I hail from the Skyhorn tribe, whose turn it is to watch the path leading down the mountain."

"And you do this alone?" Harry asked, glancing over his shoulder into the opening at the top of the hill they had been descending into the dale. "Or are we just so blind that we didn't see anyone else?"

"Forget being blind. Shy-rotam and I would have smelled them," Quetzal said, rearing up next to Harry, from where he had been examining some of the faces closest to the ground. One of them looked distinctly snake-like, but not quite, which had thrown him.

"Hah! your noses haven't been worth much yet, have they?" Harry questioned archly.

Shy-rotam scuffed the ground in front of her while Quetzal shot back instantly. "Dogbar smell of the earth and stone, they barely smell alive when we're fighting them, let alone when they are hidden. Besides, who was it who spotted the two ambushes we attacked in turn?"

Jorl blinked in surprise, staring at the talking snake, then over to Tyrande. "Is this some new nature magic of your people? The ability to talk directly to animals?"

"No, that ability belongs to Harry here. And the animals must be intelligent enough to converse in the first place," Tyrande replied.

"Truly? Fascinating." Jorl looked thoughtfully at Harry, then over to Tyrande. "As for my being alone, I am. I am a watcher of the path, not a guard. After all, you have all made the trek up here. How likely is it a war band of any size, let alone any other kind of danger, could make it up to us from that path?"

"You have a point," Harry mused. "Still, I would have thought the only entrance to your valley would have some kind of guard on it."

"It isn't the only entrance. It is simply the only entrance that leads directly down the mountain. And there has been talk, you are correct, about placing guards here. But it was felt that the war bands should instead guard the entrance to Drogbar caves that come out in our territory."

"Yes, we were attacked twice by Drogbar on the way here. Might I ask if you know why they have become so warlike? Protecting their caves and their dwellings, I can understand. They have always been territorial to that extent, a bit to attack those of us on the surface, surely that is not usual," Tyrande questioned closely.

Jorl nodded, although he looked a little worried himself. "I do not know what is causing it, and if the high chief and the other leaders do, I certainly haven't heard about it. But can I assume, my lady, that you are here as ambassador from the Kaldorei to the new high chief?"

"Something of the sort," Tyrande answered with a small smile while Harry chuckled and gestured toward him. "I am also here escorting this one to your people in the hopes that you can help him better understand his own nature so he can use Nature Magic more effectively."

The Tauren chuckled, waving one hand in the air back and forth. "For that, you will have to speak to the shamans. I am a mere hunter. I leave the greater mysteries like that to those with wiser heads."

Tyrande nodded that, having expected that kind of an answer. She was also pleased to note that Jorl was not reacting negatively to Harry in any way, even though he very obviously was not a night elf or any other race the Tauren might have interacted with. "We would like some directions to the high chieftain's village, but first, tell me what you can of this totem and your various tribes, please."

"Gladly," Jorl said with a smile. "These four logs were originally from the four corners of our valley. Each, as you suppose, was carved by a different tribe. The faces you see there are

famous leaders or warriors from each different tribe. The faces on these, in particular, are ones that every other tribe acknowledges are important rather than solely important to the tribe in question. This is a totem of unity to show that the lands of Highmountain belong to all four tribes equally. Like you, miss..." He trailed off, indicating that the Kaldorei woman had not introduced herself.

Sighing and realizing her little bit of fun was over, Tyrande introduced herself, seeing the warrior's eyes widen as he bowed respectfully towards her. "Please don't do that. There is a reason why I didn't introduce myself first, after all. I am on my sabbatical, and I would rather not deal with such things."

"I... Yes, my lady." The Tauren stammered, suddenly sounding a good deal younger than he had previously. But he continued on, gamely pointing to the tribe of his own people. "The Skyhorn tribe is denoted there, the totem topped by an eagle carving. Our markings are thus, green and white lines in the shape of two curved-back wings, with a square denoting that the heart of our people is in the sky."

Harry smiled faintly, hearing the pride in his people in Jorl's voice. "As someone who considers himself quite close to birds, predatory ones anyway, can I take it that you all have a connection to birds as well?"

"Yes. My tribe has bonded with families of giant eagles, who can carry us where we wish to go. We have become the scouts of Highmountain, ranging far and wide through the peaks of our mountain home," Jorl answered. "I'm afraid that we are not as welcoming of sharing our secrets as some of the other tribes are, however."

That caused Harry to nod, understanding his point. "And Rivermane? The tribe that Tyrande already mentioned?"

"They are actually the most welcoming of strangers and outsiders. Indeed, if not for the trouble with Drogbar, you would probably have met several of them in your outpost. They are our diplomats, our fishermen, and some even farm the land."

Harry's eyes widened, and he glanced around, then looked back at the Tauren, raising an eyebrow in a show of extreme shock to get that across to the Tauren, who no doubt didn't know human body language all that well. *Considering I'm the only human around at the moment.* "Truly, up here?"

Jorl laughed, nodding his head. "I see you understand something of the soil then. Yes, it is extremely difficult to work and somewhat thankless. I know that young fools from my own tribe and Bloodtotem tend to make fun of the Rivermane plan. But those of us with more sense remember that, as Lady Tyrande said, the Rivermane clan won their name in battle against the demons, and indeed in several cases did far better than the other clans. That they do not take

pride in martial prowess is no reason to forget that they too are Tauren and can fight just as well as the rest of us."

"And the Bloodtotem clan?"

"The Bloodtotem tribe is the tribe that is most used to the idea of the warrior path. They are warriors, explorers, and hunters. It is a very rare Bloodtotem tribesman who would bother with agriculture or tending domesticated animals when they could hunt for their meal. They hold some pride in the fact that the first leader of the Highmountain clans came from the Bloodtotem tribe." Unlike when he spoke of his own tribe or the Rivermane tribe, when Jorl spoke of the Bloodtotem, his tone was wary, annoyed. It was clear that there were some tensions between the tribes here.

I suppose people are the same everywhere. We always latch onto differences rather than what could unite us, Harry thought.

Tyrande cocked her head thoughtfully to one side. "The first leader of the Highmountain tribes was Huhn Highmountain, Huhn of the Eagle Spear. I met him personally, and I would say that we were friends during the war of the ancients. For someone so serious and warlike at times, he was a gentle soul who liked to play with the children when he could. Whenever he could, Huhn could be found doing one of two things. One was being among the children, carving little toys for them or playing games to keep their spirits up when they were transported from one place of safety to another. the second would be hunting, but not to eat or kill, instead simply to test himself. He often said that the kill was nothing, it was the skill to get close enough to make the kill that was important."

Tyrande shook her head, coming back to the present with a small shake of her head. "So why do you speak as if he was from the Bloodtotem tribe?"

Jorl was stunned, staring at her for a moment, before remembering that this was indeed Tyrande Whisperwind, one of the two leaders of the Kaldorei during the war of the ancients. "I, I did not know that. But the war of the ancients is not the first time the four tribes had been brought together under one leader. The first to do so was a Bloodtotem chieftain, as were several of his successors. Indeed, it was Huhn who broke the power of the Bloodtotem tribe. Since then, the leadership of the tribes have rotated, but the Bloodtotem tribe have never really reconciled to that fact, despite the thousands of years which separate us from that ancient past."

"Ancient past, yes, I suppose it is for most," Tyrande said with a sigh, shaking her head. She touched a small scar on her side, remembering a specific battle, where she had led a force of Kaldorei alongside Huhn and combined tribes of Tauren. "Although for me, it is not so ancient. Some things cannot be forgotten."

For a moment, the group fell silent, staring at Tyrande as she was lost in memory once more. But then, Shy-rotam butted her head against Tyrande's shoulder, nearly causing the night elf to lose her footing, so out of it was she. "Enough of that. The past is the past and should stay there. Instead, we should concentrate on the now."

"Such wisdom from one so young," Tyrande teased, running her hand through the frostsaber's pelt.

Harry nodded wordless agreement with the tiger. *After all, if I only dwelt on the past, I'd become a broody and angsty soul very quickly. And who would want that?* "Is there actual physical conflict between the tribes?" He asked, trying to bring the conversation back to the here and now.

"No, if by that you mean open warfare or anything similar. Occasionally, there is a meeting of champions, wrestling matches, contests of strength and knowledge. That is how we settle disputes when the word of the high chieftain is not enough. I will not deny that the Bloodtotem tribe demands more such contests than any other, but they, like all of us, revere the memory of Huln despite his having broken their position of greater authority over the other tribes."

"And all of that means that the last mark here, the one that looks like a simple mountain but is surrounded by triangles made of the colors of the other tribes, is the Highmountain clan?" Harry found it fascinating that this tribe had actually worked the idea of unifying the various tribes into one into their personal symbol. That either spoke to the purpose of the tribe as they saw it or hubris. Harry wasn't certain which.

"Indeed." Whereas before when Jorl spoke about the Bloodtotem's, Jorl's tone had indicated wariness, when he spoke of the Highmountain tribe, it was tinged with simple respect, similar to the tone Jorl had used when he spoke of the Rivermane tribe only perhaps a little more? Harry wasn't certain. "Whereas once the Highmountain tribe was simply one of four, they changed their name and became the dominant tribe under Huln's command and for some time after his death, and then created the system with which the high chieftain is chosen from among the tribes peacefully, even though this decreased their own power."

Tyrande nodded, having heard of this before, but still showing quite a bit of appreciation for the idea. The idea that unity mattered far more than the power of a person was something she readily understood. Harry too understood it and wished that wizards could have shown such wisdom more often.

"Since then, we have had several thousand years of peace and prosperity, and the Highmountain tribe seeks to serve the interests of all Tauren upon the mountain, not just themselves. A sign of this is that anyone from the other three tribes can join them if they wish, or leave if they wish, whereas the other tribes are still tribes in truth, with family ties of blood connecting everyone together."

Quetzal made a grumbling noise as he shifted away from the discussion. "I hunger," he said simply. "If you two legs are going to continue to talk about histories and societies and such useless things, I am going to see to something far more important: filling my belly."

Harry chuckled at that and then gestured Jorl to sit. "If your duty will allow you to, would you mind answering some of our questions? We would like to know where to go from here, as I don't think Tyrande has an idea on that score past getting us up to this valley in the first place."

Tyrande indicated that was the case, opining that, "While I was told that the new chieftain would be chosen shortly, I wasn't told which tribe he would represent. I understand that the chieftain's seat of power changes with the chieftain."

"That was true in ages past. But it was decided that that was not the way forward. Each tribe has its own separate territory, but beyond that, the four tribes hold a single town equally. There has been some talk of transitioning that to a formal city, as, despite my earlier words about the Bloodtotem and my own tribe being insular, we do still interact with one another. Such things are easier to do in a centralized area. But that hasn't occurred yet," Jorl corrected.

From there, the three of them talked about the various tribes, where they could be found in the Highmountain territory, and some aspects of each of their history. Here Tyrande joined in, mentioning this or that warrior she had known during the war of the ancients, although she had never as close to any as she had been to Huln as a fellow leader. Even so, she didn't talk much about the war itself, instead speaking about the quiet times between the battles, the moments of momentary peace they had between the various campaigns.

Jorl lapped that up, and it was clear that he was looking forward to passing on these tales to others, which, Harry reflected, was probably part of why Tyrande was doing it. Still, Jorl gave them enough directions to make their way to the combined Tauren town, which was, according to Jorl, in the direct center of the valley. He also gave them an idea of the dimensions of this valley, which was, to put it bluntly, huge. The valley continued out of sight around several different peaks that Harry had thought originally marked the end of the valley. It would take a party traveling nonstop from the home of the Skyhorn clan more than a week to get to where the Rivermane clan had their home on the opposite side of the valley.

Harry mostly listened and asked but eventually, when it became lunchtime, and the talks had not finished, made all three of them a meal. Jorl had never had some of the spices that Harry had picked up among the Kaldorei and declared Harry, "one of the best cooks whose table I have had the honor to sit at."

They spent much of the day with Jorl and then set out as evening began, leaving him to his lonely duty, although having supplied him with at least one more meal's worth of food from Harry. Quetzal, who had returned at some point, looking sated and somewhat annoyed, to move on, stating that, "We should be on our guard when we hit the forests. I ran into

particularly large versions of those snow leopards we saw earlier. One of them had the temerity to attack me."

"Which just means you ate well," Harry drawled, shaking his head. "Still, if you think we need to be on guard, we'll do so."

"And I would rather like to return to my real size Harry," Quetzal shot back repressively. "I made several mistakes in that fight, including forgetting for a moment that you had shrunk me before the battle began and that it nearly cost me."

Harry apologized for that, and when they hit the edge of the forest that seemed to dominate this portion of the valley floor, Harry canceled the shrinking spell he'd used on Quetzal earlier that day. It had simply been easier for Quetzal to get along when he wasn't the size of a train car.

Continuing their series of traveling during the day for some time and then during the night the second half, the group made good time, despite Tyrande now stopping more often to educate Shy-rotam on moving with Tyrande on her back. Now that the tiger was almost fully grown, it was time to train her as a war mount rather than simply a hunter.

But as they moved through the wilderness, they came upon signs of battle. A few sites were small, skirmishes if that, but at one point they found signs of a much larger battle, with several dozen funeral mounds dotting the area.

One night as they traveled, the quartet started to notice that many of the trees around them had been decorated. However, unlike the Kaldorei' decorations, there was little subtlety about the Tauren items in the forest. Most of them were very brightly colored, or small copper and bronze plates which shone in the light of the moon above, standing out starkly against the forest in a way that most of the Kaldorei similar items would not have.

As they continued on there was the sound of a horn from one side of the direction they had been traveling. A second later, there was a sound of many feet, and out of the forest around them came a band of eight Tauren, all of them armed with axes or large, heavy spears. Built to fit the size of their users those axes looked massive, as did the spears, and all of the Tauren looked ready to fight for a moment, charging towards Quetzal, before halting as they saw Harry and Tyrande moving along peaceably with the giant snake. For a moment, they skidded to a halt, and then one of them, the oldest of the group, stepped forward, planting his spear in the ground. "Hold strangers. You, bring a beast of such danger into our lands?"

"Actually," said one of the other Tauren, frowning as he stared at the snake. "How did a snake of that size climb to our lands? It should not have gotten through the middle layer. And there is no chance of such a beast having grown to that size without our knowledge in our valley."

"I'm afraid that is because of me," Harry answered. "My name is Harry Potter."

"Tyrande stepped forward, making certain that the band of Tauren saw the armlet on her shoulder as well as could make out her features in the light of the moon above. "And I am Tyrande, of the Kaldorei." She said nothing more, no title, no last name. Like with Jorl, there was no need.

As one, the Tauren looked at her in surprise and awe, and many of them lifted their weapons in salute. "Lady Tyrande, you are known to us, of course, although none of us expected or were informed that you would be traveling our lands!" The spokesman said. He looked over at Harry quizzically, cocking his head to one side. "And do you vouch for this magic-user? And his monstrous companion?"

