

Hey all. I can't program nor am I British...

Wooo... The combat portions aside, this chapter fought me like a bucking bronco. But at least half of it's been Grammarlied, and I hope there won't be any world breaking errors in the rest. If I tried to Grammarly the rest, it would probably take me at least two, three extra days. Considering it's 13,000 words longer than I hoped already... yeah. So here you go!!

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Chapter 15: Journey through ice, A War of Fire

Tyrande and her forces had spent several days near their landing area getting used to moving, hunting, and scouting in the harsh winter conditions of Northrend. With many of the panthers and other animals unsuited for moving over snow for extended periods of time, even with the enhancements they got through bonding with their partners, this left scouting around the expedition to only a few sentinels, and, mainly, the druids from the Order of the Talon.

Even those sentinels with tigers like Shandris and Tyrande could not truly scout for trouble, not without leaving a trail behind them. The snow here was too soft in scattered areas, with no cover, and occasionally, they even made noise as they moved over patches of hard-packed snow. That was unacceptable to any of them after centuries of training and experience moving silently through Ashenvale. To say nothing about how the Order of the Claw druids felt about it.

Truly, the snow and cold were well beyond what they had all been prepared for. Those who had been part of the campaign to burn Vordrassil all commented on this. Tyrande, Shandris, and more than half of the present expedition had been part of that campaign. At the time, yes, the conditions in Northrend had been horrendously cold and wintry, but there hadn't been nearly as much snow, and it hadn't been nearly as cold as it was now.

The only people in Tyrande's entire force that could move through such terrain without leaving any kind of trail behind them were the two members of the Unseen Path. How that came to be was a topic of much consternation among the sentinels and even many of the druids. Not that one of their own folk could do it, but that beyond Nealu, Davo could do it. Seeing a tauren move through snow and leave so small a trail or hide himself so well that only a few druids from the Order of the Claw could see him was amazing.

Of course, even Davo couldn't move through fresh snow, the light, dusty stuff that couldn't take anyone's weight, without leaving a trail. But even so, he won quite a bit of spices and herbs from many of the other sentinels who wagered they'd be able to see him coming, only to find out they couldn't.

"The trick is in the cloak and how you move," Davo confided to Tyrande a few days after they had finally begun to move again. "The cloak is double-layered. The inner layer is for warmth. The outer layer has been specially treated with a sap that allows snow to cling to it. I take a bit every morning to, heh, roll in the snow, building up a layer. With that, I become nearly invisible. After that, it took me several winters up in Highmountain to get used to moving through snow without making noise, and to move slowly and quickly at need. Slow movement to not draw the eye, quick to move fast over any terrain."

He had looked somewhat sad for a moment, not the sadness of someone reflecting on a tragedy, but rather someone contemplating an upcoming sadness. "Pathfinder Vurg was the one who taught me when I first joined the Unseen Path. He was easily the best at moving in winter terrain among my fellow tauren."

The snow was one thing, but the cold was another, the second aspect of being in Northrend that was well beyond what Tyrande and the rest of them had thought it would be. Normally, most kaldorei could ignore the cold, but up here in Northrend, the chill was more than most could bear.

Conversely, none of the kaldorei had any trouble with the fact that the sun was only in the sky for a bare few hours this far north, something that would be true for the majority of the year, according to Nealu and other stargazers. Indeed, they preferred it, resting during the day and moving at night.

"Luckily, we arrived during what... well, from what our records tell us, this is what passes for the start of the spring season in Northrend. We will have at least half a year before we start seeing truly excessive storms. At this point of year, what you will see are a few exceptionally heavy snowfalls and worse winds occasionally, which get far less so as you push deeper into the interior," Nealu had explained when Tyrande asked a question on that score, his tone that of someone recalling something he had seen written down rather than experienced.

"During winter, only the woolly mammoths and the vrykul move. Well, them and dragons, of course." The Seeker laughed at that. "But anything smaller than a woolly mammoth isn't going to be making much headway during wintertime up here."

The sixth night after the expedition made it to Northrend, Tyrande climbed up onto her mount, patting Shy-Rotam's head affectionately. Scratching at just the right place behind an ear to cause the large frostsaber tiger to purr, Tyrande looked all around her as other sentinels,

including Shandris, pulled themselves up onto their own mounts. The vast majority of the kaldorei were bundled up, the cold and the cutting wind getting to them here in a way that few kaldorei were used to.

Except for their extremities. Their fingers, toes, boy bits and tits, as many a young kaldorei had put to it over the past few days, could become quite chilly even in an Ashenvale winter. Admittedly, most of the time, the word tits wouldn't be used in proper society, but the young folk, those kaldorei below five hundred years or so, could get away with using such terms.

That, and many of those same folk were having issues keeping their ears warm. Certain allowances could be made for rudeness in such times.

For her part, Tyrande didn't really feel the cold at all, not even in her ears. Even the wind wasn't that much of an issue, and she, unlike the majority of her fellows, was wearing the same set of half-armor and clothing underneath it that she normally would year-round. The other kaldorei all took it as a sign of her favor with Elune, the power of the moon goddess filling her, making Tyrande immune to temperature changes.

Now, she turned her head skyward, staring up at the stars and the moon. Tyrande raised her hands towards the sky, whispering a prayer to Elune as the final members of their group prepared for the march. Many of the kaldorei all around her, regardless of druidic circle or task, bowed their heads in prayer before raising their heads and moving about briskly. While the kaldorei people had renewed their devotion to Elune since the War of the Ancients, they didn't go into extreme acts of faith.

As Shy-Rotam began to move under her, Tyrande looked all around her, staring past the other sentinels and druids, most of whom had taken the form of bears or stags, to stare out into the nighttime landscape of this wintry land, a faint smile on her face.

Traveling even by boat was extremely fun, but nights like this, when she had a lot of travel to look forward to under Elune's gaze, reminded Tyrande of when she was younger and had just felt the call of the goddess. At the time, she had thoughts of perhaps becoming a traveling priestess, going from one settlement to another at the edge of the Empire as the goddess directed her feet. But even back then, temples were the norm, and such travel had never really become an option for her.

Instead, I was forced to stay at the temple, to sleep and eat at that edifice, that creation to the glory of Elune rather than simply give of myself. At the time, I thought there was more than a hint of hubris in the entire concept of temples; looking back, I think I was quite naïve. Temples provide stability and a place for both veneration and quiet communion, which is as true today as it was before the War of the Ancients.

Shaking off those thoughts, Tyrande nodded to Shandris, who held up her hands, and then chopped one of them forward. Silent gestures and orders were always the name of the day, and here in unknown territory, that was even more necessary.

As the column began its trek for the night, Tyrande became pensive, hiding the shift in her emotions with the ease of several millennia of practice. There'd been something in that beloved radiance, the normal thrum of awareness and power as Tyrande gave her praises to Elune. *Anticipation... concern?*

Tyrande could tell that Elune's attention was not entirely on her, but Tyrande still felt those emotions, like a faint echo in the distance. That was somewhat worrisome. The moon goddess was loving and devoted, but usually aloof, rarely doing more than imparting her power to her faithful or sending visions. Now, the fact that Tyrande could feel that her attention was on something, something that didn't seem to have to do with her followers at all, was equally odd.

"Why do I think that I should have sent more help with Harry?" She murmured to herself, unheard even by Shy-Rotam underneath her. *Oh dear. I realize I couldn't have at the time, given Lady Versera's refusal to carry anyone for extended periods, but still. I am rather concerned that some of the visions I saw of fire and those volcanoes might prove to be the reason behind my goddess's concern.*

Underneath Tyrande, Shy-Rotam bounded forward through the hard-packed ice and snow, making headway easily. She had been doing so since the first, even when moving through heavy snowfall thanks to her heavier frame and her coat, which dealt with the cold easily. Indeed, Shy-rotam didn't even feel the cold as far as Tyrande could tell, and it had nothing to do with the power that she gained from being bound to Tyrande. Rather, it had everything to do with her fur.

While no one would ever doubt that she was a tigress, Shy-Rotam's coat actually had more in common with what Harry would have compared to that of a husky back on earth. It was a little oily, double-layered, and incredibly thick. It could be shed far more easily than a husky's, but in wintertime, it kept Shy-Rotam warm and unbothered by any drop in temperature.

The lighter animals were having far more trouble. Even deer occasionally had issues with this kind of heavy snow, which had yet to truly settle, being soft and only lightly packed. To say nothing of the panthers and other tigers, who had no such coat like Shy-Rotam. The tigers could deal with the cold, but not nearly as easily.

Indeed, many of the forest panthers and jaguars had been returned to their totem forms, rather than forcing them to endure the cold. Meanwhile, many of the deer-shaped

druids were pulling sleds, while druids who had transformed into their bear forms broke trail for everyone else, along with some of the Sentinels riding tigers. Above, druids from the Order of the Talon flew all around.

Even there, the cold sometimes bothers my folk. What did that one Talon druid say yesterday? That the wind tends to get into places he'd rather not talk about?

Thankfully, tonight they began to run into hard-packed snow soon after setting out. The expedition began to spread out, shifting from a column into a looser formation as they moved, with many of the sentinels on tigers that had been breaking ground moving from the front of the column to its sides and around. In this manner, they could keep an eye out just as much as the ravens, crows and owls above them did.

Tyrande soon found herself back in the middle of the group, staring all around her, a bow rather than her favored moon glaive in her hand. If trouble was to find them, she hoped that she would be able to see it at range before it had time to close.

A moment later, a new voice rang out from one side of the party, so close to one of the druids that the bear twitched up and roared, snarling even as the words registered to Tyrande and several of the others. "What news from the south, Lady Whisperwind?"

Weapons were out and pointed as bears reared up, and even a few stags threateningly lowered their antlers towards the two people who had simply appeared among their party, well within their strict security cordon. Both men were kaldorei and looked to be veterans of the War of the Ancients, if their scars were anything to go by. But how they had been able to sneak through their lines like this, and underneath the eyes of the Order of the Claw, was anyone's guess.

The one who had spoken pushed back his hood, looking at them all. "I am Senior Seeker Narvae Feltstep of the Unseen Path. To answer the questions on all your faces, we did not sneak into your lines. We simply waited here for you to come to us, which is far simpler. Consider this an example of the type of ambush you will encounter here in Northrend. While I see you've started to acclimatize to moving in this kind of weather, there are those who have lived through it their entire lives, and they are far better at hiding than you are at finding."

"I know those acerbic tones. You haven't been seen in years, we thought both of you lost, Seeker Narvae, Cartographer Purde," Nealu grumbled.

"Nealu, you and Davo's presence among these folk gave us both pause when you first spotted you," Narvae answered.

"Still, we decided to go with our plans to give you a friendly warning about what you might expect from the locals here. Although I am still surprised that it works so well with such a

varied group. You druids need to think more with your noses. I know bears have good noses. Always assume that there are enemies over the next snow drift, and you might not be taken by surprise,” Pinefrost added.

While many of the youngsters around them took umbrage at that, Tyrande stared at both men, taking in their features and bodies. Both were excessively scarred and older-looking than the majority of the kaldorei with Tyrande. Indeed, Tyrande thought they were both older than she was, or at least stood that way. It showed in the way they stood, not just their scars, but a tilt of their ears, a slant to their eyes and a slight droop to their shoulders. These were men who had endured extreme hardship and loss.

“Tell me, Narvae, how long has it been since the two of you arrived here in Northrend?” She asked.

“I have not returned to Trueshot Lodge since dropping off a young aspirant more than a decade ago now,” Narvae answered almost dismissively. “Pudre and I have been trying to map Northrend. As you undoubtedly felt from the storm last night, winters are simply impossible to move through for those of us of normal stature.”

Pude nodded. He was the most senior Topographer, the highest rank a Cartographer could achieve, still willing to be out in the world and a part of small teams rather than large ones, or, in this instance, to work simply with one Seeker as a partner. “Hard going indeed,” his voice was so low even kaldorei had to strain to hear him. “To say nothing of how many changes to the terrain we have discovered and enemies we have had to deal with.”

“Davo, Nealu, do you two vouch for them?” Shandris growled, her voice and expression equally unamused by being snuck up on like this.

“Yes, General,” Nealu answered formally, if succinctly, while Davo was a bit more forthcoming. “I haven’t worked specifically with Topographer Pinefrost, but I have seen him teach Copiers and Learners. Narvae is a hoary, gruff old man, but he knows his stuff. And he’s always been one of our experts in moving through snowy and winter trains like this. Although I didn’t know that he and Pinefrost had been assigned a mission to map Northrend.”

“It was decided about two decades ago that we would eventually be sent. Once I returned with young Samantha, Pathfinder Vurg decided it was time,” Narvae shrugged in reply.

He had been somewhat respectful, if brusque, up to this point. Now, as Fandral joined them, his stance and body language shifted as he almost glared at the archdruid, a thin sneer appearing on his face, his ears becoming stiff and twitching above his head. Staghelm looked back at him with scant favor, his large hands flexing as if he was still in his bear form for a moment and wanted to charge the other kaldorei.

The two men had fought alongside one another occasionally during the War of the Ancients, and they did not like one another at all. Some memories and arguments never faded, and worse, both Narvae and Fandral were the type to hold a grudge.

Seeing this, Tyrande held back a snort of amusement with some difficulty. *My word, but Fandral really does have a way with people, doesn't he? It's almost an art form how often he gets on people's bad sides.*

Beneath Tyrande, Shy-Rotam felt much the same, looking back and forth between the two kaldorei, before craning her neck back to look at Tyrande. "Will they challenge one another or simply fight to the death? I can never tell with you two-legged folk. But it's clear that these are two alphas that don't like one another."

"Thankfully, I don't think that we need to worry about them trying to kill one another, dear one. My folk are far too civilized for that kind of thing," Tyrande chuckled, her eyes sweeping back to the two old men, her gaze exceedingly firm as she stared at them. "I do not want any ancient issue between you two to be brought into the modern day. Is that understood?"

The two men continued glaring at one another, but Pinefrost shifted around his companion to bow towards Tyrande. "Priestess Whisperwind, the reason why we wished to test your response as we did was that we are not the only ones who can move and hide so well in this terrain. There are trolls ahead of you. A full warband. Most of them are on foot, but some of them are riding bears, giant beasts bigger than any bear found in the south. They all have white coats, which allow them to blend in with the snow far better than you might believe possible. They might have moved on since we spotted them, but then again, they might not have. Regardless, I don't have to tell you how trolls will react to the presence of any kaldorei nearby."

Tyrande frowned a little at that. She was too young by a good seven thousand years to remember the series of wars the burgeoning kaldorei Empire had fought with the trolls, but she had been taught about the hatred trolls felt towards kaldorei. The trolls had their own empire at one point, but in clashes with the kaldorei, they slowly lost influence, manpower and territory, pretty much in that order. However, that hadn't stopped the small, bitter wars between the two races.

That was all historical knowledge, though. There had only been a few small-scale run-ins with trolls in the few thousand years leading up to the War of the Ancients, with the last sighting being a few hundred years before Azshara's folly doomed the empire, and Tyrande had personally never actually fought trolls. However, the hatred between the two races was ancient and harsh.

“What do you propose?” she asked calmly.

“Spread out,” Narvae answered promptly, turning away from Fandral. “Use your druids’ other forms. The trolls won’t be able to tell them from normal animals. Push them out in every direction, then have them come in to attack once the trolls engage you. Coming in from multiple angles will pin the trolls in place, so they can’t try to hit-and-run.”

Pudre nodded, elaborating. “Trolls are stronger than kaldorei for the most part, and these have grown up here in Northrend. They’ll be able to move far faster on foot through the snow than you might think. Their spears and arrows are dangerous for all their primitive appearance. But mainly it’s their ability to blend in. You always need to be scanning your surroundings. Your ravens are good, but we just showed you that they can be fooled or miss things.”

Staghelm remained scowling at Purde but actually nodded agreement to the plan. “My stag or deer-shifted druids can leave the column in different directions, then when they attack, shift to our combat bear forms.. The trolls haven’t spotted us yet, so they don’t know the size of our force. I’d also recommend that we tell the ravens. They can attack from on high.”

Narvae looked as if he would argue with that but shrugged. He had only rarely worked with Brothers of the Talon, thus, beyond turning into different types of birds, didn’t know anything about their abilities and was interested to see what they could do.

“Choose four of your Druids of the Claw to stay with the rest of the column. We might need help in terms of healing and spellwork,” Tyrande decided, before looking over at Shandris. “Daughter?”

“Spread out our band even further. Warn everyone to be on guard, with those of us who specialize in bows and arrows falling back of those who are primarily close-range fighters,” Shandris ‘suggested’ firmly. “We can also tell our sentinels to be ready to call on their partners. While most of the beast companions might not like moving in this terrain, they still represent a force multiplier in an actual battle.

“Don’t forget you have a mobility advantage even in close combat,” Narvae warned. “And remember, trolls regenerate incredibly quickly. To even gravely wound one, you’ll need to remove a limb. Aim for the neck and head. With no brain, they won’t regenerate, same with the heart, but trolls have a naturally toughened rib cage that acts almost like a second layer of armor.”

Fandral didn’t like the fact that they were taking advice from Narvae, but like Tyrande, he’d never fought in the troll wars, so he just nodded. “Very well.”

“You sound as if you have fought trolls before?”

“We have,” Nealu answered, gesturing to himself and Narvae. “There was once a troll presence on the Broken Isles. We ran into them as we were mapping the islands, and they attacked members of the Unseen Path whenever they saw us. Eventually, they became too numerous and posed a real threat. We lost several members of the Unseen Path before we decided to make war on them, pushing them back to their own island and keeping them there.”

“I remember that. Wasn’t that the last time that Lady Versera had stopped in, around six hundred years or so ago?”

“Yes, it... Wait, last time?” Narvae blinked. “What do you mean?”

“You two have missed quite a bit,” Nealu said, allowing himself to chuckle for a moment.

Tyrande left the group of Unseen Path secrets to speak for a while, moving ahead towards the front of the column. While she could fight with bow and arrow, she was far more skilled in close combat. Besides, unlike many of the other sentinels, she could switch from one weapon to another seamlessly, even while riding on Shy-Rotam.

Not an hour later, the night was riven by roars ahead of them. From out of several snow mounds, which had previously looked completely undisturbed, trolls came roaring ahead, riding giant polar bears. Bigger and far heavier looking than even the grizzlies of the Druids of the Claw, they erupted almost in the central formation, showing that the warnings from Narvae and his companion were all too accurate. The trolls here could truly hide far better than any of Tyrande’s folk could discern.

However, instead of getting in among the Sentinels, the charging trolls and their mounds ran into similarly mounted sentinels prepared for them. The tigers and panthers of the Sentinels closed in from behind and the front, getting in close to aid their fellows swiftly. Meanwhile, arrows peppered them from the back lines as those Sentinels who preferred bows quickly retreated, everything accomplished in near silence, with simple gestures and finger movements.

This was an incredible sign of discipline and individual training. Shandris Feathermoon demanded excellence from her Sentinels, and now it showed in this small battle.

For her part, Tyrande fired two arrows, then slung her bow, pulling her moon glaive from her back. A twitch of her legs sent Shy-Rotam forward, and the pair charged alongside Shandris and her mount to slam into the first of the trolls to meet them.

The polar bear lashed out towards Shandris. The troll rider stabbed out at Tyrande, wielding a strange trident-like spear. The tines of the weapon were not level with one another; they were almost in a triangular formation rather than a line. The troll wielded that weapon

one-handed and had a heavy shield on his other arm, an affectation that few sentinels used, preferring either to use moon glaives in either hand like Tyrande, or bows, arrows and spears.

But despite wielding that trident with one hand, the impact of it on her moon glaive surprised Tyrande, knocking her own blade off course. This slowed her next blow so that the troll was able to get its shield up in time. *Fast and strong too!*

The polar bear bit at Tyrande next, but Shy-Rotam twitched aside and went for the polar bear's throat with her fangs. The polar bear backed away rapidly, getting raked by Shandris's mount at the same time, but nearly catching Ca-Fullen, her tiger companion of many decades, with a back paw. Luckily, it was the back paw, and Shandris' mount only skidded backwards rather than having his head smashed in.

Even as her mount was sent skidding through the snow, Shandris leapt off of her mount, lashing out with a kick that caught the troll's leg where it was around the neck of the polar bear, breaking bone, while her moon glaive flashed down. The troll was able to get its shield up in time, blocking the blows, but this opened it up to Tyrande, who instantly took advantage, her moon glaive flashing in an arc.

The next second, its head flew off, and Tyrande's other moon glaive stabbed deep into the polar bear's head. It took a remarkable amount of force to penetrate its skull, and even as it did, Tyrande was forced to release the weapon as the polar bear reared up, lashing out wildly with its forepaws, forcing both herself and Shandri, who had flipped back and away from the troll and its mount to her own, to back away.

Even as they shifted their attention to another polar bear and its troll rider, who came in on Tyrande's side, the stricken polar bear slowly collapsed, as if it wasn't willing to realize that its brain had just been pierced by a sharp piece of metal. There were at least ten other polar bears, all being ridden by trolls attacking the expedition force, but alone, they wouldn't have been much of a threat. Indeed, they were now entirely surrounded by teams of three mounted sentinels, worrying the larger beasts from every angle.

However, even as the fight quickly turned against their mounted brethren, other trolls shifted out of the snow, firing arrows or hurling spears and even axes forward. Those spears were shorter than a close-range spear, with at least half of their length being the metal point rather than the wood. When they struck, that metal began to warp almost instantly, showing that it was simple iron rather than steel, but still deadly for all of that against unarmored opponents.

This included all of the druids, who disdained armor at the best of times, preferring to use their animal forms. Similarly, only about one in three sentinels preferred to fight in heavy

armor. Although at present they were all wearing heavier furs and leather than normal, clothing made for warmth provided only a bit more defense than nothing.

Two of Shandris' Sentinels went down, screaming in pain, but the rest of the Sentinels dodged or deflected the spears sent their way. Four mounts went down, causing howls of outrage and grief, with five more sentinels hissing in pain from arrow strikes.

Instead of staying back as Narvae and Purde had thought, many of those spear hurlers charged, bellowing war cries. They pushed through the snow easily, crashing into the sentinels all around the expedition force. However, if they had thought to push in toward the long-range fighters among the Sentinels, they were sorely mistaken. The sentinels on the flanks, who had not moved to engage the polar bear riders, held their ground, meeting this charge.

By that point, two of the four druids left with the sentinels and Tyrande had already transformed, and one troll became the unlucky victim of a bear that reared up and smashed his head in with one powerful strike.

Elsewhere, the trolls were fighting the kaldorei on an almost even footing. For one thing, there were at least two of them in comparison to every sentinel. The trolls were also stronger than most of the kaldorei, something that caught many of them by surprise in those initial clashes, just as much as the trolls having a reach advantage over most of the sentinels. They were, however, just a bit too slow to make up the best of that difference.

But then there was the trolls' regeneration. As Tyrande sliced at one, she cut deeply into his leg where it rested on one side of the polar bear's neck, she saw it begin to regenerate the moment her blade left the cut. Then Shandris was there, forcing the polar bear rider back.

Taking in the total battle and the fact that many of the owls and ravens were now beginning to plummet down into the trolls, Tyrande shouted, "Shandris, pull back and reinforce the left flank! They haven't attacked us from behind just yet, but if they can bend around that side, it's only a matter of time before they get to the archers!"

Those archers had killed several of the trolls, accurate fire taking them in the eye, forehead or throat. Those hit in the throat had actually begun to pull the weapons out, but Narvae's words about blows to the head killing them seemed to be accurate. None of the ones struck through the eyes, and thus into the brain, was going anywhere but to the grave.

