

Hey all. This was gotten back to me by **Alex Crate** Monday afternoon (where I am, anyway) but I wanted to get as much done on Fate as I could. So it took me a bit to go over it. He pointed out one area that needed more of an explanation, and seventy odd small mistakes along with a few unfinished/badly written sentences. So send him some thanks, please!

Chapter 17: A Summons to War

Not two days after their impromptu rhino meat feast, courtesy of Harry's cooking skills and Versera's hunting, Harry and his companions started to retrace their route, heading back up the coastline northward to Ashenvale. This was deliberate on their part, as Versera wanted to go over the terrain she had already begun mapping to ensure her maps were as accurate as possible and to note any differences that had occurred since their trip south to the trio of volcanoes. After all, events there had resulted in one volcano erupting, and a minor earthquake.

Even two full days had been unnecessary, in Harry's opinion. His training to call on and use Tempina in power was something he could do anywhere, and the same could be said for Versera's lessons on how to navigate by the stars. As for Harry's mourning for Quetzal, that wasn't going to go away anytime soon. Grief was like that. And since his search for something to remember Quetzal by had been a nonstarter, his interest in the area around the volcanoes began and ended with the remnants of the troll arks.

Harry and a transformed Versera went over those ships with a fine-toothed comb. They'd even used Harry's Repairo spell to try and fix segments, but there was only so much that spell could do with the materials on hand. Harry had also tried to find any snacks along the shore to question, but while there had been some there, tiny sand snakes, the trolls had hunted and eaten them, as evidenced by the skeletons left behind.

On the ships themselves, the pair had found nothing to hint at where the arks had come from. If anything to hint at where the trolls had come from- helmsman's logs, diaries or any personal effects- had survived the battle when the trolls had fallen into a civil war, it hadn't survived the time since. Not there, nor anywhere the pair could access among the volcanoes.

Versera had a theory though, which she shared as they settled down for dinner the second night out from the volcanoes. The group had pushed through the first night out as it had been such an amazingly nice night with both moons high in the sky, and none of the four had wanted to stop. Which meant the next night, the foursome, having fallen into a diurnal cycle early in the trip after leaving Ashenvale, were somewhat tired.

“The Unseen Path, the Emerald Dragonflight and the Red Dragonflight are the only real groups that travel very much at all,” the transformed dragoness mused, leaning back on one of the beanbags that she had pulled out of Harry’s yurt. “Even then, there are some caveats. The Reds may have spread out, but mainly to the south of the new continent to the east and the islands there... they also aren’t the most organized or communicative group. My own flight hasn’t spread out nearly as far, and only to the north of that continent and Kalimdor.”

“Who decided to call the new continent Azeroth, by the way?” Recca interjected, tearing genteelly at some bread Harry had made for them, which made the young human smile. Despite being mostly carnivores, the harpies were **all** ga-ga over bread and pasta products. “That’s always annoyed me. Azeroth’s the name of the planet, right? Why use it to also name a continent?”

“I believe it was the Highborne who did that. It would certainly be in keeping with their general attitude. We live here, and thus it is the world; we will ignore all evidence and history to the contrary,” Versera stated, actually trying to give her voice an accent for that last sentence.

While Versera could respect individual Quel’thalasans, the attitude their society took towards its own history, and the way those dragons who moved among them were often treated, rubbed her scales the wrong way. She wasn’t the most prideful of dragonesses, but Versera had severe limits to what she would allow, as did most.

That attitude is why there are only, what, two Greens and a single Blue interacting with the whole nation of Quel’Thalas? And that only because Ancient Ysera determined we needed a representative among them. Just to watch and make certain the Highborne don’t fall back into their own ways.

Shaking that thought off, Versera pointed her fork at the harpy. “Now quiet, you cheating chicken, I’m pontificating.”

“**HEY!**” Recca squawked in outrage. “I won that game of High Houses fair and square, you sore loser lizard!”

“Ladies, you’re both pretty,” Harry interjected dryly, the term becoming habitual to use at moments like this. *It’s like being back with Ron and Hermione sometimes, albeit Recca’s prettier and far more belligerent... and intelligent, than Ron was.* “Let’s not continue this. You were saying, Versera?”

The short (stacked; Harry still couldn’t stop himself from noticing, even after so many weeks in her company) sent a final glare at Recca before returning to her previous topic, making Harry reflect that yes. Versera was indeed a sore loser. Recca had indeed won the aforementioned game of High Houses fair and square.

“The point I was trying to make is that neither my own flight nor the Red Dragonflight like to travel over the ocean for any lengths of time. If we know where we are going, that is one thing, but to simply explore the ocean? No. Even young dragons don’t do that; the weather patterns and winds aren’t nearly fun or interesting enough to bother with. As for the Unseen Path, they have no boats... or didn’t until you all captured that vrykul pirate ship.”

Versera gestured over one shoulder towards where the ocean lay to emphasize her next point. “I have never heard of anyone being able to reach Azeroth the continent from Kalimdor directly without stopping in the Broken Isles or their equivalent on the other side of the Maelstrom. While the Unseen Path knows something about what lies to the north of the Maelstrom, there’s nothing in the library covering what lies to the direct south out in that vast ocean. All we know is that the continents veer further away from one another the further south you go, and even that’s because of this mission and a similar one done on Azeroth two centuries ago.”

Not for the first time, Harry wondered if he’d ever get used to being around other sentients who threw out the term ‘centuries’ so casually. Yet he didn’t interrupt as Versera concluded, “With all that, I would say there could be another chain of islands or even a small continent out there. The kaldorei like to think that they wiped out the Troll Empire... whose actual name escapes me at the moment. That was well before my time, amusingly. But trolls are a durable folk, and breed as fast as rabbits.”

Versera chortled at that, shaking her head. “Although of course, all you two-legged folk breed faster than most of us in the Dragonflights.” She then became serious, a scowl crossing her features and her ears pressed to the side of her skull in a kaldorei sign of worry. “If there’s a troll community out there advanced enough to build those ships, they might prove to be a danger in the future. Trolls are, as we saw, inherently xenophobic and expansionist. A dangerous combination.”

“Honestly, those ships looked more like this one picture I saw of an ark back in my old world than anything else. Not exactly advanced in comparison to the kaldorei ships we saw up north. And maybe that was what they were. An island or what-have-you could have been pulled down to the depths in some natural disaster relatively recently, right?”

Harry would have brought up the idea of tectonic plates and how active Azeroth as a whole was in comparison to Earth, but since he barely understood all that himself, he didn’t. *That kind of thing wasn’t exactly necessary knowledge when I was hunting down Dark wizards and witches around the globe, or dealing with all the Wizarding World’s shite.*

“That is supposition, not fact.” Versera shook her head, sending her long ears to flap. “I’m not even going to include it in my report. It could presuppose the Unseen Path, leading to a lack of understanding of the dangers involved. A troll society out there with

knowledge to build those ships could be a threat, not to the world as a whole, but to the Unseen Path's mission of keeping the Burning Legion from finding Azeroth again. You saw what happened here. They thought Garr was a fire loa. What will happen when they reach out to power and something beyond a loa or even a powerful Elemental Lord answers as it did for Azshara?"

"Ehh, I can't say I was really impressed by the trolls," Harry disagreed. "Their magic wasn't nearly as dangerous as I would have expected, and while their combat abilities were alright, I'd say any comparable force of tauren or kaldorei could take them apart. I'd wager anything that it was the inclusion of so many fire elementals that let the fire loa worshippers overcome the local tauren tribe."

"There you are wrong, Harry," Versera argued back instantly. "We had a lot of advantages going into that fight that most would not have, and further, the trolls we fought were all fanatics who had become wilder and more undisciplined. I shouldn't have to tell you how much trouble their flying forces gave us when we first ran into them. Yes, a large portion of that was due to the fire elementals, but the troll's shaman-based magic can be dangerous too."

Recca agreed with Versera. "You throw around so much odd magic, Harry, that you don't understand how dangerous shaman-style magic can be to those who have none. Or even just simple throwing axes, spears and so forth to those who can't defend against them magically."

That was probably true, and Harry acknowledged the point before turning back to finishing the evening meal.

The group of flyers made fantastic time for the first week. Versera would routinely put down, transform and pull out her writing equipment to make changes to her prior work or note down something she had missed on the way out. Her speed was such that she could catch up to Harry and Recca easily despite Tempina helping the pair along. Similarly, because of Tempina, the harpy and harpy-shaped flyers were able to move faster, without breaks. The wind itself molded to help them, letting them move at least four times faster than even Harry, with his phoenix wings, could have moved normally.

When they stopped at night, Harry would spend time going over designs for long-range weapons for the harpies, having set aside any thoughts on armor for the moment as per Recca's recommendation. He had been able to figure out a way to shoot things out from a container, but the speed of the projectiles still left much to be desired, and Harry just could not figure out a way to change that. The Engorgio charm and the expanded sack of pebbles still worked far better on land-bound targets.

After discussing things with Recca, though, Harry decided to start from scratch again. The delivery system could come later. Right now, he needed to figure out more about the runic arrays needed. Or some means of creating permanent enchantment to instill both such on the target ammunition.

His experiments... did not go well. Twice over that week, an array he had thought promising enough to shift to an actual medium outside the sandbox had destabilized, destroying the rock he'd practiced on. A third time, when the array had passed that test,

and Harry put it on Recca's cuirass, for some reason the whole thing quickly began glowing red-hot as if someone had dipped it in lava, its edges starting to melt.

This was made worse due to Recca's response of dumping a pot of water on it, causing the whole thing to explode before Harry could stop her. Only a hasty shield spell protected both of them from the results of that, and Harry was busy for hours after repairing the sides of his yurt and various bits of camping gear that had been around the campsite.

At the end of that week, their progress halted almost instantly as a massive storm hit while they were awing. One moment the sky was blue, then gray, and then suddenly there was lightning in the distance and massive raindrops the size of Recca's talons began splattering down on them.

"By the ancient Titans," Versera hissed, her line of sight rapidly decreasing as the rain increased. "I do so hate this type of weather."

"Well, it's not the first time we've had to deal with sudden storms on this trip," Harry said, even as his brow twitched a bit at the amount of water hitting his fiery wings. It didn't do anything. After all, who had ever heard of a phoenix being leery of the rain? But it was, oddly, like being pinched. Not to the point of pain, just like someone was pinching your skin very lightly. All over his wings, with increasing frequency. *If I didn't have Occlumency, that would be insanely distracting.*

"I don't know what you guys're talking about, this is great!" Tempina howled in delight, flicking her board up and over, before doing a series of barrel rolls and then a dive right in front of the dragoness's head.

Harry had helped her finish carving it out of granite, and now she basically looked like a snowboarder in the sky, which normally was amusing to look at. Now, Harry could barely make out her moving form through the rain.

"Let's just land and get under cover," Versera growled, her head twitching upward and away from the diving air elemental, her secondary eyelids flicking down to protect her eyes from the rain. "I am very much the largest thing around here and getting hit by lightning is most decidedly not fun."

They all landed quickly, and while Versera transformed and tried to hide under a solitary tree with limited success, Harry began to put up the yurt. Soon, all of them were drenched, with only Tempina not caring. Indeed, she was still in the air.

Now completely unable to see where she was through the storm, Harry could only tell where the young-seeming Skywall princess was via their magical connection. To his senses, that connection was a bright blue line leading up into the sky, almost like something in a picture that was constantly in the foreground.

Harry was currently trying to concentrate on that to the extent he wasn't taking in anything else... like the impromptu wet t-shirt moment that he, Recca and Versera were all having at present. While Recca's blouse covered everything above the waist well enough, Harry could still see two small tips underneath pressing the material out. That,

and the way that blouse was now clinging to her form to the extent her toned abs could also be seen would have been distracting on its own.

It wasn't, and Versera's shirt was both thinner and white to boot. Versera enjoyed wearing white as it showed off dramatically on her assumed form's green skin. Right now, though, that same shirt left very little to the imagination, and unfortunately, at present, Harry's imagination was very active indeed.

Gah, I just want to slide my... nope, stop it right there, Harry, he thought as he slammed the last stake into the ground. *Do not go there. Versera is a dragoness with views, whatever her body type, and neither of you are the type to have casual dalliances.*

There was a humming noise as the various ward and enchantment-based defenses activated, the yurt and the ground beneath it glowing to his senses for a second. After a moment, the process completed, and Harry pushed himself to his feet, wiping away his wet hair from his forehead. "That's it, in, in, in!"

Recca, who had been using her taloned legs to help hammer down a few of the stakes, didn't need any urging. Nor did Versera, who had been using her bare hand. Thus, both women beat Harry inside, where Recca quickly moved to huddle over the heating stone in the center of the yurt. It had yet to become very warm, but it would as the various runes carved throughout the yurt continued to work.

Versera, though, stood by the doorway as Harry ducked inside, and then pointed peremptorily at herself. "Drying charm, please, wizard."

Harry nodded, but couldn't stop his eyes from going downward, or rather, further downward given their height disparity. *Guh...* This was not the first time that Harry had become aware that Versera's exceptionally odd kaldorei body was equally sexy. Indeed, he'd been pretty much aware of that from the first. But nowadays, having gotten in touch with it to a far greater degree than before, his basilisk side was **very** much in favor of doing adult-rated things with her.

In either of her forms. Even if Harry's basilisk side was somewhat confused about why Versera's chest fascinated the rest of Harry so much.

"Er, sure," he said aloud, trying hard not to sound like a teenager. *Ah, I see it's time again to clean up my Occlumentic realm again. I've been spending too much time doing that solely for my memories with Quetzal, I suppose... or it's just been that long since I've had any action. Ruddy Nature Magic. I'd have really liked for it to stop at just enhancing my body and physical abilities.*

Well, that was his story, and he was sticking to it, anyway. The idea that Harry was just a randy fellow when he didn't have the demands of the world on his shoulders or had to deal with the dozens of accumulated injuries he'd had back on Earth on top of his basilisk side's urges was not one Harry was willing to contemplate consciously.

While she might not have been showing it, Versera was **very** aware of what kind of show she was putting on right now, and shivered not entirely from the feeling of the water on her skin drying up in an instant as Harry complied with her request. "Thanks,

Harry,” she murmured, trying not to breathe in for a moment as Harry used his drying spell on himself.

Thankfully, while they had powerful instincts, dragons were not animalistic, and, not for the first time, Versera’s mind grabbed those instincts by the neck and shook them. *Stop that, damn it! Just because he’s a powerful male and has some nice-looking muscles in his normal body and gives out those pheromones regardless of form does not mean I want to mate with him!!*

Harry was a good friend, but not someone she could see while the centuries away with. He was far too active, too energetic, and seemed able to change his mind and plans on a dime, which was very strange to Versera. Then of course there was the social stigma against cross-species relationships. While Reds could occasionally get away with that kind of thing so long as it didn’t result in children, the Green Dragonflight’s society did not allow for such. Something that Versera also reminded her instincts of right now.

It was a toss-up which was hitting harder right now, Harry’s hormones, enhanced by his basilisk side, or Versera’s lowest of base instincts. For just a moment, both the transformed dragoness and the dimensionally displaced human stared at one another.

In that tension-filled moment, it wasn’t their self-control that kept the pair from making a mistake. Rather, it was the fact they weren’t alone in the yurt.

“AHHh, yeah, that’s the stuff,” Recca exclaimed, her teeth chattering, stretching her wings over the heating stone. “Love the heat, Harry, but unless you want to smell wet feathers for the rest of the night, you better use that drying charm on me too.”

“Right, sure,” Harry gratefully pulled away where he had been staring at Versera for a moment, turning to use the same charm on Recca. He then moved over to the cooking area, trying hard to not think of the chubby he was sporting right now. “So, any preference for dinner?”

“Meat,” Versera and Recca said as one, causing Harry to laugh.

That laughter cut off as Tempina came in, sliding through on her granite skyboard. “Groovy!”

She smacked into Versera, who, regardless of her form, was still a Green Dragon. She was far heavier than her tiny body looked, and though she tumbled back, it was Tempina’s skyboard which was battered off its previous course, along with the young-acting Skywall princess. “OOF! Watch where you’re going, Tempina!”

“Heh, sorry, but I couldn’t exactly see you were still standing by the entrance like a lump of malachite from outside,” Tempina chortled. “But wow, that was cool. I’d like to have some more solid surfaces to do tricks on, but the wind currents on Azeroth are so new, and so wildly unpredictable, it’s still fun just free gliding.”

Harry rolled his eyes, noting absently that Tempina had once more shown an unusual understanding of rocks and minerals. He wondered why, but then again, she had also shown a few times that the Air Elementals had dozens of terms for different

types of wind, each term describing a different type of gale. *Maybe that knowledge is just instinctive for Elementals?*

He was about to demand that Tempina leave her skyboard outside when Tempina's odd, solid-air form seemed to shift. A wild surmise hit him, and he quickly waved a hand wildly in denial. "Oh no, don't you do i—"

That was as far as she got before Tempina's body, such as it was given she was an air elemental, seemed to swirl even faster for a moment. The bits of rain that had been caught in her body before this had looked, to Harry's eyes, like tiny flowing streams. Now they were pushed to the outer edge, hanging there, seeming more like dew on a spider's web right before the water was flung out everywhere.

"Ahahahah," Tempina laughed, a sound like a mix between a high-pitched, feminine giggle and the sound of wind rushing through rocks. "Ah, much better."

Once more using his drying charm on himself, then Versera, Recca, his bed and several other items, Harry shook his head. *My mind seems to use metaphors and comparisons a lot when I look at or otherwise interact with Tempina.* "Just for that, you can go back to Skywall."

"AWWwww... do I have to?" Tempina asked, sounding even younger than she normally did.

How much of that was an act, and how much of it was because of how Harry had sent her back to Skywall every night, and she'd been forced to deal with that elemental realm's politics, Harry didn't know. The first morning she'd come back from such, she had spent hours burning off energy complaining about the Conclave of Wind.

"I'll be good, I promise. I'll even stay outside tonight and do my best to try and manipulate the weather to make this storm dissipate faster. I've been told Gramps' Vizier wants to talk to me about the air elementals I freed, and I **really** don't wanna be in the same hectare as him, let alone a room in the stuffy old Pinnacle."

"Pinnacle?" Harry asked, trying hard not to turn to where he could hear something slithering in Versera's direction.

The dragoness's shirt and pants, a look she'd begun to use during the day over the past few weeks, were actually magical in nature. Essentially, they were part of her transformation, a portion that Versera could change into different outfits when she concentrated on them. When she wasn't, accidents occurred. Now, though, she changed them into a large, flannel-like shirt that reached her ankles.

It still looked sexy on her short, 'stocky' frame, but it was the shift from one outfit to another that Harry very carefully did not take notice of at present. For one thing, seeing her clothing flowing from one outfit to another was a bit strange, and secondly, Versera had a thing about being watched while changing like that. Even more than being naked in her kaldorei form.

"The Vortex Pinnacle's what you all would call the palace of Skywall. It's the place where Gramps and the Conclave, who actually run stuff, live. It's old, it's made of

bronze and stone, and I swear it just feels foul,” Tempina said, moving over to hover in the air to one side of Recca. “The air there is thick and moves slowly despite Gramps being there whenever he’s not at the various front lines in our wars with the other elementals. It’s...” Tempina’s voice faltered, and she seemed to shrug. “Foul is the only way I can describe it, sorry.”

“Hmm... sounds almost like it’s a ritual point.” Tempina blinked at that, and Harry began to explain even as he pulled out the last of the rhino meat. *Rhino meat sandwiches, I think.* “Back in my old world, magical rituals existed. Some were what we call Dark, some Light, although most were neutral. All of them left a residue that could be sensed by those with the talent or magic to do so after the fact.”

Recca scowled. “Dark magic like the Burning Legion, the Old Gods, or something similar? I didn’t think your old world had such.”

“We don’t. But Dark, in this case, meant evil, like a ritual based on murder or desecration, a forced binding of souls, accumulating pain, and so forth.” Harry spoke almost lazily, but his eyes were hard and grim for a moment. He had seen a lot of things in his time as general WW troubleshooter since Riddle fell, and few of what he had seen in the darker corners of Wizarding World society were nice.

He turned to look at Tempina, who stilled, her cerulean orbs staring back at him. “I am **not** saying this Pinnacle of yours was the sight of something so wrong and evil as that, but if it feels foul to you, I would ask why it doesn’t to those who make it their home. And if you’re the only one who does feel that way about it, well, that might mean something else entirely.”