"His monstrous companion' has a name, and can speak for himself, thank you," Quetzal grumbled, rearing up to stare down at the Tauren.

"It speaks the common tongue?" One of the Tauren exclaimed, staring up at the still shrunken snake. "How?"

Tyrande smiled. "That is part of Harry's magic. My own companion can speak as well."

Shy-rotam came out of Tyrande's shadow, padding forward, looking at the Tauren with as little fear as Quetzal had. "They are quite large, are they not? Those horns on top of their head look dangerous, and yet I rather like the look of their eyes for some reason."

"On behalf of my people, I thank you for the compliment, young tiger. Your kind, or at least a variant of your kind for we have never seen one with fur so white, are known to us. But, unfortunately, your kind, giant snake, is not."

Quetzal hissed in amusement as he replied. "I am a Needlespine Shimmerback. My species only live around large concentrations of magic. I do not believe there is any such within your domain."

"There are places on the island which are like that, although you are correct, there is no such within Highmountain." The Tauren who was speaking seemed to compose himself, at last, shaking his head. "I have been remiss in my manners. My name is Tarl Axehand. And I welcome you strangers and allies to our lands. Please, come with me. I will take you to our High Chief."

He led the way through the forest to the outer area of a village. It didn't have an outer wall, although it did have a series of ditches here and there and several well-built lookouts, towers made of stone and rock. One of those was currently unmanned, and Harry supposed that was where Quetzal had been spotted from.

Behind that spaced-out defense was a large town, but instead of houses, the Tauren lived in large tents, circular or octagonal in shape. These were large structures, some of them two stories tall, although much of the size was simply because of how spread out they were rather than how tall.

While the Tauren of the town might have been warned about their approach, Quetzal still garnered quite a few stares as they reached the outer edge of the town, and then still more as it followed Harry and Tyrande in with the tiger moving along beside him, looking around and interest. Harry, too was looking around in interest, although a time or two he had to shake his head and move on quickly.

The reason for these momentary stutters in his self-control was simple: the Native American-like feel of the Tauren continued here, including their clothing, and of course, among the townsfolk were a good deal of women of all ages and sizes.

The Tauren were not human, and for that Harry was very thankful, because much of what they wore showed the Tauren's, ahem, proportions quite well. Their legs were covered with light fur and not shaped well, or else the type of clothing the Tauren wore would be highly inappropriate in public. Moreover, their upper body was, even among the women, heavily muscled, with breasts smaller than would have been normal on a human woman of their size. Madame Maxine came strongly to mind as that realization came to Harry.

There were a few exceptions though, that grabbed Harry's attention despite the non-human nature of the Tauren. First, were a few of the middle-aged women who had babies. Evidently nursing Tauren grew several sizes, but the Tauren didn't think about changing the style of clothing they wore, and Harry had to bite his cheek to look away.

Furthermore, Harry felt the fur was not exactly a turnoff either. Outside of their hair and on some of the older Tauren's arms and legs, their fur seemed to be of the short variety rather than long. And there were several younger girls who grabbed Harry's attention for a few moments.

One had long black hair tied into ribbons falling down her chest, each ribbon denoted by a different kind of colored feather and ribbon. She stood in a leather skirt, well-made and durable, that came down to her knees, leaving her lower legs bare. She was laughing at something someone else had said, the sound and how expressive her face was drawing Harry's eye.

Another was a russet-haired woman a little bit younger than the blonde, if her less spectacular build was any measure. She was a bit shorter, but seemed full of energy, bouncing in place which did fascinating things to her anatomy despite it not quite measuring up to what a human of similar size would have. She had an anklet of some kind, which gleamed with the color of some kind of metal. In the moonlight it was impossible to tell if it was steel iron or

silver, and the gleam of it was matched by a necklace around her neck that rested between her bountiful breasts.

In both cases it was the way they moved and laughed and sounded so alive and human that attracted his attention, just like among the Young Kaldorei. Indeed, watching them Harry had a moment to regret the fact that Berena and Sylina had not come with them. "Who would have thought I'd be missing those two so quickly, and after so short an acquaintance?" he murmured.

Beside him, Tyrande smiled faintly, while inwardly laughing at that. "Hmm, I will be sure to tell them about that. Indeed, I could probably come up with an excuse to send the two of them here to join you among the Tauren. Would you like that?"

"That would be a gross abuse of your power and our friendship Tyrande. So while yes, I would like that, I don't think I can ask for it," Harry answered dryly, rolling his eyes.

"Bah, I wager I would just have to tell them you missed them, especially after so short an acquaintance, and Sylina at least would come running," Tyrande laughed quietly once more.

"I might be a teenager right now, but while that is still having an impact, hormones are the devil I swear, I am not that far round the twist. So thank you for the offer, but I repeat, no," Harry repeated, although Tyrande could detect a certain wistfulness in his voice, and he seemed to be looking between one of the Tauren and nowhere.

Almost as if, Tyrande reflected, he was imagining one of the two younger Kaldorei in the traditional Tauren clothing. That thought caused her to want to tease him some more. "Indeed. Thankfully, my own teenage years are so far in the distant past, that I cannot remember how much of a fool I made of myself. Although I know I did, if only in terms of writing incredibly bad poetry and pining away from afar rather than simply staring at nothing and having to cross my legs to hide the proof of my thoughts."

As she had expected, Harry's eyes widened, although he had not in fact been thinking about the younger twosome at that moment. No, his thoughts had been about someone else entirely. Regardless, his hands moved to re-arrange the front of his pants subtly before pausing as he realized there was no need. He looked at her and shook his head at Tyrande's twinkling eyes. "Okay, that was a good one," he allowed. "And I can't deny that Berena and Sylina were attractive. But they are Kaldorei, and I'm not. So any thoughts I might have of... companionship... in the future are useless."

"Don't set that thought in stone Harry," Tyrande murmured. *I rather think that any Kaldorei who could get past his odd appearance would be very happy with Harry. But that is for the future,* she thought, before she turned her attention back to the Tauren around them, a few of whom were looking at them speculatively having overheard their discussion.

What they made of it, Tyrande didn't know as they reached the entrance to the large red tent she had seen moments ago and a Tauren of impressive build came out. He wasn't the oldest Tauren in sight, but his shoulders and chest were among the broadest, and the beads and feathers in his beard and hair were more elaborate than anyone else in sight.

The man moved forward, then bowed deeply from the waist. "I am Lars Proudtree of the Rivermane, High Chief of Highmountain. Lady Tyrande, having you here both as representative of your people and as a veteran of the War of the Ancients is both an honor and a surprise. I did not anticipate you personally coming to greet me upon my ascension to the High chieftain's hut."

"True, normally I would not be able to get away from my own duties as a leader. But this time, your becoming high chief coincided with my own sabbatical from my duties as leader of my people," Tyrande replied, then decided to make a joke about it. "Perhaps you have heard of that before? Every four-hundred and twenty-two years, I take a year off to commune with nature and get away from my duties for a time."

The Tauren chuckled, a deep subterranean noise from his cavernous chest. "Only Kaldorei can speak so casually about the passage of time. Still, please introduce your companions to me. I also understand that your two animal companions can speak for themselves? That is an intriguing ability. Yet one which, I believe, comes from your companion, not you, Lady Whisperwind."

Harry nodded, and at Tyrande's gesture, he stepped forward, introducing himself as well as Quetzal. When he finished, Tyrande introduced her own companion, scratching Shy-rotam behind the ears.

"We have records of Shimmerback snakes from our wandering brethren, although rarely do they live to be as large as this one on the Broken Isle," the chieftain murmured, then bowed politely to the snake. "You're welcome in our lands, so long as you do not feed upon our people or our livestock without our leave."

"I ate a particularly foolish leopard a few days ago, so you need not fear on that score. I might take some unwary birds on the wing or a squirrel, but I will not need a main meal for a few more days," Quetzal responded regally.

"Please, come inside, let us talk."

The interior of the tent soon became packed, as more Tauren entered behind them, interested to hear the story of how lady Tyrande, who was a legend among their people almost as much as she was among the Kaldorei, had come to be here, and with such odd companions. Between them, Harry and Tyrande explained his past as much as Harry wished to and his training with Cenarius before their meeting in the mountains against the Frostmaul Giants.

"And so you come to us to learn our ways, to get in touch with your mixed natures," one of the Tauren mused, scratching at his beard thoughtfully. He was one of the oldest Tauren there, his hair was mostly white, with only streaks of its original brown here and there, although his fur seemed to have retained its color. He had almost as many beads and feathers in his beard as the king, and his horns were huge, even in comparison to the other men around them. All of whom, Harry was interested to note, had the same type of horns: that of moose rather than bulls or anything else.

"So long as you are willing to put in the time Harry Potter, I believe that yes, you can learn from us about our shaman ways. But do not expect that we will allow you to learn such for free. Every adult must be able to contribute to the clan. And judging by the tales of your combat prowess, you are an adult, despite your apparently youthful appearance that puts me in mind of our own young."

It was with a start that Harry realized at that point that none of the Tauren had called him out on his being human, or as the Kaldorei had put it, a cursed Vrykul. Instead, they had simply seen him as a stranger, not as a strange, possibly dangerous freak. That was humbling, as not even Cenarius' family had welcomed him without any preconceived notions.

Setting that observation aside, Harry nodded. "Whether you would prefer magic or sweat and the effort of the mind and body, I can cheerfully pay my own way."

"Nor should you expect it to be quick. We do not know how long you expect to live, but it takes decades for a shaman to truly be able to converse with the spirits, both within and without," the same elderly Tauren warned.

"I've never been afraid of hard work, although occasionally I have not volunteered for it," Harry joked, causing laughter to reverberate through the crowd of listeners, which had grown in the telling. Indeed, someone had moved segments of the chieftain's tent, rolling them up to the central support in the center of the hut so that more of his people could listen in.

"As grateful as I am that you are willing to help Harry with his dichotomous issue, I have to inform you that our trek here was more dangerous than we had anticipated. Animal, monster, the terrain and the weather, all of these I had anticipated. But these attacks by the Drogbar are beyond my understanding. I had thought that at least the very least in your father's time the Drogbar and you were leaving one another alone. Yet they clearly attacked us while we were on the trail leading up to Highmountain, along with a Tauren we met who was on his Trials. And yesterday, we saw signs of more combat."

"That is our problem to deal with, lady Tyrande," Lars answered repressively.

He was new to his position, Tyrande knew, and she understood he probably would not be willing to take help from outsiders for fear of looking weak. From what she had heard since arriving here, the Bloodtotem tribe would certainly not be happy about it. But that didn't mean

that help wasn't warranted, and looking around, Tyrande saw that several of his advisors were looking at her and Harry speculatively.

"But what is actually going on?" Harry asked bluntly. "What has started this conflict?"

For a moment, Lars was silent, then at the nudge of a woman who looked to be the same age, he started, then finally replied. "We do not know. It's been going on for a few years now, but we have no idea what sparked it. Suddenly, Drogbar were simply not interested in talking or keeping to their own territories as we were. They have begun sending war bands away from their caves, attacking travelers to and from our settlements. We have lost people, although not many as of yet. Still, the most recent attack was an assault on our goatherd, and it was more effective too, slaughtering many of the Highmountain tribe's reserves."

"And when the Highmountain clan sent out a party to hunt Drogbar warband down, we lost several people," said another Tauren. This one was another middle-aged man, although Harry guessed his warrior days were behind him given the leg he was missing from the thigh down.

"Could it be the Taint?" Harry guessed, looking over at Tyrande.

She frowned, then slowly shook her head. "I do not believe that the one buried beneath could influence events on the island. That would seem beyond his reach. Further, it is too simply too easy to point and shout 'Taint!' in such circumstances, something few can afford lest it breed reactionism. No, this is something else."

She stared up at the top of the tent, where beyond, she could feel Elune in the nighttime sky high above. Harry also did the same, smiling faintly as he stared at the stars. Harry had come to appreciate nights here far better than he ever had back in Astrology class, and the stories Tyrande had told him about Elune and Cenarius and the other spirits made it even better.

Finally, Tyrande turned her attention back to the chieftain, smiling somewhat lopsidedly. "Would you like help looking into this issue? From both myself and my companions? I think this might be more important than simply a land dispute or there being too many Drogbar for them to feed themselves. And, perhaps, if I show that you Tauren have allies, that alone will be enough."

Harry frowned at being volunteered, but after a second, he shrugged his shoulders. If he stayed here for any length of time, Harry would probably get involved in whatever this was anyway. *Best to bring it to the surface now and get it over with. Especially with Tyrande here to help.* While he had seen one Tauren warrior in action before, he had spent months fighting alongside Tyrande and knew exactly how deadly she was.

The High Chief frowned, but as other Tauren around him talked at him, Lars looked up towards the moon himself before looking back at them. "I believe that my people would value your aid in this. What do you propose?"

"Drogbar are still quite hierarchal correct? So they have a chieftain or a king?" Tyrande questioned. "Who perforce must be the cause of all of this trouble in some fashion?"

When Lars nodded, Tyrande turned to Harry. "Do you think we could sneak up on them?"

Harry smiled, stood up, and pulled out his invisibility cloak, throwing it on himself. Everyone there saw him do it, and then, no one could see Harry at all. Shouts of shock reverberated, and then Harry was back, pulling off his cloak, setting it to one side in plain sight, before looking over at Tyrande, who obligingly also stood up.

A second later, she was invisible in turn. When Harry canceled the spell, she had moved entirely around the central fire pit despite many of the Tauren up and looking around for her. Some even flailed with their hands in the air in front of them, only to find Tyrande sitting among several young women and men.

"I think that infiltration can indeed be our course forward," Harry said dryly. "Either for violence or discussion. That I will leave up to you."

Lars smiled, stood up, and reached across the fire pit to shake Harry's hand, although the human had to lean forward over the currently unused fire pit a ways to do so. "Let me tell you what we can of Drogbar and their territory, and then let us put together a real plan of action. If we can get to the King without having to fight through his domain, perhaps we can get some answers without fighting a war."

The next day, Harry and Tyrande joined a select group from the High Chief's war band. They would be heading to one of the tunnels the Drogbar had used at the beginning of the current trouble set between the Blood Totem and Highmountain tribes. It hadn't been used since the initial push the Drogbars had made into the valley.

At first, Lars wanted to take his entire band, but Harry counseled against it. "The more people I have to hide under my spells, the less effective they're going to be. For one thing, the more people I hide at one time, the more it takes out of me. For another, the more movement, the more quickly a spell breaks."

With Tyrande volunteering, the two of them showed what he meant by this. Walking, Tyrande could make her way entirely through the town without being seen or breaking the Disillusion charm placed on her. But when she started to run, the spell faded out in a few dozen steps.