Shandris might have protested, but a wave of magic washed over the entire expedition force for a second. Well, that portion of the expedition force that was present, anyway, came from the four druids still with the rest of the expedition.

This came from two of the druids who had yet to engage in close combat. One cast a Nature Magic Speed boosting spell, while the other cast a spell that gave their forces a

regeneration ability of their own. It wasn't nearly as powerful as that which the trolls had, but it would keep all but the most grievously wounded alive until a druid with a more dedicated healing spell could get to them.

At the same time, a series of bramble bushes rose up out of the snow. Even as the bushes appeared, they already showed signs that the weather was causing them to wither, but that simply meant that there were lots and lots of thorns on them to protect the back of the archers' position.

With the frontline of the sentinels now a basic curve, this protected the archers and allowed them to fire back at the more distant troll archers and axe throwers. The archers had better eyesight than the trolls, and their rate of fire was faster, too, giving the kaldorei an advantage in that aspect of the fight.

That was the last thing that Tyrande could notice before another bear rider slammed into Shy-Rotam, nearly tumbling Tyrande out of the saddle and Shy-Rotam onto her side. It attempted to tear a chunk out of her side, but was beaten by the armor Shy-Rotam wore. Instead the bite simply buckled the armor, unable to penetrate but still causing the no-longer-so-young frostsaber tiger to yowl in pain.

Even as her partner stumbled, Tyrande instantly attacked, lashing out at the bear. It lacked any armor, and soon its face was turned into a bleeding ruin by a series of quick strikes. Bellowing with anger and fear, it reared up, howling, its paws rising to its face, blocking the rider from striking accurately.

Battering a wild spear thrust aside, Tyrande's glaive sliced deeply into the polar bear's stomach, and not incidentally removing a foot from the troll, causing him to cry out in pain. Then Shy-Rotam bounded around the creature. Leaping up, she grabbed at the troll with her maw, biting and tearing a chunk out of the troll's side.

Even then, the troll didn't die. The wound regenerated, if slowly, and his trident rose on that side, but his hand flew away a second later to join his foot as one of Tyrande's moon glaives found it. The next second, his throat was sliced through from one side to another, and his head slowly slid off his body.

Two more polar bears pushed into Tyrande, but they were rapidly engaged by several of the other sentinels on their mounts. With the polar bear riders in front of her being distracted by her fellows, Tyrande had time again to take in the whole battle, and did so quickly.

Most of the polar bear riders, except for the ones in front of Tyrande, were down, but they showed no sign of knowing it. Elsewhere, many of the sentinels who hadn't yet done so had conjured their bonded partners out of their totems and were locked in battle with the troll

infantry. They were holding their own, but more of the trolls were hurling down their bows and arrows and rushing to engage in close combat, pressing the sentinel line hard everywhere.

Most of them used short-hafted hatchets, with wide-bladed spears also making up some of their weaponry. It almost looked like a harpoon, a weapon Tyrande had once seen used by fishermen against sharks.

Regardless of what kind of weapon the trolls used, they were pressing in hard, forcing the men and women of the sentinels back step-by-step in the churned-up snow, which instantly froze once more, making footing treacherous. At least three more Kaldorei bodies had joined the others who had already fallen since the last time Tyrande turned her gaze to the battle as a whole.

Even so, everywhere except for where the four members of the Unseen Path stood was holding at worst. There, trolls were literally being hacked to pieces by Davo or sliced and broken by the three kaldorei. Unlike any of the kaldorei, Davo had more than enough strength to overwhelm a troll, something that the trolls didn't seem to realize, if the sight of one after another trying to match him blow for blow was any indicator. More interestingly, the three kaldorei members of the sect seemed to have trained in anti-troll combat. They went for hinges, cuts to the hand and forearm, before replying brutally to any riposte, going for eyes, ears, throat, even the nose, forcing the trolls back, then aiming at their legs. The trio flowed through the battle, showing a mastery of combat that few could understand, let alone match. Tyrande knew she was one such, but even she was surprised by the simple efficiency on display.

Breaking off her musings, Tyrande had to concentrate on her own battle for a few seconds, as seven trolls raced forwards armed with the harpoon-like spears to engage her and Shy-Rotam. By the time the last of them fell to a back kick from Shy-Rotam, which sliced into its chest and bone there, the battle had completely turned against the trolls with the arrival of the bears and stags of the Druids of the Claw. The Druids of the Claw, currently in stag form, slammed into and through several trolls, tossing them around like they weighed nothing, before shifting into their normal bodies and engaging with fists or punches. Meanwhile, the bears simply waded into the back of the battle all around the embattled sentinels, their battle cries roaring.

Despite that, the majority of the trolls didn't break. Rather, they all seemed to be in some kind of battle frenzy. As another group of them charged at ship Shy-Rotam and Tyrande, Tyrande took a second to stare into their eyes, seeing they were red-rimmed and wrathful. They shouted in their own tongue, but Tyrande could not translate and honestly didn't care to try even if she could have.

Whatever the cause of this strange madness, the trolls stayed and fought until the last one died, taking four more sentinels with them, along with one of the druids of the claw, and three druids of the talon. Several of the trolls had realized that the crows and ravens attacking them were not natural and had matched talon and beak with hatchet in close range or fired at them. Only one of the dead ravens had fallen to an arrow, but even so, that was a grievous total.

“Why did they fight to the death like that?” Tyrande nearly demanded as she slid off Shy-Rotam, moving to help some of the healers. While Elune had not seen fit to bless her with the ability to heal like druids who pulled from Nature Magic to enhance the healing speed of their patients, she still knew first aid. Indeed, as an acolyte at the temple, taking care of simple breaks and kaldorei who were injured in accidents or during dangerous tasks had been one of the main ways that Tyrande had filled her days. *Well, that and speaking to Malfurion and his brother, Illidan.*

Narvae and the others all looked at one another, but it was Davo who answered, reaching down and wrenching up one of the trolls, holding it easily in the air, plucking something, a gourd of some kind, from its belt. “This is part of it. The other part is that trolls simply hate kaldorei and are xenophobic in the extreme to any other race to boot. I would’ve expected at least a few of them to try and flee, but I saw several of them imbibing in something from these gourds. I don’t know what it is, but it seems to have made them into berserkers.”

“Men and women alike,” Tyrande said, glancing up from her work for a second to one side, where one of the last trolls had fallen. It had broken through the sentinel line but had died perforated by close-range arrow fire. She, for it was indeed a woman, had been struck multiple times in the chest by arrows, but the curves there were still somewhat prominent, even if they were nowhere near what a kaldorei had, at least in terms of curves. In size, they were somewhat similar, yet the trolls were far more angular and bonier, and, like their menfolk, the women seemed more angular than curvy. Her lips were a strange difference, though. Full and painted red, an alluring color, those lips caught the eye, which, coupled with her tusks, gave the woman a barbaric kind of beauty despite the lack of true femininity.

“Unless a woman is pregnant, trolls don’t apparently differentiate much between what a woman can do and what a man can do in their tribal society, if such a word can even be used for their primitive lifestyles,” Narvae said, snorting. He sent a grudging nod to Fandral, who joined them, the nod an acknowledgment that he had done his part well, while the rest of Narvae’s body language made it very clear that he still wasn’t a fan of the archdruid.

The sneer he got in return matched the one that Narvae had given Fandral when they first saw one another earlier. However, Fandral pushed past that, gesturing to the bodies

around them. "I'm presuming we should burn them? Some of these trolls might still be able to regenerate and are just playing dead."

His words were interrupted by a scream from one of the trolls, whose head had just been stepped on by one of the transformed druids. His attempt to rise to his feet ended abruptly, his head turned into so much red ruin.

"True. Shandris, could you please organize that?" Tyrande said, before turning back to her first-aid work. "Send a few druids of the talon to range out ahead of us further than normal. I think we need to look for a place to rest rather than keep on pushing on tonight." She glanced sideways at Narvae and the Topographer, who had joined the sentinel orchards rather than the other three at the front. "And I think I'd like to see whatever map you all have been working on."

Narvae stared up into the nighttime sky, turning his head in one direction, then asked, "Send some ravens out that way too. It smells as if it's going to snow again, and the wind is coming from that direction."

Several of the owls, more powerful flyers than the ravens, soon shifted in that direction, working against the wind for a time. Soon, they came back to report that there were indeed quite a lot of clouds building up in that direction, and snow had already begun to fall beneath. Thankfully, the ravens sent ahead of the column found a small copse of trees, working their way through it carefully to make sure that there weren't any further trolls or any other dangers there.

A small group of druids and the members of the Unseen Path headed forward to the copse of trees, where they began to build igloos, building them up and around the trees, creating several large communal igloos, and a few out-houses. The strength of the druids in their bear forms and the knowledge of the members of the Unseen Path made the work pass smoothly.

The rest of the expedition joined them after placing their dead in thick blankets for the trip, while the dead of the trolls had been piled into a funeral pyre several yards deep and across. When the expedition was together again, the dead were slowly consigned to the earth, with the druids using Nature Magic to bury them, then raise pine trees over their graves as Tyrande led a dirge in their name. This took several hours, and the wind was howling and snow falling before they were done.

With the ceremony over, everyone quickly headed inside the igloos as snow fell, heavy and thick behind them. Tyrande and the other leaders were shown into one, which had two adjoining, smaller igloos for the men's and women's sleeping quarters. With them were the four members of the Unseen Path. Not even Fandral objected to this, knowing they had saved

the expedition from far worse casualties and had shown their own combat skills were vastly superior to most of the kaldorei, druid or sentinel.

The last to enter, Narvae shook his head, waiting, staring out at the sky before pulling the makeshift ice block door into the opening. "This will probably be the last major storm this spring. We'll have to hold up here until it passes and make sure that everyone has enough wood and warmth to get by."

"Still, that's a task we can see too, old grouch," Davo snorted, to which Narvae snorted.

Tyrande looked at Narvae and the Topographer, one of her ears twitching in the equivalent of a raised eyebrow in a human. *Interesting. Both he and Topographer Pinefrost are looking... not younger, but more energetic and poised. As if they have thrown off some old weight? Or perhaps regained a certain joy of life? Interesting. I have seen that kind of recovery before in those who were scarred inside more than the outside from the War of the Ancients, but I wonder what caused this. I doubt either of them is... what did Harry once jokingly call himself? A thrill junkie? No, this pair doesn't strike me as the type to enjoy violence. So, what did Davo and Nealu tell them?*

Deciding after a moment it was none of her business, Tyrande coughed gently, gesturing the others to sit down around a camp table set into the center of the igloo. There was a small fire going, and it was actually quite nice, so much so that Shandris and Fandral had both stripped off their woolen cloaks. "I think we all deserve some food and some information, Senior Seeker Feltstep, Topographer Pinefrost. If we supply the first, can you provide the second?"

Narvae bowed formally towards the priestess. "First of all, I must congratulate you on your luck, Priestess Whisperwind. If this were the opposite, the first storm of the winter, you probably wouldn't be able to do more than a few leagues a day. Pinefrost and I have never been able to make much headway in winter, so much so that after the first two years up here, we just holed up somewhere throughout the six months it lasted."

"Six months?" Shandris asked, aghast. That wasn't very long at all as kaldorei normally measured such things, but being stuck on Northrend for that long, and then in just one place, would be abominably boring.

"The cold gets worse the further north you go. Honestly, coming up the way you did, following the Shoals of Jagged Teeth, you somewhat bypassed most of the area of Northrend that could be called technically livable," Pinefrost said, shaking his head. "It puts you closer to your target, but the going will be harder for that shorter trip. I... honestly don't know if you would have been any better off putting down by the isthmus," he finished, his ears twitching expressively as he thought about that.

“You’re talking to us as if we understand any of the geography of Northrend. I say again my last, we are due some knowledge from the pair of you. So perhaps you should show us what you have been able to map of this continent rather than leave us in ignorance?” Tyrande asked politely, if tartly.

Narvae nodded, and Purde quickly reached into his bag. From within, he pulled out several pieces of paper, each parchment held in its own special, thin protective layer of animal sinew to protect it from wind, rain, and so forth. Every three pieces were placed into a thick leather bag, and the entire set was then snugly fit into a wooden box. He set each piece of parchment out and quickly put them together, creating a map that looked as if it covered about a third of a continent, at least in terms of its edges and where the various lines indicating that ended.

As he did, Tyrande and the others began to stare.

Mapmaking was a highly respected artform among kaldorei for various reasons, mainly because there had been several centuries after the War of the Ancients where such maps needed to be continually updated as the very land continued to change and shift due to the forces released in the destruction of the Well of Eternity and the creation of the Maelstrom. Indeed, such had been the case up to the War of the Satyrs, making mapmaking a hard, arduous and constantly changing process.

Yet it was clear that the artform had been taken even farther than among the kaldorei by the members of the Unseen Path, as this was easily the most detailed map any of them had seen in segments. Particularly, the southern end of Northrend, the shape of which told Tyrande and the others what Narvae had been talking about before. There was as yet no key to tell them what many of those notations meant, but the quality and detail were still easily visible.

The Shoals of Jagged Teeth didn’t actually reach the southernmost portion of Northrend as the maps Tyrande had worked from prior to planning this mission stated. Rather, it had taken them further north before coming within sight of Northrend well west of the center of the continent. The continent was also far larger than Tyrande expected, mentally comparing this map to the maps she had seen of the northern edge of the original supercontinent, which had been called Kalimdor back then. She could faintly make out some things that looked the same, but not many.

If Harry had been there, he would have thought the map of Northrend looked like the upper portion of Canada and Greenland had been connected by solid ice. Then extended further northwards out of the ken of the mapmaker.

“Ice quakes still happen occasionally up here, and I believe from my studies of segments of this area in particular, we might see it sink into the ocean eventually,” the Topographer

stated, scowling a little as he indicated where the group had come ashore. "Bar perhaps a small island of actual solid ground. I dislike the idea of all of my work needing to be redone in a thousand years, but that is unimportant. A tremendous portion of this continent is made mostly of ice, not just solid ground. This area up here?"

Purde gestured to an area north of their current position, which he had almost idly pointed out as he laid out the pieces of his map. "That area is solid ice. The ice is so deep, so hard and thick there, that it makes most of the old buildings of our Empire look soft and permeable in comparison. We tried to dig into it for days to see how deep it was, but all we did was ruin the drills we brought along for that purpose. All five of them. That was two weeks before we saw your expedition."

Narvae sneered over at Fandral. "Owls and Ravens don't normally fly in formation. Something to consider going forward."

Fandral sneered back, but Purde, deep into his specialty, continued talking without making any sign he noticed the tension between his friend and the archdruid.

"We saw segments of the shoreline changing last season. During wintertime it seemed as hard and as immovable as anything, then, when spring came fully, quakes began, and a significant chunk began to simply break off and drift away around here," Purde explained excitedly, pointing to an area of further westward using a small stylus, a highly advanced type with a tiny built-in inkwell, to basically almost remake a portion of the map on that side with an unused parchment. "Essentially, this whole area is probably going to change significantly in the future, but I suppose that really doesn't matter to your expedition overmuch, considering where Vordassil is, as that area is on actual solid ground."

He shifted his stylus from one point to another, and instantly, Tyrande and the others understood. They could have come ashore much further south, in an area that might not be as bitterly cold, but they would've had to trek much further and deeper into the continent than they would now. However, for a time, they would be moving over an area that was almost as much ice and snow as real ground. Yet the copse of trees they were currently in told them all that there was ground to be found there, something that Tyrande pointed out.

"Agreed, but I would liken those to bits of islands, something like the Broken Isles, only connected to the rest of the Northrend continent by ice. We know where some of them are, but this one we hadn't run into just yet," the Topographer explained.

Having shifted his attention away from his staring contest with Narvae, Fandral was now staring at the map with an almost avaricious hunger, trying to take in every detail. However, there was no key involved, and the meaning of some of the marks eluded him.

The ones for trolls were easy enough: a tiny green head with tusks. He was somewhat dismayed to see so many of them of various sizes scattered around the western edges of Northrend. There was also a large mark for what looked like blue dragons in the north, well beyond the edges of the rest of the map, as if Purde wasn't certain where they were beyond 'north' and a far smaller mark for blue dragons elsewhere. That one was situated near the center of the peninsula to the south. He pointed out these marks, and Purde answered quickly.

"We actually don't know where most of the blue dragons are, but we did speak to the patriarch of that family unit. They were somewhat standoffish and asked us not to map their territory, which we agreed to; hence, that area isn't very well defined beyond the marker for blue dragons. They told us that the majority of blues lived even further northward. On foot, that kind of trek would take the two of us at least a few years, considering winter and its conditions up here. According to the blue we talked to, most dragons subsist on mammoths, which are somewhat tough to hunt and eat. They're quite blubbery, if you understand what that word can mean."

The others all shrugged at that, although Shandris asked, "If all of the other blue dragons live further north, why did this one family live on their own?"

Feltstep and Pinefrost both shrugged their shoulders, but it was Davo who spoke up. "Actually, I think Lady Versera mentioned something about the blue flight. There are those among their number who aren't exactly happy with the isolationist policy that the Blue Aspect, Malygos has been following since Deathwing's betrayal, and have come to distrust their flight leader. How far that goes, I can't say. She was remarkably closemouthed about it, but she mentioned that there are groups of blues out there that prefer to be away from the rest of their flight because of that."

"I still don't know what is more surprising. That Lady Versera showed up for the second time this millennium, or that you all found the spear," Narvae muttered.

"What about these other marks? What danger do they represent?" Shandris asked, gesturing to a small head that looked somewhat like Harry's in that it did not have the typical troll or kaldorei ears. Well, that and no tusks, obviously. There were a lot of whatever they were, situated mostly to the east of the mapped portions of Northrend, with several abutting the area where details began to peter out.

"Vrykul," Narvae answered succinctly.

"You'll see more of them near the center of the continent here, and further east and then south. Along that coast, and then down the other side of the isthmus in particular, there are several large tribes, many of them with several longships apiece. But there are also a few clans scattered throughout the interior of the continent, and one of them is close enough to the

route you might wish to take to reach where the corpse of Vordrassil lies to be a danger,” Purde elaborated.

“If you skirt further south, you won’t enter their hunting ground. That will, though, bring you closer to trolls, so you will have to pick which enemy you wish to fight,” Narvae explained, while Purde mapped out the routes they were talking about.

“There will also be bands of trolls like the one that attacked us today. Men and women of fighting age who were not interested in starting families or settling down. They shift and move as the prey does, in this case, herds of moose or, as the group that we fought, seals. They were heading towards the coastline for seal hunting. Going forward, you will have to assume that you will run into more like that,” Purde added.

“Vrykul normally settle down into one area. They can probably be either avoided or reasoned with if you can speak their language. They’re not with other tribes of their own kind, and Narvae and I have traded with an odd hunter here or there. But fighting them is extremely difficult. I would recommend that if you had a choice between fighting one of them or fighting a troll, you choose the troll. The troll might regenerate and will most decidedly fight you harder than the vrykul, but vrykul are far tougher to hurt in the first place, far stronger, and far more likely to retreat and come back with help,” he continued.

“Do the trolls simply hate us because they are xenophobic, or is there something specific that, even debased as they are from their ancient glory, the barbarians remember?” Shandris asked, frowning a little. “I am used to fighting Fel-touched or Tainted that hate us that much, but I didn’t see any hint of such influence in the trolls. It was somewhat disconcerting.”

“It’s mostly xenophobia, although I have picked up a few words of Trollish. With that, I was actually able to listen in on a senior hunter explaining something of their past to a few younglings about the breaking of the world. They blame it on us.” Pinefrost said simply.

Snarls of anger and rage went around the room, from every kaldorei throat, even Shandris, but Tyrande shook her head firmly, her voice cutting through that growling rejection like a hot knife through butter. “Are they wrong?”

All of them turned to her, protests on nearly every face, but Tyrande went on coldly. “It was our old Queen’s greed, the Highborne and their magical addiction, which called forth the Burning Legion. Malfurion also knew the destruction he would unleash when he destroyed the Well of Ages. It might’ve sealed the rift, but it did shatter the world. It was a harsh price, but one we had to pay at the time. Yet despite the necessity of that act, do not look for other races to simply ignore the role we played in the shattering of Azeroth. None of them have as long a memory as ours, not even your people, Davo.”

“For my part, I have never heard a tauren say that they blame the kaldorei for the Sundering, not even your Highborne. I know that we Highmountain tauren do not,” Davo said firmly. “Like all other Seekers, I have studied the history of the War of the Ancients, and I understand that it was a decision between causing the Sundering or facing an unending war against the Burning Legion. When one is faced with extinction, any other choice or decision becomes far more palatable.”

“I thank you for that sentiment, but still, the cracking of the world is our guilt to bear. I cannot fault the trolls for hating us on that score. Although mindlessly attacking us is not something I will simply put up with, either. And if you say that we can actually speak to the vrykul, then we will do so.”

“I only said you could to some of the tribes,” Purde warned. “The vrykul are very much a mixed bag of crazy.”

His words released some of the tension that Tyrande’s words had caused, and even Fandral goggled at him. “I’m serious. Some tribes are almost as civilized as Tauren; others are combative in the extreme. Still a third might have a might makes right philosophy but are generally organized, while a fourth might be determined to try and make farms of some kind out of the ice and snow, which is a fool’s game.”

“Most of the tribes are as xenophobic as the trolls, but the ones who have settled down in one area seem a little more peaceable than those to the northeast,” Narvae warned. “Thankfully, we won’t have to go through their territory to get to Vordrassil, as I said.”

“Yes, this map shows a significant chunk of area around Vorrassil in detail,” Fandral said, frowning. “What can you tell us about it?”

Both Narvae and Pinefrost shivered. “Destroying the World Tree was the right choice. It cut off any ongoing connection to Yogg-Saron, yet Vordrassil was corrupted to a tremendous degree. And, as much as I hate to say it, Priestess, you and yours did not burn it entirely away,” Narvae said, shaking his head. “I know you lacked the means to truly destroy the stump and tear out its roots, but it has become a blight on the land. One with a limited area, but in that area, it is...

“I do not even worship Elune as most of our folks do. But I can only call it unholy,” Purde agreed, while Narvae glared at him for a moment, some old argument rearing its head. “It is a home of twisted things, horror and darkness, like twisted trolls in the main, and worse, undead spiders and vrykul alike.”

At the mention of twisted trolls, Tyrande frowned pensively. She had begun sending a glare Fandral’s way, for it had been his obdurate nature and unwillingness to be wrong that had

caused Andrassil's corruption. She wanted to make certain he understood fully how badly his idea of spreading world trees around the world could go, and this sojourn would prove that conclusively. But even as she glared, a shiver of unease and the memory of the visions Elune had sent her about Harry's mission once more went through her head.

So, trolls are making trouble for both of us, are they? Well, Harry, I hope that you don't run into as nearly as many of them as I am apparently going to be here in the North, she reflected ruefully. What was that human phrase you once told me, my friend? When it rains, it pours? This definitely feels like that. If we had been able to deal with one threat at a time, I feel we would've done so far better than we will now.

For a brief moment, Tyrande allowed her thoughts to travel southward towards Harry again, her young friend, although no longer young in terms of his own people, admittedly, and what he might be facing. *I wish you luck, my friend, and I do hope you return to Ashenvale sometime. I have few enough friends I can ill afford to lose even one.*

Shrugging those thoughts off, she concentrated on the conversation again, which evidently had become quite technical in terms of what necromantic energies there were around the stump, how and what Pinefrost and Narvae meant when they said twisted trolls, as well as what they meant by undead, which Shandris and Fandral had not run into before. Nor had Tyrande, unless you counted the Frostmaul giants, which she did. The mention of spiders, though seemingly flummoxed both Fandral and Shandris, until the matter of how large these particular spiders were came out.

