

Hey all, sorry this is so late, but merging two files into one is just rage inducing. And going through the chapter twice in such a short amount of time slows me down too. So I haven't had time to go back into the first chapter to make the changes Beleriond (and now Tomon) have pointed out. I will do that tomorrow when I post the September polls.

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

Chapter 2, Episode 3: Travels and Eyepopping Introductions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The next incident that interrupted their travel wasn't dangerous, instead it was hilarious for Tyrande and the two animals. They had broken off early that night, as they seemed to be coming out of the thick band of jungle, and Tyrande had to find some signs of the trail which would take them up into the Highmountain range to the Highmountain Tauren clans. Harry,

who much preferred to sleep at night despite months travelling with Kaldorei, had decided to take a nap. Quetzal had curled up nearby, while Shy-rotam had, obviously, gone with Tyrande.

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

Both Harry and Quetzal woke up at that but hearing no warning or concern in the woman's voice, neither moved quickly. Instead, Harry simply opened his eyes and found himself staring at a large owl, who had perched directly in front of him. It turned its head in a full circle, hooting at him, then leaning forward to headbutt Harry gently, before flapping its large wings and powering up into the nighttime sky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you. As for the meal, I think I’ll just make us sandwiches. The bread we brought with us from the settlement won’t last much longer the way we are going through it. That and a thick stew from the last of the panther meat.” With that, Harry started to pull out his supplies, while Tyrande sat next to him, the work around the camp done and began to chop up ingredients for him in companionable silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry nodded affably, and the two of them spent some time on that before the stew was ready. After dinner, Tyrande once more took up the task of teaching Harry proper swordsmanship, as much as she could given the difference in Harry’s weapon and the double-bladed Moonglaive, exchanging japes and mild taunts as they did.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry was completely blindsided by the attack and nearly took an axe to the face, which cut across his head, and nearly dumped him to the ground, blood in his eyes and pain wracking

his head. A hasty Incendio lit up his attacker like a torch, and Harry used the now screaming and writhing monster as a shield to back away, cursing angrily as he wiped at the blood on his face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quetzal however was already moving, heading to where one of the attackers had appeared from. A quick flick of his head toppled over what had looked like a rock but instead was a foxhole, covered by a stone made of wood and lattice. "That's honestly impressive. So they weren't waiting here for us specifically though, this kind of thing would take time," the snake observed, once more reminding Tyrande that, despite his lack of proper morals and his somewhat one-track mind occasionally, the snake had a very good mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From his hand erupted a gray, green cloud of smoke that quickly filled the tunnel, spreading down its length and into the faces of a half dozen Drogbar within. More shouted in the distance, but by that point the six initial victims were already on the ground twitching. The

smoke acted both as a paralyzer and a poison for those who inhaled it. The spell, which Harry had learned from Padma Patil oddly enough, was one of the nastiest non-curses Harry had ever learned. The person would be first paralyzed, unable to flee the area as the poison, which was slower acting, went to work.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They traveled for another day and a half in this manner, half during the day, half during the night. The going was very difficult in parts as the granite bones of the mountain started to become more prevalent, and twice the four of them had to scale up large stone rungs carved out of rocks. Here Harry would have to levitate the animals or indeed all four of them up to make progress. Nevertheless, it was a sign that someone used this path if only occasionally these days.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry chuckled and then used the Leviosa spell to carry all four of them upwards once more. As she rose a few feet off the ground, joining Harry at his head height, Tyrande shook her

head. "I still believe this is cheating. The Tauren rites of passage are supposed to be difficult. You shouldn't simply wave your hand and abrogate an arduous climb like this," she teased.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry nodded too, and the two of them led their animal companions toward the steam, finding that it was coming out of a crack in the mountainside. The steam filled the area around it with heat, reminding Harry of a science program he had seen once as a young boy in class about underwater volcanoes and air vents. Here the area around the air vent wasn't as hot as in that example, but the cumulative effect of this air vent and others in the area meant that it was a good deal greener here in this area than anywhere else in the mountain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We do, although I will admit that our artists rarely show that veneration to this extent," Harry agreed, and Tyrande pulled her finger away, shaking her head. It was evident that Harry had not heard some of the discussions about him the other Kaldorei, particularly the younger set, had when they were aboard the ship. Many of the young women had been quite taken by

Harry's emerald eyes. And she had to agree with them to a certain extent. They did look indeed like the Emerald Dream given form.