"Hmm, it's actually good to see that your magic has limits. Unlimited power is something anyone sane should be happy about seeing in the hands of anyone, even themselves. Besides High Chief, you know that we'll have issues anyway invading the Drogbar caves," opined one of the older warriors there, reflexively tapping the top of his moose-like horns reflectively. "I doubt any spell will cover the sound of horns scrapping on rock overlong."

The other experienced warriors around them all grunted agreement, with a few of them even breaking out into chuckles. Tyrande and Harry looked at them in confusion, and Lars smiled, tapping his chest where Harry's head was and then where Tyrande's head was. "Let's just say that moving around underground is somewhat troublesome for beings of our size."

"I could shrink you," Harry suggested, his lips twitching. "I've done the same thing to Quetzal here a few times."

"I wouldn't recommend it," Quetzal grumbled. "It wasn't pleasant to relearn how to fight as a much younger version of myself."

"I don't know. Being small sounds like a fun adventure," Shy-rotam announced from where Tyrande was currently rubbing her belly, the tiger's voice interspersed with loud rumbling purrs. "It'd be interesting to fight one of those brave striped creatures on an even footing, or maybe even hunt a squirrel on its level."

All the Tauren there shivered, shaking their heads in unison, sending bangles and beads to clapping so loud it created a cacophony of sounds. "No, thank you, Harry," Lars said very firmly.

With Harry's point made, Lars cut down the size of his war band to be himself, three warriors, and a shaman. The choosing was fierce, but eventually, they were ready to go, and Lars led the way out of town, with his band of four Tauren fanning out around their new allies.

The Tauren headed slightly eastward from the direction that Harry and Tyrande had entered the town from. The forest around them became larger and deeper as they went. It was surprising to Harry that all of this was on top of a large mountain, but twice during their journey, Harry saw other steam vents explaining away how it was possible to have this abundant foliage and life. *Although how the heck some of the animals I've seen got up here is a different story. I don't see squirrels being able to get up that mountain, let alone tigers. Then again, maybe in the distant past, there was an easier way up here?*

After pausing for a light midday meal, the group carried on, but before long, they halted at a shout coming from one side of the route they were following. "There you are, oh High Chief! I understand that we are finally going to do something about the Drogbar problem?"

From out of the woods on all sides came a large band of Tauren, twenty strong or more. All of them were dressed in red and brown colors and showed the sigil of the Blood Totem tribe on their shoulders. Unlike the mix of spears and bows that the Rivermane tribe favored, these

Tauren wielded large double-headed axes or warhammers to a man. A few favored multiple smaller axes, evidently for both throwing and dual wielding. All in all, they seemed a much more warlike group than the Rivermane tribe, which fit with what Harry and his companions knew about the tribe in question.

What was even more evident was the scowl on their faces and the glares that they sent in Quetzal's direction. "And why are you traveling with such a beast as that? Has a shaman bound with it, is it an ancestor spirit of some kind given life once more?"

"Hello to you too, Tarn Fangsnapper," Lars answered mildly. He showed no concern or even apprehension as he stepped forward towards the Tauren who had spoken.

While Quetzal and Shy-rotam both narrowed their eyes at the so-named Tauren, Harry and Tyrande also studied him carefully. He was the largest Tauren they had yet seen, with much broader shoulders than the High Chief. In one hand, he held a large axe that looked so large it could probably kill someone Harry's size just by the weight of it alone. Scars were evident scattered across his body, the most startling being one across the face that looked as if it had opened nearly claimed his eye in some bygone battle, missing by a hairsbreadth and traveling along with his nose and then around the other end. It gave the Tauren a perpetually aggressive, snarling sort of appearance.

Lars exchanged a forearm clasp with the larger Tauren without any sign of fear or concern, even his tone continuing to reflect that. "As for the snake, his name's Quetzal. He came with his two companions, who have offered to aid us in this current crisis. Indeed, their aid is the basis of my current plan for dealing with the Drogbar at all."

"Companions?" Tarn's face had mellowed considerably as Lars stood in front of him as if accepting the fact that the High Chief wasn't intimidated and approving of it. But now, as he looked past Lars and spotted Tyrande and Harry, his scowl came back with a vengeance, and he broke off their handclasp to thrust a finger over Lars' shoulder to point at the two of them angrily. "What are outsiders doing here!?"

"Tarn, be known to Tyrande Whisperwind," Lars announced, not even needing to mention her title or anything else. Tyrande's name was enough. "With her is Harry Potter, a human."

At the name Whisperwind, Tarn's face seemed to fight itself between his automatic distrust of other races and respect for a warrior of her capabilities. "...I suppose if Tyrande's combat prowess hasn't been exaggerated over the centuries, that her presence in the warband is acceptable enough, although I still think that this problem is something we should be able to handle on our own! And as for her companion, what is a human?" Tarn barked a laugh. "And how could he be any help? He looks as if I could break him into by patting him on the back."

“You would find that a bit more difficult than you might think,” Harry interjected before Lars could answer or Tyrande could try to calm the waters. “Especially considering I’d have to let you touch me, let alone hurt me.”

Tarn stomped over, Lars allowing the other Tauren to pass them without comment, watching from the sidelines now as Tarn loomed over Harry. “And you think you could stop me, little creature? You barely come up to my chest, and your thighs barely look larger than my daughter’s forearms! Are all your people so feeble?”

“We might be weaker physically than you Tauren, but I think we make up for it in speed. The council is still out on whether or not we have equal amounts of brain. Before this, I would’ve said so, but your example is making me question that assumption,” Harry drawled, trying to give his words the same twist Snape always did when he insulted Harry or the other Gryffindors.

Tyrande stepped forward, but Lars stopped her with a gentle shake of his head, gesturing to Quetzal to stay out of the confrontation as well. Having another outsider step in would only exacerbate issues. Understanding what Lars meant without needing to be told, Tyrande sighed, then held up her hands and moved back a pace, pushing Shy-rotam behind her, very visibly removing the two of them from the current confrontation. Whatever happened, she was not involved.

“You dare insult me!” Tarn bellowed, raising his battleaxe.

Whether or not he actually would have attacked Harry was a question since none of his fellows seemed at all concerned, nor did Lars and his own people. But Harry wasn’t about to let Tarn even swing his axe. He waved a hand, magic flashing out.

To one side, Tyrande saw the magic hit the Blood Totem chieftain’s weapon and had to roll her eyes, her ears flicking down then back up in a sign of resigned amusement.

“Among my people, giving someone a bouquet of flowers is part of the courting ritual. But I got to tell you, Tarn, you’re not my type.”

Tarn frowned, feeling his weapon suddenly weigh far less than it should. Turning, he looked up at his battleaxe, only to find that it had been transfigured into a bouquet of paper flowers held together by a thin wooden vase, the only thing about the original weapon that hadn’t changed. “What, how!?” His eyes turned red as he turned back to Harry, raising his free fist as he put two and two together. “How dare you use magic on me!”

The rest of his war band also growled, hefting their weapons and moving forward. In actuality, the Tauren didn’t have much problem with magic because none alive could remember the Kaldorei who had fought for the Demons in the War of the Ancients. Most of the magic they knew of was the Nature and Element Magic their shamans could call upon. While they hadn’t seen anyone using magic to change one thing into another before, it normally

would simply be interesting to them. But using magic on someone else outside of a life or death situation was incredibly rude. Indeed, it was seen as grounds for a duel, especially if used on a chieftain without his approval.

But Quetzal moved out of the pack of Rivermane Tauren, who also hefted their weapons. The snake reared up, staring down at them, his tongue flicking out as the spines on his back stood straight in preparation for launching. "I think you should reconsider that decision," the giant snake hissed while Shy-rotam also bounded forward, crouching down in preparation of leaping.

Since Harry had once again renewed the translation spell on both animals earlier that morning, all of the Tauren around him understood the Needlespine Shimmerback's words even if they didn't speak the common Kaldorei tongue, and the Blood Totem clan members all paused, shaken out of their anger at Harry's use of magic on their Chieftain by the revelation that the animal could speak intelligently. Shamans could speak with some animals and even understand their speech but allowing others to do so was beyond them. And most animals, bar the giant Eagles that the Skyhorn clan bonded with certainly didn't sound as intelligent as the giant snake.

Harry dodged the blow from Tarn easily, then leaped over a kick, rolling along on the ground for a moment. Tarn's speed had surprised him from someone so big, but now he twisted around, his fingers flashing out towards the large Tauren. Instantly the man doubled over in laughter, holding his stomach as he began to bellow and dancing in place as he was being tickled. "Haha, What, hahaha how, hehe, these spells, I, hahaha, I have never heard of the like!"

"Let's just say that I don't come from around here. Now, are we doing posturing, or should I start using lethal spells?"

Tarn looked around, trying to concentrate through his current peroxisomes of laughter, but couldn't find the creature he had challenged. "Where, haha, where are you!?"

"Why would I tell you that? You just tried to attack me, remember?" Harry's voice came out of nowhere. The wizard had taken the opportunity to pull his invisibility cloak around him.

"Ha, haha, have you no honor! Stand and, haha, fight like a..."

"I'm not a Tauren. Why would I fight like one?" Harry's questioned, his tone mildly incredulous.

Tarn surprised him a second later as he threw the bouquet of paper flowers in that direction. But Harry had used another spell to send his voice to a location two yards to his side, so the flowers didn't hit him and thus give his position away.

"I think that's enough, Harry. Cancel the spell on Tarn. Although, you might want to stay hidden for a bit." Lars finally spoke up, a little too late, and Tyrande's opinion. But he knew his people best, and she subtly pushed her moon glaive back into its holster on her back.

With an unseen shrug, Harry did so, noting absently that both animals were already looking in his direction. *Right, scent. I need to ask whether or not the Drogbar have a heightened sense of smell before we get there.*

As Tarn recovered, Lars helped the larger Tauren to his feet. "I let that go longer than I normally would allow someone to challenge someone given guest rights, Tarn Fangsnapper, because I wanted you to see what Harry brings to the fire pit."

Tarn grunted but heard the word of warning in Lars's tone and crossed his arms over his chest, bowing from the waist very slightly towards the High Chief. "Your pardon, High Chief, I didn't realize that you gave these outsiders guest rights. I don't agree that they should be part of solving this issue with the Drogbar. It makes us seem weak. But I'll at least listen to your reasoning."

"We don't want a war. A war between the Drogbar and us would be inconclusive at best. We could invade portions of their tunnels, but we could never conquer them. But we both know that trying to solve this diplomatically has failed. So that leaves subterfuge. Harry, as you just saw, brings quite a lot of skills that will help us in such a mission," Lars explained, moving over to pick up the bouquet of flowers.

With a true wizard's sense of timing, Harry hit the flowers with a *Finite Incantatum*, reverting them back to their original form. Lars nearly lost his grip on the weapon but didn't, and then held it out shaft-first towards Tarn. "Do you think you will need another example, or can we move on?"

Taking his battleaxe back, Tarn looked at it suspiciously, hefting it this way and that and then moving over to a nearby downed tree limb, hacking through it with a single blow. He then inspected the edge of his weapon, nodding in approval. "Just as sharp as it was before it became flowers. I will not forget that affront, but this Harry Potter has proven that he will be useful High Chief."

"That's good to hear," Harry said mildly, coming out from behind his cloak next to Tyrande, who, much to his annoyance, didn't flinch. Instead, she simply cocked an ear in his direction, not turning away from where she was still watching the two Tauren leaders, her body language suggesting that she was amused by his antics but not surprised.

Tarn sent him a glare but turned back to Lars as he explained the plan. After a moment, Tarn nodded firm agreement. "I still don't like relying on an outsider, but his spells should allow us to infiltrate the Drogbar caves. Cutting the head of the beast off rather than becoming deadlocked in a war that would not go anywhere sounds like a good idea to me."

Although the words didn't sound all that approving, he did clap Lars on the shoulder, an admission that he had been in the wrong. That act made Harry think slightly better of the bellicose Blood Totem chieftain, but he doubted the two of them would ever get along.

In contrast, when the next group joined them around evening, they were led by someone Harry already knew and was happy to see.

"Well now, when I was told a giant snake was traveling with the High Chieftain and the Blood Totem war tribe, I didn't quite make the connection. After all, the last time I saw you and your companion Harry Potter, he was not nearly that large. But it is good to meet you once more." Tyre Fleetforest smiled at Harry as he clasped forearms with the human. "It's even better to see that you are alive at all, considering the last time I saw you, you were heading off to attack a force of satyrs."

The other members of the Highmountain war tribe with Tyre all smiled in welcome as well. It was clear that he had told them how Harry had helped free Tyre from the satyrs several years ago.

"I didn't know you were a chieftain when we met, Tyre," Harry answered, cocking his head to one side.

"I wasn't at the time, but my tribe elected me to the position after our old chief died soon after my return," Tyre answered, shaking his head with a sigh.

"What is this?" Tarn asked, looking between Tyre and Harry. "You have fought satyrs as well, human?"

"Yes," Harry said with a shrug. "I met Tyre when I rescued him and a group of Furbolgs from a warband of satyrs which had attacked the village he was staying in. Together we wiped out the warband and freed the other captives."

Tyre barked a laugh. "Ha! Harry is too modest. He did most of the work at the time, as I was poisoned by some fell satyr concoction that stopped me from using my shaman powers."

"If you had told me of your past accomplishments, I might not have challenged you," Tarn grumbled, still smarting from his humiliation earlier that day. Left unsaid was that he probably would still have challenged Harry, such was the antipathy the Blood Totem tribe had for outsiders.

Harry seems to sense that and replied mildly, "I'm not one to toot my own horn like that."

"What does tooting a horn have to do with anything?" Lars asked quizzically, while the others all around Harry also looked confused save for Tyrande, who chuckled quietly at the use of what she knew was another colloquialism.

Harry slapped a palm to his forehead. "Nevermind. It's just a saying among my people for bragging about one's own accomplishments. I just have never seen the point to it." *Except when I want to intimidate someone*, He amended mentally. *And even then, just my name and lightning bolt scar were normally enough.*

"That too does you credit in my eyes," Lars responded, with Tyre nodding in agreement while Tarn still looked annoyed with Harry. Indeed, he looked annoyed at Harry and Tyrande, but such was Tyrande's position and reputation that he couldn't quite challenge her being there. The two animals barely registered in his mind. "Tales around the campfire are fun and can help to educate the young but bragging about your own accomplishments is foolish."

"Well said," Tyrande murmured, and she and Harry exchanged a glance, the human bowing his head toward her in response. After all, Tyrande's experiences made Harry's pale in comparison.

Lars explained the plan to Tyre, who nodded instant agreement. Anything that kept the bloodshed to a minimum was good in his eyes, just like it was to Lars and Tarn, despite the latter's belligerence. "Besides, the Drogbar are monolithic and culture. Their King has far more power over their society and people than any Chieftain of the Tauren has ever had, Even Huhn himself. Indeed, in a way, the Drogbar are almost animalistic like that: the alpha male being the king and controlling everything his pack does."