The others all frowned, but it was Recca who got it first. “Ah. Like those plants that ward off bugs, in a way.” As Tempina turned to look at her, the combative harpy shook her head. “If you’re the only one who feels uneasy and doesn’t like to be there, it might be some spell or something to make you, personally, feel that way.”

“Huh... I might be able to figure that out somewhat easily,” Tempina mused. “Is, is there any way to tell if it is a Dark ritual or something?”

“I have no idea on that one. Fel or Old Gods Taint don’t quite feel the same to me. Fouler, more corrupting and stronger but with less residue on the background magic of the world, if that makes sense,” Harry hummed as he started to pound and dice the rhino meat. “But wasn’t your Grandfather one of the Old God’s chief lieutenants? Thinking about it, Al’Akir’s time working with them might have left a residue you can sense. But again, make sure you’re the only one who can or not.”

At that point, the discussion shifted away from the possibly heavy topic of the Vortex Pinnacle to the history of the world, which Tempina had a very... odd view of. The Air Elementals did pass down information, and while she wasn’t nearly old enough to know about the original Elemental Wars- when the four Lords fought the Old Gods and were forced to submit to them, the coming of the Titans and so forth- she had heard about them. She hadn’t heard about anything that didn’t directly revolve around the elementals and their time on Azeroth, though.

Luckily, the group had Versera. While Recca and Harry had only been allowed to read set segments of the archives at Trueshot Lodge, she had read nearly every book in the place, and while she could not share the secrets of the Unseen Path, she spoke of some of the major events, or what the Green Dragonflight thought were major events, anyway. The exile of the Highborne didn't really register, while the creation of Quel'Thalas did. The War of the Satyrs was seen as distinctly unimportant, while the campaign to cleanse Vordrassil was the second war that Versera had seen firsthand, the first being the war against the Necrodark.

The name Vordrassil had Harry wondering about Tyrande, and what she was up to in the far north. *She didn't share much of what her own aspect of Elune's vision showed her, but I know the main issue will be based around trolls, again. Still, hopefully she will have brought enough force to deal with whatever she finds up there.*

The next day, it was still raining heavily despite Tempina's best efforts through the night, and Versera realized quickly, having gone over her maps once more, but this was the same area where they had been hit with a similar storm heading southward. "Interesting, I have to assume that this area is just hit like this routinely by storms during the season. When I went exploring, I found there are actually three streams developing out there, two to our north, one to our south."

"When you say developing, do you mean they are actually creating riverbeds and so forth, or did you see evidence of this entire area flooding? Because there's no way my tents will be able to withstand actual flooding. Its sides might be waterproof, but not that much." Harry questioned, quickly hopping to his feet from where he had been going over some runic arrays, muttering intelligibly under his breath all the while. The issue of acceleration was really bothering him. At this point, he wasn't at all certain he'd be able to find a rune-based solution.

The silence that came after that response had even Tempina looking up from where Recca was trying to teach her Chinese Checkers, figuring that Tempina lacked the patience for High Houses. Eventually, Versera did answer, her tone thoughtful. "I don't think so. Two of them did indeed have riverbeds that they were slowly refilling. The third didn't, but it was the smallest of the three and wasn't spreading out over the ground. Rather, it was creating a simple mud trail through a specific portion."

She shook her head, grumbling a little. "I had to transform into my normal body to travel comfortably out there. This storm is also quite cold, and kaldorei skin isn't good at dealing with that."

"Fur-lined raincoats then," Harry mumbled, then with a sigh setting the book he'd been reading down, and erasing what he'd done in the small sand table. "No, that will lead to the same problem I had with the array that melted the armor. The power component and speed still seem mutually exclusive, drat it. How the hells did Nimbus and the rest do this!?"

With a shake of his head, Harry conjured up two raincoats, one normal size, one shortstack-sized. They looked like a simple yellow rain slicker on the outside, but it was

clear the interior was lined with fur, as seen near the neckline. "Here, try this on; we'll see how it holds up."

Versera took it, gingerly feeling the fabric. "Your conjuration magic never ceases to amaze me. That is a power that is beyond even we dragons, creating something from nothing."

"I tend not to show it off, because apparently it makes a bigger splash than most of my other spells to those with magical senses," Harry said, remembering his time with Cenarius. "I also prefer to conjure small things in general, but a raincoat will do for now, and I can cancel them after we're done."

"What is this material?" Versera said, stretching out a portion of the hood for a moment.

"The outer layer? I Have no idea. I just conjured up images of raincoats I've used before. I never studied textiles, rubber or anything like that."

"Rubber... I'll remember that term. Do you know how these were created, the original raincoats these were based off, I mean? Were they created through magical means, or simply physical ones?"

"Magic, lord no. They were mostly created in factories made by dozens of trained laborers working on each segment in tandem, I think. It was called an assembly line. But that's about all I know," Harry admitted.

Harry had spent most of his adult life hunting down Dark Wizards (and Witches), fighting battles that really should've been fought by the local governments, dealing with extremism on both sides of the political divide between purebloods and new bloods, and generally speaking being a troubleshooter mixed with the boogie man for the entire wizard and world. He hadn't had time to spend in the non-magical world.

Thus, he truly didn't know anything about the process of making clothing. If it had ever been taught in primary school, it had long since left his memory.

Versera hummed thoughtfully, then moved over to the open flap leading outside, sticking her arm, covered with one of the sleeves. She watched as the rain hit the cloth and simply sloughed off, not being absorbed in the slightest. "Fascinating. Might I suggest that, sometime in the future, you write down anything and everything you can remember about these materials? I have gotten the impression since we began traveling together that your world had advanced dramatically in terms of textiles and perhaps in other ways too."

"I'll do that at some point, I suppose. If I remember." Harry then let out a small, warm laugh that had everyone there blinking and smiling in turn, wondering what had brought that sound on. "That actually reminds me of a time with Hermione, my best friend back home."

That was really underselling it, but he had mentioned Hermione many times in front of Recca and more than a few times in front of Versera, and both of them knew the truth, and he really didn't want to blame more about it to Tempina right now. "She got

into this argument with Lavender, another girl, about soaps, shampoos and so forth in comparison to some spellwork that did the same thing. When it came to hairstyling, the spells available in the Wizarding World were far better, but when it came to truly feeling clean, and enjoying the process, as well as when it came to smell, shampoos had anything in the WW beat.”

“Shampoo?” Versera questioned.

“A soap designed strictly for hair. It made it fluffier, smelled better, and so forth.”

“You know, if I was more fashion conscious, like some of my flock, I’d be getting in your face at the moment. A type of soap that works specifically better with hair? I don’t believe that even the kaldorei have developed that kind of thing.”

“Certainly not to the extent that Harry seems to be implying,” Versera agreed, then added teasingly, “Yes indeed Harry, you might wish to make that list up at some point. Indeed, doing so could be a major boon for you personally, and your relationship with the kaldorei as a whole.”

Harry shook his head at that, then, having pulled out his raincoat, pulled up the hood and stepped outside. As he did, Harry became instantly grateful for the fact that he had made the raincoat extra long so that it fell to below his knees, and that his boots could handle mud and rain easily. A holdover from his time among the tauren, he had let out those boots several times as he had aged during his time with the Unseen Path, but they still worked just as well now as they did back then.

His boots and conjured raincoat kept Harry relatively comfortable and dry, which was very nice indeed as the storm continued to come down so heavily it seemed as if the sky was trying to drown the land. *Good grief, I’m not exactly unfamiliar with storms being from England and all. But the storms in this world are just so much more powerful!*

Versera stepped out a moment later, pointing in one direction. “I’ll head that way and check that one river, and my word, Harry, these raincoats do indeed work quite well! Why didn’t we use them on the way down?”

“For what?” Harry asked, shrugging philosophically but not meeting Versera’s gaze. “Recca and I can’t fly with them on, you don’t like flying in weather like this, and I seem to recall you using your time stuck inside my yurt quite well.”

Versera had a sneaking suspicion that Harry’s protest on that point implied that he had simply not thought of the idea but said nothing, simply nodding, and heading off on her own. Harry did the same, wandering further inland.

As he did, Harry let his mind wander, almost meditatively, as the rain hammered down on his hood, the sound a background susurrantion, like white noise, thinking about Quetzal and how he had enjoyed this kind of weather. Indeed, Harry could sense his basilisk side was enjoying it too. His phoenix side not so much, having a take-it-or-leave-it attitude towards rain.

This time though, his thoughts about his old friend weren’t entirely drenched with regret and sadness. Rather, they were tinged with a sad sort of fondness, a warm

regard for their shared memories rather than grief at their time together being cut short. This was a sign that Harry was truly getting over his friend's death, his days of meditation having helped things along tremendously.

Coming out of one such memory, Harry wondered aloud if he should use Serpensortia to find another companion, then shook his head, sending rivulets of rain every which way from the hood of his raincoat. "No," he murmured, the sound so low that even if someone had been standing directly next to them, they wouldn't have been able to overhear them over the sound of the torrential rain. "No, that would be a mistake. Quetzal cannot be replaced so easily. And who knows what kind of snake I'd end up with anyway?"

He chuckled wryly then. "Maybe in a few hundred years, after I've gone through a few burnings. But not right now."

Instead, Harry turned back, heading back the way he had, until he could vaguely make out the shape of the yurt ahead of him, more visible because of the light shining from within than anything else. There, he stopped, dropping into an Indian squat on the wet ground, his raincoat under him still enough to keep the wetness away.

Thanks to his being permanently read into the various defensive wards, Harry could make out that light, whereas it would've been entirely invisible to anyone else who had not been read into them. Versera and Recca were actually only two of three people who had been read in, beyond Harry himself. The other was his closest friend among the Unseen Path, Davo Bluefeather.

Sitting on the grass, Harry fell into a deep meditation, his thoughts already having nearly been there before that point. With his basilisk side already awake and enjoying the weather, Harry felt it was time to see if he could get in touch with that side of him even more than he had previously during the battles with the trolls and afterward. He wanted to see if he could transform into a half-basilisk or something, as he could into his half-phoenix form.

How long he sat there, he didn't know, but a part of his mind was aware of a vague movement rising from the south. The movement was no threat, and was making for the yurt rather than Harry's current position, so he ignored it.

Eventually, as he concentrated on his basilisk side, Harry felt it, like a door opening inside him. His thoughts and emotions fully merged with that of his basilisk side, the changes suddenly flowing through and outward, like a gust of powerful wind through a suddenly open window.

Only, this change was far more... Dramatic than with his Phoenix side. Instead of his arms changing into wings, his whole body began to feel it, began to feel the change. And Harry allowed it, allowed the winds of change to fill his being.

Almost back to the tent after confirming that, yes, the stream to the south seemed to be becoming a permanent fixture, Versera stopped, turning her attention towards Harry as she heard the sound of something tearing, loud enough to carry over the sound of rain. Now, she watched as the yellow mound that was Harry, sitting there

meditating, shifted and grew, the yellow raincoat tearing apart from within as his body transformed.

Good grief, I am suddenly very grateful that my clothing can be made part of my changing into my kaldorei self, she thought, before gulping as Harry's change continued, then finished. *Ohhhhh my...*

Thanks to her draconic eyesight carrying over pretty well in kaldorei form, Versera could see everything as the change continued, with Harry's basilisk form growing to match Versera's draconic body. But there, the similarities ended. Harry's basilisk body was thicker all along until near the end of his tail, and when he reared up, his fangs glinted in what little light came through the rainfall around them. Those fangs protruded both from above and below and made what Versera knew of her own seem small in comparison, although not quite up to the size of her claws. Several sharp horns and a frill wound across his head at about forehead height, rising upwards and fusing to create a crown almost.

He coiled there, rising higher into the sky, hissing a challenge into the storm.

All in all, despite his lack of wings, Versera's base instincts thought Harry made for an immensely interesting sight for some reason. Perhaps a throwback to when her race first evolved from proto-dragons, where size and pheromones were a sign of power and strength? Regardless of why, Versera, despite being in her kaldorei body, felt her interest rise as the smell of Harry wafted out amid the rainfall all around them.

"Nope!" She muttered, shaking her head and racing towards the yurt, ducking inside. *Still not going there, nope, nope, nope!*

Recca looked up from where she was still trying to teach Tempina how to play Chinese Checkers. Both the air elemental and combative harpy cocked their heads to one side as they saw Versera literally leaping through the flap. She rolled as she hit the ground, her face a mask of confusion and other things neither could name.

"What was that set out just now, and why do you look so panicky?" Recca demanded bluntly.

"Nope!" Versera responded firmly. "I am not dealing with this."

"This, what 'this'?" Recca said, moving past Versera to stick her head out and stare out into the storm, uncaring of how her hair and feathers got instantly drenched. Swiftly, her eyes alighted on the massive form to one side of the tent, and she slowly pulled her head back in, looking over at Sara. "Harry?"

"Yep. Also, nope." Versera said, pulling off the raincoat and letting it fall to the ground in a wet heap, heading deeper into the yurt. *Gotta find something for my mind and hands to do. More mapmaking, yep, that's the ticket.*

Still having no idea what Versera was saying 'nope' to, Recca nodded slowly then moved over towards the fire again where she had shifted her perch. "Right, we'll just let him sort out whatever he's dealing with. Although, when he described a basilisk before, I didn't think he would be that big. It's as big as a dragon."

"I noticed, I very much noticed, thank you, now be quiet about it, please!" Versera grumbled, grabbing at some of the meat jerky that Harry had made along the trip, tearing at it, concentrating on that to the exclusion of all else. It helped, and soon enough, as Harry found himself battling with new instincts outside, her own began to subside, and she pulled out her mapmaking materials. *Good grief! He doesn't even have wings. Stop that, damn it all! I am a dragon. I will not let my instincts control me!*

At the moment, Harry was dealing with his own instincts, though most of them involved hunting, finding large predators, challenging and killing them and establishing a territory over which Harry would rule. That was prominent in those instincts: a need to dominate and rule over others. Not for nothing was the basilisk called the king of serpents.

In this form, Harry's thoughts were colder, but not as much as he would've thought back in his second year at Hogwarts, as he had realized since becoming a chimera, the basilisk wasn't actually a cold-blooded snake. It was, however, somewhat simple in mind. Beyond its desire to reign, the basilisk had an interest in killing and eating, well beyond any kind of hunger Harry had felt in his normal body, which said something considering he'd gone hungry more often than not among the Dursleys, and occasionally since discovering magic.

The basilisk within Harry wanted to go hunting right now, right now for living things which it could gulp down whole, alive, to feel them wriggling within its stomach. Needless to say, Harry stamped down on this hard.

Eventually, Harry had that instinct dealt with, mentally thanking Versera for making a beeline for the yurt so quickly, as spotting her might well have aroused the basilisk's hunting desire even more, or perhaps an entirely different kind of instinct.

Although thankfully not as much as seeing her in her Dragon form would have, he thought, his tongue flicking out in reptilian confusion for a moment as he wondered why the basilisk form would even be attracted to the dragoness's body. They weren't the same species at all, after all. *I mean, I can say that a tauren girl is pretty, but it is very much an abstract understanding; I don't find Tauren women attractive. Although obviously, the kaldorei are something else entirely.*

Apparently, recognizing Versera as a strong female carried over from one species to another, despite their physical differences. That was a little bizarre to Harry, having thought maybe that was bled over onto his basilisk side from his human side, but regardless, he had already gotten used to the fact previously.

Moving in this form was entirely new. Harry had never even thought about how his human mind would be able to interact with his snake body. Thankfully, instinct followed form, and allowed him to slowly slither forward, and then more and more. He slid all around the yurt, then out and away for a moment, before coming back in. Harry didn't really want to go hunting despite what his basilisk side was trying to convince him of, and he could also tell that the longer he stayed in this form, the stronger its instincts to do so became.

Once he was back in sight of the yurt, Harry slowly began to transform back into his human body. He did so by leaning heavily on his training with his phoenix and half-phoenix forms, superimposing the image of his human self over his basilisk self, pouring the basilisk self into the human, and then pushing down what remained in a way that he couldn't quite describe.

Once the shift finished, Harry suddenly found himself collapsed forward, groaning as his hands went to his stomach and thighs, a deep, horrible ache thrumming from all three areas. "Oh, my God! I forgot about muscle pains! Bleeding hells!"

When Harry had first begun to transform into his half-phoenix form or even his full phoenix body, Harry's arms, and more, his shoulders and pecs had routinely been incredibly sore very quickly, something that carried over from his half-phoenix body to his normal one. Now, the same thing happened only magnified several times over.

Even a phoenix routinely used as much of the air pressure and wind as it could to remain aloft and thus didn't need to rely solely on the strength of its wings and shoulder muscles. A snake, on the other hand, did need to rely entirely on the equivalent of abs and thigh muscles to basically scoot along the ground, using its weight to slither further from side to side.

Groaning, Harry pushed himself to his feet, cursing the fact that a healing totem wouldn't actually help deal with injuries such as this, only direct damage dealt to him either by enemies or accidents. Once back on his feet, he slowly inched his way towards the tent, each step causing his thighs to scream at him.

Unable to concentrate through the pain enough to even think about conjuring up a raincoat, Harry was drenched and sore by the time he arrived. He nearly collapsed onto his bed, idly drying himself and the sheets beneath with a spell, groaning and ignoring the snickers from Versera, Recca and even Tempina. "You lot are on your own for food today. I'm just going to lie here for a bit."

"Sore muscles?" Recca asked, almost solicitous now that she'd had a good cackle at her friend's misfortune.

"Yes! Far worse than it ever was with my half-phoenix form," Harry grumbled. "I've dealt with growing pains in my life, but this is ridiculous!"

That won him still more laughter, but it also had Versera grabbing some of the jerky and moving over to help Harry eat some of it along with some water. As she did, Recca wondered, "So, now that you can transform into your basilisk form as well as your Phoenix form, or at least, a half Phoenix form, I've never seen you take the full form of a phoenix..."

"I can do that, actually. I did it several times while with the Skyhorn tribe. But the half Phoenix form is so much more useful," Harry groaned around a bite of jerky. "It's got a voice other people can actually understand, and like you harpies, I can use my wingtips almost like hands. I can't do that in my phoenix body."

"Understandable. But I'm wondering if eventually you'll be able to merge the two forms," Recca finished her thoughts.

That caused Versera to stare at the far wall for a second, the image of Harry's basilisk form suddenly having the same wings as his half-phoenix form, coming into his mind. It was a very odd image, bizarre and strange, and yet also strangely enticing. A fact that had Versera shaking her head rapidly, even as Harry answered Recca, not noticing the transformed dragoness's confusion.

"Maybe in a few dozen years down the line," Harry snorted. "I also have no idea how that form would look. I doubt I'd retain my arms since neither form has them, unless I can somehow keep the image of my human body on an equal footing with the other two. As far as I can tell, my shifting from one form to another isn't really all that alike to the way a druid can shift into his animal forms, or Versera can shift from her dragon form into a kaldorei. It isn't nearly as malleable as all that."

He thought for a moment, before shrugging. "I wouldn't look like a dragon, with arms and legs. I'd simply look like a wyvern, almost. And a very odd one to boot. I wouldn't look as sleek or put together as a dragon does, anyway."

The next day, the rain stopped midmorning, and the group, eager to move on as quickly as they could from this wet area, packed up, only to find that the wind remained so strong that even Versera could barely get off the ground. It was almost like being at the edge of a hurricane, in her opinion. "As if the rain was being carried at the forefront of the hurricane, and the rest is following on quickly. I don't suppose your yurt would be up to protecting you lot from that?"

Versera could simply curl up somewhere, keeping her wings close to her body and digging her claws into the ground. The hurricane would hurt like blazes, and if they were somewhere more rocky or sandy, she might have had to flee before it, but as it was, so long as Versera could remain on the ground, she would be able to survive. Battered, certainly, but alive.

"No," Harry was quick to shut that thought down. "My yurt isn't built solid enough to withstand those kinds of winds. We need to get out of here."

Thankfully, Tempina was able to help, deadening the wind around them with difficulty and helping to push Versera off the ground. Once in the air, Recca and Harry spent most of that day basically huddling down onto the green dragon's back, as the power of the wind around them badly drained even Tempina, to the point where she had to go back to Skywall to rest at around midafternoon.