"These spiders are **that** large?" Shandris asked, her eyes wide and a certain childhood fear trying to rear its head. The idea of there being a spider out there that could have fangs longer than her moon glaive was concerning in the extreme.

"They are. How they came to be around the stump, we have no idea; their home is further north and east of the stump. But perhaps... they might have been in the area long ago, and simply moved. Or, perhaps they sensed the corruption and came to investigate, only to be corrupted in turn. We didn't try to go very close, I tell you that," Pinefrost said, shaking his head.

"You speak as if these spiders are intelligent. Is that so?" Tyrande asked, joining the conversation again.

"They are. Moreover, there is..." Narvae and Purde exchanged a look, one of both worry and excitement, while Davo and Nealu looked on. They had some idea of the giant spiders from Northrend, but what these two had discovered would be new.

It was, in fact, new to everyone and somewhat shocking.

“About seven months ago, during summer, we were around here,” Purde explained, taking another marker and, after a few moments' study, putting it much farther north and to the east than their current position, almost but not quite to the northeastern shoreline of Northrend, deep in an area marked with a lot of giant heads. “There, we discovered what we thought at first were buried ruins from some ancient vrykul society, but we quickly learned after examining them that they had been built into the sides of caves and were smaller than the vrykul would build, and eventually found still more deeper underground. There were houses, thoroughfares, roads, even, all underneath the ground and all built by creatures who could climb walls and ceilings as easily as we can walk on the ground. All of it was smashed in some long battle with the vrykul, but the architecture was impressive.”

“More than just that, we overheard some of the vrykul speaking occasionally about threats to the north. An Empire they called it, an Empire of spiders under the ice,” Narvae added reluctantly.

The other Unseen Path members frowned at that, looking at both of them, but after a brief second, Narvae shook his head. There was no indication that these spiders had anything to do with the fell spirits of the Old Gods. Admittedly, a part of Narvae wondered if that had always been the case, considering how many of the Old Gods' servants had aped the form of normal bugs, but if they were true servants, then all of Northrend would have felt the spider's fangs by this point.

Davo and Nealu exchanged a glance, then slowly nodded. They would later pigeonhole the two explorers for more details, but if there was no obvious connection, both were willing to let it slide for now.

“The vrykul have had run-ins with these spiders numerous times, and very rarely do they come out on top as they did with that complex we found. Apparently, that was a mighty victory against the spider Empire a hundred years ago under one of their warlords, someone who had been able to basically pull together several giant tribes and get them all pointed in the right direction.”

“And you're saying that these spiders are not a threat to us on this journey?” Shandris questioned, bringing the conversation back to what she considered most important.

“I hesitate to say that we could reason with them like we might be able to reason with a few of the vrykul tribes, but then again, there aren't any settlements of these spiders as far as we know between here and the stump of Vordrassil. However, their ability to build and their organization point to a nation that perhaps diplomatic overtures could be made to, if we could find them in the first place. That won't be easy. Even where we were when we first found that ruin, both Narvae and I were suffering,” Pinefrost admitted, shaking his head. “There is a limit

to how much cold even we kaldorei can take, and we reached it there. We were forced to turn back, even after trying to go forward bundled up as heavily as possible.”

“And the vrykul in that area, they are organized? Are they a nation as well?”

“No,” both Topographer and Seeker said as one, before Pinefrost continued on. “Each of these symbols is a different tribe, a different clan. We were never quite certain which term they used among themselves for their large groups. All of these tribes are constantly warring against one another in small-scale skirmishes. Well, small scale in terms of numbers. In terms of violence, considering they are vrykul, it’s quite tremendous. They’ve only united into a single force a few times in their past, from what we can tell. And each time, it’s always been at the tip of the spear or at the point of a sword.”

“Their metallurgy is passable, making for very good weapons,” Pinefrost went on, something that both Davo and Nealu were well aware of. “Their painting is somewhat decent as well, but I think where they really shine is in their carvings. Both stone and wood. You should see some of the totem poles and statuary they make. Not only do they do so on a large scale, but it’s incredibly well-detailed. A lot of the information we have on the spiders comes from such carvings as well as the ruins we discovered.”

“Which we wouldn’t have been able to if not for the recent earthquake having unearthed the buried entrance to that cave,” Narvae asked.

“These twisted trolls, are they intelligent? Or have they lost what little intelligence they might’ve had to the Taint?” Tyrande asked, shifting the conversation back to more important matters. These spiders sounded both horrifying and fascinating, and she was determined to question the four members of the Unseen Path about that little look they shared when they began speaking about them. But right now, that was not why they were here in Northrend.

Pinecrest shrugged. “It seems to vary wildly. The undead certainly don’t have any kind of intelligence, other than attacking anything living that comes near them. The Tainted trolls?”

As Purde looked at him, Narvae also shrugged. “I am uncertain. We didn’t come close enough to examine them or their movements.”

The discussion on that score continued for some time, with Fandral falling silent, letting Shandris and Tyrande lead the discussion as he took in the map from one end to another. This map was incredible, and he was determined to memorize as much of it as he could, teach himself the skill set necessary to create such a thing.

When the discussion about what they might face in the vicinity of Vordrassil began to end, he held up a finger, motioning down towards the map, pausing before actually touching the pieces of parchment. Judging by the Topographer’s face, it looked like Pinefrost might

attempt to kill him if he did. "What are these other marks? They are far smaller than the ones you've used for vrykul, and they are marked with the word for small, as well as what I assume are marks to indicate they are on the move, these little arrows..."

At that, Pinecrest winced, while Narvae crossed his arms. "That is the marks we've used to indicate where we saw evidence of cursed vrykul. A lot of it is only evidence. Bodies for the most part, ranging from babies left out in the cold to die, and a few cases of cursed vrykul actually on the move, moving away from their taller brethren. We only found evidence of five or six of those."

"What causes the curse? Does anyone know?" Shandris asked, glancing over at her mother.

Tyrande shook her head as if to say she had no idea. *Nor was Harry a cursed vrykul, so if you're wondering if he told me something, daughter, I hate to disappoint you.*

"We know it started well before the Burning Legion was brought through the portal," Pinefrost muttered, frowning pensively at the question. "Cursed vrykul were sometimes captured and brought into the empire. We also don't think it has much to do with the Old Ones, at least not directly at this point. Something in the vrykul makeup is just fading."

"The aspects mentioned them in the past, the vrykul," Nealu interjected. "They were apparently servants of the creators of the world, the ones who imprisoned the three Old Ones and slew one of their number outright."

All the kaldorei there shivered a bit, and not just at the mention of the Old Ones. After all, when such powers were invoked upon a merely material realm, did it matter to the mortals skittering around their feet?

The Aspects had spoken of the Ancient Titans to the kaldorei several times. They had come to Azeroth to cleanse it of the Old Ones, the four dark gods, whose origins none knew. Yet as powerful as they were, the Titans had only been able to kill one of the four and imprison the others. There were several theories as to why that was, but the Dragon Aspects had never shared what the truth of it might be. For her part, Tyrande felt it was likely that, if they had killed the remaining three, the Titans would have done irreparable harm to Azeroth as a whole. *And considering my race has risen to live on Azeroth, I'm rather happy they did not do so, even if the Old Ones are a continuous problem for us all.*

Where the Titans had gone, none knew. What was known was they had left when the Old Ones had been imprisoned, and had made servants for themselves. What those species were, no kaldorei knew, but many scholars believed that such species could include the vrykul.

"I could conjecture that it's the lack of Titans being around that has started this slow creeping disease among the vrykul. Their lineage is be that old," Nealu mused, evidently a believer of that theory. "However, I don't think we will ever really know the truth, as certainly no records of those ancient days survived, even if there are a few scattered artifacts and weapons. And really, does it matter?"

"It does not. What matters is whether the two of you will join our expedition? Or will you go your own way?"

The two scarred and ancient-looking kaldorei turn to one another, speaking more through ear movements and slight facial twitches than could have been conveyed by words in the same amount of time. "We will join you," Narvae decided. "While you might be heading into an area where we've already traveled and mapped, we're not exactly in a hurry on this mission, seeing as we'll have to leave it at least halfway undone regardless of anything else."

Tyrande nodded at that, and the meeting broke up quickly thereafter, with Shandris heading to the fire with Davo to cook them all a meal. They had a better idea of what they would be facing going forward, but whether that would truly help them overcome it was a question.

Still, Tyrande mused, if dealing with undead and Tainted Trolls does not convince Fandral to at least reach out to the Aspects for aid with his idea of spreading World Trees around, I don't know what will. And this will also allow us to clear up the last vestiges of a problem he and his druids created, which can only be a good thing, no matter how difficult it will be to accomplish.

OOOOOOO

Harry slunk forward, putting his feet down one after another with precision, watching a nearby troll carefully. His attempt to sneak past the troll further into the territory around the volcanoes had been hampered by a wide area of loose gravel and bits of volcanic shale. He had no idea how it had been created, as up to this point, he had been mostly solid bits of volcanic rock, over which he could move relatively well with his Mufilatio and invisibility magic.

However, there were just too many pebbles here, each of them carrying the noise of clattering stones out from the area under his silencing spell's influence. He hadn't gone more than a few steps in the past turn of the candle, although thankfully, the troll wasn't looking all that interested in anything at the moment, instead looking as if he was blissed out on something that he had just eaten.

Taking a chance, Harry hissed an instruction to Quetzal, who, currently the size of Harry's forearm, slithered down his body until he was wrapped around Harry's leg. "I am doing

this in protest, you realize. The movements of your legs make me feel uneasy, and if a snake could be said to become sick, I am certain I would become so.”

“Your concerns are duly noted, and I will repay you for the service by conjuring up a large boar for you when we get back to the others,” Harry replied, waiting until Quetzal was in position. Then he moved, shifting forward quickly.

He made five steps before the troll began to look around for the source of the noise through whatever drug-addled haze he had been in, and Quetzal, who had been watching the troll carefully, skittered out from Harry’s invisibility spell. The troll blinked, staring at where the snake had suddenly appeared, then stared down at the bits of weed he had been eating.

Before he could look up again, Harry was out of the gravel area, standing on a large piece of basalt, crouching there. He waited, watching the troll again, but the troll didn’t do anything, simply staring at Quetzal for a few moments. Quetzal, aided by his race’s ability to camouflage itself, shifted away, doing a far better job than Harry had about not making much noise on the gravel, Harry reflected ruefully. *Next time, I’m going to make him carry me.*

That last sprint had carried Harry to what looked like a small cave entrance of some kind. Waiting for Quetzal, Harry peered in, holding up a hand briefly to use an echolocation spell, one of the least useful from the *G’day Mate* book that Hermione had given him back on earth. Considering how useful many of the other spells in that book were, though, Harry had simply learned this one for the hell of it.

The spell came in handy now, telling Harry that this particular cave didn’t actually go anywhere. It ended just out of sight deeper in, and considering how good Harry’s eyesight was, that was a bit further than most humans would’ve seen.

The next second, though, he was forced to duck inside for a second as he saw a group of trolls coming around the mountain. They weren’t patrols per se. The trolls didn’t seem to do that kind of thing, although Harry had seen that many of the fire elementals did. Whether or not they had been ordered to or had taken it upon themselves to patrol the area around the volcanoes was anyone’s guess but regardless, there was a **lot** of movement going on all the time around the volcanoes.

Quickly, this particular movement proved to be a hunting party. Two of them had already broken off, heading out into the distance around a series of rocks to one side of where Harry was hiding. Between the two trolls, they carried what looked like giant rats of some kind, strung up by their tails on poles held on their shoulders.

The other trolls gave what had to be rude gestures to the successful hunters as they moved off, heading away from Harry's position directly along the route that he had followed coming in, presumably heading out to hunt more for themselves.

As the last of them moved off, Harry exited the cave, and Quetzal shifted around a boulder to one side. Shifting into the area around Harry – whom he sniffed out – the snake pointedly turned his head away from the cave. "A few more trolls are coming from the same direction as the other hunters, I think, and you do not want to go deeper into that cave."

Harry waited, and sure enough, five more trolls came. One of them wore a headdress that Harry hadn't seen yet among the trolls, and from here, all Harry could tell was that it had bits of something that reflected the light, and the feathers reminded Harry strongly of harpy feathers in terms of their colors and size. This troll held a large staff in one hand, topped by the skull of a tauren, the horns distinctive even from here.

Similarly to how he could tell the headdress had something reflective in it, Harry could also see what bits of glass or large volcanic shards were attached to his upper arms, forearms and hands. It almost looked like the man had been given artificial spikes, and Harry stared, shaking his head for a moment.

Harry watched the man carefully, wondering if this was a shaman or some other kind of leader among the trolls. It seemed to be, because the rest of the group were carrying similar poles, from which three rats hung apiece. *Do they have an area around here where they can somehow farm rats or where the hunting is simply easier?* The society of the trolls was as much a mystery as anything else to Harry, and such questions had frequently popped into his head since he began his lonesome investigation of the volcanoes.

He had to do it alone. While Harry could certainly have used spellwork to cloak Versera, the green dragoness had completely refused to go into any kind of situation that could end up in a fight in her elvish form. "It's far too squishy, far too small, and has absolutely no natural offensive capability. No!"

Meanwhile, Recca was nearly useless on the ground. Harry hadn't even tried to convince the harpy to come with them, knowing full well that she knew that just as well as he did. She might have a kick like an emu, which Harry had seen occasionally over the years, but on the ground, no harpy was at her best. Alas, flying was too intensive for any of Harry's various invisibility spells to stand up to, even Harry's own invisibility cloak.

Scouting around the trio of volcanoes had given them a vague idea of the territory that the trolls, fire elementals, and captured or suborned air elementals controlled, and the news wasn't good. Anywhere that the volcanoes could be seen from was pretty much under their control, or within the territory that they routinely moved through, anyway. Beyond that area,

troll hunting parties headed out every day. Indeed, there were at least five or six such hunting parties every day, to say nothing of lone trolls heading out to hunt on their own.

The group had some good luck in the first few days of their scouting mission around the area controlled by the trolls and their allies.

The first bit of luck came when they found a defensive position to make their home base. A butte of exceptionally hard stone jutting out from the ground west and far deeper into the continent than the trio of volcanoes. Versera posited that it might be due to residual tectonic activity, as a very shallow trench led from it to the nearest volcano, the lava dome.

Despite that, the stone was well outside the area where trolls and others routinely moved. Harry estimated the butte was at least two days of hard marching past the area where the fire elementals patrolled, although the troll hunters might well range much further than that.

In a way, the butte reminded Harry of the one that had been in the center of the valley controlled by the Fel touched harpies that Recca and Harry had fought in the mountains. Except there was no cave here, and the top was a gradual slope, not a flat surface. A few spells had seen that right, and it was big enough for Versera to lie out on, with room for Quetzal, Recca, Harry and his yurt.

To add to the inherent defensive position of the butte, Harry spent two days creating defensive wards around it and into the rock of the butte itself. He had some idea of maybe convincing the trolls and their elemental allies to come and attack them at a position of power, although Versera, the only one of the three who had ever fought trolls before, said that wasn't going to be very likely. She had fought them numerous times on Azeroth, the new continent to the east of the Maelstrom.

"Trolls are xenophobic to the extreme, extremely tribal, and superstitious, but they aren't entirely stupid. If we go out, attack one of their few patrols or start wiping out a few of their hunting parties inside their territory, and then very visibly retreat before being forced to, they're going to wonder why. We might be able to bring in a few such patrols before the others wise up, but that's about it.

"Beyond that, most of your traps are based on people on the ground, Harry. Fire elementals could bypass them for short amounts of time, and they have manticores and manticore riders; they will do the same. Despite your defenses, we would be overwhelmed if we tried to hide behind these defenses."

Still, at the time, it had seemed like a good idea, and Harry had continued to add further magical defenses to the butte for a few days. Fire-retardant runic arrays, the type that were

necessary in any potions lab. Runic arrays to conjure water, like most wizarding households used, were made larger and included an added speed component to make the water come out harder and faster. Anti-magic totems, of course, and anti-element wards to draw off or block fire and wind-based attacks. Cursed items, attention-grabbing totems, and numerous trap-based defenses, anything and everything that Harry thought could work on a being like an elemental. Until the trolls proved themselves a danger on their own, they were not the primary threat Harry had to plan for.

As he was finishing on a totem that would, he hoped, harden the whole butte against destruction by wind or fire attacks, Versera arrived, coming out and down out of the sky. Her booming voice pulled Recca from where she had been trying to move her wings in a new chest plate, a modified version of the first that Harry had made her, and Harry from his own work. "You two, get awing. I found evidence that the trolls have ranged much farther than the territory they currently live in. And it isn't good."

A few hours of flight at Harry and Recca's best speed to the southwest had the trio landing in the ruins of a tauren village. Scraps of leather tents, poles, and so forth littered the area, and Harry could see that there were even a series of what looked like large cattle farms, complete with widely spaced paddocks.

In those areas, the remnants of cattle lay dead, and their skeletons told Harry nothing until Recca called him over to one. When he did, she pointed out how the trolls had butchered the animals and that very well indeed, removing as much of their flesh as possible.

Recca, however, surprised both Harry and Versera by recognizing them. She lifted one of them, showing the creature's spine, holding it delicately in one talon as she balanced on the other. "These were spiked moose, you can tell by the hump and the shape of the antlers. These spikes at the back are a defensive thing that they developed to protect themselves from harpies and other flyers. They're not exactly all that good at it, though." She looked around, shaking her head. "Although why the trolls wouldn't have simply driven them back into the volcanic region and kept them as livestock, I don't know. They're not exactly hard to feed, unless it's a grass issue?"

"You'd actually be surprised how good grass and other things can grow near a volcano. I don't know the entire reason behind it, but ash and volcanic rock have a lot of nutrients, errr... stuff that can make for really good farmland eventually." Harry explained, getting two extremely blank looks from the predators, so much so that Quetzal even began to join in, giving him a very deadpan gaze.

No one could do deadpan gazes quite as well as a reptile. So getting a double helping made Harry feel rather alone in his omnivore status for a moment. "Just take it as a given that near volcanoes you will find a lot of farmland."

He gestured to a nearby field of wheat, which had at one point been very well cared for. Now it was growing wild, but the wheat was still tall and healthy. "A case in point."

The others all nodded, evincing no real interest in that, and Harry and Recca continued to make their way around, with Quetzal joining the process after a bit. Meanwhile, Versera transformed and began examining the wreckage of the yurts, hoping to find something that would tell her about the tribe that had lived here.

To Harry and the others, it was very evident quickly that the tauren had fought hard. There were several troll carcasses, a few tauren carcasses, and even evidence of where a few fire elementals had been slain; the area was burned to glass and ruin in their destruction.

Yet at the same time, it was equally apparent that the tauren had been taken completely by surprise. Tauren were tough, and while they weren't inherently warlike, any tribe the size of the one the remnants of this place indicated would probably have put up a far better fight than they seemingly did if they had any warning whatsoever they were about to be attacked.

In particular, Harry only detected a few weak traces of Nature Magic, mainly near where the fire elementals had died. Why that was, he had no idea, but this tribe hadn't had nearly as many shamans or druids as one of the Highmountain clans would have, and Harry estimated it had been larger than even the Rivermane or Highmountain Tribes.

It was also very evident that this attack hadn't happened all that long ago. A few of the skeletons buried under the rubble of one or two of the long houses still had some meat on them. Rancid meat, obviously, but still meat. There were also numerous signs of scavengers around, which would have faded. "I think they were attacked six or seven months ago, maybe less," Versera estimated. She had seen the like before numerous times during the War of the Ancients.

"So does that mean that at that point the trolls were still looking to expand? Or that they just moved into the area at that time, discovered the Tauren were close and deemed them a threat?" Harry questioned, staring at a skeleton that could only have been that of a tauren child. It wasn't the only one here, alas.

"I honestly don't know enough about troll sociology or how they act to tell you, Harry. I know that they worship their loa, and that might be why they are living near the volcanoes, and I know they are incredibly xenophobic. If they had discovered a tauren community like this

living nearby, they definitely would have attacked it. But how quickly after moving into the area? Or how long they've been living here, no idea," the dragon had admitted at the time.

At that point, Quetzal had found evidence of survivors or someone leaving the area and heading further eastward. "The original tracks are old and incredibly well-hidden, but someone has been back here more recently. Recently enough for me to smell them. At least three tauren, two women, one man."

Versera and Recca instantly wanted to head that way to see if they could get in touch with the tauren survivors. Harry opted out, pointing out that any survivors from this battle wouldn't have had time to recover or want to interact with strangers. Instead, he wanted to stay and bury the dead.

"It might be a human thing, but I am human, and these tauren, they deserve better than to have their bones and everything lying out like this." *Especially the younglings*. Of which, again, there were far too many bodies. "Once I'm done, I'll hunt around in this area and then back towards the volcano for more signs of fighting between the tauren and the trolls. If for no other reason than to get an idea of the size of the forces that these trolls and fire elementals can call on."

The answer was not pleasant. Moving around and examining a few other areas back towards their temporary base camp, Harry found evidence of four big battles between the tauren of that town and the trolls of the volcanoes. Broken warstaves, shattered horns, the ground still showing evidence of various Nature Magic spells, and more could be found, along with troll throwing spears, throwing axes, and even skeletons, at least sixty of them spread out between the various battlefields.

There was also more evidence of air and fire elementals being slain, and at least four very oddly contorted and burned areas Harry could tell had been the source of battles between earth and fire elementals. Another place Harry found had a tremendous amount of cracked stone, burnt areas, and deep slash marks in the ground, evidence of a water elemental of considerable power fighting against the trolls and fire elementals.

It was clear that the tauren had fought as hard as they could, but the trolls had both numbers and the fire elementals, and the tauren simply couldn't match their numbers or ferocity. One fight Harry found evidence of looked as if it had been a victory for the tauren, with troll bodies left where they had been, and no tauren bodies to be found, but that was the only one that could be said of. The three other fights were all victories for the trolls.

That night, after Harry finished his task of burying the dead, Recca and Versera returned. They had seen no sign of the surviving tauren, which probably meant that they had pushed out further than Recca was willing to go from Harry with so many enemies in the area.

Versera could well have pushed out further, but decided against it. “I could turn into my kaldorei form, but who knows if the trolls would be willing to speak to me even then. After what happened to their tribe, I wouldn’t blame them. No, whatever tribe that was is long gone. I think we can only hope that the survivors continue to do so for now.”

The next day, the group broke up again. Harry remained behind to continue his work, Quetzal went hunting – and if he happened to any trolls, well, that was just fine by the others – while Recca scouted around the western edge of the territory beyond where the trolls and fire elementals and their manticores were routinely spotted. Versera looped in the opposite direction, but instead of simply scouting, she actively ambushed a group of manticores that had flown out further than they should have. As that group didn’t have any troll riders, the dragoness didn’t take any prisoners.

The day after, while Versera began to ambush other groups, winnowing away the number of manticores allied with the trolls and fire elementals, Harry joined Recca, flying southward before making a big loop back to the shore. Versera rejoined them later that day, reporting that she had been attacked by still more of the fire elementals.

“I don’t think that the enemy truly understands that they are under assault, but they understand that I’m a threat at least,” Versera said, her tone both prideful and annoyed. “I barely began my attack on my second group of manticores when fire elementals were charging my way. I haven’t seen any further manticore riders, but lots of fire elementals followed me on the ground, and manticores in the distance kept an eye on me, herding me away from the volcanoes.”

“Let’s stop attacking them for a few days, make them think that they scared us off. Right now, they’ve only seen you attack them occasionally, let’s have them assume that it took a bit longer for them to scare off than Recca and me.”

While Versera harrumphed at the very idea of a dragon being scared off, Harry paused, flapping his wings to hover in place for a second as he cocked his head in confusion. “Come to think of it, would the troll riders we ran into first have been able to notice I was a guy? Or would they have simply noticed that my wings were made of fire as much as feather?”