The other two Tauren leaders frowned at that, as did Tyrande. "It is that pronounced? I didn't realize it was that bad."

"It is simply their way. The Drogbar are simple folk, very set in their ways. They do not grow as we do, learn or expand as we do. Do not attempt to try to place our values and beliefs on them," Tyre warned.

"Bah, who cares about that? All I'm hearing is that the High Chief's plan to kill the Drogbar King will work even better than he expected. That is all I need to know." Tarn grunted.

Lars was about to remonstrate with him that violence was only going to be the last recourse, that they were going to sneak in and try to talk to the King first face-to-face, but he decided against it. *Tarn is in a bad enough mood as it is. Better to spring that on him when it becomes time, I think.*

After a few moments, Lars had picked out a group that would go with them. He only chose three others, but besides Tyre himself, two of his fellows were also shamans, giving them a total of four. That seemed to assuage even Tarn, who had offered ten of his own warriors to the effort, only to have them be pared down to an equal number to the Rivermane tribe without a single Shaman among them.

This gave the war band fourteen warriors, including the three Chieftains and four shamans. Harry, Tyrande, and the two animals added four more. This was still a bit larger than

Harry thought was a good idea, but he didn't object, knowing the three clans wanted to be represented equally. Indeed, it was only the fact that the Skyhorn tribe was on the opposite side of the valley from the tunnel Lars had decided was their best bet that there weren't still more of the Tauren.

They stayed with the rest of the Highmountain warband that night, setting out early the next day, traveling at what would have been a breakneck pace for a human force, pushing Harry and Quetzal hard. Yet, it seemed the normal speed for the Tauren, who raced along on their hooves as fast as reindeer or moose could move.

Soon, they started to see signs of conflict in the trees and on the ground around them and signs of significant animal movement in the area. When Harry questioned this, one of the shamans running next to them responded. They'd been having a somewhat disjointed conversation about Harry's reasons for being there and the Nature Magic that the Shaman could sense in him, as well as if Harry had a source for his own magic power. Which he technically did, but not in the way the Tauren was concerned about, allaying their fears as he had done when he and Tyrande had first reached the High Chieftain's town.

"This area was home to several herds of reindeer. They were not exactly domesticated, but members of the Rivermane tribe routinely came by to harvest their fur and cull the herds. The Drogbar would come either to take a few of them, meat is not easy to come by in their caves, or trade with the Rivermane tribe. But when these hostilities began, the herds in this area were among the first casualties, with a few survivors fleeing."

"The same can be said for other beasts within striking range of one of the Drogbar's tunnels," another shaman interjected. "Meat is a staple of their diet, but they simply started to kill for the pleasure of it. I know that several other herds of animals and even some predators have been killed by the Drogbar since this began. They don't just raid farms or settlements."

Harry frowned at that, seeing a connection to how the Frost Maul Giants had acted, which was made worse when one of the other warriors muttered, "that's as maybe, but I know that they also take a lot of their kills away. I didn't think the Drogbar population was that large. What are they doing with all the meat they take away? They surely can't preserve it for overlong, can they?"

"Perhaps. The Drogbar could transport ice relatively easily into their caves, after all," the first Shaman spoke again.

Harry listened attentively and yet found himself glancing at one of the other shamans, one of the ones who hadn't spoken yet. On the surface, there was quite a bit about him to grab Harry's attention.

He was one of the few Tauren that didn't come in shades of brown and red that Harry had seen. Instead, his hide was a darker color, almost a black hue, while his hair was pure black. His horns two were large and worthy of consideration, being almost as large as those on the

Chieftain or some of the oldest members of their war party. Yet, the Shaman in question didn't look all that old to Harry's eyes.

Yet, that was simply physical. For some reason, Harry felt as if there was something... Off about the Shaman. Different. It was as if his Nature Magic was telling him that something here was not what it seemed. This was exacerbated by the fact the Shaman in question was trying to keep at least three of his fellows between himself and Harry at all times and seemed to flinch whenever he felt Harry's gaze on him. It was quite odd.

Still, Harry decided not to inquire further. Instead, he questioned the others about fighting the Drogbar and why Lars said they might have trouble fighting in the tunnels anyway. Many of the Tauren chuckled, a sound mixing amusement with grimness in equal measure.

Surprisingly, it was one of the warriors from the Blood Totem tribe who answered him. His tone was gruff, and he didn't look very approving as he looked at Harry and over at Tyrande, yet he still answered. "The Drogbar, as you have seen, are shorter than my people. Whenever we have gone to them on diplomatic missions before, we have come upon areas that take advantage of that. The tunnels narrow so much that even Drogbar have trouble getting past while the roof comes down to just above their head height. It makes us almost impossible for us to fight our way into the tunnels beyond a certain point."

"Then why did Lars not agree to my idea about shrinking you all?" Harry asked disingenuously, wanting to both understand why and needle the Blood Totem tribe further. Their isolationist views reminded him a little too much of the prevailing thoughts of the Wizarding World, although he had thankfully not heard anything about their thinking that they were superior or wanted to wipe out other Tauren for having impure blood.

All of the Tauren within hearing range stared at him in horror, even the one that Harry had been surreptitiously gazing at before overcoming his aversion to Harry to stare at him in shock. "That would be horrifying! Having magic used on us in such a way by someone outside our own clans would be an indignity no warrior would allow. It was somewhat allowable during your battle with Tarn, but trust an unknown magic-user of another race to perform such on us? That would not be something any of us would endure save perhaps in the heat of battle," the Blood totem warrior said, his voice conveying his shock at the very idea.

Tyre was a bit more honest, chuckling dryly. "There's more than simple distrust of your magic working here, Harry. Height is **important** among Tauren. Our height is a sign of our status to our fellows. It is a social convention, much like our horns, and the marks we bare to show we have passed the Rites of the Earthmother and continue to do so to prove our status."

"More importantly, much of our combat style relies on us having a greater reach and size than our opponents. If we went into a combat situation so shrunk, it might leave us open to being overwhelmed in a way we would not normally be," another warrior added, looking around at his fellows, wincing. "But it might be a good idea to get through the chokepoints."

There was a rumble of reluctant agreement at that, although most of them still looked very wary at the idea, and the conversation turned to other matters. Specifically, Harry was surprised to learn that the Drogbar also had some magic of their own. They had an extreme affinity with stone and earth magic and could take power from the earth and stone much like the Kaldorei druids and Tauren shaman could from nature, if in a very different manner from either of those equally disparate groups.

“They do not seem to innovate, and from what I understand, Drogbar shaman won’t have as vast a repertoire of different spells as you do, Harry. But what spells they do have are powerful and will be more dangerous underground,” Tyre said.

“Stone spikes, bringing the roof down, creating chasms on the floor, creating a Golem, maybe?” Harry asked, counting spells off in his finger.

“All but that last one I have heard of. But what is a Golem?” Lars asked from where he was leading the group forward.

“A stone monster that I can create and command during the battle. It could be a force multiplier if we need it.”

“Wait, you mean you can summon an Earth Elemental?” one of the Highmountain Shamans asked in interest. “That’s fascinating. How intelligent are the elementals you summon? I can summon a small one, but the stone around here is so saturated with magic it would stay around forever if I but allowed it.”

“Er, not intelligent at all. My golems are just dumb rock given form and commanded by me. What is an Earth Elemental? You make it sound as if it is something alive.”

As one, the shamans all turned to the oldest member of their brotherhood there, a Riverman tribesman who had come with Lars. He smiled and stepped over to Harry, running beside him. “I think, Harry, we need to talk a bit more about this. You see, when we speak about Elementals, we speak of actual element-based spirits. Elementals live on different planes of existence, and...”

The following conversation was utterly fascinating, and the Shaman was somewhat thankful to realize that Harry’s golems were not, in fact, elemental spirits, while also being pleased to discover Harry was a good listener. As the conversation shifted to the Elemental Spirits themselves, Tyrande began to add her own knowledge of the Elemental plains. She knew in particular about their Lords, having learned of them from Alexstrasza herself in ancient times, and knowing that they had served, some willingly, some not, the Old Gods. She hadn’t seen Harry use his golem spell before and asked him why at one point.

“Eh, it’s not something I do normally, as back home, large-scale constructs like that were often more trouble than they were worth. My enemies would either destroy them easily, or

their creation would give my presence away,” Harry admitted, somewhat dumbing down the reasoning behind his decision to not use golems often.

The fact was, golems were destructive but easy to destroy in turn by most spells, although they had their uses when fighting in an area that you didn’t mind laying waste to. And to be blunt about it, Harry hadn’t really experimented with them all that often before coming to this world. Despite that and his bemusement on there being actual elemental spirits, Harry was certain now that attaining a new outlook on his chimeric body wasn’t the only thing he would be learning from the Tauren.

At around midafternoon, the warband’s scouts crested a rise and found themselves looking down into a small dell in the valley floor, where an entrance to a cave could be seen among sparse trees. Soon Harry and the other leaders were all hiding, laid out among a few bushes as they stared down into the dell.

Lars scowled, shaking his head very slightly so his horns didn’t rustle the surrounding foliage too much. “That is the Drogbar tunnel that I was leading us towards. It was one of the first they used to attack from, but they haven’t done so since. I’d hoped it would be abandoned, but...”

The reason for their caution was a force of four Drogbar moving around a small fireplace right in front of the cave. Given how the Drogbar had been able to ambush him and Tyrande on their way up the mountain, Harry knew that meant there were probably at least two, maybe three times that number hidden nearby.

“Spread out. We’ll attack the Drogbar from every direction,” Tarn growled out, taking command from Lars, who looked at him sharply. That was a challenge to his leadership that he could not allow, and he hissed out a negative, glaring at the Blood Totem Chieftain.

After a moment, the other Tauren backed down but gestured down into the dell, his tone dripping sarcasm. “How then would you attack, High Chief?”

“I don’t think we should attack at all.” Tyrande spoke up. Everyone turned to her in some confusion, and she looked over at Harry. “Do you think you could create a sleep spell that would take out those guards?”

Harry frowned speculatively. “I could, and I could even get close to cast it without them noticing. But I don’t think I could find all of the Drogbar in hiding. I have a spell that could reveal them if they were members of my race, but the Human Revealing spell doesn’t work on other intelligent races. And unfortunately, it would only take one of them to sound the alarm, and then we would be fighting our way through the tunnels, which is not what we want to do,” he ended, deliberately looking over to Tarn, who huffed angrily. “I could maybe make an illusion and lead them off after something they want to chase...”

"I suggest we do something different," Quetzal said, smirking slightly from where he had slithered up unheard behind them, watching the Tauren twitch. Harry had shrunk him to half his normal size an hour ago when the Tauren told Harry they were getting close to their target. "You all are overthinking this."

"Alright, Scaly, what's your plan?" Harry asked.

"If we cannot get past them, and if you cannot put them all to sleep, then we must scare them away. Scare the Drogbar back into their tunnels and then follow after. And I am quite frightening, you know. Since none who have seen me have survived to speak about my connection to the pink-skinned one, they will think I am just a dangerous beast who has moved into the area."

"That could work," Harry agreed with a nod while the Tauren all frowned a bit but said nothing. "Which direction should we scare them towards?"

Lars pointed to the north of where the sides of the dell were least steep. "If you attack from behind where the cave is, you can scare them away from it down that direction. We'll set up an ambush there and wipe them out. We don't want any of their war band to just start wandering around behind us, after all."

Tyrande wasn't so certain about that, but again, this wasn't her land, and she was more than willing to let Lars take the lead on this. He and Tarn conferred for a few moments while Tyre led the other shamans out and around, followed quickly by the others, who gave Harry an approving glance, before following after their leaders, leaving Harry and Quetzal where they were.

"So, how big do you want to be, and do you want to rely just on your own chameleon scales, or what?"

"Since I am rather insulted already that the Tauren believe I will leave any of these creatures alive to flee, simply return me to my present size, and then hit me with one of your spells to help get me close. After that, I will do the rest," Quetzal declared proudly.

Harry did so, and Quetzal moved to attack the Drogbar. Once in position, he covered the distance as fast as the Disillusion spell on him would allow his own chameleon scales not as much help on the move.

The first the Drogbar knew of their peril was when Quetzal reared up, covering the last few feet between him and the first Drogbar within seconds. A quick bite had one of the creatures flailing in his mouth, where he was quickly swallowed. Then Quetzal was rearing up, hissing as he stared down at the other Drogbar, his long tongue flickering out.

The three surviving Drogbar visible outside the cave screamed in fright. Two Drogbar rushed inside, the other one turning away after hurling his spear up at Quetzal.

The spear did nothing to Quetzal's thick hide, and that Drogbar died, Quetzal's teeth sinking into its back like twin swords, picking him up and shaking him from side to side, to release him from the fangs, the paralytic in Quetzal's bite overkill to the size of his fangs. At the same time, several dozen Drogbar appeared from out of hiding places all around the cave, proving Harry right in his supposition they would be there, although this time they hadn't just used fake rocks. Instead, the Drogbar had created little foxholes for themselves with bushes pulled over the top, hiding in them like only the best human snipers would've been able to do.

The Drogbar hurled Spears up towards Quetzal, but then one of them knelt to touch the ground with both hands. Harry watched in interest from his hiding place as spikes began to appear along the ground heading towards Quetzal. But Quetzal simply smashed them aside, coiling for a moment, then springing forward, his whole body extended towards the Shaman.

The Shaman was a little too quick for Quetzal to snack on but was still headbutted backward, rolling like a spiky ball around along the ground.

This left the other Drogbar to grab up spare spears and clubs. With these, the Drogbar began to strike at Quetzal from several sides, but he just thrashed, tossing them this way and that, crushing one underneath his coils and then eating a second. Watching this, Harry was amused in a somewhat morbid way. *I wonder how much Quetzal's volunteering to do something for once had to do with his desire to try what Drogbar tasted like.*

If that was so, and Quetzal would never admit it, he was now regretting his decision. *Ugh, they taste okay, but those spikes are annoying my stomach something fierce.*

Regardless of Quetzal's stomach problems, it only took a few strikes each for the Drogbar to realize that they couldn't really harm Quetzal. As that realization went through them, the Drogbar began to flee one by one. Unfortunately, they fled in every direction while the Shaman attempted to cast another spell towards Quetzal.

Busy smashing a Drogbar with his tail Quetzal was hit by the Shaman's spell this time and hissed in fury as a stone spike took them in the center of his body mass, hurling him backward and to the side. Yet the spikes couldn't penetrate his scales, and he twisted around and hissed balefully at the Shaman before slithering forward once more.

Harry killed two of the Drogbar as they came racing up the slight incline of the dale. Waiting until they were out of sight from further below in the dell, Harry hit each with a cutting spell to the neck. They fell, but looking around from under his cloak, Harry hoped that the Tauren were in a position to do the same.

Several more Drogbar came out of the tunnel behind where Quetzal was chasing after the Shaman. But they took one look at the giant snake, then shook their heads and fled, heading back inside the cave as fast as their legs could carry them.