The next day was better, and the trio didn't run into any nasty weather after that for three more days. This let them reach the foothills of the mountains, oddly near where they had camped and been attacked by snakes going south. There were no snakes here any longer because of that little bout of idiocy, but there were dozens of birds. No giant ones, like rocs, but owls and falcons aplenty came to fly or sit around Harry.

Versera watched this, humming thoughtfully. "You know, I might need to make a note of that. Not your bird attraction, Harry; that's been well documented."

At that, Recca began to laugh wildly, shaking her head. "Oh yes, it has! I wonder what the twins are going to do next time to try and grab your **attention**, Harry, especially with so many weeks away from you to ponder their next move."

Much to the teasing harpy's annoyance, Harry ignored her, looking pointedly at Versera. "What were you actually talking about then?"

"How we didn't see many birds at all to the south," Versera pointed out simply. "We saw pockets of them here and there, but even when I flew deeper inland, when I found those rhinos, there weren't that many around. When we did see birds, they'd obviously gather around you, Harry, so it didn't seem to be as big a deal, but now, thinking about it, I'm wondering why."

Harry and Recca paused, the harpy setting aside her humor at Harry's expense to think about what she had said. "That's true. I didn't even see any birds when we investigated the old tauren village, not even scavenger birds. There wasn't any near the bluff we made our camp on, and obviously there weren't any near the volcanoes. The only ones I can remember seeing at all for several days before we even engaged with the wyverns and the rest of their forces was seagulls, and even then, I saw them well out to sea."

"It might be because there is something in the air down there," Tempina said, drawing their attention to her. Harry had called on her the day before, sensing that she wanted to come through from Skywall. If that was the case with other more intelligent elementals, Harry had no idea, but Tempina's personality was quite forceful, and Harry had no problems with letting her through whenever she wanted.

"What do you mean, something? And when did it fade?" Versera asked, carefully not asking why Tempina hadn't brought up whatever it was before this. *It would probably be a very silly answer, such as "no one ever asked me" or "I didn't think of it, anyway."*

"I don't know. It's just something in the air. Magic on the winds maybe? It's subtle, so subtle even I have trouble feeling it. But I'm not a bird, and aren't most birds, well, fragile?"

As if they had heard her, several of the hawks and falcons perched all around and on Harry twisted their heads to look at her.

The young air elemental stared back at them, her entire body seeming to almost give off the impression of smirking. "Yes, I'm talking to you when I say your fragile, birdbrains."

Several of them squawked at that, but resolutely turned their attention away when Tempina made no motion to indicate she was intimidated as Versera hummed thoughtfully. "For the first time in my entire life, I wish I was a Blue. Blues are so naturally good at sensing and using magic, I've no doubt they would've discovered something there. Heck even Rasela would have done a better job than me. But you're right, rats, mice and other small mammals and avians are often the first to sense

something wrong in the air. Hopefully the explosion of that one volcano will have cleared whatever it is out."

Harry hummed thoughtfully at that but then twitched as one of the birds leaped away. A second later, it landed on his bag where it sat against the side of the yurt. Looking at the pack, Harry blinked in surprise as he saw that one of the pouches there, one of the ones that he hadn't used before this, was glowing. "The heck?"

Versera and Recca turned to look and saw the same thing, with Versera frowning in confusion. "What is that?"

"That's the messenger tube, isn't it, Harry? I mean that's the pouch you put it in," Recca mused, hopping over towards it, reaching down and using her wing feathers to tug the flap off, her pinion feathers acting like more ungainly fingers in a way that Harry always found a little fascinating to watch; it was so strange. "It must be some kind of emergency if the folk back at Trueshot Lodge are trying to communicate with us, right?"

The messenger tubes at present couldn't all communicate with one another. There was no way to set multiple addresses in the transportation array. Rather, they all currently reported back to what Harry thought of as a switchboard back at Trueshot Lodge. Not a large one, admittedly, as there were only fifteen of the messenger tubes in existence at present. Harry hoped to create a better array in the future, but it hadn't been his priority for many years now since the version he had now worked quite well.

"It might be, otherwise they wouldn't be contacting us," Harry murmured, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

When the mixed group of Seekers and Oathkeepers had left Trueshot Lodge on Harry's first journey, they had brought two messenger tubes with them. One had been intended to be left behind in Ashenvale, to be carried by Nealu to Tyrande in the capital. Because they had met in Danaviea that hadn't happened, but Harry had obviously kept one, while Davo and Nealu took the other with them.

The tube hadn't been used up to this point, not even to send Versera's maps back. Not because they couldn't be, or because it would wear out the system or anything like that, but rather because there was an unwritten aspect to the first quest of a Seeker: they were expected to be entirely on their own. Hence, small groups rather than large ones, or even single Seekers/pairs, were more common. The messenger tubes were for emergencies.

When Harry read the message on the parchment inside the messenger tube, he stiffened. It was short but very descriptive.

"Harry, Recca and Versera, return to Trueshot Lodge with all haste.

Tyrande, Davo and Nealu met with a pair we sent north years back. Together, they have discovered a catastrophic problem caused by trolls at the stump of Vordrassil. The trolls have done something to give their shamans necromantic powers and seem to be using the saronite. We all know where that can lead.

The expedition needs reinforcements posthaste, but while Lady Whisperwind has sent a message for aid, the rest of the kaldorei are months away. We are hoping that your magic can provide a solution to get us there faster, or else the problem will continue to grow worse.

Signed,

Senior Seeker Marduc

“... Well, that’s descriptive. And worrisome,” Harry scowled, handing it over to Recca to read, trying to figure out what solutions he could come up with quickly that would allow them to transport the entire Unseen Path to wherever Tyrande and the others were. *It also probably means that Pathfinder Vurg’s passed on. I knew it was likely, but still, it’s a wrench.*

No solution was going to be all that quick, he knew. While the messenger tubes could transport small nonliving material, living material was very much far, far in the future, if Harry could ever figure it out at all. And even then, someone would need to go there in the first place to set up the other side.

Back on Earth, of course, a Portkey could have been a solution to get back to Trueshot Lodge, at the very least. However, there were a few problems with that.

Firstly, Harry had, for one reason or another, only rarely used Portkeys back in his old life, and whenever he had, he’d always tripped, crashed, or hurt himself coming out the other end, much like he did when using Floo Powder. Thus, he’d never actually learned how to do the spell for himself.

Second, Harry honestly doubted that, even if he knew it, a spell like that would work at all here on Azeroth. There was simply too much background magic here. Then there was the third reason, that being the nature of Trueshot Lodge. The place was bound up in so much magical defenses and Nature Magic-based wards that Harry just knew any attempt to teleport there would be impossible. It might have been more likely to work to get to Tyrande, but again, Harry didn’t know the spell for it.

No, flight is going to be the necessary mode of transportation here, and even there, I haven’t figured out the arrays used on broomsticks back home.

“Are you willing to carry us directly back to the Broken Isles, Versera? Cutting across the triangle like that is surely going to be faster than going through the mountains and along the coastline, although you’ll have to be flying the whole time, and I doubt Recca or I could make that journey,” Harry asked formally.

“If you can keep us on target, yes. I know vaguely where we are and where the Broken Isles should be. We probably won’t get lucky enough to hit the main island right away, but if we find even one of them, we can get there quickly enough after,” she said, tossing two items from her pack towards Harry.

Harry caught them and found they were a sextant and a compass, and nodded, understanding. Moments later, the entire group was in the air, and with Tempina helping, they turned, heading out into the ocean.

OOOOOOO

Early that same day, the four members of the Unseen Path who had met up with Tyrande's expedition had returned. That was how fast the Unseen Path responded to the report sent to Trueshot Lodge. A message written mainly by Nealu while Davo, Purde and Narvae explained what they had seen deeper in towards where Vordrassil's trunk lay...

Flashback:

One thing that all members of the Unseen Path were taught to the point of near-mystical levels was moving unseen over any kind of terrain. Tauren, furbolg, kaldorei, Highborne, dragon and even, in the case of the oddest recruit, human had all been taught this skill, and while Davo Bluefeather lacked his friend's magic, even moving over snowy terrain like this silently was well within his abilities. The large Tauren warrior could put his hooves down so that nary a crunch was heard regardless of what kind of snow he was trotting on automatically due to long seasons of training in the snowy mountains, and shifted his hooves slowly forward along the snow so that there weren't even any real prints left behind.

Yet occasionally, even such as Davo found himself without any way forward without being spotted. Now, several days after starting this slow, quiet approach, through night and day alike, he and his companions paused, staring across an open area ahead of them from between several dozen rocks and desiccated trees to another such area beyond.

Within that area, there were small, hidden bits of saronite. Both the rocklike type, saronite that had come straight up from the ground, and the more sap-like substance bleeding from the trees. None of the Unseen Path had let it touch them. Such was insanity and worse, yet there wasn't nearly as much as they had feared here, in the direct shadow of Vordrassil's stump. It lay like a massive hill to one side of their current course, blotting out the horizon to the east, north and south. Yet it was no longer their direct goal, because, as they had closed, they had seen smoke, the sustained smoke of a settlement of some kind at the base of that stump.

To reach the source of that distant smoke, still invisible to them here, the quartet of warriors had to cross this open zone. And, of course, because luck simply worked out that way, there was something there that could give the warning if they weren't careful.

Although the strange undead-seeming thing was the same as the troll and furbolg constructs they had seen before, given unholy life by the careful application of saronite, the base creature was... different. Indeed, staring at the creature, Davo felt a sick, horrified recognition.

This creature was built almost like a Tauren, but not quite. Its horns were much smaller than even a young woman's. Even though one was broken off, the other one was still in place, a short, stubby thing, for all its sharp appearance, barely rising more than a few fingers from the creature's skull. What was left of the construct's forehead bulged precipitously, looking as if it had evolved to ram opponents. Its fur, what

remained, was white and gray, yet there was no sign of age in what remained of the creature's face, half of which had been crushed in the blow which had initially killed it.

His clothing was similar to Davo's, though slightly more primitive. In the construct's hands, it held a spear, still marked with images carved into the wood and a series of feathers disturbingly like the ones that Davo would routinely wear in times of peace in his hair or, indeed, on his own war-staff.

Yet the creature's one remaining eye glowed the black flecked with dark green of the old god's corruption. Saronite could be seen where one arm was attached to its body, and still more bubbled from the rest of its head.

The undead creature, or construct, the quartet was still debating nomenclature there, was guarding this particular area. It marched slowly back and forth along the open zone between the two clumps of stringy, rocky growth, peering all around itself, the spear lifting to thrust forward in a horrible parody of the training the body might once have been given.

Staring at the horribly familiar and equally disdainful parody of Tauren life, Davo felt his teeth grinding together so hard they hurt. *I know not who you were in life, brother, but I swear to the Earth Mother I truly fear we both worshipped that I will end this profane use of your body, and give offerings to Musha for your soul this day.*

With an almost brusque twitch of his hands, Davo used the Unseen Path's finger signals to gesture to himself, then out to the creature. Narvae, Nealu and Purde all nodded, the two seekers slowly falling back and to the left where Purde had somehow, even Davo couldn't tell how, perched himself into a tree without making any noise or sign to watch ahead and behind.

Purde wasn't a noncombatant, of course. Very few even among the cartographers were entirely inept in combat. Indeed, even Milifiana, for all her bookish ways, was a crack shot with a bow. Yet Purde wasn't as good as the other three in the area of silent killing and had taken to covering their rear from the start of this trek.

Waiting for several moments until he knew he'd given his companions enough time to hide themselves lest the worst occur and there be some other undead construct or something out of sight from their current position to raise the alarm, Davo shifted forward slowly. Three minutes later, he had shifted to the nearest point between the tiny, ragged copse of trees and the pseudo-Tauren construct's course without the construct having noticed, blending in so well that even if someone had been looking at him directly, they might have missed Davo.

When next the construct passed by the same point it had dozens of times before as Davo had moved, the construct was within war staff range. Davo's finger flicked over one of the runes that Harry had carved into his war staff, and Davo felt the familiar hiss as the fire head of his war staff activated, and he whirled it around, aiming for the construct's neck.

With the added heated edge to his blade, Davo cut through bone, gristle and sinew in one hit, ending the construct's unnatural 'life' in a second. His head slowly

rolled away, and the body collapsed where it stood, some of the sap-like saronite drizzling out from the eye and the massive open area of the construct's skull as it fell.

Instantly, his companions appeared, with Narvae and Purde speeding across the open segment into the next area so fast that even Davo almost missed their passage, while Nealu moved to help Davo, grabbing up the head and tossing it into the woods behind them. The two of them grimly heaved the corpse out of the open area and back into cover, where they piled snow upon it quickly and quietly before doing the same to any leftover blood and pus out on the pathway.

With that done, instead of staying to give an offering to the Earth Mother right there as a part of Davo wanted to, he and Nealu moved into the new copse of trees. *I will have time enough for that later. Indeed, I might wish to hold off regardless, as there might be far more such pseudo-Tauren here. I wonder where such came from? Are there more out there somewhere in Northrend? If so, where?*

The pair soon found Purde waiting for them, with Narvae having shifted to the other side of the small group of rocks and withered trees. The more experienced pair of kaldorei had been all around the area, making sure that no other undead construct was coming their way. Now, Purde reported there were several in the distance, but the killing of their fellow had not roused them. "As this is the sixth time we've killed such sole constructs without rousing a general response, we can conclude that killing any of the undead won't warn whatever fool troll has woken them from their slumber."

"I would not put it such," Davo said, cutting his large hand across in a negating motion. "Rather, they are despoiling the buried dead. There is nothing within those constructs to indicate that whatever has happened has done aught to their soul, and without that, what is left is but meat."

"Hmm...I am not so certain that's the case with the second-class trolls we've seen, the gray-skinned ones who have had their tusks removed," Purde demurred, seeing his large companion was still angry about the construct he had slain, whose likeness to a Tauren the three kaldorei had also noticed. "Yet I suppose we weren't talking about them."

Davo nodded, then took a moment to regain control of himself, shaking his head. "The, the scale of this is beginning to stagger me, when I think about it. How many trolls must there be here to create such an operation? Or, or could the trolls be so foolish as to call upon their loa for help in pulling the bodies of the dead from the ground and then using saronite to create these constructs?"

"Hah, the troll wars were before even my Father's time, but... I do recall reading in the archives at Trueshot Lodge that trolls do believe in some kind of afterlife, and that there are Loa devoted to the underworld and the dead. I can't recall if any of them dealt with burial, though."

"If there were, it would also have to be one to dig them up, perhaps so the dead could be fed upon? Trolls are far more willing to become cannibals than any other known race, after all," Narvae interjected, his tone grim, so if he was telling a joke at the start there or not, none of his companions, even Purde, could say. "But I have to think

there's no loa out there foolish enough to willingly answer the prayers of a priest who is using anything from the Old Gods. Even if they are not aware of what saronite precisely is, the corruption within it should be obvious to any such."

"You hope," Purde murmured. "But I recall much the same archives that young Nealu read back home. There are literally countless such 'wild gods' out there. Some might be so stupid."

"I hope," Narvae repeated, while Davo smothered an inappropriate chuckle at Nealu's expression. A veteran of the War of the Satyrs and even the more private war against the Necrodark, Nealu was not used to being termed young by even his fellow kaldorei. But considering Purde and Narvae were both veterans of the War of the Ancients, and, unlike Tyrande Whisperwind, had the scars to prove it, he couldn't really say it was unwarranted.

Narvae paused, then, staring at one lone tree in the distance, its sides lined with a few tiny pustules of black sap, gathering his thoughts as he gazed at the visible sign of the corruption of the world he had sworn to stop with his very existence. "It is very obvious to me that this excess saronite, the amount of it, and how much of it is in sap-form, is not natural. I was involved in the war to cleanse this place, to burn Vordrassil to ash. While I know Andrassil gave the buried one access to the Emerald Dream, the physical stump should never have been able to corrupt the surrounding land so much."

While Tyrande and others would occasionally name the Old Gods, Narvae was slightly superstitious, in that he never did. Doing them even that slight courtesy was to give such creatures power, and Narvae refused to do so. "We weren't able to destroy the tree utterly, but the fires we laid deep within the world tree burned out much of the physical corruption. No, someone has been cultivating saronite here for centuries, spreading and building up slowly. If only we had known sooner!"

With the last word, Narvae's fists clenched, and his ears tilted straight ahead, pressing into his skull, a sign of raw distress and frustration that most kaldorei would never allow themselves to show. "If only we had been sent to map out Northrend a century ago, we would not be facing—"

"Dreams in one hand, feces in the other, see which fills up first," Davo interjected. "We need to deal in the now, and you know that there was no way we could have done that regardless. Not unless you could find and then hide away aboard a vrykul ship..." He paused then, staring thoughtfully at Narvae and Purde. "How did you two get to Northrend anyway?"

"Precisely that. We built a small boat and shifted to the northernmost island in the Broken Isles. From there, we headed directly west and north, using the island's mass to shield us from the Maelstrom's currents and eventually, a vrykul ship found ours. We hid in the water as they examined our craft, clung to the side, then climbed aboard and hid away until they returned to land. It wasn't fun. I would not recommend it," Purde answered dryly. "Not the best of plans, but Vurg did give us the okay to try."

Probably because he thought you two would turn back when you realized there was no way to get to Northrend on your own, Davo reflected, his thoughts a mix of

admiration at their sheer bravado and determination, and shock that the plan had worked. *Although that might say more about how far afield the vrykul tribes along the southern edge of Northrend sail than anything else.*

“Setting aside that that was not a plan, but insanity, is the saronite still being created by Vordrassil’s stump?” Nealu demanded. “Are its roots the main source of the corruption leaking upwards, or is this place as a whole simply too close to the dread one’s prison?”

“As I understand things, it isn’t so much distance, as reach,” Narvae answered, his expression having eased as Purde explained how the pair had reached Northrend. “Even at the height of the empire’s strength and knowledge, we kaldorei didn’t know precisely where the dread ones were buried, or how they had been imprisoned. We only knew it was somewhere in the ground, and the first we knew that they could influence those above was... well, Deathwing’s fall from grace and the draconic civil war that resulted from it.”

All of them winced at that, but none could let their minds dwell on that ancient event which no non-dragon knew much about. Well, save perhaps Cenarius, Malfurion and Lady Whisperwind, but regardless, the vague points were enough to make them all cringe.

“But yes, it’s probably the tree’s stump, it’s deep-buried roots that are becoming the problem here. Well, that and troll malice, of course,” Narvae concluded, his tone bitter.

“Hmm... if we have to destroy that thing, root and branch, it’s going to take... well, I don’t think even Harry could do it with his magic. Not even that Fiendfyre spell he’s mentioned a time or two as his most destructive in terms of area of effect. And frankly, given what he’s told me about that particular spell, I’m almost frightened what would happen if Fiendfyre consumed something like saronite,” Davo murmured, tugging at his beard thoughtfully.

Normally this would have resulted in a few gentle taps of beads on beads. But like Davo’s feathers and a few polished copper bands for his arms, Davo had removed all such and carefully stored them into his pouch. Sneaking about like this was serious business, and a single clacking bead could not be allowed to give the quartet away.

“Funny you should mention Harry, as I think we would need Versera’s help just as much as I would like his. Or perhaps even more than one dragon, to help burn out that stump,” Narvae grumbled. “We tried to reach out to the Greens and even find the Blues that are supposed to make their home up here, but the only greens we knew of were locked in the Emerald Dream fighting the Nightmare within alongside Ysera. And the blues could not be found at all, nor could the reds.”

He shook his head then, fingering one of his prominent forearm scars. “Yet it is the trolls using the saronite that bothers me more than its simple creation. How whoever is behind this is using it, setting it to a purpose. It almost seems as if they are farming and spreading it out, and that is horribly worrisome.”

All four of the Unseen Path members shivered at the thought of what Yogg-Saron would do if he was somehow able to reach through the blood, to manipulate a troll society based around using saronite like that. They knew it was possible. It had been documented before that simply being near that stuff was often enough, and the grey-skinned trolls, the second-class citizens among the trolls here, were further proof.

Yet that brought up something that Nealu and Davo both had at the back of their minds since long before this. "Do you think that the dread one is directing everything here already?" Davo asked.