Tyrande stepped back, gesturing to the four twined logs. "These, I believe, are supposed to represent the four tribes that make up the Highmountain nation. On this log, we have the Rivermane tribe, those blue lines creating a wave-like motion paired with a blue dot under the wave. Their tribe made a name for themselves in the War of the Ancients by being very good marsh fighters and also helped to supply food to their own people and mine."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tyrande nodded that, having expected that kind of an answer. She was also pleased to note that Jorl was not reacting negatively to Harry in any way, even though he very obviously was not a night elf or any other race the Tauren might have interacted with. "We would like

some directions to the high chieftain's village, but first, tell me what you can of this totem and your various tribes, please."

"Gladly," Jorl said with a smile. "These four logs were originally from the four corners of our valley. Each, as you suppose, was carved by a different tribe. The faces you see there are famous leaders or warriors from each different tribe. The faces on these, in particular, are ones that every other tribe acknowledges are important rather than solely important to the tribe in question. This is a totem of unity to show that the lands of Highmountain belong to all four tribes equally. Like you, miss..." He trailed off, indicating that the Kaldorei woman had not introduced herself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jorl laughed, nodding his head. "I see you understand something of the soil then. Yes, it is extremely difficult to work and somewhat thankless. I know that young fools from my own tribe and Bloodtotem tend to make fun of the Rivermane plan. But those of us with more sense remember that, as Lady Tyrande said, the Rivermane clan won their name in battle against the demons, and indeed in several cases did far better than the other clans. That they do not take pride in martial prowess is no reason to forget that they too are Tauren and can fight just as well as the rest of us."

"And the Bloodtotem clan?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Harry mostly listened and asked but eventually, when it became lunchtime, and the talks had not finished, made all three of them a meal. Jorl had never had some of the spices

that Harry had picked up among the Kaldorei and declared Harry, "one of the best cooks whose table I have had the honor to sit at."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As they continued on there was the sound of a horn from one side of the direction they had been traveling. A second later, there was a sound of many feet, and out of the forest around them came a band of eight Tauren, all of them armed with axes or large, heavy spears. Built to fit the size of their users those axes looked massive, as did the spears, and all of the Tauren looked ready to fight for a moment, charging towards Quetzal, before halting as they saw Harry and Tyrande moving along peaceably with the giant snake. For a moment, they

skidded to a halt, and then one of them, the oldest of the group, stepped forward, planting his spear in the ground. "Hold strangers. You, bring a beast of such danger into our lands?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There are places on the island which are like that, although you are correct, there is no such within Highmountain." The Tauren who was speaking seemed to compose himself, at last,

shaking his head. "I have been remiss in my manners. My name is Tarl Axehand. And I welcome you strangers and allies to our lands. Please, come with me. I will take you to our High Chief."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One had long black hair tied into ribbons falling down her chest, each ribbon denoted by a different kind of colored feather and ribbon. She stood in a leather skirt, well-made and durable, that came down to her knees, leaving her lower legs bare. She was laughing at

something someone else had said, the sound and how expressive her face was drawing Harry's eye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

attractive. But they are Kaldorei, and I'm not. So any thoughts I might have of... companionship... in the future are useless."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please, come inside, let us talk."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

we were on the trail leading up to Highmountain, along with a Tauren we met who was on his Trials. And yesterday, we saw signs of more combat."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

End Episode