To that question, none of the others had any answer, and Harry shrugged. It really didn’t matter, but it would’ve told him something about his enemy. Not knowing anything about why these trolls and fire elementals were working together, or anything about how trolls really thought, was getting to Harry the more they tried to discover, moving around the edges of the troll tribe’s territory.

When he fought Death Eaters in his past life, or indeed anyone who espoused similar (or completely opposite but just as fanatical) views, he always understood the way they thought,

the way they would act. When he fought the frostmaul giants alongside Tyrande, he understood how they would think and act after barely three battles.

Here, Harry had to build up that understanding, and if he tried to do so in a series of engagements, he knew that it would warn the trolls and so forth that they were under attack. Which was the exact opposite of what he wanted. Harry wanted them to be, if not complacent, then unaware of the true scale of the danger that Harry and Versera at least could represent.

Recca, while far more dangerous than a normal harpy, wasn't really on the same level of danger as her two companions. Something she admitted to with ease.

Versera was willing to follow Harry's lead on this and remained back at camp from then on. She worked on mapping out the territory around the mountains from memory, then on her map of the coastline leading north.

Harry and Recca continued to travel southward, skirting the volcanoes, then turning eastward to reach the shoreline farther south. There, they made their next discovery, whereupon Harry used a Patronus to lead Versera to them. She arrived two turns of the candle later at full speed, and the trio of flyers wound their way down to the remnants of four burnt-out ships that had been pushed up onto the shoreline.

The ships were huge. Easily bigger than Versera from tip to tail, they were bigger even than the vessel the vrykul had used, at least three times that size or maybe more. Frankly, in terms of size, it more resembled something from Harry's world than anything he'd seen in this world, almost reminding Harry of some Chinese vessels he had seen once in a history book at the library.

They didn't look all that seaworthy in Harry's eyes. He didn't really know a lot about seamanship, but he had been on several vessels and spoken to Nealu several times about sailing. Nealu had been enthusiastic about ships, shipbuilding and the way the vrykul's longboat was built. These were bigger across than Versera, and even with their beam length, they would probably wallow in any kind of storm.

Despite that, they had made it here from wherever the trolls had come from. Further south, out to sea on some island? Harry didn't know. Heck, there could be a whole different continent for all the Unseen Path knew.

Harry could also tell these ships had belonged to the trolls because of the number of bodies around. Again, those bodies weren't new. They looked at least a year old, and the skeletons, much like the vessels themselves, had become home to many crabs, snakes, and other such. To the point where Quetzal had to scare off several ocean vipers before Harry and the other two could start exploring.

However, what quickly became apparent to Harry was that a majority of the trolls here were children. "I mean, I'm judging that by the size of the skeletons, but it certainly looks like it. Why would the trolls turn on one another like this?" Harry asked, somewhat bewildered. He'd wondered about killing troll children in consideration of what they might eventually need to do to push into the volcano zone and figure out what was going on there, and had not been happy with the idea at all, but this was something else altogether.: trolls turning on one another, with the majority of the victims being children.

"I'm counting at least two dozen bodies of children just in sight, and there could be as many as fifteen or twenty more if you're considering partial skeletons," Recca mused. "Judging by the size of these boats, it's almost certain there's more in the wrecks. Not as many adults, but even then, at least a dozen partial skeletons."

"... I have mentioned that trolls worship elemental spirits, the wild gods that they call Loa. These represent emotions, specific actions or natural phenomena," Versera said, coming out from one of the more intact hulls of the strange, massive ships. She had found possibly a hundred separate skeletons, mostly womenfolk and children, but Recca and Harry didn't need to see that. "If the majority of the warriors started to worship a new Loa, one that called for aggression and violence, while the others didn't..."

She sighed, shifting to her dragon form even as she leaped off the shore-side of the wreck. "The effect would be slow, but then someone notices, and the majority of the womenfolk and children are either declared expendable, or refuse to start worshipping the same as the warriors and... We get a schism," the dragoness continued, her deeper voice giving her words added impact.

Harry nodded, looking sick, then stumbled as Recca lightly kicked him in the back. Lightly, because she hadn't extended her talons to rake him. Instead, she had made the harpy equivalent of a fist, which for them was about as nonviolent as they could make their talons. "Don't get lost in your own head, Harry."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, turning to her.

"I might not personally have fought trolls in the past, but I know about them from my mother, and Cilla. Both of them had run-ins with trolls in the past and will tell you that troll children fight you just as ferociously as their parents do. Trolls aren't mindless, like Recca said a few days ago, but they are xenophobic, and it's not something they are taught; it's built in. They will literally fight you simply because you're different, regardless of age. They need to be taught or learn differently as they grow up."

"That's honestly the exact opposite of how humans would do it. Don't get me wrong, I understand indoctrination. Death Eater children back in my old world were just as eager to kill

for their cause as the adults, after a certain point. That point when they started to see people that didn't think the same way they did, as both different and lesser..." Harry reminisced for a second. "Still, I understand your point. I don't think it will ever be easy for me to see youngsters of any race, no matter how big a threat they are if they are actually sentient, but I can understand it."

"Also, understand that trolls are cannibals. A lot of these dead were eaten afterward, just as the tauren were. Mutilation is also the norm among trolls. They take their regeneration for granted, and I remember more than one story about how certain troll tribes had drummers who made their drums out of their own peeled-off skins," Versera added.

Versera was also fully on board with the idea that troll children were just as nasty as their parents. Worse, trolls matured exceptionally quickly, the exact opposite of kaldorei. She had no idea why that was, but a troll child could go from being a toddler to fully mature in body and mind within five years. It was why trolls could spread out so quickly, even in comparison to tauren, let alone kaldorei. A few of the older greens she had talked to had explained how, at one point, that hadn't been the case, but as far as Versera was concerned, it had been.

More importantly, at the moment, this place told her some things. "I've seen burnt-out holes like this before, and I think this place is actually older than the ruins of the tauren village. Whatever happened here happened at least a month or more before that attack."

"Can you tell me what kind of numbers these things could have brought here?" Harry asked, gesturing to the four arcs. "If we have an idea of what kind of numbers were dealing with, then..."

"I would say each of these carried at least two-to-five hundred trolls, depending on how many were children. I don't know if trolls have any idea of personal space or like to spread out as much as kaldorei, but I doubt it, and I'm just going by the size of the vessels. Three hundred apiece is what I would guess, more because there were so many children. And this definitely didn't happen long enough ago for any children to have become an issue. If the warriors or whoever started this schism even care about the future like that."

Versera paused for a moment, holding up a large claw in a thinking motion, before shaking her head. "And that's not considering the very nature of a volcano or fire-based Loa who would encourage something like this. Thinking about the future of their tribe would probably not be a priority."

That was all that Harry and the others had been able to discover by going around the area away from the three volcanoes. Not a day and a half later, Harry had begun his work to spy out the area where the trolls actually lived.

The terrain changed dramatically as he moved, from rolling fields of grass to rocky and then even rockier with many different crevices and so forth. Volcanic rocks the size of houses dotted the landscape around and between the mountains. Pumice, obsidian and other stone types that Harry was less familiar with were all in abundance, but there were also patches of some kind of hardy dark blue grass that seemed able to survive here. There were numerous small, crawly type bugs too, for some reason, something Harry made a note of. *It will be easy to use my druid spell to summon such to, heh, bug any magic user or normal troll I want to.*

Quetzal had also reported a surprising number of rat-like smells on the way in. There seemed to be an abundance of the creatures around the area, feeding on the bugs and one another, supposedly.

Harry had also tried his best to count the number of trolls he'd seen when he first started to enter their territory. That had been a losing prospect, however. Most trolls seemed to look enough alike that Harry couldn't tell them apart unless he was right in front of them.

In contrast, Harry had successfully counted seventy different fire elementals, mostly lesser types, the same level as Tricky or a few grades more powerful. They were all distinctive enough that Harry could easily tell them apart. On top of that, he had seen at least two dozen chained air elementals before this. They had mostly been set to patrol the area, with several accompanying fire elementals or trolls on manticores.

Those patrols didn't seem to be searching for anything in particular, thankfully. Harry's ploy to calm things down seemed to have worked. Rather, the air elementals were doing something with the air itself. The ash and dust swirled and shifted away from the ground constantly, perhaps to help the trolls breathe? Harry didn't know, although he did know that he and Quetzal were both wearing modified bubblehead charms to sift out the ash as well as other dangerous gases.

That was something Recca would need to be aware of. *Maybe Versera too. I know she didn't like the look of the aimed poison cloud that came our way, but I don't know if she can handle simple ash.*

Feeling a strange sensation Harry looked down at his feet and cursed. "Dammit!"

"What?" Quetzal asked, staring at a nearby troll, who was moving towards the cave whose vicinity they had just vacated. As he watched, the troll entered, and barely within the cave, he pulled off what little breaches the man had, squatting down to take a dump. "Ah, so I was right. You just missed out on the opportunity to hide within what looks like a regular outhouse for the trolls, Harry."

“Delightful. Although not quite as delightful as the fact that I think the bottom of my shoes are melting.”

Harry wore a very good pair of boots, hiking boots made by the tauren and kaldorei of the Unseen Path for their Seekers. They were form-fitting, soft on the inside, and incredibly durable on the outside, with thick metal studs and metal wiring connecting the layers, leather soles backed by a layer of wood, and even thicker leather on the inside. However, the outer layer of leather, the one made to cushion his steps, had begun to smoke a little.

With a growl, Harry pulled off his footwear and socks, stuffing them into one of his expanded backpacks, then stood experimentally on his bare feet. Luckily, his heat resistance as a part-phoenix was more than up to the task of allowing him to ignore the heat of the ground here, just as it had allowed him to deal with the heat being generated by the volcano.

I do have to wonder where the third volcano came from, Harry mused. That wasn't in the visions I first got from the air spirit who wanted me to come here. And it's the cinder cone, the one that's most active at the moment.

From here, Harry could, without using a spell, see the sides of that volcano and the shield dome volcano. Currently at the foot of the composite, which had been spewing lava, a ton of ash and even larger bits of rock when the locals and his group had first clashed. That seemed to have settled down a bit, but he could still see at least a small stream of lava coming down nearby, and could see in the distance the cinder cone belching ash. The shield dome looked quiescent at the moment.

Turning his head away from the distant view, Harry looked off around the edge of the mountainside where several trolls had just come out of what Harry had thought was just a large boulder. But judging by how many of them there were, there might be another cave of some kind on the other side.

The one Quetzal had been observing taking a shit moved to join the other trolls, shouting something that made many of them laugh loudly enough to carry to where Harry was currently standing, his body hidden by his Invisibility Cloak. A moment later, the troll joined his fellows and the whole group moved on in a different direction.

“Quetzal, check to see if you're comfortable moving around here. If you're not, I want to know about it in advance,” Harry said, turning his attention upward. There didn't seem to be any sign here of the trolls making use of the slopes above where he was now, and Harry decided to stay at the foot of the volcanoes for now.

It only took Quetzal a second to test if he could move around, then he was back slithering up Harry's leg under his invisibility cloak. It was a somewhat disturbing feeling, but

after years of practice, it didn't bother Harry at all. "The ground is far too hot here for me to move very far. Perhaps if you cast a cooling charm on me I could move, but I would not be willing to move around in this area on my own. Further, if any of the trolls spotted me, they might understand that I am not a predator which would normally be in this terrain."

"Good point. I'll still have you test the ground occasionally when we move forward, though. The trolls don't seem to find it at all irritating, but then again, I haven't actually gotten close enough to look at their footwear." Harry smirked then, shaking his head. "I think it's time to rectify that."

As Quetzal made a comment about fools rushing in, Harry made his way forward, quickly covering the distance to the boulder around which the trolls had come from in a single sprint. There, after waiting and looking around to see if anyone had seen him, Harry then climbed up the side of it, perching himself on top, staring down into what was very obviously a major entryway to something underground, either a cave or a carved-out area of rock.

There were a number of carvings cut into the rock of the entryway as well as a large arch of bones and wood. *Tauren horns, along with what looks like bones from various animals and even trolls. As if I needed more examples to understand that these trolls are not nice people.*

There was even a sign. It was about as wide as Harry was, and as long, although what it said in the troll's tongue Harry could not tell. Though the three red – blood? – marks through a few words might indicate that it was no longer being used for its original purpose? *Which shows a level of organization I really didn't want to see in my enemies. Give me bloodthirsty and hopefully mindless enemies any day.*

Across from him, the curve of the mountainside dipped, creating a small cul-de-sac to one side of the marked entryway before curving back out. Here, a dozen trolls lounged around a fire pit of considerable size, over which a dozen more of the rat things were cooking slowly.

From here, Harry could finally examine the trolls close up, and did so with interest, starting with their weapons and clothing. He'd been able to see the trolls before this in the battle in the sky but couldn't really think of what he was seeing or take time to notice anything beyond their tactics and magic.

In terms of weapons, the trollish armory was a strangely mixed bag. Several of them had large pickaxes next to them, the heads of which looked incredibly crude. The nearest to Harry didn't even seem to have an edge; it was instead just a thin, blunt ridge of pug iron.

In contrast there were several throwing axes, arrowheads and javelins among them. Their various contact points gleamed with the shine of worked steel, matching what Harry had seen in tauren blacksmiths in Highmountain Valley and with the Unseen Path in quality.

That comparison leaped to Harry's mind because alongside those weapons there were several that looked as if they were trophies taken in the battles against the tauren. One even had a war staff, the double-headed staff-axe that many tauren used in war.

Admittedly, some of the trolls' weapons also looked crude in comparison, but most of those were crude in the way of someone who had little time or inclination to make the work pretty. They were still made of steel, but unworked and poorly made. Counting briefly, Harry realized those were the majority of the weapons in sight. *Okay, that's interesting. I'd bet a million pounds that the better weapons are from when they first arrived on these shores or when they had access to their artisans before the schism happened.*

As for the clothing the trolls were all wearing, as Harry had seen from a distance, it was pretty darn barbaric. Most of the trolls he saw went with what amounted to well-made skirts, or perhaps kilts. They were made of leather, lots of feathers, and bones that rattled whenever they moved their legs. Up top, a few trolls had vests of decent craftsmanship, matching their older weapons, but most had a more ragged appearance. Here, though, Harry somehow got the impression that it was a personal preference, whereas the kilt was not.

A few trolls had headwear. Simple affairs in comparison to the troll with the staff, they were made of feathers and bone. None had anything that reflected the light as whatever had been in that troll's headpiece. Beyond that, the majority of trolls here had earrings or nose rings. What those earrings might imply socially, Harry had no idea.

What he could tell was that Versera's words were quite accurate. Trolls went into self-mutilation a lot. Many of the trolls he saw had earrings of large size, up to and including what looks like the horn of a tauren child in one of them, while others had bones sticking out of their forearms perpendicularly, or bits of volcanic stone, sharpened to points, sticking out of their forearms as if they had wanted to make themselves into living weapons.

Those things would be deadly sharp, if brittle. Painful to deal with, and even more painful to emplace. Trolls don't just have regeneration; they have a high tolerance for pain. Damn, that one even has some of them sewn into his lips!

The trolls' skin was purple with red whorls. Those whorls looked almost like tattoos, but they weren't. Looking at the closest troll, Harry could see they were instead new strips of skin, not marks into the skin or even rising out of it. *Did they cut out the skin and let it grow back in? Then how the heck... is the environment here shaping them somehow, changing their skin color in some way?*

In terms of appearance, the trolls were incredibly different from the kaldorei. They stood taller than most kaldorei by a few inches, though they seemed hunched over normally, perhaps because of the shape of their backs or shoulders. Harry couldn't tell.

Troll faces seemed to be mostly wider than most kaldorei faces, with big jaws, deformed further by their tusks, which thrust down and then up in a curve from their upper jaws, big and dangerous enough to put Harry in mind of a boar's tusks. Their ears were just as large as a kaldorei's but seemed immobile. Harry hadn't seen even one twitch from any of them since he sat on the top of the boulder. They pointed outward and tapered to a thick rather than a thin point as kaldorei ears did and had bigger bases to boot. Their hands had four fingers, thicker than human or kaldorei fingers, and their feet, thinner and narrower than a human's, had two large toes.

Instead of being centered around their ears and tiny facial movements, trollish body language was far more effusive. They seemed to go into joking, grinning, and lots of back-and-forth shoving. Trolls had very deep-set eyes, also in comparison to kaldorei, and their arms and legs were almost spindly, not malformed, but very much wirier than strong-looking. Combined with their self-mutilation, made them look spindly and more angular than the kaldorei did.

This applied to a certain extent to their womenfolk too, as there were a few among the group Harry was observing. Harry almost wanted to use the term females and males rather than men and women, but he couldn't for a variety of reasons. One, they were communicating using a verbal language, even if it was one that Harry didn't know, which made them an intelligent race rather than a monstrous one.

Further, the women among them had tits. Tits that were very much on display for several of the womenfolk. They weren't very big, but wow, were they perky, and for a few seconds, Harry couldn't take his eyes off a set of nipples that were pierced with small bones, the woman's chest bare to the world. It had been a few years since he and Sylina had broken up, and the trolls were closer to the human/kaldorei side than tauren were, by far.

They also didn't have talons for legs or wings for arms, which was why Harry had only rarely been attracted to the harpies of Cassandra's flock. Heck, even their tusks weren't all that bad. The women in this group had small tusks that looked more like three-inch long incisors sticking up from their mouths, not destroying those jaws as it did for the menfolk. The changes this meant for the rest of their facial structure was profound, making them far more human. The womenfolk also didn't go into the disturbing skin-tattoos rather having whorls of and lines of white painted onto their skin in an almost hypnotic fashion.

However, all of the piercings were something of a turnoff as the lack of feet and hands among harpies, and the women did go into those as much as the men. And Harry had never been into thin, spindly girls or those with piercings.

Thin, yes, bony no, Harry repeated in a mantra, pulling his attention away from the troll tits on display by a few of the women who had disdained the use of a bodice or vest. *And these*

trolls are definitely bony. Not to the point of emaciation, but close. Despite the fact that they also had some visible muscles on them, something Harry had only seen in a few sentinels and Unseen Path kaldorei, the trolls were very obviously not getting enough food to be truly healthy looking. Or maybe they were just missing something from their diet. Harry had no way of knowing.

Damn hormones, he thought, shaking his head as he pulled his eyes away again from one of the pairs of pierced tits that had so sidelined his thinking for a moment. *I can't even blame this on my occlumentic realm needing a cleanup this time.* Harry had done just that a few days before they came within sight of the volcanoes for the first time. *No, I'm just horny. Blast it.*

Setting that aside with some annoyance, Harry reversed course down the side of the boulder. Once on solid ground, which here was a stone Harry vaguely recognized as rhyolite, Harry then moved around the boulder. Slowly and carefully, he closed the distance with the group sitting around the fire.

As he did, he made sure no other trolls entered the area.

Harry wasn't scared of them noticing him at this point. His Mufilatio and his invisibility cloak let him move entirely unseen. But if one of them accidentally bumped into him, that would give the game away just as easily as being spotted would have. Worse, he knew that well-trained druids and even shamans could sense his use of 'Arcane' type magic. Since he was currently using his Mufilatio and a modified bubblehead charm that was no small worry.

While Harry was moving, one of the women pulled off one of the cooking rats and began to eat it all by herself. None of the others even tried to take some except for one of the other women, who reached in very dramatically as if to grab a chunk, only for her hand to be slapped away. This caused a round of laughter from the others, and the two womenfolk grinned at one another, before the one eating went back to the exceptionally serious work of filling her stomach as the others waited for their catches to be ready in turn.

As Harry watched, the woman basically ate the entire thing, from tip to tail. *Merlin! That had to have been something like thirty pounds of meat, and her stomach doesn't even look distended. Trolls have to eat a hell of a lot, don't they? Or, again, are they just missing something from their diet that would cut down on the sheer amount of food they need?*

By that point, Harry was close enough for what he wanted to do and after carefully examining all of the trolls for any signs that any of this group could use magic, Harry raised a cloak covered hand to his ear, mumbling a translation spell. "Babel Ichthys," he murmured. His words were hidden by the Mufilatio, and his movements by his cloak.

This was not a regular translation spell, but one developed for spies. It would enable him to understand the enemy's spoken tongue, but didn't have any flair of magic. Further, it wouldn't allow them to understand him in turn. It was an old spell that Harry had used on occasion back in his old world while hunting extremists in foreign countries.

Despite that, Harry had to blink and wonder if he had cast the spell properly as the drones of conversation hit him.

"And I tell you, mon, that elemental that looks like a slug, it's developing a case of the bad mojo. It's always sniffing around the—"

"Give it a rest, ya idiot! Why would a fire elemental be interested in our special hashish anyway, mon?" another troll interrupted the first.

"No, no, Snoril's onto something. A few of the fire elementals do seem interested in the smoke, at least that comes from when we smoked our pipes, and I'd swear that one air elemental, the one that looks like a cross between a fish and a bird---"

"It's a flying fish, no idea where it got the idea to shape itself in that form, but that is what it looks like. Don't be getting confused about it, mon."

"I still say Snoril has been smoking the good stuff far longer than he should have. All hail Lord Garr, but there needs to be a limit to what we personally can burn, ya know, mon?"

"Or how much we can sniff it, mon!" Another troll crowed.

Harry very slowly raised a hand to his forehead, being careful once more to not let his hand appear out from under his cloak, where he began to knead the bridge of his nose as he slowly shook his head. *Why? Why do they sound Caribbean, or is it Jamaican? There is no way messing up the spell could have done something like that... is there? What in the heck!?*

Shaking his head, Harry continued to listen for a few moments, but it was very clear that these trolls weren't exactly high on the totem pole around here. They talked of a fire Loa, of a Garr, but whether that was because a powerful and intelligent fire elemental had convinced them he was a God and that was his real name, or because they had bestowed that name upon him, Harry couldn't tell. That was about all he was learning here.

Well, other than the fact that most of their jokes had to do with making fun of one another, making fun of other species in a very mean way, and that all of them seemed to imbibe in many of the same type of medicinal herbs that Harry had on occasion with the Tauren. When Harry did it, it was to let him meditate on the elemental realms or reach out to Nature Magic more easily. With the trolls, it was obviously recreational and far more powerful.

Shaking his head at that, Harry glanced down at Quetzal. "Can you tell me anything about the trolls? I'm not learning much of these twelve."

"They stink of uncleanness, smoke, and some kind of other earthier smell underneath. I don't know what it is, but it grows stronger whenever they reach into those pouches and pull up some of the herbs they use in their pipes. I don't like it," Quetzal said, shaking his head. "And judging by the effect it has on a few of them, we might need to be wary of it if we run into a patch of smoke like that."

Harry nodded, then slowly backed away from the twelve. For a moment, he thought about venturing straight into the entryway nearby, but decided against it. *I'll finish looking around the surface first. Besides, that tunnel's too narrow. If trolls are coming and going, I won't be able to dodge them all.*

Twice more Harry found other groups camping outside entryways around the composite volcano. At one point, he dared to look into one of the caves and found it led to what looked like a simple cave. If natural or not, Harry couldn't tell. He also couldn't figure out anything from the writing of the signs over the entrances. Of the ones he examined closely, there was nothing in common beyond the triple blood-red lines.

At night, Harry camped out. Sometimes he stuffed himself between two boulders and putting up a Notice Me Not array. The ground here was too hot for Harry to want to chance the bottom of his yurt, and he had left it behind with Recca and Versera. Other times, they found an area of colder rock and Quetzal would wrap himself around Harry for the night. Enlarged to almost his full form, the Needlespine Shimmerback gave Harry more protection, something he only argued about a little bit before agreeing to Harry's request. He also helped hide Harry even more than just his invisibility cloak would have.