"No," Narvae said instantly, shaking his head. "The ancient one might be somehow instigating how much of his blood comes to the surface here, but is not directing what is done with it. Even reaching through his blood to do so would cause far more physical changes to the world than we have seen so far. This area might be desiccated and dead, but that is nothing to the changes the ancient one's direct influence would cause to the physical world. No, this is something else, something smaller. A lesser mind taking advantage of things. Although, obviously, it won't be for very long."

All of them nodded grim understanding of that. For whatever reason or however an individual did it, once he or she used the power of an Old God, eventually, the payment would come due, and his or her will would be subsumed by the monster underneath the world's crust.

When they set off over the open ground once more, covered in white and grey cloaks that made them seem like nothing more than mounds of snow, Nealu led the way with Narvae behind, erasing their footsteps as they went. Within another hour, they had finally begun to make out more details about the smoke. From here, it was obviously from more than one source, the smoke joining up high in the sky. At least sixteen different sources, maybe more, were out there, signifying a large camp at the very least.

Moreover, from here the trio of kaldorei could make out a series of deep drum-like booms from the same general area.

Doing this had brought them even closer to the side of Vordrassil's stump, enough for even Davo to see more details of it. To his surprise and that of the others, while they had seen scattered small droplets of saronite on the lesser trees around the area, the sides of the stump itself were oddly clean of saronite. That was beyond worrisome and backed up Narvae's earlier words.

Moments later, as they moved around the stump where it jutted out a bit more towards the west, they spotted trolls working along one side of the stump, actually harvesting some of the saronite. This group of trolls was large, a force of twenty, with fourteen grey-skinned, saronite-infected trolls working steadily under the guise of six green-skinned trolls. Their forearms were bare to the cold, despite the heavy furs they wore elsewhere, and were marked with dark green tattoos.

Or rather, the tattoos of troll-kind. No other race simply cut out segments of their skin and treated the cuts with something to cause the regrown skin to come in a different color, after all.

These trolls were also heavily armed, as most such were equipped with multiple hatchets and a single heavy spear, bows, or throwing spears, each with a different preference. One had two small skulls set on his shoulders as part of an elaborate backpack of some kind, while a wide leather cloth, marked with a black hand holding a skeleton, sat in the center.

What that mark could mean was beyond the watcher's ken, but it was clear it was the symbol of this tribe of trolls, or perhaps their particular loa. None of the quartet was going to guess, nor would they be drawn on what manner of beast had supplied the leather of that banner.

The workers had only a single spear strapped to their backs as they worked to gather up finger- or hand-sized droplets of saronite.

To the shock and worry of the Unseen Path members, the group had obviously been at this for quite a while. Several large, open barrels of the dark substance had already been gathered, each so large it required four of the grey-skinned trolls to lift.

"Follow them, or avoid them and keep moving towards that village?" Davo murmured into the snow of their hideaway, so that his breath could not give their position away.

Narvae shook his head, pointing with the slightest twitch of his fingers. Follow.

With that, the group of four decided to slowly follow this group of trolls as they moved away from the stump further northward and slightly west away from the stump. Given how late in the evening it had been when they spotted the group of gatherers, it was nighttime by the time the group of trolls and their unseen stalkers came within sight of the source of the smoke, by which time even Davo could make out the noise of the drums. Indeed, it was rather loud by that point.

The troll village was large, easily three or four times the size of the camp the expedition force used. It was also clearly meant to be a permanent settlement. While there were no walls around it, the huts were built of stone and wood, primitive, but durable. There were dozens, maybe as many as two hundred, normal-looking trolls moving around the area, seeing to various small farms where snow rabbits and elk were stored. A few more normal farms were also scattered around the area; the snow cleared away to the ground deep underneath, though the Unseen Path members had to shiver at the idea of what kind of corruption crops here would carry with them.

To Narvae's eyes, there didn't seem to be nearly enough for the number of trolls in the area, but then again, trolls were more hunter-gatherers than kaldorei or Tauren. The meat animals were clearly there more to supplement than to be the main source of meat. Still, he noted their positions. It might come in handy later.

Ahead of them, the group of saronite gatherers were met with another group of trolls, all thirty of them, the green-skinned variety. These were also all marked with masks covering half their faces, skulls on their shoulders and shaman staffs in their hands rather than weapons.

One troll was older than the others; indeed, he was perhaps one of the oldest trolls that Narvae had ever seen. He was scar-tattooed like the others, but unlike them, he didn't have darker green-colored tattoos; rather, he had orange scar-tattoos with the occasional black one worked through the other colors.

He also seemed to be very much in charge, and he directed the new barrels of Saronite into the village.

From where they lay on the ground, tiny mounds of snow pushed up ahead of them, their cloaks all around them, none of the watching quartet could see what was within the village. This, perforce, forced them closer, something none were happy about, and they skirted around, approaching the village from another angle to avoid the animals seeing them.

Thankfully, this deep into their territory, the trolls didn't seem to believe they needed patrols. There were a few outer farms where grey-skinned trolls were at work under the watchful eye of a single, green-skinned overseer, but that was it.

Soon, the group was able to peer deeper into the village to what was obviously the communal center of the troll tribe. There, on ground cleared of snow much like the rest of the village, there was a large ritual circle of some kind. And within, seven captured vrykul knelt, thrashing in their bonds despite being tied down to large, heavy-looking rocks.

As the group watched, the last of the saronite was poured onto the ground in deep trenches, the trenches leading deeper into the ritual circle towards the still living vrykul. How they had come to be captured, none of the quartet of Unseen Path members knew, but they were all weak, bloodied and crippled. Their hands and feet were missing, having been chopped off either in battle or to keep them from being able to escape afterward, the wounds then cauterized so they could not bleed out.

"What is this?" Narvae murmured, staring at the markings on the ground, not the writhing vrykul. They were immaterial to the other aspects of this ritual. "My spyglass, I need to know what some of those symbols are."

"You can read troll script?" Nealu asked, even as Purde moved behind Narvae, reaching into his pouch quietly, pulling out his spyglass and handing it over his shoulder to his companion. The glass and metal were worked in such a way that even in the day there would be no glint of sunlight off it to give their position away, but since it was night now, and most of the light was from scattered torches and fires within the village, that wasn't necessary.

"No, not all of it. But I have seen some of those symbols before during moments of worship to various Loa before battle. The mix of saronite, though, that is something altogether strange. I don't like the pattern either. It isn't part of the original troll script being used; rather it is something on top of the rest of the ritual, maybe?"

"It almost looks like a, a net maybe..." Davo said slowly, frowning thoughtfully, staring at what he could make out of the way the trenches the saronite was sliding around in were laid out. "A spider web perhaps, with those four as bait..."

"I...Oh no... that old troll, he can't be thinking of that, can he?" Narvae whispered, shaking his head, his voice horrified, before he barked out slow, quiet commands, his voice trembling in a way none of the others had heard. "Spread out, and make certain, **certain** you cannot be seen! I do not know what Loa they are calling, but I want us in a position to watch what is going to happen here from as many angles as possible."

His companions quickly hastened to obey, spreading out from where they clustered together for a moment, shifting through the snow and ice as quickly and quietly as possible, through the farms around the village, using what little cover there was so well that even had the trolls in the area been looking for them, they might not have spotted them. Soon, all of them were hidden, watching events unfold inside the village as the ritual began, snow stuffed in their mouths to prevent even a whisp of breath from giving them away.

Dozens of trolls whooped and hollered, smacking their weapons together, dancing, blowing on loud horn bugles made of their own horns, while an even thirty-six trolls set up around the area in groups of six continued to set the tone, bashing on drum sets made of their own skin. The ululation was controlled, a chorus rather than a cacophony, with each group of dancers being led by a mask and skull-clad lesser shaman.

In the center stood the ancient troll, very deliberately, it seemed, outside of the script-based ritual circle yet connected to the network of saronite-carrying trenches. He wasn't touching it, but it wound all around him in a circle. A long flaying knife was in one hand, while in his other hand a spear with several dozen heads tied to it rattled and cracked as he waved it above his head, intoning in the trollish language something that none of the four could hear properly.

Nor would they understand it if they could. None had ever used Harry's translation spell, after all. But then again, here understanding wasn't really needed. It was obviously part of a ritual, a summoning of a wild god, or a Loa as the trolls called them.

An hour after the quartet was in position, just as Davo was becoming a little sore simply lying out there in the snow, there was an upswell of power, a roar barely heard, a pressure on the world, as if something beyond mortal was pressing itself onto the material plane. A large gash appeared in midair at the center of the ritual circle, beside the captive vrykul, its edges dark purple and deep blue, almost white, crackling with energy as this place suddenly linked to another realm.

On the surface, it was like the feeling Davo and Nealu had felt when in the presence of Ohn'ahra; as if you were suddenly feeling the touch of a god nearby, wild and powerful. But that was where the comparison ended with all the abruptness of a guillotine. Because Ohn'ahra was kind, gentle. The winds she controlled soothing even as they demanded courage and resolve from those who looked to her as their patroness.

This was anything but. Feeling behind this pressure, this feeling of **OTHER** was dark, demanding, pressing down on the mind and will of those who watched with all the abruptness of the hammer coming down from on high rather than gently wafting over them. With it came a surge of bloodthirst, a feral hunger not for flesh, perhaps, but for souls and domination, both demanding such and pushing those who felt the loa's presence to want such for themselves.

This demand for blood and death hit even the four watchers. Nealu found his teeth grinding together, his hands clenching and unclenching on his weapon. Davo found his hand inching towards where he had hidden his war staff in the snow directly in front of him. Narvae grimaced, shaking his head and pushing hard against the influence, pushing it out of his mind with difficulty, as Purde did the same.

Soon, Nealu did as well, while Davo took a while longer. He resorted to stuffing even more snow into his mouth to muffle any noise he made as he grunted and growled to himself, pausing only a moment to make certain the snow wasn't black, yellow or smelled before doing it.

The four members of the Unseen Path's reaction to this summoning was mild in comparison to that of the trolls. They hooted and hollered louder, bellowing ancient war cries to the sky as their chorus lost its rhythm. Dancer turned on dancer, gauging, hammering; man or woman, it didn't matter. Drummer turned on drummer, smashing their sticks against one another like clubs, rearing back to bore with tusks.

However, when the being finally coalesced out of the rip in reality, all that motion stopped. Nearly every troll there- warrior, dancer, bugler, worker, grey or green-skinned- dropped to their knees. Their wounds were already healing, as the mass of trolls raised their hands into the air and roared a single name. "Mueh'zala!"

The construct that appeared was massive, as big as the seven captured vrykul would have been had they been standing upright, but clearly of troll stock rather than giant. Its tusks looked as if they had been chopped off haphazardly at some point in the past and jutted out only the same size as a normal troll's forearm rather than an entire arm as should have been the case given his size. Ridges were coming out of his forehead as if other bits of bone were bursting through in places, and its ears were noticeably shorter than those of a normal troll, its hair white and wispy. All in all, the loa looked like a nearly sickly, dying troll which had somehow been fused with a troll warrior in his prime.

The loa's eyes were the blazing white of magic, and in its chest was embedded some kind of marker. Huge, it almost looked like a small chest plate, marked with some of the same glyphs that the trolls had etched into the ground.

The troll loa, perhaps one of death or combat, Narvae didn't know, nor did any of the others, turned aside from his worshipers. As the loa did so, he didn't even notice the one elderly troll who remained on his feet, swaying and muttering while everyone else in sight remained on their knees, kowtowing towards the loa. Instead, Mueh'zala, if that was his name or title, turned to the seven bound vrykul. With a wicked grin and a cackle of pure enjoyment, he reached into them two at a time with his three-fingered hands.

As Narvae watched, bile rising from within him, the construct tore out the hearts of the first two vrykul, who screamed and kept screaming as something else came with those hearts, something more ephemeral. There was a light around their hearts, blue and white like that of the eyes of the loa, only different, not cold, but warm.

That was, until those hearts were dropped into the troll loa's mouth. The wild god then devoured the hearts and what Narvae felt to be the vrykul's soul alike.

The bodies collapsed to the side, barely twitching, and the troll god turned to the next two.

Knowing what was going to happen, Narvae tore his eyes away from Mueh'zala, instincts warning him to make no sudden moves. Twisting around very, very slowly, Narvae looked all around his small hide, an area between an outhouse and one of the outermost houses of the troll village, and out behind him. There, five more trolls had appeared, coming in from outside of the village. They were all moving forward into the village, and Narvae carefully, carefully, pulled back further into the shadow of the outhouse.

The smell of the outhouse, which hit his senses like a punch, did its work, and the five trolls avoided the area. Yet they remained there, kneeling close to his position, staring ahead towards the loa. *Well, that's going to make exfiltrating difficult.*

Elsewhere, Davo, Nealu and Purde were all faced with similar moments.

Davo had spent most of the time leading up to the start of the ritual burrowing into the snow, putting so much snow over his body he looked like just any mound of snow left near a fence separating two of the farms. He found himself stepped on, with two trolls actually kneeling on the snow above his back, to the point where the snow shifted and covered one of his eyes where he had been peering out towards the chief priest and everything going on.

Purde, the best climber of the group, had perched on a roof, but found several trolls had the same idea. With no cover, he was forced to hide by simply lying out in the shadows cast by the flickering firelight below. Meanwhile, Nealu found several troll womenfolk having shifted into their own small group directly behind and to the left of his position. Why they were raiding the farm there, Nealu didn't know, but they had bowed where they were, meaning that Nealu, hidden like Davo more by snow than shadow, couldn't move at all, save for stuffing snow into his mouth.

Thankfully, while their position was precarious in the extreme, the four members of the Unseen Path could still see what was going on. And almost instantly, it wasn't Mueh'zala's guffaws of joy that grabbed their attention. Rather, it was the priest's silence, the gentle movements he made with his staff.

Underneath Mueh'zala, the mass of sap-like saronite began to stir. The chief priest was using some kind of spell on it, allowing him to control it like it was just any other liquid. And as the troll loa continued to partake in his feast, he didn't notice it spreading up his legs or rising in various areas around him and the other sacrifices. Not like a wall, but like a web, as Davo had noticed.

I do not know what that troll's thoughts are, but this is indeed reminding me all too much of a trap. Narvae frowned, debating not about what was going on but about what he should do. Narvae was a very good shot, and he could probably hit that troll from here with an arrow to the skull. However, putting him down permanently, that would need more than just an arrow to the head, not unless he could penetrate straight to the troll's brain and do enough damage there that the body just collapsed. Even though it was difficult.

And if I did, what would happen with the ritual? Narvae didn't know much about such enchantments, but he did know that interrupting any such was never a good thing for the surrounding area.

The idea that taking such a shot would bring the surrounding trolls down on him was immaterial. So long as one of them got out of the area, that would be enough. *But making certain it is a killing shot from here is practically impossible. Curse it all! If only I could have gotten closer.*

More horror than the sight of the vrykul's souls being eaten as they thrashed was soon to come. Between one moment and the next, the low chanting of the chief priest stopped, and he whirled, his staff pointing inexorably towards Mueh'zala's back.

As if sensing what was about to happen, the wild god half-turned. Yet as he did, his silver eyes flicked down to stare in shock at the black goo that had risen up his legs. A hand reached down and tried to wipe it off, even as his other hand reached out, energy forming there, purple and white mixed, reaching out for the priest.

But it was too late. The spell that the priest had been casting finished. Instantly, dozens of saronite tendrils formed under the touch of his magic and then slammed into the loa, stabbing in like a mix between the tentacles of an octopus and a hunter's spear.

Whether or not the troll-like loa was the main body of the loa or a representation, a debate the Unseen Path had been having for centuries, didn't matter right now. The saronite tendrils penetrated the troll-shaped loa's hide, causing him to scream in pain, and then, still more of the saronite rose, connecting the troll Loa to the circle of saronite around the priest.

There was a pulse of that dark purple and white energy through that vessel, as if the saronite was acting like a hose, pulling something large through it. The loa screamed like his previous victims, dropping from the sky where he had been hovering towards the ground, his aura noticeably weakening. A moment later, the same energy flowed out from the circle of dark liquid around the troll priest into the orange-tattooed troll.

Mueh'zala gasped, swaying, roaring, trying to fight its way out, tearing and ripping at the tendrils, spraying droplets of saronite everywhere within the ritual circle, but the damage had been done. The wild god couldn't escape, couldn't pull his arms free from the coils of saronite that now encompassed them, or his legs. He tried to blast out some kind of magical spell, a blast of magic bursting out from his entire body or sending, whichever it was.

Yet this removed only chunks of the saronite, not the majority, and another pulse of energy from the troll deity transferred to the priest. Mueh'zala collapsed to the ground entirely at that point, while the same white light as Mueh'zala's own eyes began to gleam from the priest's.

There was a third pulse, and a roar from the loa as he tried to surge to his feet. Then, as Mueh'zala seemed to swell in place, a vast susurrant of released energy erupted as the loa exploded, causing the entire area to quake as everyone's ears threatened to burst. Whether that was Mueh'zala's death knell or a last-ditch effort to escape, none of the members of the Unseen Path could say, nor were they in any position to care as they and every living troll there were smashed off their feet by that pulse of released deific energy.

The grey-skinned trolls were not. They swayed in the breeze left by their fellows, but remained upright, staring all around them.

As the green-skinned trolls groaned and moaned on the ground, their minds, which had been lost in religious ecstasy and now not able to deal with events, Narvae glanced around, making certain none of the grey-skinned trolls could see him. They couldn't, but it was a near run thing as he moved on quickly just as one seemed to be turning towards where he was hiding.

Better, there was no sign of the troll priest at present, cutting off his first thought as he was forced to move from his hiding place.

As he did, Nealu heard the wild hooting of an owl, as if it had been startled out of its hiding place nearby. The sound, while going unremarked by the grey-skinned trolls still on their feet or the slowly recovering green-skinned trolls, signaled the order to retreat on your own. That told Narvae his fellows were in much the same position, and he began to slowly, very slowly and very carefully retreat from his position.

Thankfully, the impact of the released deific energy wasn't something the troll's regeneration powers could help with. They were still recovering by the time the quartet met up in the same place they had originally split apart, and were well hidden under the snow, even Davo, who looked spooked by something. His exfiltration had been easily the most nerve-racking thing he'd ever done, needing to slowly dig himself out with his legs then pray that no one saw him as he turned in his little den and made his way out, all the while several trolls were laid out on top of his previous hide.

They were nearly too far away to see the center of the village even with a spyglass but that was more than fine by them. After that blast of energy, even moving was difficult, a sense of exhaustion building in their minds that weighed down their arms and legs like lead. Instead, they settled into waiting, as Davo and Narvae, the owners of the group's two such devices, watched the central plaza of the village through their spyglasses.

Pulses of dark blue and white energy erupted and thrummed there, like a heart, for several minutes. This continued as the mass of green-skinned trolls finally started to rouse themselves, and Davo and Narvae had almost begun to believe the main troll

prize had been slain. Then, just as dawn broke over the horizon, the orange-tattooed priest got to his feet.

His staff had been shattered, and a portion looked to have been embedded into his shoulder, but he pulled it out, waving it on high. The next moment, the priest rose off the ground as if hovering there as Mueh'zala had previously. His entire body crackled with Arcane energies, the white and purple of the loa predominating, while etched alongside the black of the touch of the old God.

He waved a hand, and the six vrykul that had been executed by the troll-shaped elder god rose, their eyes black, unseeing, uncaring of the stumps of their hands or feet, which gleamed with the black of saronite.

And then the last giant died screaming. Another spell, or perhaps raw magic, it was impossible to tell, crushed it utterly into paste.

Were that the only horror, Narvae and his friends would have still been frightened, worried beyond compare. But then, as the troll reached down towards the ground, once more, the energy white and purple flowed out of him, and into the ground. Seconds later, across a wide area from one horizon to the other, the earth began to shift and move.

Not in its entirety, but in hundreds, thousands of different places, different small mounds of dirt moving like something was underneath it. And then, skeletal hands reached up out of the ground, pulling themselves up and out as still more undead followed suit, much to the roaring delight of the trolls. As those hands began to pull out the skeletons below, the four members of the Unseen Path looked at one another in growing horror, understanding now that the loa had been one of the dead, and had 'gifted' the chief priest with real necromantic powers to go along with the use of saronite.