Now that could be good or bad, Harry thought, before racing down as quickly as he could towards the cave.

A few hundred yards into the tunnel, Harry caught up with the Drogbar as they retreated deeper. They met up with a few others, bringing their total numbers to almost the same as the group Quetzal had dealt with. This made Harry wonder if maybe their timing had just been super bad and this group was coming out to relieve their fellows.

Or does every tunnel have a reserve force like this? Harry wondered, remembering the ambush they had sprung on the Drogbar attacking young Pahr Fangstone.

Regardless, none of the Drogbar looked to have any interest in rushing outside to fight Quetzal. In Harry's opinion, this was uncommonly wise of them, and he followed on their heels as they retreated further into the tunnel.

The larger meeting area quickly gave way to a smaller tunnel, which choked off to the point where the Drogbar could only go in single file. The top of the tunnel almost scrapped their heads. *No wonder the Tauren had trouble fighting down here.* A Tauren would be forced to go on hands and knees, which would leave them horribly open to attack.

Harry had no such trouble walking behind the Drogbar as they entered. They continued on while the tunnel began to descend slightly. In this manner, they passed two more chokepoints before they reached a bend in the tunnel, at the end of which the tunnel connected to two others. There Harry paused, watching the direction they went, before deciding that the Drogbar didn't see Quetzal as a danger to their tunnels and seemed content to let him take control of the area around the entrance. *So that way will be the way to their main area.*

With that, he turned away, heading back outside, looking angrily at Quetzal and volubly denouncing Harry as a coward. "He fled! He ran away rather than take part in our foray into the tunnels. Are you certain that this one hadn't done all of his fighting for him, Tyre?" Tarn growled, pointing to Quetzal.

Pulling off his invisibility cloak, Harry called out, "Does that mean you wouldn't like to know what's exactly waiting for you in that tunnel? I could leave it as a surprise."

All of them turned to look at him, and he smiled. "I thought turning you lot invisible was the point of my being here. Is it any surprise that I would use that ability to scout ahead?"

"The Tauren are just bothered by the fact that Quetzal did his own thing and didn't let much fighting left for them, Harry," Tyrande replied, smiling faintly. "For my part, I thank you for scouting ahead of us. Did you run into any trouble?"

"There are a few chokepoints, but the Drogbar had a reaction force inside the tunnel. Heh, they took one look at Quetzal and decided to call it a day, so the tunnel is actually unguarded thanks to my friend."

“Just as I planned,” Quetzal hissed. “My appearance terrorized them into fleeing, which allows us a much easier way forward.”

“True, but you and the Tauren will all need to be shrunk, quite a bit in your case,” Harry warned. “You were right about those chokepoints.”

Tarn grumbled, but the other Tauren all looked pleased enough with Harry’s forward-thinking, although apprehensive about the magic he would have to use on them. A moment later, the shamans began to cast spells to mask everyone’s scents, making them smell like dirt and stone instead of living creatures, a useful spell to have among a race that preferred to hunt for most of their food. Another set of spells meant that anyone who heard anything of their passage would just hear natural noises, an equally nifty little spell Harry was eager to see if he could learn.

Harry went to work when they were done, casting spells on them all as they held hands. That necessity left all of the Tauren looked a little bemused by. But when Harry explained why, they all understood.

The last thing to be done was Harry shrinking Quetzal down to a manageable size within the tunnels. Then they were entering the tunnel, with Harry and Tyrande in the lead. That caused even further grumbling, but that grumbling subsided instantly as they reached the first chokepoint. Many of the Blood Totem tribesmen looked a little uneasy, muttering about whether or not that size continued on. Luckily for them, it didn’t, and Harry canceled the shrinking spells once they reached the intersection.

Behind them, they left two of the shamans by the doorway. Three of the other warriors waited with them to guard the tunnel keeping an eye on either direction of the intersection. This way, the way out would be kept clear if the infiltration team had to retreat abruptly. Which they probably would, unless Lars’ hope of talking the Drogbar King down worked.

Following the same direction that Harry had seen the Drogbar go, the party traveled in silence for some time. The tunnel didn’t break off again, instead heading further down in intervals, passing through what was obviously small natural caves that had been connected by the Drogbar in some long-ago time. Some of these caves were being used by other drogbar, causing the party to slow as they passed through mushroom and fungi farms, the mushrooms as tall as Tyrande.

These small caves did not prepare Harry for the sight that greeted them when they reached their actual destination. Harry had built up the idea that the Drogbar lived in small caves, like the ones that had been passing through, not really doing much to change them up, almost living like animals more than thinking beings.

But this, what had to be the central town, or perhaps even city, disabused him of that notion. The cavern was large, the equivalent of several football stadiums in size. Along the edge of it were several series of interconnected houses built out of the side of the cave, moving

up and down the walls in intervals, connected by walkways and stairs. In the center, further houses dotted the area larger and seemingly more prominent, perhaps for public venues or artisans, Harry wasn't certain.

Several hundred, or perhaps more than a few thousand, Drogbar moved around the cavern. With them were tiny creatures of various shapes and sizes which Tyre whispered were examples of Earth Elementals. Some of them were obviously work beasts: a few of them were working what looked like a water wheel pulling up water from some source beneath the cavern. Others pulled carts. But many were anything but, simply following around their masters, many of whom were young-looking Drogbar, as if they were pets.

But what most fascinated Harry was that above them, the stalactites of the cavern had been worked to a mirror shine, and lamps had been hung in a long spidery network of golden chains. In each lamp was set a massive candle, Harry couldn't estimate their size, but he felt they would be at least as large as his leg, maybe even more.

This created an atmosphere below that was, while dimmer than daylight would be, actually quite nice. It reminded Harry of being in the Great Hall in Hogwarts when the lights were turned low for dinner.

But the most impressive structure in the large cavern was certainly the one set at one end of the cavern's ovoid-shaped interior. For there, what had to be the equivalent of an underground castle rose. Built into the cavern wall like the majority of the Drogbar dwellings, it also came forward in the form of a series of staircases designed for Drogbar legs, shorter and longer than that of a human or night elves would prefer. To either side of the staircases were a series of statues of ancient Drogbar, although Harry had difficulty picking out differences between them save for the crowns they all wore. The castle's front was made into a series of frescoes surrounding a few holes in the stone, signifying windows looking out over the city.

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say that is our target?" Harry quipped in a low tone, causing Tyrande nearby to shake her head and poked him hard in the shoulder, indicating that perhaps he should be quiet.

Without any words being exchanged, the band of Tauren warriors began to break up into groups of three. There were just too many Drogbar moving around the city for them to get through to the castle without bumping into if the Tauren tried to get across in one group. They each moved across the cavern one group at a time, taking a different route each time.

Everyone had a few close calls thanks to how many Drogbar were around the cavern, with one of the Highmountain clan members having the worst experience as he was nearly hit by a cart backing out of one of the buildings in the center of the cavern. Luckily, Harry was nearby and renewed the Disillusion charm on him a second after it went out due to his fast movement.

Yet eventually, they were all together once more in front of the castle, with Tarn and the other Blood Totem warriors looking exasperated at the experience. Sneaking around like this was not for them. Luckily, it seemed as if the castle wasn't expecting visitors, and this area of the cavern was much quieter due to that.

After they had all taken a few seconds to recover, Lars led the way inside, trusting to Harry's spell work. Harry turned back to glance at Quetzal. "Stay here, my friend, and guard our back."

Grumbling, Quetzal agreed, moving into the shadow of one of the statues. There he lay, his chameleon scales letting him blend into the background even without Harry's spells so long as he didn't move.

Inside, the castle wasn't quite as impressive as the exterior. The stairwell abutted into a hallway that went on deeper into the solid rock of the mountain, but the rest of the castle wasn't as large as you would have thought from the front. There were only three rooms to a side and one stairwell leading up to more above them before the hallway ended at the open doors leading into the throne room.

That throne room was smaller than the main hallway in Hogwarts, which was the only castle Harry had to compare this to. And beyond a few columns set against the two walls to either side, there also didn't seem to be much in the way of decoration. Except, that is, a long carpet set into the center of the room, his colors red, gold and bronze, and what looked like metal sconces holding more giant candles, although these were free-standing, not inside crystal.

Oh, and there was also a throne at the far end, on a dais. The throne was made of wood for some reason instead of stone, but even from the doorway into the hall, Harry could see it wasn't exactly a master-crafted item.

On top of that throne sat a Drogbar. He was a little taller, a little broader in the shoulders, but his colors were much more striking. Instead of the normal gray tone to his skin, his skin looked a little black in places, like freckles on a Drogbar and his spikes were entirely black. A large club made of a single piece of stone rested to one side with bits carved out at the top to create spikes. On one wrist, the Drogbar king wore a few bracelets, and his armor covered his potbelly stomach and chest, unlike most of the armor Harry had seen previously on Drogbar, which only protected their stomach. And unlike those Drogbar, the spikes of stone-like protrusions that came out of his arms, back and legs were also tipped with some kind of dark metal.

Now they were here, Harry moved to one side of the door, intending not to participate in the discussions, making certain his hood was up. If it came to trouble, he wanted to be

invisible. Any hope of this being a peaceful meeting (if such a thing were possible, frankly, Harry was on Tarn's side on that score) would be left to Tyrande and Lars.

But as Tyrande and Lars stepped forward to make the trek down the carpet, things began to go wrong.

"And who is this, who has wandered into my halls covered with magic? Magic to obscure the minds of simple creatures like these Drogbar. Has someone discovered me? They must have! But I, in turn, have discovered you." An instant later, a blast of magic, raw power like Harry had not seen yet in this world, flew out, acting like a Finite Incantatum spell on the Disillusion charm Harry had cast on the Tauren and Tyrande.

Harry himself had been using his invisibility cloak and remained unseen for a moment. But he, like the others, was blasted off of his feet by the same roll of magic.

Tyrande rolled the attack, flipping in midair, her feet smacking into the wall by the door, pushing herself off and into a forward roll. The Tauren, like Harry, couldn't do the same and slammed back into the walls or down the hall where they now struggled to rise, grabbing at weapons.

Those in the hallway pushed themselves to their feet, as outside, the few Drogbar guards they had passed to enter the palace now became aware of them. As the Tauren pushed to their feet, the Drogbar charged down the hall, wielding their clubs hurling themselves forward. But unlike in the outer tunnels of the Drogbar nation, these tunnels were wide enough for two Tauren to stand shoulder to shoulder, and pair of blood totem warriors who had been flung out into the hallway did so now, blocking the six Drogbar moving towards them.

They were helped in this action by Quetzal. Roused by the shouts and the sight of the Drogbar racing into the castle, he reared up from his hiding place and attacked the guards from behind, halting half of them before they could even engage the Tauren.

Behind them, one of the archers from the Rivermane clan also pulled his weapon taught, the bow having miraculously survived his tumble. Now he shot into the charging Drogbar, downing one with a shoulder wound and another with an arrow to the neck.

Behind those three warriors, their fellows slowly pushed themselves upright as the Drogbar who had risen from the throne looked directly at Tyrande and smiled. "Now, this is a prize! Whisperwind, the hated leader of the night elves, not as hated by my Lord as the Stormrage but still a prize. Not as great an affront, as great a trophy as the one I am here to seek, but still great!"

"What are you talking about?" Tyrande asked, her moon glaive in her hand, as she crouched down low, grimacing internally. *And why do I think this is no normal Drogbar king?*

The King's eyes glowed, and then he looked over at Lars, his eyes widening in recognition. "And you have even brought me hostages!" Not just the High Chief, but two who

wear the marks of clan chieftains! Magnificent. I will have the one I am here for, and you! With both, I will be raised greatly in my Lord Deathwing's eyes when he awakes, greater even than Nefarian and Onyxia!"

At the name Deathwing, Tyrande's blood ran cold, and she remembered with a certain amount of horror that the Drogbar had served Deathwing thousands upon thousands of years ago when he was the Aspect of Earth. And then again, only unwillingly, when he had become Deathwing, betraying all of the other aspects as he unwittingly came under the influence of the Old Gods, becoming a self-styled Aspect of Death instead.

But this is not Deathwing, praise the goddess! With that thought, Tyrande barred her teeth, her moon glaive flickering around her from one hand to another as she glared at the transformed Black Flight member in front of her, unwilling to try and gain distance to use her bow in so small an area. "You will find, dragon, that my head is not so easy to take!"

At the word dragon, the stasis that seemed to have fallen over the Tauren at the creature's words broke, and they scattered all around the hall readying themselves to charge in. But the creature on the dais ignored them, laughing even as he batted aside a spell coming at him out of nowhere. "Bah, a magic-user hahaha, that will at least make this amusing. My name is Badrinath, remember it, Tyrande! It is the name of your killer. It is the name of the black dragon who will hail the return of our Lord with your carcass!"

With that, another blast of magic rose to engulf several more spells Harry had sent the creature's way, but this time Harry had enough warning to create a Protego in front of him and the nearest Tauren, protecting them. Then the creature began to change shape, growing, his stone-like skin changing into scales as he fell to all fours, the metal tips on the ends of his rocklike protrusion expanding before being shoot off with the tips of the spikes with a clang. One of them hit a Tauren, a warrior from the Highmountain tribe, right in the head.

He was flung backward, knocked unconscious by the impact. But with the speed imparted on those little bits of iron, Harry wondered if he was even alive. An impact like that would have probably killed any human or Kaldorei.

Thankfully he was the only casualty while the transformation continued, the raw magic coming off the creature having smashed them against the walls bar those protected by Harry's spell. The two warriors thus protected charged forwards, with Tyre clasping his hands once and then thrusting a palm forward, sending a spell that looked almost like a Patronus, but far more diffuse, in the form of a group of wolves.

Taking his cue from the Tauren, Harry sent another cutting spell at the still-growing dragon. But neither of their attacks did anything against the black dragon's scales, and it hissed in amusement, looking around it, as the change completed, and the dragon's bulk began to press them all backward.

“Hmmm, speaking of which, I thought that you night elves did away with your arcane fellows?” The dragon mused, his calm, almost lazy tone angering Harry, who launched a bowel exploding curse at the dragon, watching in dismay as it faded away the instant it hit the dragon. “Well, no matter, you are no match for my might!”

“Out!” Tyrande shouted. “We need room to maneuver, and if we stay in here, he’ll just crush us with his bulk!”

The two blood totem warriors who had been guarding the hallway leading into the King’s throne room now led the way with their Rivermane companion directly behind them. The group barely had time to get down the steps, pushing the group of guards ahead of them with the weight of their bodies when the black dragon burst out of the stone behind them. The monstrous beast treated the thick rock of the King’s castle as naught but wood and not particularly strong wood at that.

With his forearms and upper body free, he now stood on all fours amid the rubble of the castle, slowly pulling himself out from the remnants, his tail swishing from side to side as it cleared. Badrinath kept his wings furled close to his body. The cavern was huge, but so was the dragon, and there wasn’t quite enough room for him to fly.