In this manner, Harry took nearly two weeks to go around the entire mountain area, mapping all of the various entrances and everything else of interest. During that time, he and Quetzal were subjected to a series of small-scale earthquakes, and a minor eruption from the cinder cone volcano. That eruption came in the way of the side of the mountain nearly exploding outward near their position, forcing Harry to race away.

He then had to hide out for several days as a few trolls had seen his hands and face as the speed he'd been forced to move had meant his invisibility cloak had fluttered off him. Eventually, though, those trolls had been 'proven' to be liars by the others and became the butt of jokes for several days about how their weed, essentially, gone bad, or been too powerful for them.

In general, the trolls' reaction to this event was jubilation. Every troll in sight when it began whooped, hollered and literally jumped with joy. The fire elementals were equally ecstatic, and

right after finding a hiding place, Harry had the odd opportunity to watch several fire elementals act like excitable children in using magma flows like slides.

When Harry was able to go back to exploring after that, he snuck closer to the caves, as they were the most numerous features of the area, of which only a few were marked with signs. A few of those were marked solely by rat bones. Entering one of these, Harry found it was an entrance to a small farm, of sorts. There, a pair of trolls, each of whom had an ear burned off, watched over dozens of rats captured in hunting parties.

These small spread-out larders were rarely used while Harry was in exploring, but Harry watched a small moment where four trolls that were forced to eat such were taunted, belittled and even hit by blunt weapons as they cooked their meals. Evidently using these rats were something the trolls rarely wanted to do. If that was because they were supposed to be emergency rations or because it was a sign of someone's lack of hunting expertise and thus humiliating, Harry couldn't tell.

As he went, Harry marked down each of the entrances to the possible underground warren mentally and on a few pieces of parchment. Although Harry predicted Versera would sneer at his best attempts at mapmaking, let alone his footnotes like this.

Most of the time when Harry found an entrance, there were also trolls or fire elementals nearby. Sometimes, there were even a few air elementals, and one time, Harry saw two of them being brought out from underneath the ground by several fire elementals, who stood all around them. Harry wasn't close enough to use a translation spell or hear anything that the two groups of elementals might've been saying to one another, but it was very easy to see the fire elementals were lording it over the captured air elementals.

Harry wasn't certain why or even how the fire elementals had captured their flying fellows, but they had. Every air elemental Harry saw had the same manner of manacles that he had noticed in the first battle with the Volcanic Alliance, as Harry had mentally begun to call this group.

Remaining on that mountain, the newer-seeming cinder cone, was tough, as that was when two more earthquakes hit, but luckily, the volcano itself didn't explode. Harry was thus able to discover the cave where they had initially seen the poison gas coming from, and that it and other caves, which may or may not be linked to it, were the source of the air elementals. This area was also where Harry saw more of the troll magic users. He wasn't certain they were shamans, though he didn't think they could be called druids, either, as they didn't reach out to Nature Magic directly as a druid would have for any of the noncombat spells that such would use.

They did, however, use totems, if only to create small farms. This came in the form of a small herd of sheep, and a strange animal that looked almost like a kangaroo that had both back and

forelegs built up to an incredible degree, no tail to speak of, and a longer neck. He had no idea what they were, and he didn't think the Unseen Path had any idea either, considering he had never seen any images of such.

Beyond that, there were also several small but well-cared for farms. One contained what looked like wheat, although it was also black rather than golden or tan in color, in a small, well-maintained farm, kept free of ash by an air elemental stationed there, chained to a totem like a guard dog. Beyond those, there were dozens of smaller plots devoted to what Harry mentally called marijuana, although he doubted it was anything like that drug. Well, except for impact on the trolls as every four or five trolls Harry saw seemed to be mildly blitzed out.

Despite these farms though it was clear that whatever was brought in on hunts made of the stuff made the largest portion of the trollish diet.

The majority of that diet was meat. A lot of it, as Harry's first guess about how much the trolls ate was proven correct as he moved around. Giant rats that stood at least as tall as Harry's knees could only feed a troll for a single meal, and there were always at least three dozen Hunter groups out and about looking for more of them or anything else that could be brought in for the pot.

In contrast, the kept animals, beyond the rats hidden in several caves, were only taken out from their pens one at a time and then cooked and ritualistically shared with groups of trolls. At first, Harry didn't understand the significance, but inching closer he was able to overhear one such group. Apparently, these creatures were now termed as delicacies among the trolls, and eating even a portion of one was a big deal. They were thus used as motivation for some of the trolls who had performed above and beyond normal when it came to mining out whatever they were doing underground.

Through those days, Harry tried again to count and even got some names among the trolls. He was far better able to do the second than the first though. At any given day, there were between a hundred or three hundred trolls outside the mountain, with more within, working on what he heard called 'Freein' the Lord Gar', which Harry put down to some form of mining.

The trolls on mining and hunting duty switching off, making for at least three or four hundred underground or out hunting. Unfortunately, he didn't see anyone that was in a position of power or giving out orders beyond a few who led teams of hunters.

Most of those used the same tauren skull-topped staff as the first one he'd seen. They didn't use any magic as he trailed after their groups. Instead, they seemed to be trackers rather than shamans or druids, making the only magic users he saw the ones up where the air elementals came from.

As many trolls as he saw, he saw at least one fire elemental for every five trolls. Admittedly, most of them were lesser fire elementals, like Tricksy. Small, dangerous to be sure, but they could be dealt with easily. However, mixed in with them were a few that were **far** stronger. Harry could tell by their sheer size, and the fact they seemed able to communicate with the trolls easily.

Yet even there, there wasn't any fire elemental Harry would call a Lord, one powerful enough to convince the trolls it was a real Loa. Not like this Lord Garr the trolls spoke of.

The air elementals were a mixed bag, but they were very much in the minority. Indeed, there were more manticores than them, and Harry found three eyries as he forged up the side of the shield volcano. There looked to be around a hundred and eighty manticores, with at least a third having riders. They also hunted on their own, and occasionally shared game with the trolls.

However, not everything was sanguine between the manticores and the trolls. As he was counting manticores after the fourth earthquake since his scouting mission had begun, Harry was on the side of the shield volcano, where the manticores stayed. There, he saw a bit of disobedience from two of the creatures.

Without any warning, the manticores attacked and savaged one of the trolls, eventually killing him, but not before another nearby troll had slammed a club down onto a large drum at his feet. Fire elementals and trolls alike converged, and before the troll with the drum died as the pair of manticores turned on him, the recalcitrant manticores were attacked, burned, and then torn apart by the trolls and eaten.

So was the dead body of the troll that they had savaged. The trolls were indeed cannibals, or at least this group of trolls were cannibals. Harry hoped that wasn't a racial thing, as Versera head hinted it might be.

Harry continued to watch as a larger than normal fire elemental came up to the group of manticores. The elemental in question was two stories tall, with arms shaped out of fire like they were made to look like a gorillas, wore armor plate made out magma, which shifted and flowed as the elementals fire wound through it. Its legs were vast, eight of them making the thing look like its lower half was that of a spider, with two of those legs also armored with the same magma-like substance. The fire elemental also had no head, or if it did, it was set too deep into its shoulder blades for Harry to see from his current vantage point.

Walking beside this behemoth of fire, magma and all things scorchy was a stooped, almost old-looking troll. One of his arms had been seared near the shoulder to form an intricate tattoo the details of which Harry couldn't make out, although he could also see more of the strange 'flesh

strip tattoos' on the elderly troll's hands. The oldster had a vast headdress, its edges almost trailing on the ground behind the troll, and a massive metal spear in one hand.

Despite it being entirely made of metal, the spear resembled the more recent weapons Harry had seen before this: it looked almost crude, but also cruel, jagged in places, and smooth in others, almost as if someone had melted the steel into this shape rather than having actually forged it. *Or even using a mold*, Harry reflected. *Good grief, though, those tips looked as if they're made to rip and tear rather than just cut.*

Harry didn't need to feel a tingle on his skin as the troll began to dance and jig and thrust out that spear to know that this person was a magic user. He was tempted to sneak closer, but there were too many trolls and fire elementals about. This was evidently supposed to be a public spectacle of some kind, as there were more manticores coming in herded by air elementals commanded by their riders.

I really don't want the first time I come close to a troll shaman and learn they can somehow detect my Mufilatio to be when there were so many other trolls and their allies around. Harry was confident he could defend himself or even kill many of them, but all of them? No.

So instead, Harry remained where he was, sitting cross-legged in the shadow of a giant boulder using its darkness as well as his cloak to hide himself, while Quetzal rested nearby on a rock. Shadey regions, so long as they were far enough away from any active lava, was much cooler than the rest of the area around here, and made the flat rock actually quite pleasant, almost like laying out in the sun on a warm day except the heat was beneath rather than coming in from above.

He watched as the magic user gestured, and walls of stone rose up around several of the manticores. They were cut out from the rest of the watching flock, and then two of them were grabbed by the large fire elemental. Instead of killing the manticores though, the fire elemental simply allowed some of his fire to sear them, burning away feathers and flesh around the neck. The manticores both screamed, the noise high and loud, reminding Harry almost of the shrieks of harpies without the Songbird charm.

The fire elemental seemed to say something, which the troll translated for the manticores, or perhaps the magic user was in charge? Harry wasn't certain where the impression he got that the fire elemental was higher up the totem pole than the shaman, but he still felt that even now as he watched. All of the manticores bowed in unison, and Harry kept on watching as two of the other manticores were similarly marked.

If Harry had to guess, whenever one manticore rebelled, two would be punished in their place, while the one who rebelled was simply killed.

Regardless, this kind of discipline, if such it could be called, seems to keep the manticores in line. Not one of them seemed to try to flee or fight back. As Harry watched, the other trolls and fire elementals retreated from the area around the eyries and the manticores simply went back to lazing about, or flying away to resume their hunts. The issue had seemingly been settled.

Five days and another earthquake later, Harry was certain that he had mapped as much of the surface level of the area between the three volcanoes that he could and had found all the entrances to whatever the trolls were up to, although he hadn't been able to enter any of them. Whatever the trolls were doing, they had trolls coming and going all the time, making it very hard for Harry to get close let alone enter without the danger of bumping into someone.

This included entrances that were very, very high up the mountainside of the most active volcano, the one Harry's memory told him would be called a cinder cone. It was continually shooting up ash and even larger bits of matter, while also having a constant flow of lava down its side.

The lava from that volcano seemed to shift around several other totems stuck into the ground around those entrances, but Harry didn't see any trolls come and go from them. Of fire elementals he saw several in the area, so much Harry couldn't try and get past them, but never trolls. That meant that it was probably too hot to even be that close to the magma flows.

Quetzal certainly felt so and complained constantly about the heat from the moment Harry had come close enough to see the first of those entrances. Harry had to use cooling charms on him several times during the day as he scouted around there, the cooling charm's efficacy failing under the heat. Meanwhile, Harry felt the heat but wasn't bothered by it beyond sweating a bit more than normal. His phoenix-side gave him immunity to actually being burned, thankfully.

Slowly, Harry exited the area controlled by the Volcano Tribe, heading southward first, then, when he was certain that no one was around observing him, transforming into his half-phoenix form flying northwest towards the butte where he and his two companions had made their base camp.

He arrived amidst an argument, with Versera scowling and shaking her head in annoyance at something that Recca had said as the two of them sat cross-legged across from one another, a Chinese checkers board between them. "I don't want to play another game, blast it! I want to feel useful. And I really don't around here. If it was just manticores and trolls, maybe, but—"

Recca broke off from her complaint, looking over at Harry as he landed. Versera also nodded to him, and Harry bowed back to him as his body shifted back to normal from its half Phoenix form. "Ladies. I think I've seen everything I can on the outside of the volcanoes. However, a warning now, you're not going to like it, and there is almost undoubtedly more beneath the surface."

Soon, Recca and Versera were looking over Harry's notes. Recca was pleased with them, but more was listening to Harry explain what he had seen, while Versera simply sighed as she looked at Harry's mediocre mapping skills. "While I didn't want to come with you, Harry, I had thought at least that your notes would be better than this. UGH."

"Oh? What's wrong with it?" Harry mock-asked. "Is it the fact I don't note down anything but the most obvious in terms of the shape of the land, the fact that my notes are in shorthand, or the general fact that while my writing is neat and tidy, my attempt at a map looks like a child's doodles?"

"All of the above! And while your writing might be neat, it's very much flow of thought than actual note taking. You've got seven separate notes here about the various troll weapons and three about different theories behind their strange tattoos, while some suppositions about their magic. Make one note to mention the theory that the fire elementals might be really in charge, then put more notes around it to back it up. Don't mention it again twice. And telling me one cave was higher up the second volcano than one with the same marker on the first is also less than helpful," Versera stated, her own tone almost affronted.

With a sigh, Versera shook her head, but when she spoke up again, she still sounded almost personally insulted by his efforts, which was somewhat hurtful, frankly. "Would you mind sharing the memories of what you saw with me, Harry? These notes are... helpful, I think our planning going forward would be better and more accurate if I made a map, if you don't mind."

Holding up a hand in negation, Harry shook his "I can extract my own memories magically, although letting you view them is a different story. Among my people, we can't share memories directly, and you don't have any mental magics to enter my Occlumentic realm either... I don't think?"

Harry had thought of time or two about creating a pensive, but there had always been other jobs for him when among the Unseen Path. Before that, he had always been learning and doing more with the tauren, and hadn't had the inclination. As for Versera not having any magic to enter someone's mind, that wasn't that much of a leap of logic. Perhaps she could find his dreams if they both connected to the Emerald Dream, as Green Dragons could, but that was a far cry from entering Harry's mind and seeing his memories.

"The Unseen Path developed a spell... er, well, the Highborne among them created the spell before they joined the rest of their folk on their migration east. I didn't have any part in its creation, and it actually took me a few decades to learn," Versera said, looking a little sheepish. She wasn't a Blue Dragon, at home with any kind of spellwork or magic, able to intrinsically use the magic within them in specific ways above and beyond shape changing and the few other spells that all dragons could use.

“This spell will let me basically retrace your steps from start to finish. It’s a kind of binding ritual between us, controlled by me, but the depth and time frame by you,” she explained earnestly. “From that, I’ll make a map refining it as we go with more details and technical knowledge.

Harry frowned for a moment, then shrugged. He wasn’t certain that kind of spell would be able to get through his mental defenses, but if it did, that too would be a learning experience.

Versera nodded and then gestured to Harry to get comfortable in one of the large beanbags that Recca had long since taken out of Harry’s yurt. She did the same, then shifted closer so their knees touched. She seemed completely unaware that this gave Harry an incredibly enticing view down her shirt at her, frankly, nature-defying chest but thankfully her mumbles and the flare of magic from Versera distracted Harry... somewhat.

Thanks to his training in Nature Magic, Harry could sense that park of magic, the flare of it from within Versera. Not her entire body, but a point within, situated somewhere below the chest of her kaldorei body. It then spread upward in thin lines through her body. One went to her eyes, the other went into her knee, where it spread to Harry’s body, skittering across his skin like tiny jolts of electricity. To Harry, it felt like a series of butterflies had landed on his skin in a row, leading up to his head. There it entered the skin, and Harry grunted as he felt it hit his mind.

At that point, judging from the expectant look on Versera’s face, something should have happened, but to Harry, it felt like a warm ray of sunlight as it struck his defenses, flowing around them and not taking hold. “Yeah... that’s not going to work,” he announced, trying and failing not to gaze down on those gravity-defying globes, barely hidden within her shirt.

With a flicker that felt remarkably like static clinging across all of Harry’s body, the ritual ended, and Versera hummed thoughtfully. “Well, that didn’t work. I suppose I’ll have to fall back on questioning you about each mountain in turn, then wringing out every little detail you could have seen the old-fashioned way: by hours upon hours of repetitive questioning until I’m satisfied.”

At the gleam in the currently diminutive shortstack’s eyes, Harry felt a shiver go down his spine, completely forgetting the view down her shirt she had been getting during the ritual. Equally disconcerted, both Recca and Quetzal took a few steps back, staring at Versera and Harry warily. “Now hold on! Let me, um, let me make a hole in my mental defenses. I’ll even pull out the right memories and um, get them ready for you to view, alright? That way the spell doesn’t need to search for anything.”

“Hmm...we’ll see if it works,” Versera tsked. “I can always question you after.”

True to his words, Harry made a hole in his mental defenses, then, creating a mental avatar brought out the memories of the past two weeks of his infiltration. This took a bit mentally, but

for those watching no time at all had passed before Harry nodded to Versera. "Alright, let's try again."

A moment later, Versera hummed, and still linked to Harry by a thread of yellow and bright blue magic, began to draw. "It seems to be working. Harry, any discomfort? We can talk and so forth even as the spell keeps working, just so long as our knees are touching."

"It feels tingly, essentially, like someone's rubbing a feather over my brain, sort of," Harry mused.

"Ha! Harry would be very familiar with the idea of someone running their feathers over him. The twins did that kind of thing a lot, as did many of the flock a time or two," Recca cawed in laughter.

"It's true, it was rather off-putting at first, then I just learned to ignore it... which kind of backfired more often than not, admittedly. Your younger sisters were most persistent." Shaking his head at Recca's caw of 'were!? HAH!' Harry looked over at Versera again. "So how long..."

Versera shook her head repressively at Harry's question, her eyes seeming to glow as she saw what Harry had seen on top of what her actual eyes were seeing. "Until I'm done, Harry... huh... this is quite a big area. We're we right about how many trolls there were? Seven hundred or so?"

"Maybe a little more, I could never quite get a good count of the trolls. There's always at least three hundred or so outside working around the volcanoes, or on hunting parties, hence the number always changing. One thing you didn't mention about trolls that was among the first things I noticed was how big an appetite they all have. It's **crazy** how much they put away. Far more than I could or even Recca. Even you Versera don't need as much as a single troll. Not when you're in your kaldorei form, anyway."

"Troll metabolisms are incredible. I do remember learning about that; it's why they're sometimes cannibals. If meat and so forth aren't available, there's no recourse but to eat each other," Versera said, scowling and shaking her head at the very idea. A dragon would never think of eating another dragon. Tearing a chunk out of someone during a fight sure, they did that all the time, but actually digesting the meat of another dragon?

Perhaps a black dragon would do something like that after Deathwing's fall and the corruption of him and his wing by Old Gods, there were few taboos they had not trounced on. But none of the other flights would, not even accidentally during a fight.

"I saw the trolls eat one of their fellows when a few of the manticores rebelled and killed one of them, tore his head to ribbons along with his chest, which I think included the heart. It was definitely a sense of waste not, want not after that, and they weren't about to let the

manticores have them. That is not a happy relationship,” Harry recalled going off on a more positive tangent for a moment. “There’s some respect I think, but it’s mostly simple obedience.

“Could we use that? I don’t like the idea of working with manticores, they’re vile creatures of the best of times, but in comparison to whatever these trolls are doing, along with their fire elemental allies, or servants? And what is up with that? Do these trolls have enough shamans among them to manifest that many elementals?” Recca asked hesitantly. She hadn’t read anything about troll magic in the history texts at Trueshot Lodge, but she figured that their shamans would have much the same abilities as tauren shamans did.

“The troll shamans certainly don’t have that power. Like my notes said, I think the fire elementals are the ones in charge,” Harry said slowly, before looking down at Quetzal. “Oh, sorry Quetzal, do you want to go hunting? Personally, I think I’d like some food that isn’t dried jerky or rations, but since I’m stuck here, at least one of us should get a good meal.”

“I’m certainly going to go hunting. I was getting a little hungry while we were napping near the top of that last volcano,” Quetzal said tartly. “Beyond my observations about the smoke that they use in their pipes being bad for my stomach, and the fact the ashes make for hard breathing at the best of times near those volcanoes, I don’t actually have any observations to add. So I will go and do that now.”

With that, Quetzal slid down Harry’s body again, then looked at him, demanding without words that Harry return him to his original size. After confirming with Versera that his use of magic wouldn’t disrupt the mental connection between them at present, Harry obliged.

Soon, a giant snake was taking up about a third of the butte’s top, then he was sliding down the side, almost able to reach the bottom of it while his tail was still up top, before falling just a little ways further. With the task of climbing down done, Quetzal moved out across the rocky fields below, heading further westward towards where Versera had reported a pride of lions.

While Quetzal went out hunting, Harry explained more about what he had seen among the trolls and others who lived among the volcanoes. The fact that the manticores were all in one place besides those that were out hunting was of interest to Recca, while Harry’s complaints about how the conversations he overheard among the trolls that he could get close enough to listen to was hilarious.

That first instance had proven all too accurate to what Harry could expect from other trolls. Trolls jabbered a lot, and their discussions were rarely serious. The worst of them had occurred when Harry had come upon a pair of trolls, a man and a woman, flirting. The pickup lines of the man had been cringeworthy, with the accent making it worse. The putdowns coming from the woman had been the only thing that Harry smiled about the entire day.

While Harry was telling Recca and Versera about his observations of the trolls, the fire elementals and so forth, Versera had kept on working to make a map of the area, noting down several things that Harry hadn't. In particular, she noted that a few of the entryways that Harry had noticed had been marked with something on their signs that hadn't been there on others. Not just the red slash marks through some of the squiggle-words that Harry had noticed, but rather there had been a pattern to how the bones had been set out.

She didn't know what that meant at first, but felt it might prove significant given how often those signs were used. Eventually, she decided that pattern marked dates and depth. Harry had investigated a few of them close enough for Versera to guess at how deep some of them could be given the angle they started at. She also was able to note that all the tunnels from which shackled air elementals had been taken were interconnected. The others, she wasn't certain of. Some, specifically on the shield volcano, were definitely not, and many of the others weren't either, but there was clear sign some of them did indeed meet inside the mountain. The question was, why?

Further, she noted down the various types of rocks and so forth that Harry seen, making Harry wonder how much geology and mineralogy the Cartographers learned to go with their mapmaking skills. A few bits she thought were significant, including the fact that several of the entryways seemed to have been dug directly out of solid stone rather than part of an existing cave structure.

"These two types are definitely unnatural," Versera announced definitively, pointing to two caves she had just drawn from Harry's memory. One was high up on the cinder cone volcano, the other lower down the composite. "This one was dug inward, and this one outward. You didn't note it at the time, but you were close enough to get a good glimpse of the edges. Something with great heat melted the rocks here from the inside, creating that entryway, hotter by far than simple magma. Brute force created this other tunnel or cave from the outside. The edges of both are very distinctive."

"I didn't see any trolls near that one where you said something burned its way out. You think that's significant?"

Versera didn't answer for a second, going over her notes. She then slowly began to mark down more of the map for a second before answering. "I think that the fire elementals were here first... There is a kind of pattern, or a greater plan." Versera quickly explained what else she had seen, then went on. "The entrances that have been burned outward, there are several of them, and they're not as haphazard as some of the other entrances. I... it honestly looks like some kind of search pattern."

Suddenly excited, Versera held up a hand, then dove into Harry's memory again. "Yes, Yes! This one and... that one! OOOO..."

Blinking Harry could only stare as suddenly all thought about making an accurate map went out of Versera's mind. Instead, she quickly began to go through his memories of each cavern entrance, sifting through them quickly. With the memories prepared and moved to the forefront of his mind Harry barely felt it, the feather on skin feeling returning, only with each stroke of the feather going faster.

"Yes! It is a search pattern. The Fire elementals, all of the burnt out segments, those are older, they've been here longer. But there... there must be some kind of stone that they couldn't burn their way out of. Why they were trapped I don't know but..." Versera hummed, pulling up a few more memories from Harry. "Oooh, but there's evidence of fire and earth elementals fighting in several places. The superhard, super-heat resistant stone, the makeup of some of the areas on the shield volcano and the older composite volcano. Yes, and the newer, most active volcano, it must have started as an offshoot of the other two!"