End Flashback

"We retreated as fast as we could while remaining unseen, avoiding contact whenever we had the chance. But we still had to kill a few more of those undead constructs, and we did run into a group of the grey-skinned trolls. Putting them down wasn't pleasant, but even doing that didn't rouse any response from deeper in, which we hoped was a sign that the priest was still getting a handle on his new powers. But eventually, those powers are going to give the trolls a horde to play with. One that grows with every battlefield they find," Purde finished, shaking his head.

The quartet had taken turns to tell the tale, yet all four still seemed drained despite that. Even finishing the message to the Unseen Path seemed to take a while.

Leaning back, Tyrande ran a hand over the underside of one of her ears, trying hard not to let her dismay show, when, quixotically, a thought came to her that this might be one of the many things Harry had been sent here by Lady Death to deal with. *If so, I can only hope he is on his way already*, she thought grimly. *The constructs made of dead flesh and saronite are one thing, and were already a challenge. Truly necromantic powers like that which this shaman now possesses could be far deadlier.*

"Tell me more about this loa that was... drained... slain? I suppose it doesn't matter which. Do you know anything about him now that you've had time to think?" Shandris asked, leaning forward.

"No. It's certain Mueh'zala had some connection to death, something to do with the soul maybe? The Unseen Path have ancient records telling us that even back in the time of the Zandalari Empire, the trolls believed in some kind of underworld, someplace where their souls went to be judged and kept, and eventually, if they deserved it, returned to life, their memories swept clean. But the name isn't known to me," Purde answered, looking over at Narvae.

Narvae nodded. "We honestly only know of three names among the Loa, because we have run into their worshippers in the Broken Isles. Elortha no Shadra, Dambala, and Enraka no Kimbul. Those are all bestial wild gods. Intelligent enough, and representing something far beyond their physical appearances, but this one... this one was different. And at the start, I think it was far more powerful."

Fandral looked like he was grinding his teeth for a moment, gazing at Purde and Nealu in particular, trying hard not to look towards Narvae. Whatever issue lay between them was still there, still making working together difficult. "I am not so willing to move beyond whether that was a sending or a real god you watched be slain. Are loa the equivalent of gods like Cenarius? Did you witness a god being slain or some kind of sending?"

"I don't know. I think the troll God wasn't really slain. That burst of energy that smashed everything off its feet, that didn't seem planned by the troll shaman or priest, whatever he was. It was horribly weakened, regardless," Nealu shrugged.

"Given the sheer number of undead that troll shaman pulled out of the ground with a single pulse, I have to assume that it was indeed the real loa in question, not a sending," Purde added. "The Unseen Path came up with the term avatar for such, and we know that the spider loa, Shadra, prefers to use such, but the others apparently do show up in person in their full godlike presence given the wide range of powers and abilities they can exhibit or gift to their followers."

Fandral leaned back, frowning just a bit. "I... I know of no way to use Nature Magic to bind such a wide area. This land has already been corrupted to a certain extent. My druids and I might be able to stop the dead from rising in an area, or tie them to the ground if we cannot, but stopping it over this large an area, we lack the power to do that."

"How long do you think it will take the rest of the Unseen Path to respond to your message?" Shandris asked, looking over at where Davo was adding a few notes of his own to the rapidly growing letter. *One would not expect a Tauren to have such neat writing, but his writing is no larger than that of his fellows... and they've still filled that entire piece of parchment from top to bottom.*

"To respond? A mere few hours. To get us aid? That will depend on many things," Davo answered for the quartet, his bovine lips quirked. "Most importantly of all, if Harry is there. With his various magical skills, I would assume he could come up with

some- what would he call it, 'bloody slapdash lash-up' -that our brothers could use to get here as fast as possible. Say, a few weeks, maybe, if the harpies and Versera could be inveigled upon to lend us their aid."

"But they'd have to be traveling over relatively unknown terrain to our South. Given we know there are satyrs there, that could be dangerous too," Nealu warned.

"As would any forces we attempted to bring in. We could send a Druid of the Claw back," Shandris advised. "But it would take my Sentinels and the druids months to get us aid. The larger the force, the longer it will take them to arrive."

That was as true for kaldorei as it was for any army on Earth. The kaldorei still needed to eat, rest, and, in this case, take up space on ships. Ships that the kaldorei did not have all that many of, a number further cut down when considering only those seaworthy enough to reach Northrend. Particularly over the open ocean, rather than up through the Shoals of Jagged Teeth, which would put them still more months away from where they were needed across the same terrain the expedition had traversed.

"Worse, the troll might be in control of all that necromantic magic and the saronite, but for how much longer? How much longer before he becomes the tool of the creature below?" Fandral grumbled. "And what will happen then? We've already faced such large-scale corruption here. This could be far worse."

"...Not long, I don't think. Not more than a month and a half, maybe two, depending on his willpower and how much he actually interacts with the saronite. I noticed during the ritual that he was very careful not to touch any of it himself, instead controlling it through magical means. The energy he siphoned off from Mueh'zala came out of the saronite, but even then it didn't touch him," Narvae replied, also looking away from Staghelm.

Tyrande had not taken part in the conversation, watching thoughtfully instead. Now, she continued doing so as Davo put the message into the tube and then replaced the lid. The thing seemed to glow for a second, before there was a brief humming noise in the air. When he opened it again to show them all, the written message within was gone without a trace. He then closed it and set it aside. "Now we wait for a response."

"No, we don't," Tyrande and Shandris said as one, causing the two women to look at one another, and for Tyrande to twitch her ears downwards, the equivalent of a nod in a human, indicating her daughter could speak first. Shandris stood up, moving to the entrance into the tunnels that connected the hidden igloo with all the others, before pausing to look over at Fandral. "I was about to ask for just a random Druid of the Claw, but do you know one of their brethren who would be good specifically for long-range, fast flight?"

Fandral did, and went to the entryway himself, speaking to a runner there. "Send for Drathas." Turning to the others, he shrugged. "He not only prefers to use a falcon, but he also has a fast-moving fish form for when he reaches the coast. Drathas Swiftbeam has been timed at going nearly five times faster than most other hawks and falcons among our brethren here in past contests among the lodge, and he can travel

as many as fifty miles an hour, although Drathas will need to rest occasionally as he moves. Going over the ocean Drathas will take up his fish form, that of a marlin.”

At that, Davo and the others nodded, bar Shandris and Tyrande, neither of whom had ever taken up fishing. “The marlin is a big fish, and fast in the water too. Armed as well, with a spike coming out of its front that it can use to fend off other fish or hunt,” Davo explained.

Soon, Drathas arrived, by which point the three leaders had worked out a message for him to carry. He headed off that moment, winging as fast as he possibly could towards Kalimdor and the capital. However, before he went, Tyrande changed his orders slightly. “When you arrive in Ashenvale, communicate with the forest as best you may, and send a message to Cenarius. He can hopefully also lend us his aid for this challenge. And... might even have magical means to get such help here faster,” she added with a sigh, before turning her attention to her daughter. “Now, I think we need to do as much as we can on our own. Shandris?”

“We cannot allow this priest to spread his influence now. Could you infiltrate the territory and assassinate him?” Shandris asked bluntly.

“No,” Narvae answered equally bluntly. “We thought of it after we recovered from the mental fugue that last implosion of power created. But by then, the Trolls had begun to pull in still more of the undead, and there was some manner of construction going on as well. Not magically assisted, but a big fortress of some kind. Even then, without the living trolls there, it might be possible? But as it is, no.”

Davo remained silent, as did Tyrande, glancing at one another. If Harry was here, his cloak and various abilities would make such an operation possible. Until then, though, the decapitation plan was not going to happen.

For now, Shandris had further ideas, and quickly, the organization of three different groups was created. One would go north, the other to go south, and work their way around the area where this shaman and his undead horde held sway, leaving behind small scout forces. These would have orders to attack any small band of hunting trolls, either type, undead or constructs, they could attack and then pull away from. The Druids of the Talon, along with the expedition, would be set up in rotation in the sky above to watch and relay information between these hunting packs and back to the main camps.

“Ambush and decimate the constructs or undead as we can, but more importantly cut down on the number of living trolls this priest can call on,” Shandris explained, her tone firm even as her lips peeled back in a snarl at the term priest. To her, who had been raised by Tyrande in the temple to Elune, this troll was anything but a priest, yet it was the only term that seemed to work for his place in this odd troll society.

“We can put all of our normal tactics of maneuver and fade into play here, if not as well as we could in an actual forest. For every fifty that that monster raises, we need to be killing ten or twenty. They might be undead, yes, both types, but they can still be

killed a second time and kept down when we do it. Unless anyone thinks nature-magic-assisted fire won't be enough to keep a skeleton from rising again?"

Fandral shook his head firmly at that. "It will. I promise that."

"I would recommend that we create fallback points for the next day and a half before doing anything more offensively. We can also strike at the trolls in another way," Davo said, causing the others to look at him in confusion, and he smiled thinly. "I've not fought trolls before coming to this continent, but I know one thing about them. Their metabolisms are **insane**. They need to eat far more per day than even my folks do. And the farms we saw can't feed the numbers even just in that village, let alone any trolls that were away from the village at the time."

Narvae nodded. "Scour the countryside away from where the undead shaman holds sway. Most animals can't live in that area anyway without the trolls looking after them. Kill or drive away everything edible in that area. That will force the trolls to turn to cannibalism. They will do that far faster than we might think, as it is almost normal for them to do in times of famine, but it will still cut down on their numbers and more."

"Beyond that, we create a soft encirclement. We hit any unit of undead we can, wipe them out and retreat," Shandris supplied.

"Day or night," Tyrande said firmly. "It will be hard for our folk, but we need to keep up the pressure all around the encirclement at all times."

That drew some protests from Fandral, Purde, and even Shandris. Fighting at night was one thing, and by this point the expedition knew to expect trouble during the day and could fight under the glare of the sun well enough. But fighting all the time was going to wear on the kaldorei and their familiars alike.

But Tyrande was adamant. "A hundred and sixty-two thousand," she said, glancing over towards Fandral, who grimaced at that number, knowing what it meant, while the others, even Shandris, looked a little confused.

Not that Tyrande held it against her daughter. Shandris was the Sentinel General, and the Druids were very much not her concern. "That is the minimum number of druids needed to hold the line, with Ysera and her most powerful daughters, against the ancient one within the Emerald Dream. We cannot, cannot allow this shaman to become Yogg-Saron's avatar and create the equivalent in the physical world, or worse."

I see why you sent me here, oh goddess, but would it not have been possible to give us more information? She added mentally, her tone wry. *Still, I will work with what I have, and thank you for the chance to stop this cancer before it gets still stronger.*

That won nods from all around, and Tyrande gestured to the list of men and women that Shandris had been compiling, creating the various units they would be using going forward. "Now, let us see about organizing our efforts further. Narvae, as senior Seeker here, do you have a preference to—"

Tyrande cut off as the messenger tube glowed. Davo quickly opened it, pulled out the message and handed it to Narvae, who took it gingerly. He'd been told about the

messenger tubes, and thought them a brilliant idea, but Arcane Magic still bothered him a lot.

He quickly read the message and then explained. "The Unseen Path has responded, and will send us any information Milifiana can find in the archives. They've also sent word to Potter, and have sent our harpy allies out to find any other group of Seekers around the islands.

"They also remind us that the Unseen Path is not above finding allies close by," Purde mused. "There was that group of blue dragons that we communicated with. We might be able to convince them to take part in this campaign. But it would take both of us to get there in any kind of timeframe, let alone argue our case."

Tyrande didn't need to think too long about that. "Do so. We can do without your services here if it means bringing a group of blue dragons into the battle on our side. In fact, you should leave as soon as you can. Let me write up a message for the Unseen Path as well. With that in hand, they will be able to commandeer a ship if aid from Versera and the harpies proves impossible for some reason."

Narvae and Purde both stood up, bidding their fellows farewell. They would take some supplies from the expedition's stores, but beyond that, they had everything they needed. Purde did, though, go the extra mile and actually leave his latest map of the area around Vordrassil behind. It wasn't finished, and only covered the area to the south and west of the massive stump, but it was still so good that it had Tyrande, her daughter and Fandral whistling in admiration.

Organizing the various movements, assigning troops, leaders, and druids to every group they could. This didn't mean there was a druid with every hunting pack. Instead, the Druids of the Talon would occasionally need to come in and provide magical aid for many. There were simply far more Sentinels in the expedition than Druids. But every small hunting pack was assigned a leader, and Fandral assigned a force of forty Sentinels and fifteen Druids of the Claw to head south and provide a strong local force there.

Meanwhile, Nealu and Davo would lead another, similarly sized force to the north, with the mission of spreading out beyond the other side of Vordrassil, to see the true depth of the area this strange troll tribe controlled. They would move out with the small hunting packs moving northward for now, but would continue on as those broke off, creating a third strong point where supplies and wounded could be kept near the 'front' of the cordon.

Meanwhile, a force of three Sentinels and five Druids of the Claw would move further back, creating a series of fallback points further away from the area around Vordrassil. Those would be used as rallying points and gathering zones in the future if the forward bases were discovered. The kaldorei did not intend to stand and die regardless of what force was sent after them.

By the time they had finished organizing everything to their satisfaction, it was near morning, and Tyrande bid them all get a good day's rest. It would be the last one she allowed herself or any of them until this threat was dealt with. *You sent us here in*

time to deal with this threat, I hope, my goddess. This foulness will be excised from the world, no matter what.

OOOOOOO

With Versera doing most of the flying, it took them nearly eight days since setting off before they spotted the first of the Broken Isles, and then barely a day to find the island where Highmountain resided. From there, it was the work of a few hours of searching to find the valley where Trueshot Lodge resided. That last bit, when they started to fly over the islands, was actually the nicest part of the journey, because the group had found a few reasons why dragons preferred not to make long overseas flights.

First was boredom. There was no place to set down, and the dragon, or in this case Harry and Recca, had to keep on flying, sometimes against very nasty crosswinds, if they wanted to get to where you were going. It wasn't like on a ship, where the sails did all the work. While the exertion wasn't much to a dragon, keeping it up for days on end was annoying, frustrating, and bothersome.

Truly, it gave Harry even more respect for Cassandra and those of her flight who had made the trip from Ashenvale years before they had met Harry and the Unseen Path. The harpies had made that flight entirely on their own, and they had none of the strength or durability of dragonkind. Although they did seem to avoid one problem with flying over the ocean that Versera had not anticipated.

Not the boredom or exertion, of course. Exertion didn't bother Versera much, and she had Harry and the others along to liven things up with discussions. Harry had even developed his special Accio-based fishing spell to drag fish up out of the ocean, including a giant white shark at one point that Versera munched on happily while awing.

No, the problem that the dragoness ran into were the seagulls. The birds were not entirely unknown to the north or near the Maelstrom, but here to the south of the Maelstrom and the Broken Isles there were a lot more of them, feeding on shoals of fish the size of which dwarfed anything Harry, Recca or even Versera had seen in her travels from the new continent of Azeroth to the west.

Harry had never really interacted with seagulls before. Despite being British, he'd never actually gone to the seaside or anything like that, let alone out to sea. The closest he'd ever got was to spend a few hours in a seaport hunting this or that Dark Wizard, pureblood activist or 'New Blood Revolutionary' which in terms of their actions meant much the same thing at times.

Thus he had no idea how incredibly annoying their calls were when there were several hundred of them in one place, nor how **stupid** they were.

Almost the instant that the last sight of land disappeared behind them the seagulls began to congregate all around Versera. This in itself wasn't bad, but then they began to attempt to perch on her wings or tail, or even head. That stopped for a time after she released a tongue of flame to scare them away, but even so, the seagulls still kept on flying around her, squawking all the time to one another, an incessant background noise that drove even Recca to twitching.

"We never had to deal with these winged vermin when we made the crossing!" she shrieked, needing to yell to be heard over the din. More than once the irate harpy launched herself off of Versera screeching a warcry and lashing out with talon and wing to smash seagulls out of the sky.

As they had known prior to setting out, Harry and Recca mostly relied on Versera to do the flying. Not because they couldn't have flown against the winds they were dealing with. Because of speed. With time of the essence, Versera was pushing herself harder and faster than she ever had while heading south, and not even Harry with Tempina's help could have kept up. She was able to fly as far as seventy miles every turn of the glass.

Yet it wasn't just their incessant noise that made the seagulls so annoying. Harry could have dealt with that via another spell, a Mufflatio to keep the sound from driving them all batty. No, it was the fact that they left droppings behind.

The first time that happened to Versera, the first time she felt something liquid hit her wing, she hadn't actually believed it. The dragoness twisted her neck around and saw something small and whitish sloughing off of her wing as she kept on pumping the appendage, and had blinked in confusion. "Is that a feather?"

Harry and Recca hadn't seen it, locked in their own discussion about what would happen when they reached Trueshot Lodge, and some ideas about using the harpies to carry the warriors of the Unseen Path. The next time though, they had, and stared aghast as a seagull, released its foul droppings right between her horns.

Harry hastily cast a Scourgify spell, cleaning the refuse off of Versera's head, but the dragoness had felt both impact and the spell, and twisted her neck around once more, this time to stare at Harry, a pilot light visible in her maw as she fought her temper back. "What was that, and what spell did you just use on me?" She growled. While she was accepting of the necessity to act like a beast of burden, having someone else use a spell on her without warning like that was beyond the pale.

"I don't think you want to know," Harry said, one eyebrow twitching, as he fought to keep from blasting out curses in every direction to try and scare off the damn seagulls as beside her Recca covered her face with her wings. "You would probably be obliged to go on a one dragon crusade against these damn birds."

Versera's draconic eyes narrowed dangerously. "Tell me, Harry, now or else I..." She paused, and several other seagulls attempted to land on the back of her tail, well behind where Reca and Harry perched. She flicked her tail and irritation, then watched as several small bits of white dropped from the bird, smacking into her tail. "Are they, are they..."

Harry and Reca had turned when they felt the whip crack of her tail through her back, and now Harry winced as he turned back to Versera. "I'll get it with a Scourgify, don't worry!"

His words were drowned out a second later as Versera released a blast of flame up and around her in every direction, fricasseeing dozens of seagulls and sending the others into flight. Although, of course, seagulls did one thing quite naturally when startled. "Damn you, damn you, I am a dragon, I will not suffer this affront!" Versera roared as she felt still more fecal matter hitting her.

Normally, Versera was pretty laid-back as far as dragons went. She was more than willing to just go with the flow, and her pride as a dragon was far more controlled than it would have been even for most Greens, let alone Blues or Bronzes. However, some things were just beyond the pale.

With Harry and Reca hunching down on her back, Versera whirled this way and that, lashing out with fang, wing tip, and flame, searing as many of the seagulls around her as she possibly could. Unfortunately, while dragons were quite agile for their size, that was for their size. Against tiny opponents like the seagulls, they couldn't move quite fast enough most of the time to get more than four or five with every blast of flame, and her talons and wings were practically useless as offensive weapons, simply buffeting and smacking them away with the power of their passage. Not once did she feel the impact of actually hitting something small and squishy head on.

Of her companions, Recca quickly joined in the slaughters, screeching and racing around the far larger dragon. She was able to keep up with the sudden movements of the smaller flyers and downed several of them with her claws. She refrained from using her mouth though. While Recca was no stranger to eating other birds, even on the wing, seagulls were the rats of the avian world, and tasted similarly to such rodents. There had been a time when she wouldn't have turned her nose up at such a meal, but those days were decades behind her.

Harry only reluctantly joined in the wholesale slaughter. Fast-moving cutting spells, Bombardas and others lanced out, keeping the seagulls further away, and, perhaps, doing just as much as the raging dragon to convince the seagulls to leave the area.

How long Versera had lost herself in her rage, none of the trio knew, but eventually she calmed down, flipping herself upright again in midair, finding that she had lost quite a bit

of altitude in her fury and that the ocean was barely a few hundred yards below. Versera pumped hard, regaining lost height, steam still billowing out from her mouth as she tried to force down her fury, but luckily, the seagulls in this area of the ocean had finally gotten into their pin-sized brains to leave her alone.

As her flight straightened out, Versera felt Harry using his Scourgify spell. Moving from one wing to another and then down to her another spell hit her tail, removing the remnant of the assault on her dignity. "Thank you. And, I say this with feeling, we will never speak of this again. EVER. If either of you share what happened here with anyone, I will be forced to burn you to a crisp... or crush you in my jaws, in your case, Harry."

"They nearly hit us a few times," Harry shot back. "I really doubt either of us will ever want to share this event either."