The dragon reared his head up, staring past the invading force to the Drogbar all around them, before shrugging his shoulders. “Serve one way, or serve another, little creatures. That will be your choice once I have dealt with these interlopers.”

At that, guided by old instincts and fears, many of the Drogbar fled, their screams filling the cavern with a cacophony that served as a harsh parody of the bustle before. In the ancient past, the Drogbar had served the Earth Aspect joyfully, but since his descent into Taint-fueled madness, Deathwing had become a figure of horror to them more than any other race. Hundreds died as they were crushed by their fellows in their haste to escape the dragon who had suddenly appeared in their midst.

But a few dozen stalwart souls did not flee. Instead, they hid, waiting for their fellows to pass or, if they were in apposition to, they charged towards where the former castle had stood. Some of those moved to attack the Tauren, causing Tarn to bellow a command to the nearest four Tauren, regardless of clan. They obeyed, forming a line behind their fellows to block the Drogbar set on attacking them.

More Drogbar, however, growled in anger and perhaps some chagrin, considering how Badrinath’s words left no room to doubt what had happened. Already having grabbed up any weapon to hand, mostly mining tools or farming tools, they now charged forward, shouting out, “Never again! Never again!”

At the same time, a few smarter Drogbar shouted commands to the Earth Elementals around the cavern. Harry couldn’t hear what those commands were, but the effect was

obvious. The largest Earth Elementals started moving towards the dragon, while others shifted, growing into thick walls scattered around the cavern, providing cover.

The Drogbar who had moved to attack the Tauren found themselves boxed in by a few of these shifted elementals. And then, two times their number fell on the dragon-followers, bellowing insults and fury. It took only a few seconds to cut them down, and the four Tauren who had been waiting for the turncoat Drogbar now charged with those wishing to be free, joining the assault on the dragon, which had halted it in place for the moment.

Seeing that, Lars and Tyrande both smiled, realizing instantly that it was the black dragon that had been behind the Drogbar's recent attempts at expanding into the Highmountain territory. That meant that, if they survived this, peace might well be possible between the Drogbar and Tauren.

Harry disdained such long-term thinking. As Quetzal, who had been forced to retreat along with the others from the castle, slithered forward, a thoughtful expression on his reptilian face, Harry also moved to one side of the black dragon away from the others. As always in a fight, his thoughts were analytical, almost cold now. *I wonder what kind of spells will work on that hide?*

The answer seemed to be 'not many', although it wasn't the dragon's hide that was the main issue, something that became apparent after a few spells into Harry's assault. Sectumsempra struck Badrinath on the ridges above his eyes, startling Badrinath, and suddenly, a sibilant hiss and an aura of some kind, hazy almost like thin black smoke appeared around him, blocking the next four spells from Harry as Harry teleported around the area.

Then Badrinath began to attack, smashing two Drogbar into paste with one clawed paw, his tail shattering a dozen Elementals who died to defend still more Drogbar, ducking away from the strike. A piercing spell struck that elbow but was slowed dramatically by the aura before hitting the limb. Although it did cause Badrinath to growl, turning towards where Harry had previously been, growling angrily. "I will find you, Arcanist! You will learn that no magic is strong enough to harm one of my flight!"

By that point, Lars, Tyre, and Tyrande had all closed and were attacking Badrinath with their weapons, the black-smoke-like aura doing nothing to stop purely physical attacks. The weapons of the two Tauren still bounced off, doing no harm beyond perhaps annoying Badrinath. But Tyrande's moon glaive sliced a slight furrow across a few of the scales, not penetrating but showing that perhaps it could.

But when Tyre tried to use a strangely colored lightning spell, this too failed to do more than anger the black dragon as it hit Badrinath's aura. *So it's an anti-magic defense, then? Crap.*

As Harry tried another series of spells aimed at a specific area to see if he could overcome Badrinath's aura, Tyrande leaped up and over the strike from his other front leg, then

flung her hand out, hurling what looked like dust up into the dragon's face. Whatever it was caused Badrinath to rear his head back and scream angrily, "I will feast on your guts slowly for that, Kaldorei bitch!"

And then, Badrinath breathed out fire. Yet this flame was nothing like anything that could occur naturally in nature. Instead, it reminded Harry of Fiendfyre, save the near sentience of that fell spell. It was as black as it was red and so hot the overall temperature in the cavern rose dramatically.

Harry was well away from the attack, which flashed down towards where Tyrande had recently been standing. She dodged under the tongue of flame and to one side, grimacing at the heat but otherwise unharmed. But the fire kept on going, so hot that when it hit, it melted the very stone into magma for a few moments as Badrinath angled the attack up and away. This caught two of the Tauren warriors, another group of Drogbar, and then hit a house set into the side of the cavern, melting its façade into a pile of molten magma.

"Okay, so fire spells probably aren't the way to go," Harry whispered to himself, remaining hidden for now as he launched another spell towards the creature. "But that does give me a clue."

Shifting tactics for a moment, Harry hit Lars and Tarn with Engorgio charms to start. Both of them had been hiding behind one of the Earth Elementals turned walls. Now they exchanged a grin as they saw one another growing by at least half again the size they had been. "Now that's more like it! Someone hit us with a Bloodlust spell!" Lars bellowed over the tumult of the battle, no easy feat.

Still, one of the Drogbar Shaman heard him. A second later, both Tauren and several nearby Drogbar glowed red. The red then faded into their skin, becoming a tint instead of a glow around them.

Their normal semi-animosity gone, Lars and Tarn charged out of their hiding places, weapons raised. "For Our Ancestors!"

To take some of the pressure off them, Harry then gestured to the other side of the dragon, directly behind Tyrande. The rubble and bits of a house that had been there previously shifted and grew into a large, if somewhat simply, constructed golem. "Attack the dragon!" Harry ordered, before Apparating away as the dragon sent a tongue of flame toward where he had just been standing, grateful that the sound of the battle covered the implosion of air this spell created.

The dragon took several blows from the two Tauren and a few of the Bloodlust infused Drogbar. But even with their size enlarged and the Shaman spell heightening their strength further, they weren't strong enough to do much more than push the dragon around. Getting through his scales to really do damage was beyond them, although it was clear by his bellow that those blows hurt Badrinath regardless.

Meanwhile, having pulled back from the front line, Tyre started to use his magic to defend Lars and several warriors as they attacked, working alongside the Drogbar. But even so, the Tauren, Drogbar and few remaining Elementals were almost a sideshow. Tyrande was the dragon's main target, and she danced around it, dodging every flail of its claws, every strike from its tale.

{play <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVE9FAf-y9Q>}

Watching her move, it was almost like Tyrande was dancing. Every strike, every flail from the dragon was dodged by the nearest inches as Harry's spells zipped in, trying to penetrate the dragon's aura or aiming at his mouth or eyes. She leaped up over one strike only to somehow dodge a second in midair, then disappeared, holding onto the dragon claw with one hand to avoid a blast of fire. A strike against the dragon's scales caused a flash of sparks, then Tyrande was dodging a tail strike before leaping up onto the tail and then off as the dragon lashed out at her with his forepaws.

If it wasn't for the deadliness of the battle, it would have been amazing. And also the fact that the tail strike destroyed his golem and crushed two Drogbar to a pulp. The golem's blows hadn't even registered as much as the attacks of the Tauren. *And is it my imagination, or did the golem's hands start to fall apart before hitting the dragon's actual scales? Damn.*

A final spell from Harry picked up the rubble of the golem, reforming it into a ball, then hurled it at the dragon's head. Right before it impacted, Harry hit it with a Reducto, creating a wall of moving shrapnel.

The dragon's scales ignored the assault, but it did flinch away from it slightly. The dragon's scales and magical aura were proving a powerful defense. Yet that was fine. Harry had other tricks.

"In that case, it's time to put my third rule of warfare to work. First, blind the fucker," Harry roared before Apparating to one side and behind the dragon's right flank.

At those words, Quetzal, who had just gotten into position to attack the dragon from behind, closed his eyes automatically. He had moved slowly to allow his chameleon scales work, hiding him from the dragon's sights. But Harry, his stomach now queasy from the continued Apparitions, took the time to shout, "Shut your eyes!" before casting his next spell. **"LUMOS Maxima!"**

The spell created a Lumos right in front of the dragon's eyes that was so bright it was almost like the sun had suddenly appeared in the middle of the cavern. It was the same spell Harry had used against the harpies and satyrs years ago, and like them, the Tauren and Drogbar were all blinded, stumbling back.

Tyrande had followed Harry's orders quickly enough to avoid it and now raced forward, hopping on the dragon's forearm then back even as the dragon thrashed. The few remaining

Elementals were not affected at all, and their attacks, centered on the dragon's tail, actually did some damage, denting scales or knocking a few loose.

Neither attack was noticed at present as the dragon had other things to worry about.

The light as bright as the sun appearing right in front of his eyes, Badrinath screamed, his voice going from a basso rumble of delight and evil merriment at what he was doing to the puny creatures attempting to fight him to one of agony in an instant. He thrashed away from the light, twisting so that his head was under one wing, even as Quetzal entered the fighting by biting into his other one.

The snake's venom didn't seem to do anything against the dragon's physiology, yet his fangs did tear nice big holes through the dragon's wings, and Harry paused in his next spell to hit the snake with an Engorgio charm of his own to make those wounds even worse. Thanks to his already large size, this meant the snake was almost as large lengthwise as the dragon, although the dragon had Quetzal beat in girth, and the dragon's overall weight was probably still more than three times the snake's own.

Better than crippling the dragon's ability to fly, Quetzal's assault protected a few of the Tauren, forcing the dragon to twitch away from that assault instead of crushing them under his weight. His front paws kept scrambling at his face, trying ineffectually to cover his eyes while his back legs came up, kicking out spasmodically.

Unfortunately, many of the Drogbar were too slow to back away and were slain in the dragon's pain-wracked spasms, and Quetzal was hurled aside, hissing in pain as gashes appeared on his flanks. The snake hastily retreated, firing off his spines into the dragon's side and neck, doing nothing against the dragon's scales, something Quetzal noted even as his chameleon scales let him fade into the background.

Still able to see, Tyrande on his back leaped clear as the dragon roared, now thrashing even more violently, his wings opening despite the agony. But his thrashing still protected the dragon from her strikes going wild or skittering along his scales instead of penetrating. The dragon's scales were now marked with numerous slash marks and gashes, while blood was starting to seep out from between a few of them where the Tauren or Elementals had landed blows.

Suddenly Harry oofed in pain, his breath leaving him in a gasp as the tip of Badrinath's tail caught him in the side, a rib or two breaking under the impact. He had been concentrating so much on the dragon's main body that he hadn't seen the tail spasming out towards him at the same time, twitching away from the Elementals attacks.

Despite being only the tip, the impact still lifted Harry off his feet, hurling backward to crash into the cavern's wall, although Harry was able to use a cushioning charm to soften the impact.

Leaning against the now-soft cavern's wall, Harry touched his side with his other hand, casting a quick bone-mending charm. This spell wouldn't repair the bone perfectly unless accompanied by a diagnosis spell, but it would keep the user up and moving.

Dropping to the ground once more, Tyrande dodged through the thrashing dragon's paws, her moon glaive stabbing here and there with better penetration this time. When Badrinath responded to these attacks by flinching away, she darted under his forearm, stabbing with all her might at his side where the smaller, somewhat softer-looking scales covering his stomach began.

But Badrinath suddenly superimposed his back leg between itself. Tyrande's blade stabbed deep into his arm, penetrating several scales to the flesh beneath. This enraged Badrinath further, and Harry saw his back leg kick at Tyrande like a dog with a football. But Tyrande leaped up and over the attack, although she was forced to leave her moon glaive stuck in the creature.

I am rather glad I convinced Shy-rotam to stay behind. This fight is not one that she is prepared for. With her moon glaive gone, Tyrande rolled and rolled again before getting to her feet and racing away from the dragon, pulling her bow from her back and an arrow from her quiver. A few of them had been smashed when she had been tossed off Badrinath a moment before, but most remained intact, and Tyrande put one of them to her string, turning, aiming it towards the dragon.

"Elune's light might not find me here, dragon, but her strength is always with me. Piercing Arrow!" Tyrande shouted, calling upon a specific power that Elune had blessed her with. A second later, she felt the rush of her connection with Elune filling her for a moment, passing through her body and into her hands, then into the arrow. Diffuse as it was thanks to the many thousands of tons of rock between her and the sky, that connection was still strong, and her spell lashed out, crashing into the dragon's upper arm and pectoral with all the power of a trebuchet.

The dragon, whose eyes had begun to clear, was hurled off his feet again onto his side. But despite that, Badrinath's anti-magic aura had stopped the majority of the attack's power, and now his sight had adjusted to the day-brightness. "You will pay for that. You and your bitch goddess will..."

"Die, dragon!" the still-enlarged Tarn roared, charging forward once more.

At the same time, Tyre had been given enough time to call on some of his own Shaman spells. Now he slammed his hand to the ground and beside him, a large mound of Earth shifted upwards, forming into a somewhat scary, heavily modified Tauren face. "Earthmother, fill my allies with your power!"

All around the dragon, the surviving Drogbar and Tauren, and the still hidden Harry and Tyrande glowed with a light brown color as the Shaman's spell impacted them. This was

followed by another spell from a nearby Drogbar Shaman. A second totem appeared in front of the Shaman, and the warriors around them were covered by another grey aura.

The dragon bellowed in real pain now even though the axe still couldn't penetrate his scales, the flesh underneath was going to feel it, and blood spurted out from between his scales. Yet without a weapon that could break Badrinath's those scales, they weren't doing enough damage, and as he too charged forward once more, Lars knew it.

Yet only one weapon existed on Highmountain that could really harm a fully mature dragon, one with full access to their Aspect and the intelligence to use magic: the Hammer of Khaz'goroth, an ancient weapon, older than the Tauren race, older by far than even the War of the Ancients, where it found its way into the hands of Huhn Highmountain during the last days of that conflict. It had been used in ages past to help drive out Deathwing himself and would undoubtedly have been up to slaying this far weaker member of the Black Flight.

But Lars hadn't brought it along, thinking that would be immense overkill against simple Drogbar, and dangerous besides to risk on such a mission. Lars had also been worried that the weapon would overawe the Drogbar if they could actually converse with their King. Now he was castigating himself severely for that, even as he charged forward only to suddenly changed direction. Instead of attacking the dragon's neck, he body-checked Tarn out of the way of a backhand from the dragon that would have splattered the Blood Totem High chieftain.

Despite the Stoneskin Totem of the Drogbar, both Tauren were sent flying, bones broken and out of the fight but still in one piece, generally speaking. The same could not be said for their followers. Two more of the Highmountain tribe who Harry hadn't enlarged was struck by another claw strike. The claws caught them as they tried to charge forward, and while the spell the drogbar Shaman had cast kept them largely in one piece, the strike still snapped necks and horns alike, hurling them aside as their chieftains had been.