"Huh... you know, Quetzal and I felt three small earthquakes while we were in that area..." Harry peered at Versera's map for a moment. "Do you think there could still be an earth elemental somewhere in that area fighting this Garr fire elemental?"

"No, I don't think so. If there were, the trolls and everything would not be nearly so entrenched," Versera shook her head. "At the least there would have been enough signs of combat for even you to notice."

"OUCH," Harry grumbled. "Hmm... well, I will say that after one of those earthquakes, I saw a few air elementals escorted out of one of the holes that you just pointed to and said that it was burned outward," Harry said.

"That's interesting, and I already discerned that all the caves you spotted air elementals coming out of could be interconnected without compromising the integrity of the volcano as a whole," Versera said.

"As interesting as all that is to you two, it doesn't tell us anymore about how to attack the tusked fuckers. Were you able to get close to any of the air elementals? How did they act?" Recca asked quizzically. "Fire elementals capturing air elementals and using them like they are here, that's just weird, and has to have something to do with the war against the Trapped Trio, I think?"

Recca shivered a bit as she mentioned those monstrosities. She never liked speaking about those three, and always used euphemisms when talking about them, even in general terms.

"I know, I heard much the same from Shan'do Cenarius, and again with the Unseen Path. The Fire Elemental Lord, Ragnaros, went over to the other side, which was the start of the end of the war between the Elemental Lords and the four Old Gods. Unlike the others, he continued to serve them willingly after the Titans came. However, the Titans eventually killed Y'Shaarj and imprisoned the other three."

Recca shivered at the use of that name, while Versera looked up from her work, a scowl on her face as she shook her head. "Even dead, the names of such creatures have power, Harry. You shouldn't be so free with saying their names like that."

Frowning, Harry nodded at that, understanding her point. A part of his mind fought with the idea, wanting to liken that to the whole taboo on saying Voldemort's name back in his old dimension, but it very much was not on the same scale whatsoever. The Old Gods were literal creations of the Void, beings set outside time, place and death, and even though torn asunder by the titans, the strongest of them, Y'shaarj, might still have left behind echoes of his presence.

"The four Elemental Lords were imprisoned along with their masters after the war, right? The Titans didn't make any allowance for who joined them willingly or not. Could one of them be imprisoned beneath those three volcanoes? Is that why the fire elementals are here, and willing to work with the trolls?" Recca asked.

"No," Versera said firmly, so firmly that Recca and Harry both looked at her in surprise, although she didn't notice, still busy with writing down every note she could along with the outline of a map. Once she had the contours of the three volcanoes done, she could then go back and fill in more detail now that she had an idea of what was going on here.

A hypothesis that was not in keeping with Recca's concerns. "Absolutely not. All of the elemental lords were each jailed inside their own elemental realms. The Firelands for Ragnaros, Skywall for the air elementals and so on. They all do have shared borders and continue war, or so particularly intelligent elementals have told the rest of us over the centuries."

Versera paused, frowning a little. "The fire elementals **could** be working to create a way to connect the Firelands to this plane of existence, although that would show an incredible level of sophistication. Perhaps one of their generals could be buried here, this Garr, not finished off by the Titans and their fellows in that ancient war, simply because it was so deeply buried during it, but even that feels a bit off, especially given what I'm seeing here. I honestly don't know what they're doing."

"Are the fire elemental lords still allied to the ancient gods?" Recca asked slowly. "After all, there is a physical component to their prisons right? Would they be looking to just sort of dig down into one of their prisons?"

“That is a disturbing thought, but I think it would be beyond them unless Ragnaros himself is here leading the activity. No, I think the best would be to assume that a vastly powerful fire elemental is buried here, one with some kind of connection to air perhaps. Perhaps a greater fire elemental is keeping a slightly less powerful air elemental imprisoned, forcing it to summon lesser air elementals and capturing them? We still don’t know enough, botheration.”

“Yes, that’s what adventuring is for, to face the unknown,” Recca said, snorting as both Harry and Versera looked at her. “What, did you think I came along here just to help you map things Versera, or for you to find the site of your vision? I came along to fight, to have fun and see new things. We’ll figure it out eventually, and when we do, we’ll fight them. Simple as that.”

“Simple as that,” Harry chuckled, shaking his head. “I quite like that. Thanks for keeping us focused, Recca. We cannot take advice from our fears.”

“Yeah, well, considering this particular fight, I need something better to do at range. Harry. Dropping stones and what-have-you is good, but do you think you can come up with anything better? You with your busy hands and ability to craft things?” Recca teased.

“Actually, yes. I have been thinking about that for a while now. I think the idea will be to create... Well you won’t get the reference, but I can put a spell on some of the boulders you drop to make them explode, and to send the explosion in a specific way. That way, you’ll basically turn the boulder into shrapnel, shrapnel that will move at speed. Although you’ll also want a renewing bubblehead charm. The air around those volcanoes is deadly. Frankly, I’m astonished that the trolls and manticores can live there.”

While Recca grinned in a blood thirsty manner, Versera shook her head. “The trolls probably have simply evolved through their regeneration ability to ignore it. As for the manticores, I believe they originally were discovered by kaldorei near volcanoes. They might be able to ignore such or even enjoy it.”

“Yes, yes, very interesting. Any more ideas for me, Harry?” Recca asked excitedly.

“I really want to try and figure out a way to keep you invisible while flying. Invisibility spells and wards won’t work, but maybe I can look to the Shaman school for inspiration.. That, and your ability to fly higher than even the manticores can come in handy when we attack,” Harry mused.

That they would need to attack was obvious. Whatever the fire elementals were doing was causing a **lot** of tectonic activity and Harry didn’t need the instincts he’d honed in the war against Riddle and all the copy-cats afterward to know that whatever the trolls and their rulers were doing it was building to a crescendo.

There were also the enslaved air elementals to consider, and that the fire Loa, whatever it was, had apparently poisoned the minds of a significant chunk of a troll tribe, so much so that they had turned on their own and wiped out a tauren tribe as well. No, whatever was going on here had to be dealt with, regardless of how hard that might become.

However, with Versera's insistence on continuing the ritual they were doing until she had taken enough notes and finished at least a preliminary map, Harry was stuck in one place for a bit. Admittedly, after the past few weeks, sitting in one place in a nice, comfy bean bag without the constant danger of discovery was nice. But it was limiting, especially when it came to food. Indeed, Harry put his foot down on that score, and with Recca backing him up, was able to get Versera to stop the ritual to let him start dinner that night, and allocate time for it in the morning after.

Luckily, it only took two days for Versera to be satisfied, and honestly, the time spent was actually somewhat useful for Harry too. Harry hadn't really been doing much beyond seeing to the upkeep of his occlumentic realm after he began to make real progress with his chimeric abilities and everything else. He very much preferred to master his new combat styles and what the Unseen Path had begun to call his 'runic artifice' but that seemed to have been a mistake.

Because as he continually had to work to keep a hole in his mental defenses and the memories of his weeks of infiltration 'nearby' close to the fore of his brain, Harry created a semi-autonomous mental persona. This persona handled what Versera needed, while Harry personally concentrated on working out what he wanted to do for the coming war. This wasn't exactly life changing, but it had some interesting connotations, especially when Harry remembered how well Dumbledore and a few other Occlumency masters could multitask.

For now, though, it had allowed Harry to concentrate on other things. First, he started to do what he could about a blast-type runic array. Stuck for that day he concentrated on making as many different runic arrays that might make the effect he was interested in. That took the majority of the first day. The second day Harry devoted to building an anti-fire elemental series of spells and spell-chains to use, taking from the shaman and druid schools for some, while also reaching deep into his wizard-type bag of tricks, even going back over the few books he'd brought with him to find some.

On the third day after returning to the butte, Versera finally admitted she had gotten as much information as she could from Harry's memories. Harry then was free to start really experimenting.

The first time he gave her something to try, Recca, who was perforce helping along acting a carrier for each attempt, came back, wincing a little bit at the pain to her claws. "So, I think

you've got the, what did you call it, the blast radius down, but it went off **way** too quickly. It went off the instant it fell out of the pouch and nearly caught my talons in it regardless."

"Well, progress is often painful. And you're the one that wanted a new weapon," Harry said, before pulling out one of his healing totems from their special pouches, sticking it into the ground nearby. *I'm going to need to spend at least a day remaking totems, darn it. That's my second to last Healing Tide Totem, and I've only got two other anti-magic totems in there. Useful, but not as useful as Earthen Wall Totem against more physical defenses.*

"I want to complain about how blasé you are about my nearly losing my talons, but considering this is a weapon I asked for to make me at least a bit relevant in the coming battles, I will refrain from kicking you off the side of the butte," Recca said primly, before pausing. "By the way, as I was flying up there, a thought occurred to me. You and Versera were debating whether or not the Fire Elemental Lord could be trapped here, and why the heck there were so many chained air elementals right?"

Harry grunted as he moved one of the runes to another place in the sequence, staring at the results in his sand table for a moment before shaking his head, putting it back, and then moving another around. Figuring out a way to delay a runic array from performing its final task after being activated was incredibly difficult, and it was looking more and more like it wasn't really possible. He'd been able to figure out a blast ward, sure. Those were somewhat normal in his old world, so recreating them had been easy. But to create the same effect on something that was supposed to be mobile, to send the shock in a specific direction and time it to go off midair, that was incredible hard.

I think I'm going to need to give that up as a bad go. Instead, I can create a regular ward, make it so that it explodes on impact with the ground just like if someone had stepped where they shouldn't. Easy enough, but not as deadly as if it exploded mid air directly above the manticores or whoever. Or, maybe have Recca hit it again with another one? Hitting one target dropping straight down with another can't be too hard, right?

He was about to ask that aloud, when Recca continued, and Harry suddenly found his mind arrested for a moment as the voice of sweet common sense made itself known. "Well, why don't you just try to get in contact with the air elemental that's been blocking you from making contracts with other air elementals? This is the place she wanted you to go, right?"

"UGH. Okay, on the one hand, why didn't I think of that?" Harry nearly whined, shaking his head. "And on the other hand, I don't know if it'll even work."

"Yeah, but if you do it far away from the base camp, what's the harm in trying?"

“...” Harry stared at her deadpan, and Recca stared back, slowly starting to smirk. “This is for my line about experimentation sometimes leading to pain, isn’t it?”

“Just a little bit. However, I am serious. She might be able to tell us more about what’s going on here.”

Harry sighed, then nodded. “All right. I’ll head out tomorrow morning. If I can find a place near enough for me to see the volcanoes, projecting that into the connection might help me calm the spirit down enough that she doesn’t shred me along with everything else around me.”

Even if he called on his basilisk armor, there was a severe limit to how durable Harry was, and beyond gale force tornado winds that could shred straight through solid granite was probably on the other side of it. *And that isn’t at all something that I want to test. I’ve gone a couple decades now without needing to reincarnate, I would like to keep that trend going, thank you.*

When told of the plan, Versera frowned a little, but agreed that it was a good idea. However, she would be in the air high above Harry, just in case the ritual to connect with Skywall, and thus the spirits there, took too long or garnered attention from the forces around the volcano. After saying that, she scowled a little. “You know, we should really figure out a name for them.”

“I’ve been calling them the Volcanic Alliance occasionally in my head, or just ‘those odd-sounding bastards’ whenever I tried to overhear the trolls conversations. We could also go with the simpler ‘Fire Tribe’ I guess,” Harry said, smirking just a little bit as he remembered a child TV show that had just begun to air in Britain before the mission that had ended his life. *If in a very odd, and not at all permanent way.*

“Fire tribe works,” Recca said, completely unaware of why Harry was suddenly smirking even wider.

Setting up a ritual to summon an elemental and try to form a contracted bond with it was a bit time consuming, but not very difficult. Once Harry finished, and began to meditate, his mind already floating in a haze of drug-addled Zen, the connection nearly snapped into place, as quick as it ever had before. Harry’s connection to Air as an element was simply that profound.

As it did, and the small bottle in front of Harry began to vibrate, shift and quake, the air elemental slowly appearing and already threatening to shred it’s way free, Harry’s mental construct, the same one he had created to help provide Versera with the memories she demanded, pushed out the image of the three volcanoes in the distance down the connection, and suddenly, the urge from the air elemental to burst through, to come into this world solidified dramatically. It also condensed, and became more controlled, less wild.

Instead of appearing with enough released wind to tear Harry and everything around him apart, the air elemental slowly appeared, bursting out of the small container and continuing to form

without tearing apart everything around it. The elemental's form was that of a six-foot-tall tornado with a thin funnel of air where its legs should be for a human or kaldorei. On that funnel where a chest would be on a person was a large breastplate of copper that seemed shaped to show a feminine chest. On her limbs, the air elemental wore rings of copper and bronze.

Her head was easily the most formed portion of her body, with long streams of well-contained air that looked almost like dreadlocks bound by wire constantly jingled together. She, if indeed it was a she, had two eyes of profoundly dark purple that were currently wide as she stared all around her.

"Groovy," the spirit said, her voice also decidedly feminine, yet feminine, deep, husky, with a hint of youthful energy. Feminine, yes, but like the way a tauren woman was: Harry could say it was feminine, but it wasn't very attractive.

"So, that's where at least a portion of my dad's soul is being kept by those fire-fuckers," the elemental went on, not addressing Harry but rather talking to herself. Harry got the impression that this was a habit this spirit had gotten into at some point, rather than a sign that it was thinking deeply. "This is Azeroth, interesting. It feels heavier here. There aren't nearly as many winds to play with, but it also feels... feels **natural**. Like, like everything's weird, up and down, topsy turvy, but still in, in balance? Weird, very weird. And what are those...?"

Almost blindly grabbing for a batch of herbs that would deaden his currently blissed out mind, Harry mumbled, the mumble turning the spirit's attention towards him. "You're the weird non-tauren or kaldorei guy that keeps on trying to contact Skywall, right? Your connection to air is incredible, and your soul reached out for me, for some reason, pretty cool. Now you're here too, awesome, but you summoned me? Does that mean you need my help to free my dad? Are you okay, your eyes are doing this weird swirly unfocused thing."

The air elemental came close, but now that it was controlling itself and its form had fully formed, that wasn't putting Harry in any more danger than he already was. However, as Versera and Harry had both feared, the summoning ritual had garnered some attention. Hopefully not enough attention to warn the enemies back in the Fire Tribe's territory that something really big had been going on here, but there was a team of troll hunters racing in the direction of where the ritual had occurred.

Luckily, Versera saw them coming before they could spot her in turn. "Harry!" She bellowed the noise a roar from on high that caused the air elemental in front of Harry who had just been peering down at him in confusion, to jerk backward and look upwards. "You've got company coming."

The air elemental stared up, and if Harry had to put a term to her body language, she seemed awed, or interested perhaps. "A dragon! Groovy. Some of the oldsters've talked about them, but I've never seen one in person."

With that, her lower body seemed to coalesce into a more powerful wind for a moment, and she skyrocketed up, soon hovering in the air next to Versera, who had jerked sideways, worried that this air elemental that had caused Harry so much grief in the past was about to attack her. "Hey, my name's Tempina, you a friend with my so-called summoner down there? What's up with him?"

"The mind of most mortals can't connect to other realms without the use of certain mentally destabilizing herbs. Harry was forced to imbibe in such before he sought to communicate with you," Versera said, looking sideways at the air elemental and beginning to grin. Harry had warned her that this spirit felt young to other spirits but hearing her speak was kind of cute in a way.

"That sounds like fun, I might want to try some of those, if spirits can eat anyway, I'm actually not certain we can, I don't think I've ever tried in Skywall, and I don't know if what I would eat here on Azeroth, but what were you talking about being spotted? How long do you think it'll take Harry, is that his name, to fix his brain?"

Chortling at the word choice, Versera jerked her head downwards and to the side, pointing at a group of trolls who were hurrying towards where the disturbance had come from. They must have been a hunting party, and must have some magic user who had sensed the change in the air and the local magic.

Luckily, there weren't any manticores or others around, as once or twice the manticores had proven that they were smart enough to send someone back to report to the rest of the tribe and report what they'd seen. Normal trolls, not so much. *Now if that group disappears, it might cause some consternation, but hopefully not much. Heck, if they do send out search parties for their missing hunting party, then maybe we can wipe out more of them away from their center of power. Do that enough times, then maybe they will attack us in a position of strength, like Harry hoped initially.*

"Those are trolls. They live in those volcanoes over there, and are allied with fire elementals, and either they were or the fire elementals have figured out a way to chain air elementals like you." Versera jerked her head again, directing the young spirit's attention straight across to the band of air elementals.

"Excuse fucking me!" The air elemental roared in sudden rage. "Chain my people?! Oh hell no!"

With that, she shot forward faster than even Versera's emerald-colored fireball could've moved.

The hunter tribe below didn't even have time to look up, and then the air elemental slammed into the middle of their pack. It released a blast of cutting force winds, a hurricane whose power Harry was painfully aware of. However, this time Harry was nowhere near it, and Versera watched, a tiny bit impressed as the entire hunting party were simply eviscerated, turned into so much blood guts and churned up bits.

The next moment, the air elemental was back up by Versera, seemingly turning his head downward to look at herself. "Ew. I didn't know that you Azeroth types were so squishy, I thought you'd shred like rocks. What's all that red stuff? Did I get any of it on me? It was a little disgusting. I don't think I want to do that again."

"You didn't get any of it on you, but you might need to do similar things again in the future. As I said, the trolls are allied with whatever is going on in that volcano, and from what Harry told me of his past attempts to interact with you, you want something from within before contracting with him?"

"It's a little more complicated than that." For the first time, the young elemental seemed to be thinking about what it was saying. If Harry had been there, he would have said she was no longer sounding like a Valley girl. Well, she was, but one who had gone to higher education instead of dropping out of high school. "It's kind of a long story, and I, well, now that we're here, I'm fully willing to contract with Harry. But I do need us to do something about what's going on in those volcanoes. Although I don't know the whole of it. I only know that, well like I said, it's a long story."

By this point, the herbs that Harry had taken to try and offset the mind-altering herbs he'd already taken had begun to work. Versera and the air elemental only had to fly around the area for another twenty minutes before he signaled that he was back to normal with a small firework.

The air elemental was still staring at that as it came close enough for Harry to have a conversation with. "Greetings spirit."

"Yo. What was that thing? It was cool, and it exploded at the end, that was really neat, all those colors," Tempina enthused. "I'd like to see a lot more of those."

"They haven't been developed yet on this world, although on my old world, they're called fireworks," Harry chuckled, remembering how Tessa's Earth Elemental, the powerful kaldorei-shaped spirit named Felnar, had spoken about this young air elemental.

"Another world? That's kind of weird, but cool. How'd you come to be here on Azeroth?"

“That’s a long story. And I am gathering that whatever your requirements to make a contracted bond with me is also a long story,” Harry said leadingly.

Almost visibly setting aside her interest in the fireworks, Tempina nodded. “Yeah, it is. I can feel you loaning me some of your magical power, letting me connect to the Nature Magic around here, which I wouldn’t be able to otherwise so easily. It’s kind of a neat feeling, but it’s starting to fade out.”

“Then let’s get down to the contract, and then we can exchange stories.”

The air elemental nodded and settled into place across from Harry. Harry slapped his hands together, then held them out, Nature Magic glowing from him, then condensing into his hands.

For most elementals, those whose minds were more akin to animals, there wasn’t really a need to form a **formal** contract. The energy that an air elemental could or someone like Carrie, who really didn’t fit into that category, was what kept them on this plane of existence for however long the controller wanted. That connection would continue as the elementals returned to their own dimension, and they could be summoned back any time, like a dog on a leash.

However, for smarter elementals, a full contract was required.

The air elemental reached forward, the wind of its hand pressing down into Harry, pushing his hand down and away rather than shredding it. Suddenly, it too was glowing, as Harry’s magic, already acting like a go between Nature Magic and Tempina, shifted from a thread to a channel, pouring still more power, still more Azerothian Nature Magic into her.

When the contract was completed, the air elemental nodded, looking down at herself, seeming to bounce almost in place. Her form had changed a bit, becoming less ephemeral, more solid, and somehow just a tad bit more feminine, oddly. “It worked! I think I’m here! I mean fully.”

“That’s good,” Harry muttered, shaking his head. That had taken a lot more power than he had expected, and he was now almost exhausted. Not physically thankfully, and he was able to push himself to his feet, and transform into his Phoenix form, but he didn’t think he was going to use any spells anytime soon. “Now come on, let’s head back to the base. We can have that discussion behind some pretty solid defenses rather than out here with our arses hanging out of our trousers.”

Harry said that deliberately and got the laughs he had hoped for from both Versera and Tempina, and within seconds, all three of them were in the air, with the young Tempina pattering on questions about Harry’s bird form, why he was on fire, and if he had made contact with any powerful fire elementals. “Because that would be a problem for me. I don’t have much issue with them as a, you know, whole race or whatever, but most of the powerful fire elementals are assholes, and the more powerful they are, the more asshole they are!”

When Harry explained about Tricksey, Tempina was fine with it though. A little spirit that liked to cause mischief and had more in common with a hummingbird and a mind that ranged from an incredibly intelligent dog to that of a toddler was fine by her.

Back at camp, a quick round of introductions was made, and as Harry sets to cooking a meal for the three who could in fact eat, Tempina was asked to explain what she knew about what was going on but with the three volcanoes.

“Okay, so first, you have to understand that I don’t have any up-to-date information or anything like that. I only know that a portion of my father’s essence is somewhere either under or near those volcanoes. And as to why that is, well I told you my name is Tempina. But I suppose my full title is Tempina, Princess of Skywall. I am the granddaughter of Lord Al’Akir,” Tempina began, causing Versera to blink, then nearly fall sideways in shock.

That was one of the last things she’d been thinking to hear today, and to hear it said so blandly, was even more of a surprise.

Tempina noticed the shock of the dragon-turned-shortstack-kaldorei, and waved her arms to either side, creating light buffets of air that buffeted Recca and Harry where one was sitting, and the other working at the fire pit. “We air elementals don’t go into much in the way of formality or anything like that, and I’m way worse than most when it comes to that thing anyway. And it’s not like Al’Akir likes me or anything like that... or even cares. He’s all too busy warring with the other elemental planes, dreaming of the old days when he and the other three reigned supreme on this planet, or worked for the ancient weirdos, those gods that came from beyond. Heck, he doesn’t even really lead our people, that’s fallen to this conclave of old foggies, who just do whatever he wants ‘em to do to keep the wars going and any voices that might, y’know want peace, silent.”

She laughed then, a sound like dueling in chimes. “Not like I care about most of that stuff, I wasn’t even alive back then. I came into being a few hundred years after the Titans had forced us back to our elemental realms and sealed us there. Sealed us behind a one-way door, anyway. You all can open it from here, but we can’t open it from there. Which is really a bummer, and sort of ties into what happened.”

“My father, Prince Thunderaan, was trying to make peace with the Firelands, but the two he had contacted there had no real desire to make peace. Instead, they tricked my dad, and Ragnaros himself destroyed my father, ate some of his essence and sealed what he couldn’t destroy. He couldn’t destroy my father, because my dad was so powerful. He’s almost as powerful as Lord Al’Akir and destroying him would’ve taken a lot more of Ragnaros’s own power to do, weakening him to the point where Al’Akir and the others, Neptulon and

Therazane might have been able to take advantage. So instead, he split him, then sealed each side into a, a thing of some kind.”

Tempina scowled. “I wasn’t there at the time obviously, so most of that is secondhand information, beyond the splitting and how Ragnaros and his generals tricked my father.”