"In that case, get out the compass and sextant. I've lost any idea of where we are," Versera admitted.

This proved a necessity because somehow, the trio had been turned entirely due south. Soon, though, they were back on their way in what Versera hoped was the right direction. Going by the memory of their former course and now, she felt she could at least set them aright.

In this the Topographer (which was Versera's Rank in the Cartographers) was only proven correct days later, but unfortunately, while the seagulls in that area of the ocean had learned its lesson, not an hour later, more seagulls began to congregate around her. To keep Versera from losing her cool entirely once more, Harry ordered Tempina to keep a sphere of cutting force air around them at all times.

This time, when he called her, Tempina came somewhat reluctantly. She had wanted to investigate Vortex Pinnacle and had found that none of the others who made it their home felt the same foulness as she did. Which was very odd and hinted at the fact that whatever was causing that, it was aimed directly at Tempina. That was highly unusual, but removed as he was from it, Harry only had advice to give, not anything more substantial.

Regardless, Tempest was able to create a vortex of air around Versera that was so wide and large that it kept the seagulls away, buffeting them away every time they tried to get close. Although the birds continued to release their foul refuse, even that was battered aside.

That had been days ago, and now, Versera angled downward into the valley, as Harry and Reca, who had been flying alongside her since they'd reached the islands, followed. From below the horns of Trueshot Lodge announced their presence, while

harpies began to fly up from their end of the valley, with Cassandra in the lead. The harpies formed up around Versera, all of them dipping their wings in salute to the dragon, before several of them started to call out to Recca, and the twins made a beeline for Harry.

Cassandra, though, called them all to task with a harsh call, so harsh Harry wondered for a moment if her songbird spell had for some reason failed. "Enough, all of you! I've shared what our allies told us of the news from the north. This is not the time for such distractions. We have important things to concentrate on now."

With the harpies cowed, Versera landed without further incident to find Master Seeker Marduc and Master Topographer Milifiana waiting for them. Both of them looked grim-faced, but relief was also visible there as they watched the trio land, particularly when they looked at Harry. As good as it would be to have a dragon once they arrived, getting to Northrend, and then deep into its interior to Vordrassil, was another matter entirely.

Marduc's words addressed this in no uncertain terms. "Harry, good. We need a magical solution here, and we're hoping our resident magic man will come through for us."

"Normally upon your return from your first ranging, regardless of where you went or why, you and Recca would be put through a series of question and answer sessions on where you've been, what you found and so forth for our records. Then you'd be asked if you wanted to become full Seekers, rather than Oathkeepers. However, at least there is precedence for putting off that and the follow-on ceremonies," the librarian said, her tone a little more annoyed and frustrated than Marduc's.

"We've had further messages from Nealu and Davo, and it isn't going well," Marduc said, shaking his head. "This... this has even put off honoring Vurg's passing."

Harry grimaced at that, while Marduc seemed to almost deflate for a moment as Milifiana closed her eyes in sadness. As kaldorei who had been part of the Unseen Path almost since its inception, the pair of senior leaders had long since gotten used to the fact that tauren did not have anywhere near the lifespan their people did with access to the Well of Eternity's energies through Nordrassil. Even those like the two of them who spent most of their lives away from Nordrassil only had to visit once every few hundred years, and they could quite easily live forever.

Furbolgs had less than five decades of maturity before they started to fade in a few years. Tauren had more, upwards of a hundred. Pathfinder Vurg Farstride had reached a hundred and thirty. He wasn't the first friend the pair had to watch fade away in old age. Yet it never became any easier.

Harry bowed his head, half in respect for the dead, half-acknowledgement that now wasn't the time for more. "I suppose the Tauren druids have used their magics to preserve his body? Or have you already done the burial rights?"

"We have not," Shial Farhoof, the only tauren in the Unseen Path even close to Vurg's age, growled as he came out of Trueshot Lodge behind the two acting leaders, scowling and shaking his head. "Such would take too long to set aright, and we have been incredibly busy since that message came through. Fletching arrows, carving spears, sending out our new harpy compatriots with messages for every Seeker or Cartographer busy elsewhere on the islands."

"My flock has indeed been quite busy, Harry," Cassandra said, her tone once more normal as she smiled at him, holding back a smirk that was wholly inappropriate for the conversation at hand as she noticed her youngest daughters had landed behind him, and were now shifting forward almost into touching range. "And I imagine we will be quite busy in the future. I have decided that all of us will travel with you to help against this undead scourge and the foolish trolls that have caused it."

"Come. It must've been a difficult journey for you, Lady Versera. If you'd like, we can have a meal prepared for you quickly, and for you too, Harry, Recca. Harry though, you'll have to eat your meal with us. We need to get to planning how exactly we're going to get to Northrend and, and perhaps even the longer side of the track, from its shores to where we are really needed," Marduc said, scowling.

"Your message was high in intensity and low in detail, so I'm fine with hearing more about what's been going on up there as I eat," Harry agreed, and the group of welcomers quickly broke up. Recca practically needing to bar the way from the two twins as they made to follow Harry into Trueshot Lodge. Now very much was not the time for their attempts at flirtation, and the pair weren't willing to understand that after having been separated from Harry for so long.

Harry was somewhat surprised that Versera didn't offer to join them as he took his meal with the two temporary leaders of the Unseen Path, but after thinking about it, he realized that Versera really wasn't much of a leader. She could suggest things, and had occasionally while on their journey, but she was much happier in the background or just doing what she thought best on her own.

As soon as they were ensconced in the library at a cleared table - no books, scrolls or maps would ever be allowed near food so long as Milifiana was Senior Topographer- the two leaders pulled out the various messages they'd had from the north.

Since that first back-and-forth, Tyrande and the others had been in direct communication with the Trueshot Lodge at least once a day, and it was painting a very grim picture. The knowledge of this strange power up that the troll priest who was using

saronite had gotten was horrific in Harry's estimation, and both he and Milifiana wanted to examine the leftover rooms from that ritual very closely indeed.

That, the forced theft of power from a wild god, wasn't something that even the Unseen Path had ever run into. Loa were worshiped by trolls, respected. Power was requested or asked of them in return for worship, specific quests, or deeds. They were not treated like recalcitrant batteries or prey animals like this.

Harry wondered aloud if maybe that was a sign of the saronite already impacting the troll priest's mind, and neither of the others could say it wasn't. "Whatever happens, though, whatever his reasoning, or his long-term goals, this undead thing needs to be quashed," he said, feeling his hands twitching a little as he laid them on the table.

The moment that had come up, something within him, the kernel of Death's touch within him, had started to rear its head, black and ugly at the back of his mind. This, the necromantic powers that this priest suddenly began to display, above and beyond his use of saronite to animate the corpses of the dead was something that was in the purview of Death, and she would not allow such trespass. And as her avatar, Harry would be the one that needed to deal with it.

"I know it isn't normally a question you'd be willing to answer, but are there any books and suchlike here left by previous Highborne who were part of your order that deal with necromancy-using enemies?" Harry asked. "I can't remember that ever being a part of the War of the Ancients or any of the conflicts since."

Marduc blinked at that, then turned, looking at Milifiana, not knowing the answer himself but Milifiana shook her head quickly. "No there isn't. Trust me, I spent several hours looking for such, wondering if Huhn Highmountain had been given any records from the Troll Wars that mentioned anything like that..." she shivered. "Or indeed anything about the trolls using saronite like that."

"While I was able to find some information about a few loa that dealt with the dead in such records, raising corpses like this and animating them was never something they did. Rather, they took power from killing, from soul sacrifice, adding and enhancing a troll's already available magical or physical abilities. It made some of their champions during the Troll Wars horrifically hard to deal with.

Milifiana seemed to steal herself, then went on. "There was nothing like this in our records. The killing, or attempted assassination of a loa, the draining of its power. The use of saronite to create abominations. All of that is new. New and horrible."

Harry nodded, strangely grateful for that fact, as he wasn't certain Milifiana would have been flexible enough to allow him to see some of the books that as a mere Oathkeeper he would not be able to access. To become a Seeker, Harry would need to be put under

several more binding Oaths than he already was, and he was fine with that. After all, to combat Old God taint and Fel magic, the Unseen Path had collected a whole lot of information about both of those things. And knowing about such, particularly in this world, carried with its own temptation.

“In that case, let’s deal with what we know, and the logistics of getting there the fastest with the mostest.”

Harry’s quote from some politician or other back in his old world went over the heads of his two listeners, but they got the gist of it and nodded firmly.

All told, the members of the Unseen Path at this point in time could call upon four hundred and twenty-seven members. While a bit over half of them were kaldorei, there were now ten furbolgs among their number, six more having joined since Harry had. On top of that, Since Vurg had okayed some more clandestine recruitment among his own folk, eighty tauren of various ages had joined in that same time frame, with several of them being shamans or druids, bringing their numbers up to just a bit under that of the kaldorei within the Order.

Many of these newcomers were elderly, looking to do something with the last few decades of their lives beyond serving their clans or having lost wives and no family to speak of. Yet they were still hail and hearty, and willing to become Oathkeepers like Harry and Recca. There was only one tauren so old that he really had no business joining this campaign, but old Shial insisted on doing so. “My friend Vurg did not pass in battle as he should have, I will do that for both of us. I will not shame my ancestors by missing this chance!” the old curmudgeon had growled when Marduc had bluntly told him that he should probably stay behind.

Other Tauren newcomers were younger warriors, looking for purpose, and they too would serve. Indeed, a few of the latest were well known to Harry, including two he knew very well from his time with the Tauren: Tessa Ravenwing and Cul Stonefellow. They had arrived barely a day after he had left on his vision quest to the south, and he hoped to meet up with them again in the next few days.

Shali Thunderroll and Wotor Everspring, his apprentices, had also done sterling work. The emphasis on the bomb pouches and the various simpler, rune enhanced weapons was an excellent one, as work like that was far easier than on larger expanded pouches, permanently enhanced weapons or armor, something he admitted now.

“Trust me, I ran into issues with the armor I had hoped to give the harpies. I made a **lot** of mistakes with that entire experiment. However, I can do a lot for us in terms of transportation.”

He looked over at Cassandra, bowing his head respectfully towards the harpy matriarch. "Lady Cassandra, I assume that your entire flight is willing to help not just with the fighting but with transportation?"

"Hehe, my, always calling me a lady, no matter how often I protest that I am not one," Cassandra chortled, one hand rising genteel lead to hide her mouth for a moment as she did. "But yes, everyone has agreed. We all know that this is the kind of threat that the Unseen Path was founded to deal with, and we will stand with them. After everything you all have done for us since the moment you were willing to talk to us, we can do no less."

"Which gives us lift power. I don't think we could convince Versera to help in that area. Her pride as a dragon might not allow it, although you can ask," Harry hummed, frowning as he watched Milifiana bring out a map from the records nearby now that he was done with his meal. She laid it out on the table, and, although it wasn't the most detailed, it denoted the distance it would take someone from the Broken Isles to get to Northrend.

She marked it off for him, and Harry winced. It wasn't exact, but... "At least a thousand nautical miles?"

"Possibly," Milifiana cautioned. "We don't have any specific maps that cover the distance between the northernmost isles and the tip of Northrend. But even so, from there into the depths it would be at least that same distance to get to Vordrassil. That, at least, we have better knowledge about given the map created for that area during the cleansing of Vordrassil."

"Well... I mean, it's possible. With Tempina helping, we made 70 nautical miles an hour on Versera. But that's on Versera." He smirked suddenly. "I could shrink everyone else, use my sticking charm to stick us all to Versera's back." *And I might need to figure out a way to make us go even faster... hmm...*

"If you could convince the Tauren to go along with such things for days on end, then perhaps. And convince Versera to act even more a beast of burden than you have mentioned her acting occasionally for you and Recca. Which isn't a conversation I'll be looking forward to," Marduc's ears twitch in a kaldorei expression of good humor.

"I am just saying, that would be by far the easiest way of doing things. Keep it simple stupid was a phrase in my old world among the nonmagicals, and for very good reason... even if my fellow magic users never seemed to understand it," Harry admitted with a snicker.

"Yes, but we might not be able to convince the tauren to go along with things. Not to mention our furbolg brethren also have trouble with the idea of being small. Or heights

in general. We'll need to knock them out for this entire trip. Luckily we've gathered enough herbs to make sleeping draughts for them all."

Versera was quickly questioned on this point, and her immediate hissed response made it sound almost like she was still in her normal body rather than her kaldorei form. "By the Titans, damn you all! Why is it that every time I turn around I am being requested to become a beast of burden!? **NO**. Not only no, but absolutely not. I got to know Harry and Recca before letting them use my back due to the demands of the weather. This is not that."

"No, it's more important," Harry said, trying to keep his tone from becoming sharp for a moment, knowing that doing so would only get Versera's back up further. "What is going on at Vordrassil's stump is precisely the kind of thing the Unseen Path was made to deal with, Versera. This could let us get there as fast as the air-elemental assisted dragon can fly. Surely that is more important than your pride."

"..." Versera growled under her breath, her hand clenching so far she crushed the metal fork she had been using to eat with, to the point the top of the fork deformed upward and outward. "I hate that you're right, Potter. **FINE**. I'll do it. But after we are done with this, and I've handed in my maps, I am done with the Unseen Path for a few centuries. You all have rubbed my scales the wrong way with this."

She then frowned, setting aside her anger and wounded pride for a moment, sending up a silent prayer. *At least there's no chance of any other dragons seeming me reduced to a, a ship of the sky for other sentients. UGH. I would die of embarrassment.* "However, two points: One, I would assume that this is something Ohn'ahra should know about. Both her and Cenarius. And second, could we ask for further help from the Highmountain Clan?"

"You first are reluctant to carry so many folk, then you ask us to reach out to more?" Harry quipped, only to quail as Versera glared at him so heatedly he backed away. *Damn, she could give Minerva a run for her money with that glare.*

"I would rather I suffer this indignity and bring enough force to truly make a difference than we arrive with too little aid."

"I... possibly. I doubt we could get all four tribes to agree, The Bloodtotem Tribe almost certainly won't want to be involved in any fight that doesn't directly impact Highmountain, yet the other three tribes could be more willing. We can ask the current High Chieftain for aid, at least. We lack the ability to contact Ohn'ahra, though. Remember too, we were told about the issue with the winds over the Maelstrom. I doubt she could give us much help beyond what she has already given us in the form of her feathers."

“The Spear of the Ancients might be able to help us as much as air elementals could to speed us along still faster,” Milifiana murmured. “We’d have to assign one of the tauren druids to wield it, though.”

“True, but it’s still a good idea. As is the idea of sending a message to Cenarius. If we hold off on leaving, the kaldorei could send us at least a full ship’s worth of warriors,” Marduc stated enthusiastically. “And if Cenarius sends us aid in the form of his dryads or Keepers, their weight will be far greater than their numbers would suggest.

Within minutes, Harry had sent off a Patronus image with a message to the demigod of Ashenvale. It would take a few hours for even such as it to travel so far, but hopefully, Cenarius would be able to organize and have a force of fighters on their way to the Broken Isles as quickly as the winds and tide could carry them.

With the majority of the planning done, Harry joined his young apprentices in preparing rune-enhanced weapons. Meanwhile, Cassandra rejoined her flock, beginning to do some drills near their nests against a few of the older kaldorei. They knew the range of troll bows and were going to help the harpies work out various tactics beyond simply dropping bombs from on high.

Further, the reports about the undead had given the Unseen Path a lot of information about how they fought, as well as the monstrosities which would probably be a main target for the dropped rocks of the harpies. This helped both the harpies and the members of the Unseen Path, knowing what kind of weaknesses could be targets and which couldn’t be.

For instance, while targeting the legs of a construct could slow it down to a crawl, literally, aiming at the saronite on the construct was a very bad idea as it would simply splash everywhere, including on the warrior who had struck the blow. Some of the reports from Northrend said that Sentinels had nearly died to the sudden backslash of saronite in their faces, and only nearby druids with their regeneration magic had kept them from dying. That, and luckily the corrupting elements of saronite was slower in such cases once it had been cleaned off the individual in question.

Meanwhile, as Marduc, Milifiana and the other senior leaders tried to convince the furbolgs and Tauren of the necessity of their plans to get to Northrend via dragon-back, Harry was so busy he couldn’t check in with Tessa or Cul. Instead, they came to him. Word had gotten around Quetzal’s demise, and they, and Harry’s other acquaintances from within the Unseen Path, wished to give Harry their condolences for his passing.

The first to do so were the twins, Aleria and Alari had both liked Quetzal and grieved with Harry. Despite their desires to try and flirt with him, they put that aside, having gotten over their initial reaction to his return... mainly thanks to Recca threatening to thrash them. Still, for the next few days they stayed with Harry as often as they could

while also training with the other harpies, and Harry found their presence soothing for the first time in several years.

As for his older friends, Tessa Ravenwing hadn't changed much in the decades since their time together with the Skyhorn tribe, despite being now middle-aged for her folk. She was still a very good-looking Tauren woman, and still svelte rather than curvy, with a sprinter's body, her long back hair standing out sharply on her red fur that had only slightly lightened in the intervening decades. She had also sprouted up like a weed, and was now as tall as most Tauren men, making her at least two feet taller than most other Tauren women, even if she lacked the curves of most such, to her annoyance.

Tessa was still somewhat ambitious, wanting to become the greatest elemental-based shaman the Tauren had ever seen, and had decided to seek out the Unseen Path in her quest to gaining more experience and training she could use with her twelve elementals. She seemed somewhat frustrated at Harry's contract with Tempina when she learned of it. Although happy for his personal growth, an elemental princess was a good deal more powerful than any of her own.

Still, Tessa's words of regret were sincere, and she spent several hours just sharing stories about her interactions with Quetzal while Harry was busy with his rune-based work. It was honestly quite nice of her, and Harry enjoyed it. The stories harkened back to a more peaceful time, and knowing what they were going to find in the north, that was nice.

In contrast, Cul had changed greatly since Harry had seen him during his time with the Rivermane Tribe. He had come back from his Rites of the Winds, the Rite of the Earthmother that specifically took the Tauren away from his or her tribe, scarred badly. The scars crossed his face in a series of four, wide, and painful looking. Wherever he had run into, and Cul had not been open about it, he had been unable to heal himself until the scars had become permanent, a very bad sign indeed considering he had followed a mainly druidic education.

Gone was his easy-going good humor and confidence. Instead, there was a grim note to him that seemed to fit the climate of the Unseen Path at present, and a hatred for Murlocs that was truly implacable. Cul didn't stay for long around Harry or Tessa, seeming to have, while joining the Unseen Path with her, be very uncertain around Tessa for some reason. He also didn't seem able to take much joy in anything much, and the stories of simpler times had him retreating quickly.

Soon after Cul had left, the conversation turned to more serious things as Tessa was obviously curious about not only Harry's travels, but this campaign the Unseen Path was going on. She was also very nervous about it. As arrogant as she was, and despite how easily she had passed her Rites of the Earthmother, Tessa was under no illusions

as to how much larger this conflict was going to be in comparison to anything she had known previously.

Harry had explained about his Patronus and how long Milifiana felt it could take Cenarius and the kaldorei of Ashenvale to respond and send them help, Tessa broached her worries on this score. “Harry... how, how bad is this going to be? I, I’ve never been involved in a battle this large and...”

“Being worried is normal, Tessa,” Harry soothed. “Indeed, if you weren’t, I’d call you an idiot. And I won’t lie. From what we are hearing, it’s going to get very nasty. The expedition under Tyrande has taken the right tactic from the start, but even then, they’re running into problems. Our arrival will hopefully change the odds, let us take the fight into the contaminated zone, but—” he shrugged. “Nothing in war is certain.”

Tessa nodded at that slowly, then clenched her hands for a moment, before leaning in. “In that case, I think you, me and every other shaman here need to start thinking about group tactics like the harpies are. Not just with ourselves, but with our elementals. If we need to bring the pain, then that is the way to do it, Harry, not your rune-weapons or other projects.”

Harry paused, then slowly nodded. “Well... you’ve got a point. I’ve not yet worked Tempina into my combat style, and Tricksy never been a major part of it either. What would you suggest?”

Of course, during this time, events in the north continued and every day, more messages came in. The Message tube had been left with Shandris by Nealu and Davo when they had been sent northward, as Shandris was in charge of going over reports, organizing the various supply nodes, and so forth, while also leading her own small hunting pack. And as Tessa had said, these messages painted a very ugly picture of what was going on around Vordrassil...