At the same time, a tongue of flame flashed out towards Tyre. A hasty spell shifted his own enhancement spell to that of an added layer of Stoneskin, causing him to have some immunity to the fire, while the Earth Elemental in the wall hiding him from the dragon pulled up further stones between Tyre and the incoming fire. The reinforced wall melted, the elemental within letting out a low, pain-filled groan as its essence gave way, the sound unheard by all save Tyre, then the much-reduced fire washed over the Highmountain chieftain in turn. Even with the fire being weakened and the double layer of Stoneskin, the pain was indescribable, and Tyre screamed in agony, the torture causing him to collapse.

Thankfully for Tyre, Harry now attacked once more, his back healed now, and a series of flechettes slammed into Badrinath's head all around his eyes and snout, causing the dragon to bellow in pain though once more none penetrated. Badrinath even used having his head turned away from the attack to launch another burst of fire at the Drogbar Shaman, who fared just as poorly as Tyre.

“Don’t let up!” Harry shouted before Apparating away. A second later, Harry collapsed forward, his stomach now in open rebellion so much that he had to fight back the urge to throw up as he appeared once more elsewhere in the cavern.

Apparating was easily the second-best method of magical travel Harry had ever run into and the easiest to use in combat. But it had hard limitations, above and beyond the need to have a proper mental map of the area you would Apparate into. The human body wasn’t meant to simply jump from one place to another without crossing the intervening space in the first place. Hermione had tried to explain it once to Harry using Muggle science and something she called ‘spatial jump theory’, a term she had come up with, but what it amounted to was that a person’s internal bits could only take so much sudden shifts in space.

Despite his stomach’s revolt, Harry clapped his hands together, then thrust them forward. From the ground all around Badrinath, the stone in a large radius began to shift and move, becoming almost like water, rising up to grab and drown the dragon. “Lapis Palus!” he whispered.

This was a modified spell Harry had developed with the help of Dumbledore’s ghost. A master in transfiguration, the ghost had taught him this spell, Stone Swamp. Harry rarely used it because he couldn’t do so nonverbally, the spell taking too much concentration and power, depending on the size of the swamp you wanted to create.

With a squawk of fury and a burst of fire up into the ceiling, Badrinath’s rear quarters disappeared into the stone swamp, destroying the amazing lighting that Harry had admired earlier. But the dragon’s foreclaws dug into the stone, pulling his bulk out of the water stone. But Harry kept his magic flowing into the spell, and the liquid nature of the stone made Badrinath’s attacks simply pass through it, rather than actually getting him out of the morass that was trying to reach up and pull him down into its depths.

While internally rolling her eyes at Harry’s unneeded ‘advice’, Tyrande sent another Piercing Arrow spell rocketing towards the dragon. Her attack blasted through the dragon’s uninjured wing, which was not as tough as the rest of him, causing Badrinath to below in pain and anger as the blow shattered some of the delicate bones there. Even if the dragon won the fight, he would need to spend months healing before flying.

Seeing Badrinath slowly starting to pull himself out of the water stone, Harry began his next spell while at the same time, Quetzal once more attacked. Having moved right underneath the dragon, the Needlespine Shimmerback fired his quills up into the dragon’s face as Badrinath attempted to shoot another fireball towards Tyrande. The dragon recoiled, although none of the spines could penetrate even the dragon’s snout and eyes.

With the dragon’s neck exposed, the large snake attempted to sink his fangs into the dragon’s neck but found his fangs couldn’t penetrate. Instead, his bite pinched the dragon’s

neck a bit, his fangs dragging downward, causing another deep furrow in the scales to join the multitude of other such. *Oh dear, I think I have miscalculated thisSSS!!!*

Quetzal's thoughts disappeared in agony as Badrinath's claws came up from where he had been clinging to the rock to tear at the snake. And unlike Badrinath's scales in relation to the snake's bite, Quetzal's scales were no defense against the dragon's assault. Blood spurted, and it was only a hasty spell from Harry that saved Quetzal from having his head bitten off. The piercing spell struck, impacting Badrinath's snout with enough force to cause the dragon to reel backward in pain, more of his body disappearing into the swamp of stone. This was accompanied by several Drogbar, added by another Shaman spell, trying to attack from the dragon's other side and another Piercing Arrow from Tyrande nearly taking the dragon in one of his eyes.

Bleeding badly from a series of gashes that would have killed any lesser creature, Quetzal tried to slither away. He might not have made it if not for Harry Apparating to his side, his hand flashing out to touch his friend's side. A second later, both of them were well away from Badrinath, groaning in pain as their stomachs rebelled against the side-along Apparition. "Okay," Harry gagged, "Not doing that again."

"You do, and I'll eat you," Quetzal groaned. "I'm a snake, we aren't supposed to get stomach aches, but this is the second time I have had such since we started our association, Harry!"

"Oh shut up, you have it easy right now, believe me," Harry grumbled before leaving his friend there, trying to rush to the side of the dragon only to have to shamle along thanks to his stomach. But thanks to Tyrande, the dragon was kept busy until he was in position, and, with the dragon now trying to both claw his way out of the swamp once more and fight her off, Harry launched his next spellchain, attacking Badrinath indirectly once more.

First, a modified Bubblehead Charm encased Badrinath's head and a good portion of his neck out to several feet in every direction. Then on the heels of that one, the next spell filled the globe with tiny particles, particles of flour, a bit of gas and gunpowder all mixed together. Each of them conjured into being by a separate spell, hence the time Harry had taken to set up this assault, and at the outer edge of the bubble, outside the radius of Badrinath's anti-magic aura. And because the spells conjuring these items into being were outside the aura covering the dragon, the field couldn't affect them. The magic in the particles was gone by the time they wafted into that aura.

Not knowing what odd smells were assaulting his battered nose, Badrinath decided to break the globe of magic around his head as he would overcome any problem he faced: by fire.

Yet the instant he opened his mouth and a flame appeared within, the fuel-air explosion Harry had prepared went off, the equivalent of several hundred pounds of TNT condensed into the area as large as a tall man. The dragon screamed now in real pain, his nose basically

destroyed, many of his teeth gone, and one of his eyes had simply burst due to overpressure in its socket while several scales had been blasted off or simply shattered.

Despite his agony, the dragon's mind was still working. The anti-magic aura seemed to lose some power as Harry watched, the dragon using his magic to cast a second spell. That spell flashed throughout the dragon's body from his head down, covering ruined flesh and ruined scales with a spell that looked like the Stoneskin the Drogbar Shamans had used previously. A glow engulfed Badrinath's mouth in the next second, some kind of healing spell, perhaps the equivalent of Harry's Episkey, healing the area around and within the mouth.

Of course, the remaining Drogbar and Tyrande were not idle during this, pressing the attack hard. The dragon stumbled back, yet even as more of his body disappeared into the stone swamp, Badrinath twisted, his one remaining eye staring right at Harry. Seeing that bloodshot gaze latching onto him. Harry realized with a start that in his hasty side-along Apparition with Quetzal, his hood had fallen off his face.

With his stomach still roiling so much Harry knew he'd splinch if he tried to Apparate away, Harry hastily concentrated, casting a spell chain he had practiced dozens of times when fighting flame-happy wizards. First, he transfigured a stone wall up from the ground in front of him and then backed it up with a Protego and a Flame Freeze charm cast on the wall. Although not the most powerful shield he could create, Harry had to hope that it would be enough as in the next second, flame roared towards him.

Harry's hope was in vain as his defenses started to fall after a few seconds. Desperately Harry dodged out of the way as the fire finished turning his defensive wall to magma, but then the dragon did one simple thing almost no wizard had ever been able to given the nature of even the strongest fire spells. Badrinath turned his head, following Harry's desperate dodge.

The dragon's fiery breath rolled over Harry, wider and taller than he was, burning Harry to a crisp so fast he didn't even have time to feel pain. Yet as he died, the Phoenix flames of rebirth activated, bringing him back to life as his twelve-year-old self once more. The next instant, his heavily warded and rune-protected expanded trunk seared a brand into his chest and neck, so hot was it despite the number of protections on it.

That was honestly scary since some of the runic arrays on the trunk, a Black Family item, had been reputed to be able to stand up to Fiendfyre, a spell the Blacks had created back before the dawn of Magical Britain. According to Sirius, he had seen his father cast that spell on the trunk in question to show the greatness of their family, and afterward, Sirius had been forced to touch the trunk, only to find it was cool to the touch. The dragon's black and red fire had proved far, far worse and gave Harry a greater appreciation for the Shaman's defensive spells.

Yet that thought couldn't stay in Harry's head, indignation at his body's current circumstances driving it out. *Fuck! Not again. I hate being so freaking young. I need to figure*

out a way to control that! Growling, Harry crouched down, making his way through the smoke as he ton all fours as he tore the sizzling hot expanded trunk from where it hung on his chest, ignoring the sizzling pain from his hand, another brand-like scar appearing there.

Tyrande stared aghast at where Harry had once been as the flame attack from Badrinath died off, and he pushed itself further out of the water stone that Harry had created. “Hahaha! With your Arcanist companion dead, none of you will be able to kill me! And down here, there is nowhere you can run. You will all die by my flame, no I will kill you slowly! I...”

The next second, Harry stepped out of the smoke, the invisibility cloak flying behind him, barely tied around his naked body at the moment. Connected to his new life as a chimera at Lady Death’s instigation, it could not be permanently destroyed or taken from him, not even with dragon fire. Or at least not Badrinath’s.

A stone spike appeared, transmuting into a kind of metal that shone in the light. Harry had conjured it into being as he was hidden by the smoke. Now he hurled the transfigured steel spike forward, and Badrinath screamed in agony as it crashed into his side and back leg right above where that leg had finally clawed its way out of the stone swamp. Scales exploded away from the impact, and blood spurted the leg going dead instantly, causing Badrinath to stumble back into the morass of the water-like stone floor of the cavern behind him.

Seeing that, Harry shouted out to Tyrande. “Catch!” and tossed the sword of Gryffindor towards the area between her and the dragon, where it impacted point first, sticking upright in the stone of the cavern.

Out of arrows and with many questions now swirling in her head, Tyrande raced forward, grabbing up the sword of Gryffindor. As Harry had hoped but hadn’t known until she did it, Tyrande was able to pick up the enchanted blade.

That wasn’t because of anything silly about the sword only being wielded only by a true Gryffindor or anything like that. No, it was due to a series of spells Harry had put on the blade himself after some asshole goblins had attempted to lawyer it away from him. Now only Harry or someone who trusted Harry implicitly and vice-versa could even touch that sword without Harry’s say.

Not that any of that mattered now as Tyrande charged forward, holding the sword expertly despite it being so different from her own moon glaive. Meanwhile, Harry gestured with both hands once more, taking control of the swamp-stone with a spell that allowed its user to control water, which, magically speaking, the swamp-stone currently was. Arms grew out of the water-like stone, one grabbing at the dragon’s back of the neck and twisting, pulling it back as it thrashed. The other hand grabbed the dragon around the neck.

While the dragon’s anti-magic aura started to disintegrate the water as the water touched it, that didn’t stop the attack quickly enough to protect Badrinath fully. And the next second, Harry canceled the original Stone Swamp spell. Instantly the stone began to revert to

its former nature, acting like quick-dry cement and encasing the dragon from just behind his forearms and down.

A magical blast from Badrinath blasted the water-stone all around him, shattering the arms trying to drag the dragon back and allowing Badrinath enough space to try and pull himself slightly out of the now solid stone. But by then, Tyrande was by the dragon's side. Racing up the back of his neck, she made her way towards his head, where few of the scales had been blasted off by Harry's earlier magic and had not yet been healed.

"For Elune and Azeroth!" Tyrande shouted. Invoking the name of her goddess, Tyrande's glowed like a star for a second as she finally reached the dragon's head. There, the sword of Gryffindor stabbed into the dragon's face, directly behind his cheek, and then Tyrande leaped clear as Badrinath tried to claw at her once more, his flames trying to track her.

A second later, She found herself yanked several dozen yards away, flying swiftly towards Harry even he ran away from the dragon. "Harry?" she asked, landing beside him, landing and running next to him.

"Just wait for it," Harry said grimly as they reached one of the last wall-elementals hiding there for a moment as he turned to look back at the black dragon. "I have told you a time or two that my blade is covered with poison."

"Surely you don't think it's going to work on a dragon of this one's power and size!" Tyrande shouted incredulously. "All dragons are sustained as much by magic as by their life force. The magic will counter the poison."

In far more pain than he had been ever since he had been whelped, Badrinath attempted to pull his ruined body up and out of the solid stone, sending tongues of flame out in several directions, driving back the few remaining Drogbar. Yet despite his wounds, when Badrinath spoke, it was clear he felt he still had the upper hand. "Hahaha! I do not know how he survived my fire, but even your Arcanist knows you have lost. None of you can stand against me, none of you can stand, can stand... against... a... a... black dragon, what, what is..."

Badrinath slumped, his useless wings flapping to its side, his jaw no longer responding, his legs and spine no longer working as they should. But the black dragon was still alive, astonishing Harry. He watched as Badrinath continued to try and pull himself out of the stone despite more than half his body not responding. Yet, even so, Badrinath was still alive and was now stretching his claws out towards where Lars and Tarn lay, unconscious from their earlier wounds.

Instantly changing tactics, Harry sent out a Bombarda spell towards the dragon's head, where he had lost a lot of his scales thanks to Harry's earlier spell work. When the spell struck, followed by a Sectumsempra, the dragon's remaining eye burst in his head as more teeth shattered, gore exploding out of his mouth even as it raised a feeble forearm to protect his head.

Tyrande raced forward, holding out one hand towards the dragon's side, where she could just make out her moon glaive sticking out of one of the dragon's forearms. "Come!"

The intent-based enchantment on Tyrande's moon glaive had the weapon pulling out of the dragon and into her hands as she quickly twisted to the other direction as Badrinath turned towards where she had spoken. Another tongue of flame lashed out, but Badrinath was definitely moving slower, and she was able to get right up underneath his head. "I'm down here, dragon!"

Badrinath reared, then forgetting the horrid wounds his head had taken, dove down, intent on biting Tyrande in half. But Tyrande rolled clear, then kicked up off the ground and stabbed her moon glaive into the dragon's forehead. With no scales to get in the way, she only had to contend with bone and flesh, and neither was enough to stop a moon glaive dedicated to Elune. The blade of her weapon bit into Badrinath's head and then into his brain, killing the black dragon instantly.

Instantly the dragon's neck went limp, and Tyrande leaped clear, rolling a bit as she landed. She crouched there, staring at the black dragon as it lay twitching on the ground, waiting as the dragon finally stopped moving. When it did, she moved forward and pulled her glaive out of the wound in the dragon's four head, releasing a river of blood and brain matter which slowly seeped out and down the corpse's head.