Tempina sighed, shaking her head. “My old man was an idiot, I’ll admit, but he was well-meaning idiot. And Gramps, Al’Akir, isn’t either an idiot or well-meaning. He was already apparently taking advantage of Ragnaros no longer being on the front lines, so it made sense of the time. Later, Al’Akir decided not to make any effort to find dad, instead pushing my uncle as his heir, and things somewhat stabilized, with neither side being able to take further advantage. Al’Akir had been able to make a lot of headway when Ragnaros was off ambushing my dad, but without my dad, the air elementals began to be pushed back by the stronger fire elementals. It’s a constant stalemate between the four elemental realms, since neither earth nor water want to see fire being able to become ascendant, and they joined in pushing the Firelands, but then turned on us and one another fast. My old man’s death didn’t mean anything, my old man’s overtures of peace were a lie. It’s all kind of doom and gloom, you now?”

Despite the flippant way Tempina said that in her Valley Girl-like accent, Harry could tell that the news hurt her deeply. Still, she moved on quickly. “Eventually, during what I think you all call the War of the Satyrs, some person here on Azeroth reached out to a powerful fire lord. Not on Ragnaros’s level, but just below it. At that point, Ragnaros, who wanted to make certain that my father couldn’t reform, took a chance and sent forth both shards with his general, Garr into Azeroth. That backfired on him though. The person who had summoned them into being was beaten, and the fire general sealed away, here on Azeroth somewhere. I’m guessing that means he’s somewhere in those volcanoes too.”

“And the lesser fire elementals and rest of the volcano tribe are trying to dig him out,” Harry mused, wishing that he still had more information. But what Tempina was sharing was at best secondhand, at worst, word-of-mouth several times removed. *I suppose elementals would have problems writing things down, and it isn’t as if all of this was being observed from all by some all-powerful deity who explains things to people like Tempina or myself.*

“We need to stop that,” Versera said firmly. “Tempina, would I take it right that this general that worked with Ragnaros to trick your father, he was almost on a level with your father?”

“At the time, yeah.” Tempina answered. “Or rather, there were two of ‘em. Now Garr’s way stronger on his own than whatever essence is left of my old man. Um... Garr himself? He’d be way stronger than me, if that helps more.”

“In that case, Garr’s escaping his prison would be catastrophic. The small earthquakes and that one volcanic eruption you had to deal with while scouting around the volcanoes would seem is

nothing to that, Harry. All three volcanoes would probably blow their tops, and this area of Kalimdor would be remade in the aftermath,” Versera scowled angrily. “I don’t think it would get to the point where the physical cells of the ancient ones would be impacted, but it would still be incredibly bad.

“Not just the initial explosion, but also the aftermath,” Harry agreed. “I don’t know if any of you understand, but the explosion of a volcano doesn’t just harm the surrounding area. It also tosses an incredible amount of ash up into the atmosphere. Three volcanoes going off, with that kind of power behind them? The effects could be felt as far as Ashenvale. Which is presumably the reason why the moon goddess decided to give Tyrande those visions of hers.”

Harry paused for a second, thinking about his friend to the north, and wondering idly how she was getting on. Her own mission, and the fact that she couldn’t really give Harry any help that wouldn’t have forced Versera to basically carry them all, had stopped her from sending further help with Harry, but he wondered idly what kind of trouble Tyrande was getting up to.

I’m almost certain she is running into trouble, Tyrande is very much the same kind of trouble magnet that I am whenever she deigns to leave her temple and the rest of her folk. Although I will also say she’s got a far better support group than I ever did back in my old life. The Unseen Path is nice, but right now, I’d rather like to have a dozen or so seekers here with us to help.

“Anyway, I want to free my dad. I want to free his soul and bring him back to life. What I’d really like to do is then join forces with him to kick out old Al’Akir, but I can’t do that, simply because of the ongoing wars within the elemental planes. Still, having my dad around would be a better idea than not, and I am, as much as I don’t like it, still the princess of my folk. Saving the air elementals that you have said are chained here is also kind of my duty,” Tempina concluded.

“And Al’Akir won’t help at all?” Versera asked more for clarification’s sake then because she didn’t believe Tempina when she had said he wasn’t interested in helping his son reform himself.

“No way. He’s too busy with the war and when he isn’t busy with the war, Gramps misses the old days and everything with those ancient whatever’s, the things with too many tentacles that came from space. I don’t know what he was like before they came, but now, he still pines for those days.”

While the message was serious, Recca still had to bite back an urge to snicker. Tempina was very clearly a young elemental, probably about as young as Harry had been physical for his people when they first met. And frankly, the airheaded air elemental was just amusing.

Harry took all this in, thinking deeply, then asked Versera to bring out the map she had made.

Thanks to her ongoing efforts the area around the three volcanoes was almost up to her normal level of detail, even if Harry had more trouble figuring out topography on the map rather than the diorama. Thoughtfully, he slowly began to plan. He took out various sticks, placing them on the map, pointing this way and that, then finally, after removing most of them, nodded slowly.

“All right, I think I’ve got an idea of how we can go about this. First, I think we need to start whittling down their numbers. The easiest way to do that is---”

The plan Harry came up with was relatively simple, if only because all of them could fly, and there was a limit to how far away from the mountains most of the trolls and their allies would go on a daily basis. Even the hunters stayed within a certain limit, and the members of the Unseen Path hadn’t seen any of them push past the butte or even come close to it. It was clear that with the nearest real threat, the tauren tribe, dealt with, the Fire Tribe had pulled into a defensive mindset.

This allowed Versera, Recca and Tempina to skirt entirely around the territory controlled by the Fire Tribe to come in from the ocean, and from on high. Versera came in low down, as if skimming the ocean as she headed towards the volcanoes, while Tempina and Recca flew as high as Recca could go, which, thanks to a Bubblehead charm from Harry, was quite a ways.

Recca was the first one to launch her attack. Dropping from on high, she opened up and released her entire magic pouch of stones. Hovering there for a moment, she watched several dozen pebbles fall out, becoming boulders as she flew around a small area. Specifically the area above the shield volcano where the manticores lived.

The first thing the defenders knew that today was going to be a bad day was loud whistling from on high. Thanks to how high Recca had flown, the stones had a good deal of momentum behind them as they came, and would’ve caused what Harry called splash damage regardless, but Harry also been able to create his contact-based explosion array. The modified ward array was easy enough to create once he stopped trying to overthink things.

Recca, however, had seen what could do even when dropped from a height of a mere few stories. Now, not all of the rocks she was sending down had that array, but a few did, and when they slammed into the ground with concussive force, sending hard stone bits everywhere around them and causing a large dust cloud to appear. The manticores barely had any chance to get out of the way before they were slain. Many were able to get in the air admittedly, but the blast wave from the strikes caught them, hurling them off of their wings, crashing down to the ground.

At least two thirds of the manticores were dead in that initial strike, along with a few trolls who had been unlucky enough to be in the area, and two fire elementals to boot. The air elementals

on the other hand hadn't taken a single casualty, and even destroyed several of the boulders, but not all of them.

Into this chaos Versera and Tempina came over the horizon.

Tempina stayed well back from Versera. They didn't know how the chains that bound the air elementals were created and had no desire whatsoever to realize that those things could be placed on an air elemental that was already operating on their own like Tempina. However, she could provide support and defense and a specific type of defense against her fellow air elementals, while Versera acted as their offensive punch.

They were of course seen as they came over the oceans, and with no other enemy in sight the remaining flyers, air elementals and those few fire elementals that could also fly, along with a few manticores and manticore riders came out to meet them.

This group was met by Versera's flames at range. Tongues of acid and fire lashed out from her mouth as she banked away. She kept the distance open, flying just over the ocean side to side, not closing further with the land where the fire elementals would be able to engage her on a more even footing and letting the air over the ocean form a barrier to the poison gas.

The first attackers to get past Versera's initial attacks were a pair of air elementals. One of them looked like a giant fish, a chain wrapping around its entire body as wide wings of diaphanous silk-like objects flew from both sides and above and below. The other looked almost like a tauren, except it was bloated, had no legs, and zoomed forward quickly on a trail that Harry would've likened to that of a genie, much like Tempina.

They came on, right up until Tempina erupted from below them, flying up towards them with a shout of, "Hey, slow down you two! Let's get those tacky things off you!"

Her blasts of air slammed into the metal chains holding the air elementals, and both of them ruptured. Powerful those chains might have been, imbued with enough magic to hold the spirits so chained, but they couldn't withstand an elemental of Tempina's strength. It took a bit out of her, and she quickly flew past and then around, putting Versera between her and any oncoming attackers, but it worked.

Both air elementals shimmered for a brief moment, then disappeared. Those chains had been keeping them in this dimension, not just chaining them to the purpose of the people who had created them.

Two of the fire elementals who had warily moved out over the water also stared, then quickly retreated, but the manticore riders and manticores came on, and Versera grinned evilly, an expression that came easy to her draconic face. *Well, the plan looks like it's working so far.*

Elsewhere, as Recca retreated to load up with simpler stones and do the same process again elsewhere, hundreds of trolls ran around like so many chickens with their heads cut off, trying to figure out what to do against an enemy out over the ocean now that most of their flyers have been taken out by Recca's sneak attack. Worse, word was quickly spreading among them that two of their air elemental slaves had also been freed, and more than one Caribbean voice was raised in outrage at the idea.

"I mean what's the damned point of those chains if they can be broken like that, mon? And we let them stay in Azeroth, don't we, they should be more grateful anyway, mon."

"I don't know mon, but this is bad! They're attacking from the ocean, that's our weakest side, and now, now we've lost most of our manticores too!"

Soon, though, several figures came out from some of the entrances that Versera had pointed out were burned from the inside rather than dug from the outside. And she was proven correct. Most of those were up higher along the volcanoes, mostly near the two that were semi-active in the case of the other, legitimately bulging out magma constantly. These trolls all had massive headdresses, and wielded not just spears, but large staffs made out of stone or metal.

One of them was taller and broader than the others, his tusks huge in comparison to even the other magic users around him, and his eyes were deep set, blazing with energy. That energy wasn't Nature Magic, something that Harry, hidden nearby under his invisibility cloak, could tell that right off the bat. No, this looked almost like fire-based magic of some kind.

Can an elemental empower someone, subvert the connection somehow? Harry hadn't thought about that, but perhaps it was something to ask Tempina about. Regardless, it was very clear that this one was the leader of the trolls as he barked out orders.

As serious as he looked, he was still shouting in a Caribbean accent, something that had Harry's eyebrow twitching in annoyance. "Shut up, you lot, get the stones out of your ears and listen good! They're coming in, that dragon, and whatever help she's got. It ain't going to be enough. Dragons be hurt just like any beast, and we've got the boys to do it, mon! We just got to be smart about it."

That won a somewhat ragged cheer from the trolls nearby, and the other shamans, if that was what they were, quickly began to spread out, as their leader barked out orders. "One group of fire elementals to every five hunters. Ready your spears and arrows, ready yer spells. If that creature comes into land, we'll want to be ready. First line, you'll fall back, then the second and third groups will hit 'em from the side, mon!"

He pointed specifically to a group of trolls with small crystals on the top of their staffs instead of skulls. "You be keepin' da air elementals back. If the elemental out there be so strong they can

shatter our bonds, we'll need to hit 'em with overwhelmin' force, mon. Bring them all in altogether from on high, not in small groups."

It was actually a pretty good plan, Harry reflected, if, that is, Versera and Tempina were the only two real threats. However, they weren't. First, Recca would undoubtedly be back in a little under an hour. Second, Harry was already here.

Indeed, Harry had been there for days by this point. Only this time, he had been preparing, placing golems wherever he could, hidden behind Notice Me Nots. Harry had also ambushed two hunter groups, wiping them out before word could spread, and assassinated two separate troll druids... or shamans. Harry still hadn't heard what the trolls actually called their magic users, and honestly, none he had seen bar the old shaman with the ability to raise the ground and the ones who controlled the poison gas, were worth mentioning.

All this had not gone unnoticed, but the trolls had thought it meant there was some new predator who had moved into the territory and which would move on when the air quality got to them or would eventually be found. At which point, it "Would make heap good eatin' for da hunter what bring it down, mon." None of them had sensed Harry's use of magic.

Today, he had gone further, spreading out some runic traps.

Now, as the trolls scrambled towards the shoreline to create their defensive barriers, a lot of those traps activated, as that had been the area Harry had concentrated on. Trolls found themselves suddenly burning, while others were blasted apart and a few teleported, using the same array that Harry used to pass messages back to truth Lodge. Only he still hadn't figured out a way to allow something living to pass through. They came out of the other and in bits and pieces.

Now, he ducked behind a boulder and gestured to the ground to either side of him. Two giant golems rose out of the ground at his magical call. They instantly moved to attack the nearest troll, and six more followed in quick succession. Each of them was given the same order.

"Attack every troll or Fire Elemental you see."

Soon, the last of that bundle of golems trundled forward into a mass of trolls and fire elementals. At that signal, other golems scattered around the area moved out from under their Notice-Me-Nots, attacking any target of opportunity nearby. *My work on giving long term orders to my golems is really coming in handy here. I could wish I had an earth elemental, like Felnar, here to direct them as they are still going to be remarkably stupid, but the sheer numbers of them I've created over the past few days should offset that.*

The fire elementals fought back fiercely, but the chaos of the attack continued to spread, pulling more and more of the trolls and fire elementals into it as dozens, then hundreds of

golems began attacking. Only the Air elementals up high remained unaffected, having already been organized into a large attack force. Yet they just hovered there, directionless as their commanding summoners/jailors were distracted by the sudden infection of golems that had appeared in their midst.

He looked down at Quetzal, cocking an eyebrow. "What about you? Do you think you can start adding to the chaos?"

"It is still far too hot here, and your cooling charm does not last nearly long enough," Quetzal argued. "Transform me into my true size for a moment, let me launch my needles, and then transform me back, I won't be able to move much on my own without you constantly replacing the cooling charm."

Harry nodded and looking around, he saw a place above them on the slope, where he would be able to set Quetzal down and have him transform with little difficulty, giving him a wide area to attack a large clump of trolls, who were trying to prepare for Versera. She was flying closer than before, almost daring the fire elementals and the archers to concentrate on her.

The shamans and the chief shaman, whatever his name was, tried to order these trolls to split their attention, and it began to work. There were simply too many trolls and fire elementals for it not to. But into that morass came Quetzal. He appeared suddenly, causing a shout of surprise, with several of the trolls shouting, "A snake Loa! The great serpent Ula-tek be unhappy with us, mon!"

Quetzal seemed to be amused by this, but even as he grew to his full size, Quetzal twisted, showing his back down towards three or four troll-controlled positions, and launched his entire array of needles. It would take days for his body to recoup those losses, but more than three dozen trolls went down, paralyzed.

The trollish regeneration probably wouldn't allow that to last for very long, but it sowed more confusion among the ranks, especially when Quetzal began to turn invisible thanks to his shimmer back ability. Before he was totally camouflaged, Harry finished the task by shrinking Quetzal down.

The trolls were superstitious, and that was definitely a most negative sign to many. A few theological discussions, both of which both sides were speaking with a Jamaican accent to Harry's ears, erupted, before being put down by the magic users who shouted out that "There was only one true Loa, and it is the Fire Lord Garr!"

Meanwhile, Harry, with Quetzal wrapped around his forearm this time, pulled back and away from the area impacted by Quetzal's attack. He moved around the area, using his invisibility cloak and the cover of his golem battalion (there weren't enough for an army, Harry felt, but

battalion seemed appropriate) to hunt and kill any single troll he could without giving his presence away. Given the speed he could move thanks to his druidic enhancement magic, cloak and Mufilatio, Harry was able to kill more than a dozen trolls, two of which were magic users of some type.

Twice more, Harry created a mass of seven golems while hiding behind cover, sending them out to cause havoc. One time, he did so close to the caves where the poison cloud came, ending the golems directly into the caves. Four troll magic users fought his golems at that point, and Harry killed them all with pinpoint spells removing their heads one after another. He had to fade away quickly at that point, and retreated all the way to the foot of the shield volcano, using Recca's second attack run as further cover, but felt it was worth it.

At that point, though, the plan changed dramatically. Both the composite and the cinder cone rumbled, spewing forth ash and cinders from their tops as new lava flows flowed out of the various holes that had been made in their sides. This included the caves where Harry had just slain several of the crystal-staff using magic users. The ground quaked, and a cheer rose from many of the previously beleaguered trolls.

"Da Lord Garr, he is with us, mon!"

"Yeah! This battle gonna be ours with Lord Garr behind us, mon!"

"Be better than that!" the chieftain bellowed with glee. "It mean Da Great Work be nearly done. It mean Lord Garr be close to breakin' out!"

Hearing that, any plans to nick pick the trolls and the rest of their enemies to death went out the window. Quickly sifting through his mind to determine which of the dug-out tunnels Versera had identified was the newest, Harry raced along from the shield volcano towards the composite. It took him an hour more to determine which of the holes it was when he reached it, during which the battle over the ocean ebbed and flowed, and Recca came back for a third bombing run, only to need to break off, as the air elementals raced up towards her.

Not being able to help Recca, and knowing he was the only one of the group who knew Garr might be close to breaking out, Harry entered the tunnel in question. Sliding along one side of the tunnel, he quickly left behind any sunlight, but the way was lined by small crystals inset into the wall that seemed filled with fire. *I'm detecting a theme* he thought, wondering what those were, but also deciding it really didn't matter.

Rather, what did matter was what might lie in front of him. He examined the wall closely as he went, noticing how hard the stone looked, how uniform it seemed in places. It really looked as if two different types of stone, one with a high resistance to heat, and the rest, normal volcanic

types of rock had been merged together, or mixed in various ways. *More evidence of powerful elementals fighting, I suppose?*

As Harry descended further into the ground, the tunnel began to sharply decline, and Harry almost lost his footing several times. Thankfully, the trolls seemed to have realized this was a problem and carved out steps.

As he went, despite the heat outside, there seemed to be a bit of chill in the tunnel now, or perhaps the nonferrous stone was providing insulation against the heat. Regardless, that stone quickly began to dominate, leaving behind any sign of the normal volcanic rocks. That was interesting, and what was more interesting, was the fact that it also looked to have been maybe shaped in the past? Harry wasn't certain, but he felt that an intelligent earth elemental would have been able to tell him more. *I really need to do more about reaching out to an Earth elemental after this. I hope I can, now that I've reached an accord with Tempina.*

Harry frowned a bit, pausing where he was suddenly, listening intently. There seemed to be some kind of clanging noise ahead of him, and his eyes widened a bit. *Damn! The troll chieftain was right. Some of the fucking trolls must have kept on working down here despite everything going on above.*

Twenty minutes after entering the tunnel, Harry felt he had been going for at least a mile. Whether or not that equated to being directly underneath one of the volcanoes or something else, he didn't know. The tunnel had twisted several times, but it was now beginning to level off at last, and for some reason Harry felt he was somewhere between the composite and the cinder cone. Maybe high up the side of the cinder, but those were his best guesses.

The heat had also begun to rise. It was still not nearly as hot as Harry had expected it to be underneath not just a volcano, but the one that had gone off while he was investigating the area, though. Even stranger, that heat was coming from ahead of him, not from the walls, ceiling or roof. *It's like someone made special insulation for a kiln, and then someone came around and knocked a hole in it. Which... come to think of it, might be the case. COCK!*

Moments later, the noise that he had been hearing, that of pickaxes on stone, which had also been growing, became even louder, a distant chorus of noise. Soon, the area ahead of Harry opened up to a wide cavern, even better lit than the tunnel had been, and Harry paused, staring. *Well, I think we were off by her estimation of the trolls' numbers,* he thought, staring.

There were at least a hundred, maybe as many as a hundred and fifty trolls in this one cavern. The cavern itself was large, maybe half the size of a football (real football, not the American version). It looked like the whole cavern had been mined out of the hard, heat-resistant stone, and from at least two, maybe more angles. Regardless of how the area had been reached, it was very obvious what the trolls had been searching for.

At the far end of the large cavern was a strange bulge of stone sticking out from the rest of the wall. The stone of that area was different from the rest of the stone around it, looking more like a mix of granite and diamond, almost, whereas the other stone looked more like granite. The whole thing looked slightly reddish, as if something behind that hump of stone was heating it up, like a live vein of magma. *Or maybe an immensely powerful fire elemental.*

Eighty trolls were working on that wall while still more were working on the other walls, as if trying to enlarge the cavern further in the direction of that bulge. The trolls' pickaxes rose and fell, each of them taking several hits to the wall before quickly pulling back, rotating out in a workmanlike fashion with groups behind them.

Some of the trolls were always free to grab any free chunks of stone, of which there weren't many. The heat-resistant stone seemed remarkably hard, and as Harry watched several pickaxes shattered, their users moving back quickly.

At the center of the room stone chunks had been piled in a haphazard mass. On top of them, a shaman stood, gleefully shouting and dancing as a small chunk of stone was finally smashed off the far wall. He looked younger than the old shaman who had been part of disciplining the manticores, but older than the chieftain, without that worthy's impressive tusks. Indeed, one of his tusks seemed to have been broken near the base, then filed to a point. His eyes lacked the red flare of both those worthies, but gleamed with their own version of madness, a religious one perhaps rather than simply a magical one.

"Yes, yes! Keep workin, ya zuggin' Zuugs! We nearly be trew! I knew it, I told Chieftain Bloodtusk that this day be the last day! That we'd be brakin' t'rough. Soon Lord Garr be free, mon!"

And if that isn't a call for violence I don't know what is, Harry thought, before glancing down at Quetzal. "Is it cold enough in here for you to get involved?"

Quetzal's answer was a brief nod of the head, as he moved off Harry's shoulder, and Harry quickly hit the snake with a cancellation charm, allowing Quetzal to grow to nearly his full size. As he did, the shaman instantly twisted around, sensing the magic that Harry had used, as his Invisibility Cloak couldn't cover Quetzal, but Harry hit the man with a cutting spell, slicing him in half from head to crotch, and sending the halves to either side of his former perch.

The troll miners all turned, then Quetzal charged towards them, fangs gaping wide. "You had best hope these trolls make good eating, Harry, or I will demand my weight in boar after this!" he hissed, his hisses unintelligible to any but Harry, as Harry had also canceled the translation spell on him that would have let anyone else understand Quetzal's hisses as Harry's Parseltongue allowed him to. Harry figured that wordless hissing was far scarier than Quetzal's attempts at witty repartee."

“Oh, shut up and get to killing, you daft serpent, you know I’m good for it,” Harry hissed back in the same language.

“The great serpent! Ayeeee, Ula-Tek is angry with us and has sent her avatar to kill us all, mon! We’re doomed!” A few of the miners said backing away.

Yet that was a small minority. Most of them raised their pickaxes and charged forwards, bellowing war cries at both Harry and Quetzal. “MEAT, snake meat’s back on the menu, boys!”

“Kill the servant of the false Loa!”

“Zugg Zugg! Your blood do be painting these walls for Garr, mon!”

“For Lord Garr!!!” That last was easily the loudest, coming from at least half of the trolls in the cavern.

A few, admittedly did notice Harry wasn’t troll, kaldorei or anything else they knew, but they did so while charging forward. “Kill the creature, whatever the zugg it is, I bet it’s blood still be spillable, mon!”

As Quetzal shielded his position for a moment with his sheer bulk, Harry gestured and modified Accio spells grabbed at the totems from their pack on his back. The first one slammed down right next to him, covering Harry and Quetzal with Stoneskin. Four more totems flew out under Harry’s mental guidance, slamming into the ground and creating large stone walls. The next second his chakram pouch opened and seven spinning disks of death flew out, flashing all around Harry as he charged forwards. Casting spells quick and dirty he began a direct assault on the trolls even as he dodged hurled pickaxes and rocks, most of his spells coming from his own school of magic for a moment. Wizarding type spells were just faster to cast and didn’t pull nearly as much energy as shaman or druid type spells.