OOOOOOO

At first, the orders Tyrande and the rest of her command group had given out worked quite well. Small groups, normally no more than five of mixed Sentinels and Druids took up positions at what looked like the outer edge of where the undid constructs roamed, ambushing any group they could. In this fashion, they created a solid half-cordon around the area, over the next day and a half, while Fandral and Nealu led the two larger companies north and south around the area dominated by the undead and the shadow of Vordrassil’s stump.

Reports came in that first night and day created and carried by Druids of the Claw of successful ambushes and of the two larger groups, each of them sixty strong, making their way around the area unmolested. Meanwhile, several Druids of the Claw and a group of four Sentinels were ordered further back eastward, where they started to set up the series of small bases further away from the action as fallback points just in case.

This work was slow, but after the first such small base was set up, the work sped up a bit, with most of the time taken by traveling to and away from the points chosen for such on the map Purde Pinefrost had left with them. At each base, the work was to set up four interconnected igloos hidden under the snow, then drop some measure of supplies within. They also made a point of scaring off any game in the area, or taking it for themselves. That wasn't pleasant work for the druids involved, but it was necessary to further weaken the trolls.

When work was done on the base, word was sent out by the Druids of the Claw to the small hunter packs nearest that particular fallback point. This gave them a second point to fall back to if need be.

However, while the enemy, the troll shaman and his living followers, were slow to react, they did begin to react on the third day after Davo and the other members of the Unseen Path had sent out their original message for reinforcements.

While Shandris had been involved more on the organizational side of things at first, Tyrande had joined the frontlines the night after that last day of rest they had allowed themselves. At first, Tyrande worked with a group of three Sentinels and a Druid of the Claw, in an ambush against several of the undead forces, wiping out four small groups of patrolling furbolg-based constructs. The next day, she did the same, and then on the day after that, she gathered three hunting packs together, a larger force in an ambush against a group of returning troll hunters.

There were nine of the trolls, all of them pulling sleds behind them lined with furs and packages of meat. Judging from the furs, it looked as if the trolls had ambushed a group of shovel tusks, big, bruising animals that seemed to be a smaller brother of the woolly mammoths that Narvae had mentioned being found further north. Even a troll could make a few meals out of any one such, and there was enough meat there to feed a troll for weeks.

Tyrande and two of the Sentinels slowly drifted up behind them, closing the trap. When the trolls paused, staring around them warily, Tyrande wondered what had given the ambush away, before mentally shrugging. *Remember the green-skinned trolls at least always have their minds still. They aren't dumb beasts, whatever their proclivities might hint at.*

Even as the troll hunters raised weapons and began to form a defensive circle, A Sentinel fired an arrow straight into one of the troll's guts, causing him to bend over and howl in pain, reaching to the arrow and pulling it out with a roar of anger.

"Well, that is enough of a signal," Tyrande murmured, bursting up out of the snow behind the last troll in the group even as he turned towards her, spear raised. Too slowly. Her moon glaive slammed into the back of the troll's neck, cutting through skin flesh and bone alike, cutting his head off cleanly, one of the few real ways to put a troll down quickly and permanently.

She hadn't been alone, and the rest of the hunt ambush force closed in from all sides, only a few of them bothering with arrows, which thumped into shoulders or, in one case, the head of a troll, stabbing deeply into his mouth right between its tusks and out the

other side. Even that wasn't enough to kill a troll due to his regeneration but pulling all out the arrow in question costed that troll dearly, as the Druid of the Claw smashed his head into so much paste the next second with a massive bear paw as the beast roared, sending two other trolls flying.

The rest of the fight went about as quickly, and the attackers faded into the snow within moments. Elune was high in the sky by then, but the groups of hunting packs split apart, each heading away in a different direction.

The next day, however, went very differently than those days of plenty. Once more, Tyrande led a larger force out to ambush a group of undead built around one of the the larger behemoths made of more than one body interconnected with bits of saronite. They had been watched for some time, and bringing together so many hunting packs had taken still further time, but that was fine. This group was simply moving around the corrupted area, part of the patrols there.

The ambush went off without a hitch, right up until the abomination was dying. Over the past few days, some enterprising troll had figured out how to issue a final command to the thing. Even as Tyrande's moon glaive, lighting up with the power of Elune stabbed into one of the other constructs and two Druids of the Claw bore the abomination to earth, it let loose a loud ululation. "Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!!!!!!!"

This sound rapidly left the realm kaldorei could hear, heading into the decibel registers that only dogs and other such constructs could hear, but it was more than enough to spook everyone there.

"Finish them quickly!" Tyrande ordered with a bellow. "I do not want to find out if the trolls have created some kind of quick reaction force!"

The group was able to fade away after finishing off the undead, burning their bodies, leaving another mass of smoking corpses behind them and fading into the snowy wasteland of Northrend, shifting back westward. However, before they were out of sight, more undead constructs and grey-skinned trolls appeared. Dozens of them, mostly built around furbolg bodies, slow and ponderous, but with a lot of momentum and strength within.

As Tyrande watched from a hiding place well away from the ambush point, the group stopped at the site of the fires, then slowly retreated eastward again.

That night, when she returned to the main forward camp, she found that one of the other ambushes hadn't had nearly as much success. Like her own, they had attacked a large group of undead built around an abomination, but they hadn't been able to finish them all off, nor had they tried to break contact before another group of undead constructs had arrived and engaged them.

"We didn't lose anyone, but it was a near run thing. If we didn't have our bonded animals to bolster our strength at the last moment, we would've lost half our troop," the leader of the group reported.

"Have our northern and southern groups moved into position yet?" Tyrande asked, looking over at Shandris.

"The southern group has," she answered instantly. "The northern group pitched in to help with a series of ambushes today and haven't quite gotten around the northern edge of the contaminated zone just yet. They did however run into a troll hunting party returning with two dead polar bears. I'll send out Druids of the Claw to tell both groups to be wary of this reaction force."

The next night, even though they had been ready for it, the speed with which another force of undead arrived to help a group they had ambushed took Tyrande and her small company by surprise. One moment, they were closing around a group of troll hunters, the next, a band of a hundred undead constructs, all of them furbolgs were charging in from the east where they had apparently been hiding under the snow.

The trolls acted as bait! Tyrande thought, before shouting, "Turn, turn and engage!" Tyrande shouted, pulling herself out from fighting two trolls and sprinting towards the incoming group of undead constructs. Many of the faster-moving, grey-skinned trolls avoided her, moving to attack her fellows, but both Druids of the Claw with her today had heard her shout, and pulled themselves away from helping to deal with the last of the trolls, transforming into their bear forms to slam bodily into several of the trolls.

Despite the fact those trolls had been given large, heaving looking wooden shields to use with their spears, they were still sent flying by the two bear-shaped druids. More than a few of them went down in a heap, underneath the Druid of Claw, who crushed their skulls quickly, ending their corrupted life with a ferocious roar.

The other furbolg constructs soon closed with the rest of the ambush force. The large, bearlike beings crashed into them even as Tyrande sliced down one of her own, then a second, third, a fourth., With no discernible difference between that construct any of the other constructs, this one still let loose a wail, something the others hadn't. This signal was followed by two more, nearby, so loud that it caused Tyrande to reel away for a moment.

Seeing that, Tyrande knew that they couldn't stay and fight these constructs. They needed to break off lest more arrive. *There could be another force just waiting to advance.*

However, doing so was much harder than trying to simply shout it into being. Her kaldorei quickly began to be separated, pulled away by the tumult of undead, unaware at the moment of the fact their backs were still clear of enemies, unable to realize it as they were being pressed in hard.

Closing to finish off the constructs in close combat was a mistake, drat it! We need to figure out a means to make our arrows deadlier at range!

Seeing one of her people go down, Tyrande scowled angrily, then watched in shock as some spell or other hit the body of the dead kaldorei from the east. Turning in that direction, she saw another force of undead arriving. This time, they were a group of forty or so skeleton warriors, their forms looking like kaldorei skeletons and furbolgs, but not mixed. Rather, the skeletons had been pulled whole from the ground.

Among them was a single living troll holding up what looked like a gleaming skull. He wasn't holding it like he was directing anything from it, rather, he was holding it out at arms length, almost as if he was afraid the skull would turn and bite him, but from that skull a miasma of dark blue and white energy erupted, flashing through the battle to connect to the body of the dead kaldorei. It twitched, spasmed, then slowly the corpse pushed itself to its feet, grasping his moon glaive in hand.

There was no sign of saronite, no sign this was a construct, this was a purely undead warrior, a zombie. There was no life in his eyes, no expression on his face, even as lips peeled back from teeth, and the construct leaped towards one of its former fellows. The zombie's weapon slammed down into the hastily raised moon glaive in his companion's hand, battering it aside. The furbolg that Sentinel had been fighting took the chance to gut him, and again, Tyrande, twisting away from her own fight to watch for just a split second, saw the same bolt of necrotic energy from the skull in the trolls' hands.

Thankfully, as pressed as she was, Tyrande didn't have to deal with that problem on her own. From the sky, a Druid of the Talon dove down. Then, right above the troll, the druid shifted back into his normal body, his hands clasping quickly into a spell. Starsurge, a mid-range attack spell that created several darting bolts of Nature Magic flashed out into the head and shoulders of the troll, shattering skull, brain and shoulder.

He landed, then found himself faced with several skeleton warriors. Armed with spears, they twisted and stabbed, but the young druid, so young he had yet to develop the beard most druids liked to, dodged between them, another spell, Quickness, washing out from him and to every other kaldorei in sight. "For Ashenvale!" he shrieked, his voice more resembling his hawk-forms shriek than a normal kaldorei's voice as daggers slashed out into the nearest skeleton, doing damage, but not all that much.

"For Elune and Ashenvale!" Tyrande responded, cutting down another construct, then diving into a mass of the skeleton warriors as they tried to bring their spears to bear. She danced in between them, and then her moon glaive sang, slicing and shattering bone with every strike.

A second later, she gained the druid enough time to transform back into his hawk form. He was in the air a second later, but was almost smacked out of the air by a pike in the hands of one of the skeleton warriors as still more arrived.

A third Sentinel went down, a furbolg construct bearing her to earth, biting at the back of her skull, denting armor, tearing it off as she screamed and tried to roll, tried to push away to no avail.

Hearing those screams cut off abruptly, Tyrande howled in fury, then called upon her goddess. *Elune, grace me with your light!* An instant later, moonlight erupted from her eyes, white and searing, as her moon glaive began to glow pure moon white, and she laid into the undead all around her with even greater ferocity. "Retreat! Retreat and break contact!"

Every cut from her moon glaives now felled an undead, regardless of how small a cut she landed. Skeleton or construct, it didn't matter. The spell giving them unnatural life cut out, while the saronite within them dissipated into mist even if she didn't actually

touch that portion of saronite, the magic of Yogg-Saron's blood and the stolen loa's power both overcome by the blessings of Elune.

The constructs fell apart, decaying rapidly, leaving behind a foul-smelling pile of debris that could hardly be called even a corpse, no matter how old. The skeletons turned to ash on the wind, as if the power within, now burned out, consumed them instantly. And with each cut, a feeling of a soul released came to Tyrande, a whisper of thanks on the wind she could only sense due to her connection to her goddess and her faith.

Either by some instinct buried deep within the constructs, or by command, Tyrande calling on her goddess acted like a lure. Suddenly, the vast majority of the undead all around the snowy battlefield were not interested in the rest of her party, up to and including one of the Druids of the Claw who had just lost a foot and had a spear stabbed through its mouth. The same Druid of the Talon landed, transformed and had time to cast a series of Regrowth and Barkskin spells on the group without interference.

With the Nature Magic spells running through their veins, the rest of her band were able to slowly hack their way free, while Tyrande killed and killed, and killed. She danced in place, each movement faster, stronger, becoming an avatar of her goddess's will, a white sheen glowing brighter than the sun in the sky.

Even without her goddesses blessing, Tyrande was one of the greatest combatants the kaldorei could call upon. She had devoted herself to the moon glaives almost as much as Elune for literal ages, and with the time she had put in with her daughter before this expedition began, she had regained her edge in a way that even traveling with Harry hadn't allowed her to. With Elune's blessing, her abilities were heightened, and with each stroke of her sword, with an undead construct fell, and none of their weapons so much as touched her.

Even Tyrande could well have been overcome, if there had been more undead in the area. But she was able to fight her way free, and then race away, following after her companions westward out of sight through the swirling snow before more could arrive.

Later, during a day attack on a small group of patrolling undead, another group ran into similar trouble, but did a better job of breaking contact, pulling out of the fight with the current group of undead monstrosities they had ambushed before reinforcements could hit them from the east. Or so it first seemed.

That night, however, no sooner had Shandris and Tyrande begun to take reports on the battles that had occurred over the last twenty-four hours that one of the guards outside, hidden along the outskirts of the equally hidden base camp, ducked his head into the interconnected mass of hidden tunnels. "To arms! Undead coming in... it's a large force. Numbers unknown, but I'm seeing a lot of different types out there."

Hastily, Tyrande, and Shandris bolted up and out of the command igloo, moving up and onto the surface. There, they mounted the berm made of snow and ice that had been constructed as a defensive wall around the camp. From a distance, it should have made the camp look like any other snow-covered hill, but as Tyrande looked out into the east, it was clear that the undead were indeed making right for them. *Or maybe just continuing on along a trail left in the snow for a bit?*

The mother and daughter pair were joined quickly by a dozen Sentinels armed with bows. One Druid of the Claw began a spell while a Druid of the Claw gestured to the ground in front of them. Moments later, the bows of the Sentinels glowed with the white and dark orange color of the Astral Kindling spell.

Say what you will about the man, but Fandral is an Arch Druid for a reason, Tyrande reflect as she gazed at the bow of a nearby Sentinel. Normally, the Astral Kindling spell was a Nature Magic spell a druid used on themselves to give the Starsurge and Stellar Beam spells greater range and damage. It had been Fandral who discovered it could be cast on weapons and give them some measure of an added impact. Against the undead, regardless of type, that was essentially the only way arrows could be at all useful.

At the same time, the Druid of the Talon used a Nature Magic ice manipulation spell to create spikes of ice, shooting out of the wall. Another two druids were outside the fort for a second, creating a sudden trench, so deep into the snow the actual ground beneath could be seen here, despite the snow being several yards deep here. There weren't any trees nearby, no hills or mountains to block the snow from piling up, hence why it had made sense to make their base underneath the snow here.

To the east a horde of undead closed in. at least ten Abominations, and dozens of skeleton warriors, both furbolg and kaldorei alike, complete undead rather than constructs. The skeletons were all armed with simple spears or pikes, and moved with an almost unnatural amount of structure, keeping together in groups of fifteen. The constructs were less organized, and few were armed, charging forward at their best individual speed.

This group of attackers were accompanied by both green and grey-skinned trolls too. The grey skinned trolls had even been given better weapons, large bucklers and spears in some cases, and throwing axes in others. The spear-wielders seemed to join with the skeleton warriors, acting, in Shandris's words, "Almost like lesser officers. Pack leaders or scout commanders. I don't like that, or that other group. Send word around the walls. We're going to deal with troll throwing axes... and our enemy is more organized than I could wish as well."

As that word passed, Tyrande kept her eyes on the clump of green-skinned trolls. They waited at the back of the host, watching, not moving to join the battle, simply hooting and hollering. Some of them began battering on drums made of their own skins. Others had some kind of rigging set up over their shoulders containing a war banner on their backs. Beneath the banner was a small, flat shelf, with two of the strange skulls with their embedded spells on them apiece.

"Signal every Druid of the Claw in the camp to get into the air," Tyrande pointed, and Shandris hissed. "We will need those trolls silenced, less we want to fight our own newly slain."

Shandris nodded, and hopped off of the berm for a moment to take that word personally to the reserve druids, while above her, a voice from one of her commanders shouted "Loose!" A moment later, arrows flew down into the mass of undead. Empowered by

Nature Magic, those arrows hit like tiny catapult-hurled rocks, smashing and shattering bone and construct's flesh alike.

The sentinels on the wall fired four more times, the kaldorei faster and more accurate than any troll archer could have been, if they even used such. Yet it still took three arrows to put down an undead for real, and no amount of arrows was going to put down an abomination. One was slowed as two Sentinels targeted it to the exclusion of all else, but the others kept on charging forward, unnaturally quick over the ground until they reached the ditch. There, the shield-armed grey-skinned trolls ducked behind their shields, while the horde milled about for a few seconds bar the abominations and constructs on the front line, who began to smash at the snow, filling in the ditches.

This didn't do much, but when one abomination finally collapsed, its disgusting offal sloughed out and down into the ditch, filling in a small part of it enough for several constructs to get across, although none could get up the berm alive. Meanwhile, the trolls with throwing axes did their best to duel with the kaldorei on the wall, and the horde spread out.

Elsewhere, they didn't find any ditches. Indeed, the defensive berm wasn't nearly as tall or well-made on the sides. This was deliberate, as Shandris had supposed that the undead would attack like a wave, spreading around and trying to encompass any basecamp. But if they found openings before reaching that point, they would try to pour into those openings. Hence why the camp's walls there were scattered, with numerous openings. Openings that could be used both ways.

Shandris and her lieutenant, Nym'ruin Ashfang, met them, one on the left flank, one on the right, with fifteen Sentinels each, all of them mounted on their bonded animals. At her order, The two groups of cavalry slammed into the front of the horde of undead. Moon glaives sliced and diced, while panthers, tigers and leopards bit and tore up the undead, grimacing angrily at the taste.

Luckily, by this point, everyone knew that so long as the animals didn't actually swallow any of the tainted flesh of the constructs or the undead, they wouldn't be infected by the saronite and its influence. That didn't mean it was any less of a chore to taste, though, and Shandris and the other Sentinels involved in the charge knew that they would need to do something nice for their bonded companions to make up for this. Right now, they were all too busy getting it stuck in with the undead to think about it. Shandris in particular found herself faced with an abomination, a semi-giant spider-like construct, while Nym'ruin found more spear-wielding skeleton warriors nearly making his charge into his final act.

The undead obviously didn't react like any of the living opponents the Sentinels had ever fought. They simply kept on coming, kept on trying to tear at them or get up to the scattered walls behind them, causing the dual charges to lose their momentum. Individually, the tigers and so forth were still quite deadly, but they were rapidly being surrounded and more of the undead were now reaching the walls on the sides

Even as more Sentinels began to line the wall of the base, and Druids of the Claw joined the battle in various ways, magic flowing out over all of the defenders, enhancing

and aiding their physical abilities, the undead just kept coming. Even as bears, giant moose, or shovel tusks hammered into the undead, they just kept coming.

From where she was locked in mortal combat, Shandris couldn't see the big picture of the battle far too busy chopping an abomination down to size, but that picture was a grim one to Tyrande's eyes. Where there had been hundreds, now there were thousands coming out of the east. Most of them were simple undead soldiers, the constructs and the ancient risen dead skeletons, yet there were thousands of them, and with the small forces out everywhere trying to do what they could around the edge of the contaminated area, the base camp here didn't have enough forces to try and fend them off.

Tyrande instantly understood this, and ordered the last reserve Druids of the Claw into the battle to help free up Shandris' forces, while also shouting orders to the rest of the defenders. Soon, teams of three Sentinels were pulling back out of the fight. They headed down into the igloos underneath the snow, gathering up all of the supplies and other items from around the base camp before they headed out through a series of tunnels dug out up of the snow heading further westward.

This was why they had created so many smaller base camps further away, after all. By this point there were seven such spread out back there. Fighting to the last for this one base was foolish in the extreme.

Meanwhile, a few Druids of the Talon concentrated on calling down Stellar Flare and Innervation on the various undead where they fell. Several times during the fight, the trolls of the back had launched out those strange spells, resurrecting the already destroyed undead. With the speed of the Druids of the Talon, this only succeeded a few times, and the defenders had yet to take any losses themselves.

Better, so busy were they with that they didn't see the true peril to themselves arrive from the sky.

Druids of the Talon drove down on the three trolls using the magical skulls at the back of the horde, attacking with ferocious energy and spell craft alike from the sky before literally crashing into their targets with their bodies.