Turning away, Tyrande walked over toward where Harry had moved over to where Quetzal lay. The snake had long since fallen unconscious from blood loss, more wounded than Harry had thought when he left his companion's side. The wizard now hastily went to work, aided by the arrival of the Tauren Shaman and a few Drogbar Shaman who had survived the fight.

Having been so far away from the main cavern the Tauren they had left to guard their exit hadn't even known anything was happening until the fleeing Drogbar had reached them. Then they'd been trying to push against the crowd for a while. Now, several Healing Rain spells went off in the air of the cavern, spreading tiny drops of healing magic on everything they touched, Tauren and Drogbar alike. Then Tauren were racing towards their comrades, hoping to help them.

The sole exception was the oddly black-furred Shaman, who remained at the entrance, staring at the dead black dragon for a moment before moving forward, heading for Tyre Fleetfoot. He waved off another Shaman who turned aside and moved towards Tyrande, Harry, and Quetzal.

Many questions were going on in her mind. She had known Harry was strong but strong enough to help her slay a black dragon? *No, say it true, Tyrande. Without him here, you might well have died. If that is, you could have gotten here in the first place without fighting through the Drogbar.*

With that self-deprecating thought, she reached Harry and laid a hand gently on his shoulder as he knelt beside his animal companion. "How is he?"

"He needs a lot more blood than my Blood Replenishing spell can create in one casting," Harry answered, repeating the same gestures and whispered spell. "Beyond that, he'll live. Although I doubt he'll ever be able to move quite as well ever again. I'm not good enough with healing spells to heal him without leaving a lot of scar tissue."

"Nonetheless, that was very brave of him. If he hadn't wrecked Badrinath's wing, he might have been able to fly even in here. And his second attack should have blinded the dragon if he didn't have the iron eye trait," Tyrande answered, mentioning a trait black dragons could often grow after they reached maturity: a thin film of crystal over their eyes that could protect them from harm. *Most harm, anyway*, She thought ruefully, remembering the spells Harry had used to turn that strength into a weakness earlier.

"He still should have stayed outside with Shy-rotam. But I thought he could help us in here if it came to a fight. I never expected that," he growled, jutting his head out towards the dragon.

"I don't think any of us expected to run into a black dragon. And if one of us did, I would be having stern words with them later for not sharing their concerns," Tyrande said with a little laugh, pulling a similarly dry-sounding chuckle from Harry.

Neither noticed the black-furred Tauren flinch nor the guilty look on his face as he knelt beside his chief. Instead, Harry made way for one of the other Highmountain Shamans, who began to run gently glowing hands over Quetzal's side. "What do you think, Shaman?"

"My name is Fen Croweyes, Harry, and yes, I believe that he will live, as you said a moment ago. I can even heal his body up to full mobility, although he will bear the scars of this days' battle for many moltings." The aged Tauren spoke, shaking his head. "As will many others, both physical and mental."

"In that case, I will leave my friend in your care, Shaman Croweyes." With that, Harry turned back to Tyrande. "Come on, let's check on the others. And then I think I am done with this underground nonsense."

While Tyrande fervently agreed with that statement, it wasn't that simple. Having returned to their cavern, the Drogbar were incredibly sorrowful for their part in the conflict between them and the Tauren, not having had any idea that their King had been a black dragon before this. "He seemed to change decades ago when Grillkul went out on an expedition to the foot of the mountains to retrieve some herbs for his mother, but he was the prince, so no one commented on it. And until he led us into the conflict with the Tauren, he had been leading us quite well."

“It is evident that Badrinath long planned this operation, so no fault lies in you and your people. The black dragons would know how to act to emulate a Drogbar if anyone would,” Tyrande soothed, shaking her head at the speaker, one of the oldest surviving Drogbar.

Many of them had died in the stampede to flee the cavern. Yet others, nearly three dozen, had died fighting the dragon, which had won them quite a bit of respect from the surviving Tauren.

And the Drogbar had not died alone. Indeed, it was only luck and Harry’s power that none of the three Tauren leaders had died. That, and Badrinath seemed to have thought that Lars and Tarn were both dead after he had knocked them unconscious until they started to stir near the end of the battle.

All three would bear the scars of this battle for the rest of their lives.

One of Tarn’s horns had been broken off near the base, and his arm was broken in multiple places to go with several cracked ribs. Although the horn bothered him far more than the other wounds. That wasn’t just because even now, the Shamans were healing him and the other wounded as best they could, rather it seemed wrapped up in the man’s pride. Tyrande put that down to some kind of social cue she hadn’t heard about.

Tyre had been knocked out by the pain of being struck by the fire of the dragon as it tore through the earth Totem protecting him and the others with its magic. Trying to block the fire had drained him of all his magic and vitality. Only his strong connection with the elements and the Earth Elemental protecting him allowed Tyre to survive. Even now he was being supported between his surviving Tauren, looking like he had not eaten in weeks.

As her eyes flicked over to the Highmountain Tauren, Tyrande noted they, like the others left behind at the entrance, looked very guilty for not having been involved in the battle. This was especially true of the oddly black-haired Shaman. He seemed unable to look away from Badrinath’s corpse, a snarl on his face.

But High Chief Lars had actually taken more harm in the blow that had knocked him and Tarn out of the battle, having smashed back-first into a corner of one of the central buildings, breaking his spine. Luckily, the Shamans were able to heal him, and he was now walking around under the watchful eyes of the Rivermane tribe Shaman he’d brought along.

However, the leaders got off lightly. None of the other Tauren they had led into the main Drogbar cavern escaped the dragon’s wrath. And while seven of the Drogbar who attacked Badrinath did, the subterranean race had lost far more people in total than the Tauren, despite their Shamans and Earth Elementals.

“While that is true, we should have questioned things. The King has always, he has always been the one, the **leader**, the one who sets policy. Perhaps after this, we should rethink that.” the Drogbar said, although Tyrande could detect no hint of actual hope for such a thing in

his voice. He seemed more resigned to it than anything else, which probably meant that such a change wouldn't occur in the future.

That was mildly worrisome that the Drogbar would keep their current 'follow the leader blindly' attitude. But there was nothing she could do about that beyond converse with Lars about it later. If it really was a mental thing rather than simply a social one, she had no idea how to change it.

Once Lars moved over to join her in talking to the Drogbar, Tyrande stayed there for a time to mediate between the two groups. In return for more meat being sent to them every month, the Drogbar agreed to completely shut down many of their tunnels, filling them in with stone with the magic of their shamans. Of course, they could open those up again, but the Tauren shamans could set up warning systems and traps outside of them, thus being warned if trouble stirred from this area again.

More importantly, the Drogbar agreed to pay recompense to the Tauren for the conflict between them in the form of jewels and metals they mined out of the rock. The Tauren would receive a percentage of all such they mined for two years. While the Tauren had several good smiths among them, they didn't routinely work with metals like that, simply because of how rare they were in Highmountain and because only a few Tauren devoted their craft to mining.

However, Lars pushed for access to the dragon's carcass. Its scales, fangs and claws would make magnificent weapons and armor. Armor which his shamans and artisans were better able to work with than metal. The Drogbar tried to quibble but agreed to it so long as they could keep some of the bones of Badrinath for themselves.

In the end, like most compromises, neither side was fully happy, but they were willing to go along with the final decision. That was all Tyrande could hope for.

As she had mediated between the two groups, Harry and a somewhat revived Quetzal had left, the snake demanding they return to the surface so he could hunt. Blood replenishing potions seemed to have a lot in common with Shaman spells, eating the vitality of the individual to power the spell's effects.

Harry had ignored all the looks Tyrande and Tauren sent in his direction thanks to his far more youthful appearance. While Harry liked the Tauren, he wasn't about to explain everything about his abilities past or anything else to them just yet. Conversely, Harry knew Tyrande probably did deserve an explanation, and he was not looking forward to giving her one.

He needn't have worried. Tyrande was very understanding about why he had kept his odd resurrection ability from her. They hadn't even known each other a year after all, and even if they had been friends for longer, Harry would still be under no obligation to share everything about himself with her, just as Tyrande wouldn't in reverse. However, now that it had come to light, she understood that Harry was an even more unique individual than she had thought.

*Heh, make that a **very** understanding woman to deal with this resurrection of his. This method of longevity would certainly take some getting used to, at least, and his oftentimes childish body would no doubt throw off many.*

"I would say, Harry, that I think you need to figure out a way to control the age you become when you resurrect." She then smiled, ruffling Harry's hair. "It is incredibly difficult right now for me to take you seriously, child~,," she teased.

"I still have my magic, you know, so unless you want to be subjected to a tickling spell that will have you laughing for the rest of the night, I suggest you back off the teasing," Harry retorted, although he was smiling slightly as he did so.

Shy-rotam huffed from beside Tyrande. The young frostsaber was still of the opinion she should have come with her chosen partner but had stopped complaining about it at least. And Quetzal, who no doubt would tease Harry about his new, smaller size, had yet to return from hunting.

The silence extended for several minutes, then Harry frowned. "By the way, do we have any idea what Badrinath was after?"

"Not really. The Drogbar didn't know. They were simply riled up to make trouble for the Tauren, to force them into a confrontation. Badrinath said something about a prize when he was bragging about how he would kill me, so Lars and I assume he was after the Hammer of Khaz'goroth. It is a weapon of the Ancient Titans which was used to drive Deathwing off."

Harry's eyebrows flew up in surprise at that, and he fought back a sudden urge to salivate at the idea of studying such a weapon. *Mind you, I doubt I'd be able to make much headway, but if I learn enough about the local magics and how magic interacts with the world...* "That's interesting." Then he frowned, his lips twisting into a pensive scowl. "Still... there seems to be something odd about that. About what Badrinath said..."

A shout from nearby made both of them look around, and they saw that Lars had returned with the rest of the surviving Tauren. With them, the Tauren carried the bodies of their dead, and a funeral pyre had already been erected by two of the Shamans.

Realizing it was time for the funeral rites, Harry and Tyrande stood up, making their way over to the others.

"Are you going to be happy here, Harry?" Tyrande asked as they walked.

"I think so, yes. Tyre has said that he would be happy to house me with the Highmountain tribe for a time, while Lars has officially given me leave to go wherever I wish in Highmountain. Even Tarn says that I would be welcome as a warrior among the Blood Totems, although he looked as if he had bitten into something sour when he said it."

Harry chuckled. "Seeing a Tauren make that kind of sour face was somewhat hilarious heh, helped by his now mismatched horn. So I will probably move between the tribes for a time, learning more about their shaman traditions and seeing if they can help my own issues."

Tyrande paused then before deciding to share a secret with Harry. A secret that the most senior Shamans of the Tauren and her own people had kept for some time. "If you run into trouble on that path, there is a group here, mostly Kaldorei, hunters, a few Shaman, and explorers. They form a secret society called the Unseen Path, whose task is to help those in need. You and they might be able to bond over your 'people saving thing'."

And I seem to recall that a few young ladies are among them as well. If any of my race can be open enough to accept Harry's strangeness, it is they. And... well, I am almost certain Harry will eventually meet with our estranged kin as well. When that happens, it is best to have some willing to speak for him.

"Huh. I might look this Unseen Path up. When I'm ready to travel further than the Highmountain Valley, anyway." Harry answered, amused by the idea of a secret society based around something so prosaic as helping those in need. "And you? Are you going to be happy to get back to your work as leader of the night elves? I'm assuming you need to leave soon."

"Happy is putting it somewhat strongly. Content is a better word, I think. As to my leaving, I will actually be making my farewells after this ceremony. We're closer to the entrance to the Highmountain valley here than we would be if I continued with you and the others back to the high chieftain's town, and... well, leaving like this should be done quickly in my opinion," Tyrande admitted. "Elune is high in the sky, and I can perhaps make it well down the mountain before I must rest. And if I stay, I will continue to find excuses to do so."

Harry laughed at that, saying, "I will take that as a compliment to how good a companion I am."

"Hah, it is not you but Quetzal I will miss," Tyrande retorted, her lips quirking as she fought back a laugh. As they had just reached the Tauren circle around the pyre, that would be grossly inappropriate.

They reached the others, who nodded solemnly at them, making room for the two strangers without complaint even from the Blood Totem tribesmen. If one of the animals had been there, they might have, but as Shy-rotam stayed to the shadows and Quetzal was nowhere in sight, that was not an issue.

When they took their places, Lars began. As the leader of this expedition, it was his role to say the rites. "Earth Mother, An'she, Mu'sha," he intoned, naming the primary spirit the Tauren worshipped and using their names for the spirits of the sun and moon. "We return these brave warriors to the world. They fell fighting against a great evil, obeying the laws of our people and standing shoulder to shoulder with their brothers. Let their spirits fly to the afterlife, as their ashes are consigned to the wind."

With that, Tyre, Tarn and Lars all lifted burning torches, setting it to the pyre from three sides. For several moments there was silence as the fire blossomed quickly, growing from the torches throughout the pyre, fueled by another Shaman spell. Then the Rivermane Shaman began to beat on a small drum, joined by several cymbals among the other survivors as the others started to hum. It was wordless, a simple dirge-like sound, but one full of sadness and more than a fair bit of pride at how the dead had passed.

The music continued for a time, and then at some unseen signal, the Tauren all took a step away, signaling the end of the funeral. If the bodies of the dead were fit to carry with them, they would have been returned for a more formal set of funeral rites among their clans, but none of them had been fit to carry for overlong. Even the bodies of those who had died while covered with Stoneskin had been crushed later in the fight by the dragon.

Seeing the Tauren preparing to leave, Tyrande turned back to Harry, holding her hand out. *It is time to pull off the bandage.* "Farewell for now, Harry Potter. And know wherever you go, you have a friend in me. I expect to see you stop by occasionally, once every decade or so perhaps."

Harry chuckled dryly, wondering how many of his lifetimes it would be before he too often that kind of term, and saw from Tyrande's small smile that she too was wondering that same thing. He also thought that he would have preferred a hug of farewell rather than a mere handshake after all they had been through. *But there is no way I'd do that now, not at my current height. It would place my head right into her chest, and that just isn't going to happen.* "It's been an interesting journey. Shame our destinations are different. Until next time Tyrande Whisperwind. And know you have a friend in me too."

At that, Tyrande's smile widened into a beaming grin that made her look far younger for a moment, then she pulled her hand away from Harry's and looked over at the still disconsolate Shy-rotam patting her on the head before sending a nod towards Lars. "Come, Shy-rotam, it is time for us to run."

With that, the two of them were off, racing away in the direction Lars and the others pointed her toward the exit to the valley.

Behind her, Harry watched her go for a time before turning back to the Tauren, noticing with annoyance that Tarn and several of the others were smirking at him, knowing that had to do with his currently childlike appearance. But for now, Harry ignored it. He would get even with them another time, maybe when he visited the Blood Totem tribe. *I wonder what the Tauren think about pranks?* "So, where to now?"

End Chapter