While he had been forced to overpower the cutting spell to get through the shaman’s magical resistance, the other trolls didn’t have nearly as much. A dozen of them went down quickly, but the others charged forwards still raising their pickaxes. A tripping hex grabbed several of them, an oil slick spell caused the floor of around half of the large cave to become so slick that the trolls couldn’t find any purchase. They fell and floundered, and Harry began killing them while Quetzal snapped, smashed and swallowed trolls.

Although only after making certain they were already dead. Quetzal had no desire to see if a troll could gouge out his inside with their tusks or weapons.

As the killing became general and the trolls proved to be unable to even close with Harry thanks to his chakrams and spellwork, a roar of raw fury and outrage came from behind the stone wall

that they had been hammering at. “NO! NO! I DO NOT KNOW WHO YOU ARE, BUT I WILL BE FREED! I WILL HAVE MY FREEDOM!”

The heat of the area rocketed. It was clear that Garr was making his bid for freedom and Harry cursed as a small portion of the wall began to turn red ever so slowly.

Worse, a few of the trolls hadn’t been trying to attack him. Rather, two enterprising trolls, perhaps a little smarter than the others, had pushed their way around the edge of the cavern, and now blitzed past Quetzal and down the tunnel. One was crushed by Quetzal’s tail coming back, smashing the troll so hard into the side of the tunnel that most of its bones were shattered, and its brain pulped. But the other was able to race on, heading up the region to get help.

A tongue of flame flickered through a fist-sized portion of the wall, so hot it looked as if it was plasma, searing across the open area of the cavern, but hitting nothing. A bellow of weary triumph was heard, and a finger made of flame and magma alike, thick and almost bulbous, poked through the hole, the hand it was connected to seemingly grabbing the wall from the other side. “I WILL BE FREE! YOU WILL NOT STOP ME, WHATEVER YOU ARE, WHOEVER YOU ARE! I WILL BURN YOU TO ASH, AND THEN, I WILL FORCE THESE FOOLS TO SUMMON MY LORD TO THIS PLANE! ALL THE WORLD WILL BECOME--”

Harry wasn’t listening. This wouldn’t be the first madman’s dialogue he’d ever heard, and the formula was always the same, thus decidedly uninteresting to him. Instead he reacted, a fire-retardant conjuring spell coming to his mind easily after days of practicing anti-fire elemental spells. He raised a hand away from the battlefield, launching a stream of foamy chemicals towards the hole. The stream of chemicals hit that finger, and the owner of it recoiled, yelping in some pain, before it began to curse in somewhat theatrical tones, threatening Harry’s ancestors, his face, and, oddly coming from an elemental, his sexual prowess.

Despite their losses, the troll miners pressed on, trying hard to kill Harry and Quetzal. Indeed, many of them grabbed up the weapons of the dead, hurling them like throwing axes or just wielding them two-handed. Harry lost two of his chakram to such makeshift weapons, the trolls wielding them proving to have incredible accuracy and speed, while their hurled weapons forced Harry to dodge or defend for a bit.

This allowed a few of them to get through the oils slick, but Harry still cut them down easily. A few others got too close to the Stone Wall Totems. The magic inherent in the totems caused their aggression to suddenly turn in that direction, and Harry killed them too.

In contrast, the trolls engaged with Harry’s companion were doing a good amount of damage to Quetzal. While his sheer size gave his scales a certain level of toughness along with the Stone

Skin spell, the trolls were strong as heck for all their spindly nature, and they swung those pickaxes with mad abandon either one-handed or with both hands.

Seeing this, Harry hastily tossed a Healing Wave Totem down, then covered it and the Stoneskin Totem with a magical shield.

The next second, Harry created another golem out of the floor of the cavern. Massive and looking more like a dragonoid than the normal giant Hagrid Harry frequently used, it wadded into the trolls, made of the same superstrong, fire resistant stone as the floor.

Harry's slaughter of the trolls was interrupted by a shout from Quetzal. "Watch the tunnel! We might have trouble coming. One of these boars on-two feet got away from me!"

"Should I take it that you like the taste of them if you're calling them that?" Harry hissed in response, causing a troll who had been playing dead, slowly inching closer using just his arms, to freeze.

He was decapitated by one of Harry's chakrams as Quetzal replied. "I will admit that they are strangely tasty, but I am deeply concerned that their regeneration might prove their corpses linger in my stomach despite the best my various acids can do."

Even as Harry laughed at that, more flame appeared from the wall, more holes, and one of the beams of intensely hot plasma slammed into Quetzal, causing the snake to scream and writhe in agony. One of the trolls took the opportunity to try and smash one of his eyes, but the writhing nature of Quetzal's movements protected him. The pickax instead buried itself in his snout, only for the troll to lose it a second later, and then be bitten in half by the furious snake.

Elsewhere the miner's pickaxes did enough damage for one of the Stone Wall Totems to collapse. However, another group of fifteen died to a Bombarda from Harry. The spell, only overpowered a little bit more than normal, simply tore the group of trolls to ribbons. While a few trolls Quetzal had crushed or Harry had hit with spells that didn't take their heads or hearts, there was no way any of that group was going to be moving ever again.

Snarling and inwardly castigating himself for the brief moment of levity, Harry ducked under one of them that would've caught up in his head and shoulders. While Harry's Phoenix form gave him immunity to fire, Harry wasn't willing to chance it right now. A Protego flashed out followed by another stream of fire retardant and a Water Wave Totem, causing Garr to yell in pain.

With the imprisoned fire elemental distracted for a moment, Harry raced towards Quetzal, casting down another healing totem. The combined efforts of two of them began to stitch Quetzal's wounds closed, but the burn mark remained for a bit, the magic of the blast of flame fighting the healing of the Nature Magic spell. That was a sign of the amount of magic inherent

in that flame, and Harry shook his head, wondering idly which was worse, Fiendfyre or whatever that was. Regardless, his protective spells were working against this fire,. “Are you going to be all right, old snake?”

“I might well be old, but with age comes wisdom, something I hope you eventually acquire regardless of how your own immortality treats you,” Quetzal hissed, concentrating through his pain. “That thing beyond the wall is the main threat. Let me and your golem finish the trolls here off.”

Nodding, Harry reached out with his magic into the ground, grimacing. When he had created his golem, he had found that the non-volcanic rock was inherently magical and resistant to his control. Creating the golem at the time had taken about as much energy as creating six similarly sized one. Now, as he tried to take command of the stone, to **will** it upwards, Harry gasped at the amount of magic he was pouring into the spell. Yet within seconds, his effort began to be rewarded.

As he was working on that, noise from the tunnel warned Harry that they were about to have company. “Y, you’re right, I can’t do two things at once! Do you think you and the golem can hold them off?” Harry asked, gritting his teeth. He’d been able to close several of the holes that had been burned into the wall, and had begun to pull from the other stone, shaping it around to thicken that wall, but it was taking all his concentration and power. *Fucking hell, I really need to look into that mental partition thing.*

“No,” Quetzal said bluntly. “So unless you’re willing to bring the tunnel down on top of them, which I don’t know if you’d even be able to with this hard stuff, we’re going to be facing a war on two fronts soon.”

To that, Harry could only grunt in reply, as there was no way he could do that and keep trying to seal in Garr.

Of course, the volcano tribe was also facing a two-front war. Recca had once more retreated the moment the air elementals began to ascend up towards her from over the ocean and the moment they had done so, Versera and Tempina had charged in once more for a hit-and-run attack.

More than half of the trolls that had started the battle were down by this point thanks to their assaults, the scattered golems and Recca’s efforts, and more than that in terms of fire elementals.

There were still a lot of both trolls and fire elementals left, and Versera, who felt they had whittled the enemy down to around a third of their total numbers, was sporting a few serious burns and other injuries by this point, mostly to her chest, stomach, neck and forelegs. She had

been very careful to protect her wings, and Tempina's orders on that point had been strict: given the choice, always protect Versera's wings.

Even as Versera and Tempina retreated out to sea again, Chief Bloodtusk and several others turned as a frantic miner raced towards them, howling as loud as possible. "We's got problems! Big problems! Ula-Tek be here, and it not be happy with us! It bring a weirdo, a two-legged warrior who be speaking the serpent tongue! It's shorter than us, but it got bad magic, bad mojo! It be killing the miners, and it do something to the Lord Garr, it cause him **pain**, mon!"

That was enough for Bloodtusk. "All yous boys get movin' into the latest tunnel!" he bellowed, using magic to enhance the order. "Get in there, free Lord Garr!"

In a way, he needn't have bothered. Even as that troll had come within shouting range every fire elemental who had heard that report had already turned in that direction, racing towards the tunnel. It was a very odd menagerie of creatures that did so but there were at least forty of them, and Bloodtusk and at least three times as many trolls raced with them.

Versera saw this frenetic activity, and realized instantly that whatever Harry was doing, it had suddenly pulled the attention of the entire Fire Tribe down on his head. "Press in! We have to press in! Tempina, head up and intercept those air elementals! If Recca is still in the area, tell her to do another quick bombing run! I'm going to do what I can to cut down on their numbers more."

With that, Versera twisted around, and headed right back into the shoreline and beyond, moving so fast that neither Harry nor Recca, if they had been there, would've been able to keep up beyond the first few seconds. She poured on the speed and then poison gas, emerald fire and acid rained down on top of the remaining trolls.

With half of their number having turned to race towards the tunnel where Harry was trying to stop their 'god' from breaking out, along with all of the fire elementals, there were only a few air elementals left near the ground and those in the sky who had been sent upward to try and catch Recca. Three of those were suddenly hit from behind and below, pinpoint accurate blasts of highly concentrated magical wind crashing into them with all the force of a tornado squashed down into an area the size of a fist. The metal of their chains shattered, and those three were released back to Skywall.

None of the other air elementals turned, instead obeying their earlier commands, continuing to search for Recca rather than engage Tempina as they had been ordered to. There might've been some malice in how they went about it, obeying one order and not obeying any others, but if there were, none of them were even able to say yes or no to that.

Or it could have been that there were only two crystal-topped staff-wielding trolls left by this point thanks to Harry's depredations. Regardless, they were out of the fight, and now Versera dove down, lashing out with claws, tail and breath weapon alike as she slammed down into the ground right outside the entryway the trolls and fire elementals had been making for with single-minded fanaticism. The majority of the fire elementals and a goodly portion of the trolls had already entered, but Versera would make certain no more did.

The next second, Versera screamed as one of the shamans who had remained on the surface lashed out with some kind of black lightning that caught her in the foreleg. She crashed onto her side for a moment but launched a return blast of acid that caught the troll in the head, dissolving straight through despite its regeneration. However the remaining trolls, at least sixty of them along with ten fire elementals, charged, howling their war cries as they loosed hatchets and spears at her.

While Quetzal finished off the last of the miners in the cave, Harry turned his attention to the howling wave of fire elementals and trolls racing down the tunnel towards him, sending his golem back to hammer at Garr's fingers and other bits instead of keeping his attention on the ground. Fire retardant foam flashed out from one hand as his other lashed down the hallway towards the incoming trolls with spell after spell. *Gotta finish these idiots off quickly!*

The fire elementals charged forwards, and unfortunately for Harry many of them were immensely durable, taking several water or anti-fire spells apiece, or simply forcing Harry to overpower those spells in a way that drained him. Still, even after his earlier exertions Harry had magic to spare, and slammed down another Stone Wall Totem, which protected him from the first few who got within range of their own weapons, be it balls of magma or hurled spears.

Meanwhile, Quetzal convalesced behind them. He had taken more damage from the weapons of the trolls on top of his burn from Garr, the damage done by the immensely powerful fire elemental only healing slowly even with two Healing Wave Totems. Harry's golem, on the other hand, was doing yeoman work, pushing the stone wall back up and over the holes Garr was burning through it or simply slamming hard blows down onto Garr's fingers and hands whenever they appeared.

Unfortunately, the golem was not fast enough to keep up with the holes that Garr was finally able to burn through his prison. Soon, a blast of flame burst through again. One hit the golem, turning its head to slag while washing over the rest. While the stone itself was able to withstand the assault, the magic that had been empowering the stone under Harry's will faded within seconds, causing the stone creature to collapse into bits.

Worse though was soon to come, as, even as Harry slew three Fire Elementals and removed the chieftain's head with a Chain Lightning that continued on to crash into and through several

more trolls, another blast of searing plasma burst through a weakened portion of the wall. Once more it hit Quetzal, his large frame no defense and far too easy to hit. The strike took him right behind his head, searing through his body at an angle, nearly bisecting the Needlespine Shimmerback with a hissing scream of agony.

As he heard his friend's death cry, Harry whirled, staring in horror at his nearly-headless frame, as further flames erupted, searing across the open area of the cavern to crash into the wall and along the tunnel.

So hot was that fire that several of the trolls screamed even before it hit, immolated where they were, and others died as the fire hit them. Harry's body withstood the fire, but the trolls were not so lucky, dying to the attack from the lord they had been working so hard to free.

From out of the slowly melting wall, two hands the size of Harry's upper body made out of magma and flame alike appeared, the magma seeming to be a cross between skin and armor resting on the flames beneath. Those hands tried to thrust out in either direction, only to fail, and growling, the being behind those hands began to melt some of the stone further.

Despite their losses, the remaining trolls and fire elementals in the tunnel continued their advance, Harry was forced to fight in both directions, but fury engulfed the wizard then, and he screamed, calling upon both his Phoenix and basilisk side. Fire erupted from Harry, lancing down the corridor and finishing off all of the trolls, even the last of their shamans, for while also forcing the fire elementals back, expressions of shock on their faces as his flames did something that should not have been possible. They hurt the fire elementals.

Phoenix fire was a very odd substance. It wasn't wholly fire per se, nor was it entirely holy or light based. But it did have properties of both holy and light magic as well as being almost hot enough to count as plasma. With its light and holy aspects, phoenix fire could indeed hurt creatures that were simply fire, although a part of Harry idly wondered if Fiendfyre would do anything to them, or simply make the fire elementals stronger.

Beyond that, Harry's body also changed. In his rage, Harry reached deeper into his basilisk side than he ever had, aided by the fact that aspect of his chimeric mind was also furious. From the perspective of his basilisk side, Quetzal had been something akin to a nestmate, a cross between a friend and worthy follower. The basilisk, the king of serpents, did not take well to losing such any more than Harry's human side did.

Within an eyeblink Harry grew, his body shifting and growing to almost twenty feet in height as his legs disappeared into a sinuous tail, while the rest of his body became covered in thick heavy scales, giving him an appearance of someone wearing scale mail, many times thicker than his normal use of the technique, from the head down. "All right, you flame fucker, I'm going to bury you here!"

As the cavern quaked and the volcano above them erupted again, the Fire General burst out from its hiding place, his power and exertions causing the ground to scream and break around them. **“FREEDOM!!”**

Garr had been sealed there by several strong earth elementals. When the Satyrs who had retreated to this place had begun to turn on one another, the elementals they had called and suborned through blood ritual, the earth elementals had all turned on their masters and fellows. The Queen of the Earth, Therazane was the first Elemental Lord to throw off the Old God’s chains and had actually joined with the Titans in their war. Since, the majority of her followers would take any opportunity to turn against or even outright attack those who would harm Azeroth.

Now, however, Garr was free and furious. His hands both bore the marks of Harry’s flame-retardant spells, which had somehow gotten through all of its defenses. Admittedly it was the equivalent of several papercuts, but still. Garr had been hurt, and he had spent so much time in his cage that he had forgotten that sensation.

Now he screamed a challenge towards Harry. **“I WILL ROAST YOUR VERY SOUL!”**

“RAGGGHHHHH!!!!” Harry roared back in wordless fury, lashing out with bolts of the fire retardant, and experimentally Phoenix fire. The Phoenix Fire however could find no purchase in the general, who batted it aside almost contemptuously, the holy or light magic within not powerful enough to harm him. The fire retardant, though, caused him to twitch backward, hissing in pain, the sound like a fire being doused.

But neither of that had been Harry’s real attack. Instead, he was concentrating on the floor once more through his feet. Even as the general charged forwards, its very presence setting the air around them on fire, Harry crafted a spear of stone.

Before the general could even realize what was going on, it had impaled itself on the spike of stone that jutted up from the ground, the stone stabbing deep into the equivalent of his calf. He roared and wailed, lashing down at the stone, burning through it in segments, then Harry lashed out again with a wave of fire retardant. The fire General howled in pain, but struck back, a blast of fire that hit Harry’s chest with enough energy to send him slamming into the far wall.

Again the cavern quaked, and magma began to flow in behind the general, hungrily reaching for Harry under his command.

Water blasted out from Harry even as he tumbled, and steam erupted all over the area, causing Harry to curse himself for a fool for a second, then using that for a moment, he leaped upwards, using a sticking charm on one hand for a second to cling to the roof, then, before the fire

general could locate him, lashed out and down at the fire general's head, a water-based cutting spell followed by a shaman style Wind Shear.

While the first was dodged, the second hit one of the general's eyes, it struck, blinding him for a moment even as his own heat caused the wind to bend and shift rather than strike at full power. However, behind that spell came a spell chain of fire retardant, cutting spells, puncturing spells and more, all aimed at either creating more water or straight at Garr's eyes.

One of the general's eyes burst from a puncturing spell even as one of its arms grabbed Harry out of the air, crushing him in his grip.

"Oy, yeah big fucker, I don't think so!" with a howl, Tempina burst down the hallway. She barely took a few seconds to notice Quetzal's dead body to one side before lashing out towards the general with a blast of super condensed air.

That probably wouldn't have done anything, even though she had nearly an equal amount of power to the Fire General, air was not exactly the best element to use against fire. However, her air assault had also picked up a lot of the dust from the stone throughout the cave, and Harry hastily waved a hand in the air, creating a wall of water that the tornado crashed into, carrying the water into the general.

"ARGGHHH!!" he screamed, and the magma behind him began to harden and crack and create even more steam, which exploded outwards, the overall effect forcing the general to release Harry for a moment. He fell to the ground, rolling, his basilisk scales smoking, but mainly unhurt thanks to his phoenix side.

Now, as much of the fire general's fire went out for a brief moment, Harry struck again. A bursting spell crashed into the creature's knee, Grossly overpowered the spell shattered the magma over the limb and the limb underneath. With his other leg already having been maimed by the spear of stone, the general crashed to his knees, howling in fury, launching a wave of magma towards Tempina, while his other hand reached once more for Harry.

However, Harry, still furious at Quetzal's death, moved to meet it. His outstretched fist met the general's hand, shattering one of his fingers with a contact-release Bombard, and then he was in the general's guard, lashing out with point-blank spells, hammering him hard. The general roared, enraged, bringing a fist down on Harry, slamming him to the ground, but a second later Harry was back up, as more blasts of air crashed into Garr from Tempina.

The next moment, Chain Lightning lashed out from two of Harry's hands, followed by two healing totems slamming up into the ceiling, where they began to heal Harry and Tempina of her wounds. Another series of water spells, followed by a shaman ice-spell blasted into the general's defenses, forcing him back and further back.

“NO! I WILL NOT BE CAGED AGAIN!” Garr roared, his aura flaring upwards again, searing away the last of the fire retardant that had stuck to him. Harry’s next blast of fire retardant disappeared in a haze between them, and the general again lashed out with lances of fire.

But Harry was no longer where he had been. He had teleported to one side, leaving behind an illusion of himself for a brief second. Now, as the general looked around wildly and was subsequently hammered by Tempina, another stone spear flew. It struck Garr in the side, penetrating his magma-like armor.

The next instant, Harry teleported forward, grabbing onto the stone. **“Fucking die!”** he yelled, as a transfiguration spell turned the stone to metal for a brief second. That metal began to almost instantly begin to melt but it lasted long enough for another Chain Lightning spell to be sent into it. Thanks to the spear of metal, this spell completely bypassed the general’s normal defenses, electrocuting the fire elemental from the inside. Lightning burst out of the general’s eyes and one remaining mouth, and then, he fell, dead to the ground.

Falling back and away from Garr’s body, which rapidly began to fall apart, Harry slumped, completely exhausted. He had never pushed himself that hard, not since coming to this world. Heck, he hadn’t pushed himself that hard since back when he was young and facing Riddle for the fourth time. Harry didn’t feel as if he could conjure even a small cantrip, let alone anything else.

Luckily, his totems did not have to be constantly renewed of their powers once made. They took their power from the background Nature Magic, and healing magic washed over Harry.

“I’d offer you a hand, but I don’t know if I can actually make contact with you without hurting you,” Tempina said, shaking her head as she stared at the body of the general. “Wow. That was amazing! I didn’t know lightning could do that.”

“Lightning is actually a lot hotter than you might think. It’s in fact hotter than the sun, so I knew if I could get past Garr’s armor, lightning would do the job,” Harry answered almost listlessly, his eyes straying to Quetzal’s body. He might well have simply stayed there staring at the body of his old companion, if not for the fact that the mountain was erupting. Magma was now spewing ever more rapidly into the cavern, and bits and pieces of the ceiling were now coming down as an earthquake began to accompany the eruption.

Wearily, Harry pushed himself to his feet, then shifted into his half Phoenix form. “Come on, we need to go.”

Flying down the shattered blasted hallway was harrowing, but with Tempina to rend any obstructing stone apart, the two of them made good time, racing up to the surface, just in time to beat a wall of magma coming down from higher up the volcano.

But that volcano was the only one. The other two, despite trembling and releasing gas and some ash, had yet to erupt. Harry's confrontation with the general had stopped any greater damage occurring to the area or worse, Kalimdor as a whole.

That was scant comfort though, as was the fact that Tempina had discovered the talisman containing half of her father's essence right where Versera had thought it might be from Harry's memories. Quetzal was dead, and Harry had long since gotten out of the habit of saying farewell to friends and loved ones. This, this hurt, and Harry found himself barely able to keep flying after they escaped the immediate danger of the magma.

Luckily, Versera noticed his listless expression before the absence of Quetzal. She too was badly battered, with numerous cuts, burns and one eye closed from blood flowing from a cut on her head. One foreleg rested useless on the ground, and her tail had dozens of spears stuck in it. Yet the green dragon still laid out her battered neck, gesturing with a twitch of her head to her back. "Come, Harry, let's get out of here."

Wordlessly, Harry flew up to land on her back, where he transformed, absently grabbing one of her spinal ridges to keep himself in place, not even having the energy to stick himself to the dragoness's back right now. Above, Recca flew as Versera flapped her wings, gaining enough lift with difficulty, her various injuries paining her immensely, then beginning to fly upwards, straining.

Despite that, the last sight of the volcanoes soon disappeared behind them. When they did, Harry finally allowed himself to weep for his fallen friend, his tears torn away by the wind of their passage even as they fell.

End Chapter

Well... I hope you all enjoyed this. I didn't want to show all the minor mysteries being solved or anything like that, but I did want to show Harry, Versera, and Recca putting together a picture of what had been happening in this area of the world. I Think I did just that here. As for the fighting... eh, could be better. Still, I hope you enjoyed it all. And yes, Tempina will explain the talisman and everything there in the next chapter. That chapter will be the last in this arc, and will hopefully end with Harry back in Trueshot Lodge, and Tyrande back in Ashenvale forrest.

At that point, I will want to put a pause on writing this fic, and take a month or so to just sit down and plan things out going forward, get the various magical schools, items and things situated. For a good long while, there won't be serious romance to consider, but I have literal thousands of years to world build with.

A case in point: there is, apparently, an actual canon name for Thunderaan's daughter. But I couldn't find my notes about it. So here I just use Tempina – Tempest/Tina. Not my most imaginative, I will admit.

Anyway, that's it for now, folks. Happy New Years!