However, by this point, so many more undead had begun to arrive from the east that those trolls and the ten other green-skinned trolls with them weren't so much at the back of a horde, as in a small island surrounded by an ocean of undead. The five Druids of the Talon barely had time to start crushing the strange necromantic skulls when the horde all around them closed like an all-encompassing fist.

The Druids would never been able to get away, if not for their ability to transform and take to the sky. One was still almost smacked out of the air, but almost didn't count in this case, and Tyrande breathed a sigh of relief as she saw that, then turned her attention back to the front of the battle.

Shandris, thanks to the Druids of the Claw, had pulled her forces back out of where they had gotten stuck on her side of the battle, although Nym'ruin was still having trouble doing the same. Now, in ones and twos, the Sentinels were able to break away, pulling

into the base camp. When Shandris leaped her own mound up and over the mound, the last of the holes on that side of the fore were filled up with by the Druids who had turned from making certain the undead stayed down, raising a berm there to match the rest of the defensive wall.

Moments later, Shandris and her force wheeled and smashed into the forces at the other flank. At the same time, ditches appeared on the left flank they'd just left, dumping large numbers of undead into it, while the original ditch facing straight west filled in, letting the undead there get at the walls there for the first time in the battle.

Having finished extracting Nym'ruin's forces with the loss of only one Sentinel, Shandris watched as the walls rose up. Holding up the small necklace she kept around her neck, Shandris cast the Nature Magic spell to replace the image with the transformed totem of her bonded companion, then hopped up onto the wall. She watched as the undead horde closed in now practically from all sides and hoped that the tunnels leading out hadn't been discovered and were deep enough that they could take all this weight moving all up and around on top of the pack in snow above them.

"It's a mercy that these undead don't have any long-range capability. The throwing hatchets are very dangerous, to be sure, but there aren't enough of them to surpass our own fire," Shandris mused, before slicing down at the first hand of a construct to reach up from below to try and pull its owner up onto the parapet.

The undead paid for closing with the makeshift fort, but when they did, they simply began to either claw at the snow of the berm and climb it as easily as a kaldorei could a tree, or they simply tried to dig through it. Soon, the mass of the remaining abominations, six of them, began to start just pushing through in places.

Tyrande stayed calm. Once more, her moon glaives lit up with the light of her goddess, and a lot of the horde's attention shifted to her, where Tyrande stood on the wall. "Pull back slowly into the tunnels or up into the air. Druids of the Claw first, then Sentinels."

The same instinctual response to the light of Elune reached out across the whole horde, and segments broke off from where they had been trying to fight through the berms and ditches to try and get at her instead. This allowed many of her fellows time and space to retreat. Half went through the tunnels, which would carry them eastward for several leagues before coming up out onto the surface. Others burst through these weak points of the surrounding host.

Shandris made her way through the press of bodies along the top of the rapidly disintegrating wall to her mother, and going back-to-back the two of them fought for a time, as more of their folk retreated and more of the undead reached them.

Six Sentinels and five druids died in the defense of the fort, but the vast majority of them escaped, until Tyrande and Shandris were all that remained on the ground. The lights of various druid spells washed over them from the Druids of the Talon still in the air above them close enough to empower such, and they had killed nearly every living troll with the horde, but now it was time to go.

Forging their way to the back of the fortress, with difficulty, both women pulled off their totems, tossing them forward. The chains unraveled, and the totems flashed revealing their mounts. Both animals whirled and slashed at the surrounding undead, crushing bone, shattering desiccated bodies, giving their companions time to pull themselves up into the saddle.

“Away!” Tyrande shouted, the light of her goddess filling not only her, but Shy-Rotam as Shandris bulldozed through some of the undead, getting clear of the press before it could become too thick. Tyrande was forced to leap up and over that same mass, landing next to her daughter in the opening behind them, even as the undead turned, spears thrusting, trying to catch them one last time.

But they couldn’t. If there was one thing none of these undead were, it was fast. Now freed, the pair raced westward as fast as their mounts could carry them, far faster than the undead could keep up.

Of course, if it was just in a straight-ahead contest, the undead would simply keep on coming, following the trails of the two giant cats. However, the moment Shandris shouted that they were probably out of sight, Tyrande and Shandris pulled up, while Shandris quickly bandaged one of the cuts on her forearms, which had been bleeding, letting out small droplets in the snow behind them. “I have to admit that I lost track of where we were coming out of that tumult. Where should we go now, Mother?”

“You’re not the only one, daughter of mine, but thankfully, we still have eyes in the sky,” Tyrande said dryly, pointing upwards. Above, a hawk circled them, having kept pace with them from the moment they were able to break contact with the undead, while other such birds continued to watch the undead host. Now, it screeched down at them, then twisted, heading south.

Wearily, Tyrande and Shandris followed, slumping forward a bit on the backs of their companions.

It was well past dawn by the time they reached the emergency camp, but they were pleased to see that the rest of their force was already there. Many were at work enlarging the igloos, building still more of them, and creating a defensive wall around the area similar to the one they had at the previous base, but with more spikes, more outer walls. Ditches and other defenses were also planned, but Shandris and Tyrande knew that not getting pinned down was the best defense against the undead. They just could bring too much force to bear.

For a time, Tyrande and Shandris helped the druids seeing to specific wounded, then went over the plans for the defense of this new camp, while more reports from the Druids of the Talon came in from what had happened to the various hunting parties and the other two larger groups that had split off came in. None of them had faced a direct assault like the forward outpost had, but they were still taking losses. Losses, that thankfully in less than half of the cases, were quickly raised as undead, yet still they were losses they could ill afford.

“We can’t keep this up,” Shandris said, shaking her head at another verbal report from a Druid of the Talon. “Regardless of how many we kill, there will still be far more. We

might have cost them thousands, but they are costing us more than a dozen, and they can pay that exchange rate. We can't. Not without reinforcement. We severely underestimated how many corpses they could call upon in the contaminated zone. This war of slow attrition isn't going our way."

"Agreed," Tyrande said, shaking her head. She looked at the assembled Druids of the Talon, thirty-two of them, a significant portion of the force that they had brought to Northrend, turned into messengers as much as combatants. "Thank you for your service gentlemen, and lady," she said, actually allowing her ears to twitch up in good humor for a moment as she looked at one of the druids in particular. She was a younger woman, who stood among the men with her arms crossed, her eyes as tired as theirs, yet still filled with defiance.

While making a point to open the ranks of the Sentinels to further menfolk had gone well enough almost from the get go once Shandris had been convinced it was a good idea, getting women into the ranks of the druids was a slower process. There were dozens of them now, but there was still a very small minority in comparison to the menfolk. Although for some reason, which Tyrande put down to Fandral frankly, there were more women among the Druids of the Talon than there were among the Druids of the Claw. Also oddly, very few of the womenfolk joined their male companions in the Emerald Dream to fight Yogg-Saron there.

"Communicate new orders to the hunting teams. We can't keep targeting groups of undead, but we have done a good enough job of scouring most of the animals from near where the undead were before. We can pull back further and keep doing that. The trolls will starve, and will turn on one another. That might be the only way we can hurt them from now on."

The Druids in front of her all bowed their heads in compliance, then trooped out of the igloo, leaving the daughter and mother mother pair alone again. For a moment, propriety faded, and Shandris leaned sideways, placing her head on Tyrande's shoulder, showing the tiredness she would never would or could show in front of anyone else as general of the Sentinels. She smiled faintly as she felt her mother's arm going around her shoulders pulling her tighter into her. *I'm quite glad I took off my armor and Mother did the same, or this would be remarkably uncomfortable.*

Despite the pleasantness of the moment, however, Shandris kept her mind on current events. "We're losing this, aren't we?"

"...We might be. Hopefully the rest of the cordon or at least, Nealu and Fandral realized how badly things could go faster than we did and pulled back before they could be pinned down." Tyrande said, trying to keep self-loathing out of her voice. Eleven dead in one battle was horrific casualties at any time. Given what they started with, as much as Tyrande hated to think of such in simple military terms, removed any kind of reserve to call on. "We can only hope that Fandral and Purde have luck in approaching that family of blue dragons. Otherwise... We might have to try something more drastic before we can hope to see reinforcements arrive."

OOOOOOO

The forces sent out under Fandral and the two members of the Unseen Path had to take several days to get into position, shifting further around the contamination zone and only occasionally stepping in to help the hunting packs so that the trolls had no way to know their real numbers, or, more accurately, their real weaknesses. Thus, they were barely in position by the time things started to go badly against Tyrande and the main bulk of the expedition's forces.

That didn't mean that they were having any better luck of it. To the north, Nealu and Davo led several small guerrilla actions against groups of trolls leaving on hunting expeditions as they continued westward to try and create an encirclement there. Meanwhile to the south, that encirclement was directly challenged within barely a few hours of Fandral and his force of forty Sentinels, ten Druids of the Claw, and four Druids of the Talon finding a position to make their forwardmost camp.

"It's a major force," Y'gos Shieldwalker, one of the Druids of the Talon reported, crossing his arms over his chest, his ears twitching forward belligerently, his face twisted into a snarl of fury showing the more expressive manner of young kaldorei. "I counted at least two hundred or more skeleton warriors, newly risen, four hundred or so of the flesh constructs, and four abominations. Along with at least seventy odd, grey-skinned trolls, and twelve-green skinned ones."

"That is indeed a large force. You say it's simply marching out towards us?" Fandral mused, stroking his long beard, something he had begun to develop thousands of years after becoming archdruid. Although if anyone ever made the mistake of commenting that he, like many other druids, did so because of Malfurion Stormrage's example, he probably would've torn the individual asunder. Fandral hated Stormrage with a passion, although he very carefully kept it hidden most of the time.

Not that that mattered at present. What did, was shutting down whatever these trolls were up to here. While Fandral had his own beliefs about who should be properly leading his people, a threat to all kaldorei like this needed to be excised as swiftly as possible. *Although I am severely wondering now if we have made the classic tactical blunder of underestimating our enemies in splitting our forces like this.* "There is no change in their movement to indicate that they'll be simply patrolling the perimeter of the infected area? Like the other, smaller units elsewhere?"

"None. By the time I spotted them, they were already almost at the perimeter. By the time I came to report to you, they were pushing well past it. And they're not coming straight here. They're at least going to pass six or seven leagues away from this position to the east."

Fandral paused, trying to think of the map that Purde had shared with the command staff several times since joining the expedition. He seemed to recall that there was a natural forest down that way, several days journey away, but a forest that had initially been far larger, grown to and around where he had planted the branch of Nordrassil to try and grow a new world tree.

That changed when his folk had been forced to return to this shore for the first time several centuries ago to deal with the growing corruption and the creation of the

Emerald Nightmare. In attempting what he had, Fandral Staghelm had failed, and despite himself, Fandral had been forced to understand how badly he had miscalculated then, and now as well.

"I wonder if they are to set up some kind of hunting camp for the trolls? Or are there other threats to the south of us that we don't know about? Regardless, it doesn't matter. We need to move into position to ambush them," Fandral decided.

"We will be very, very badly outnumbered if we do so," one of his advisors, the Druid of the Claw, Benrannul Stormshadow. "Range and ambush can only do so much against the undead, especially if they come at us in such numbers."

"Our Sentinel brethren will keep their distance. With the Astral Kindling spell, they will do enough damage from there. Only Druids of the Claw will close to claw range. With that, and the Druids of the Talon in reserve, casting spells on us all to enhance our abilities at the start before giving us some eyes in the sky, we should be able to do significant damage before needing to break off. Now, find us a good place to ambush them along their route," Fandral ordered.

Two turns of the candle later, the whole group was hidden among the snowdrifts, the ice, and even the occasionally pine tree, Fandral watched as the host of undead and the living trolls moved between his current position and that of several of his companions on the other side of a narrow defile. Somewhat like the crack in the ice the expedition had passed through, only wider, less deep and with less dangerous edges.

Pushing up out of the snow slowly Fandral transformed into his war form. He had changed that form since coming here to Northrend and now, rather than his regular bear, he stood as an even larger polar bear. The extra height, the blubber, and the difference in fur made it a far better choice than his normal bear form in this weather.

With a roar, he charged down the slope, the signal for the assault to begin. From both sides, his fellow druids charged down each of them in their own combat forms.

Every Sentinel on either side of the defile rolled out of cover and loosed arrows down into the horde of undead, as they started to respond. Shields came up, and what looked almost like a spear wall was almost in place before Fandral and the other Druids of the Claw closed.

The undead skeletons which had formed the basis of the spear front collapsed under the weight of the charge by the bears and other war forms as the Sentinel's magically enhanced arrows smashed skeleton warriors into pieces or beheaded constructs. One Druid of the Claw had even transformed into a woolly mammoth and bugled his cry as he stomped into the host, tossing undead monsters this way and that, smashing into one of the four abominations, goring it, and sending chunks of decayed flesh and saronite flying in every direction.

For a moment, the attempt at organizing themselves backfired against the undead constructs and undead warriors alike. They simply couldn't do it, simply had to fight with the Druids of the Claw running rampage through them. But soon, numbers began to tell.

The grey-skinned trolls with their mishmash of weaponry began to attack back, hatchets, and spears hitting hard.

Because they hadn't been able to get through the entire host to the group of green-skinned trolls one of them, wearing backpack that would've been familiar to Shandris or Tyrande, began to howl, pointing his staff of office towards the attackers, towards the two largest threats in the battle, the woolly mammoth, and Fandral in his polar bear form.

Arrows continued to slice down from on high, and now those arrows were concentrating on places where the Druids weren't, mowing through the living trolls. Several of them went down with arrows throughout their body, but they were already beginning to pull the arrows out. Only those arrows that struck their heads or took out the entirety of a troll's chest could put those trolls down

Now, spells from the Druids of the Talon began to waft over the group, enhancing their abilities. Bark Skin multiplied by their various forms made them tougher to kill, faster and stronger while an Enervate caused the Sentinels to fire even faster.

Fandral roared and snarled, smashing undead into pieces as the skeleton warriors tried to encircle him, stabbing him with their spears but unable to get through his magically reinforced fur thanks to the Reinforced Fur spell. His own strikes smashed weapons to pieces, along with arms, necks, even stomachs occasionally.

The skeleton warriors made no effort to back away, instead simply stabbing at him always from behind or to the sides. A few even tried to get underneath, stabbing at his chest when he reared up.

Hearing a howl of anguish from nearby, Fandral twisted his head slightly to see one of the trolls had just taken an arrow through the eye, deep into his brain box. That, even troll regeneration couldn't do anything with, and the troll staggered still alive, but unable to command his hands to move up to pull the arrow out.

Much to his cost.

The next second, Fandral's hand slammed into his chest, shattering bone and sending the troll flying through the air to crash into the one with the strange backpack on him.

Another pair of spells flew, empowering the arrows impact once more as they lanced down in their dozens on the trolls, with several others falling, but now they too were charging forward, making the shots less certain.

They seemed to work even better than the undead as a group, and one of the Druids of the Claw, Cedryn Blueglave, howled as his back foot was stabbed through. Another troll jumped on his back, a hatchet in one hand, grabbing the back of the bear's head, he slashed at his throat with the hatchet, opening it up, killing the druid in question before his regeneration spell could do its work.

Fandral roared, stood, and bit down, his bare jaws clamping onto the throat of one of the attacking trolls, tearing it out. He then smashed the head off of a construct's shoulders with a single blow from his powerful paws.

Another druid, one in the form of a tiger, fell with a gasp, a spear stabbing deeply into his side from one of the undead warriors. Before any of his companions could get to them, he resembled more of a pincushion than anything else. Meanwhile, Benrannul was bleeding from several places along his flank, despite the iron skin. Three of the abominations were dead, the other, still in the fight, grabbing onto the head of the woolly mammoth, trying to pull it down, trying to push it to the side, make its legs buckle.

A Druid of the Talon spell slammed into the construct from above, lighting it up with Stellar Surge, and Benrannul broke away, bugling a war cry through its long nose.

Two moose crashed into and through another spear phalanx formation, but one of them howled in pain as it got caught right behind the knee by another spear. Several of the trolls rushed forward, hatchets rising and falling, but the Druid of the Claw pushed to his feet, bloodied, but the bark skin kept him in the fight, and he reared, his horns crashing into two of the trolls, puncturing their chests, legs and sides and lifting them into the air. They were still alive, screaming as he tossed and thrashed, hurling them away, while his hoof caught another troll in the side of the head, shattering skull and brain alike.

The Sentinels had downed hundreds of the undead, and at least seven more of the trolls had been turned into pincushions, arrows through chests, hearts, throat, head, doing enough damage that even the regeneration ability wouldn't save them even as the Stellar Kindling spell once more wore out. However, Fandral knew that the battle was turning against them, and his heart turned to stone as he saw some of the recently dead trolls start to rise, pushing themselves to their feet with undead alacrity.

He wasn't able to see how or where that spell was coming from at first through the fight, but then saw the troll who had the weird backpack pointing his staff at Cedryn's corpse. Within seconds, that too was rising, turned into undead himself. His eyes were stark white and gleaming, with no soul within.

With a howl of fury, Fandral's paws crashed down into several skeleton warriors, and he transformed, ducking under a spear thrust that would've taken him in the side just as the Barkskin spell on him and the others faded. It was instantly replaced, but the Druids of the Talon didn't quite get their timing right, leaving the Druids of the Claw embroiled in the fight slightly weakened.

Worse though, the druid the Sentinels were still protecting the Druids of the Claw as best they could, firing into the undead away from them, ignoring a phalanx of skeleton warriors, mostly simple skeletons and grey-skinned trolls, for up the hill towards the left flank.

At that, Fandral signaled the retreat with a series of three notes, two short, one long, on his bugle even as he continued to smash undead into pieces.

At his orders, the sentinels switched, clearing out segments of the horde to allow the druids to retreat in pairs.

Up on the slope though, the spear-wielding undead company had just begun to reach the Sentinels that they had been charging up toward. Every Sentinel there bar a few dedicated archers slung their weapons away, pulling out moon glaives and charging

down to meet them. Darting under the thrusting spears of the undead, which had kept formation going up the steep incline of snow in a way that no kaldorei force could have, they closed before the skeletons could react.

Moon glaives slammed home, hacking, slashing, shattering bone, as Fandral called the retreat one more time before letting it drop, and resuming his massive polar bear form. Soon, the Sentinels began to pull back in dribs and drabs, followed by the Druids of the Claw able to break contact more quickly than their fellows. A group of them then followed, built around the two moose and the woolly mammoth who remained, the smaller animals pulling back, creating a wedge, until they were able to break through the undead, racing down the strange gorge-like crevice in the snow to the south.

Fandral himself along with a few others broke upwards back up the way they'd come down, their progress shielded by the Sentinels, several of whom moved down to meet them, hacking and slashing at the undead. Here though, the battle had already badly turned up the snow and ice, and finally, the undead coordination began to fade, skeletons and constructs alike losing their footing, getting in one another's way.

Two more trolls died to arrows, but the Druids of the Talon no longer empowered them, instead casting spells at the bodies of the dead, turning them into funeral pyres. Only one more Sentinel died guarding the backs of the retreating druids before they were able to get up onto the crest of the crevice then flee, heading southwest.

Like with Tyrande and Shandris' retreat from the undead, the moment they were clear of being actually spotted by any of the living trolls or undead with them, the group quickly began to start covering their tracks, splitting off into smaller groups to make it easier to do so.

One of the Druids of the Talon dove down from the sky above, landing near to where Fandral was busily covering his own tracks, shifting into the body of an elk, with a move he paused, looking over the Druid of the Talon. "Well?" He barks, angry and bitter from the cost of that battle on his forces. Four Sentinels had died during the battle along with three of his own druids, and he hated it.

"The enemy undead and formation are pulling back. Only a few of the trolls are pushing ahead on their own. There was some kind of argument there, but with the shaman slain and the skulls with him destroyed, they seemingly can't command the undead. The undead were already turning back, while the grey skinned trolls had to be ordered to follow the green-skinned ones. If I had to say why, I think there was some desperation there in their tone, but that's just supposition."

"Troll metabolism," Fandral murmured, smirking just a little. "Only four days of our folk killing and driving away any of the small game in the area has had an impact. They must be making for that forest out there. Order some of the Sentinels, the nearest group, to deal with them. Our own party is to fall back to our base camp. We've done enough for this night's work. We'll rest throughout the day, then start splitting up into scouting parties when night falls again. I'm putting my foot down on any more battles like that one. If that force had been any larger or within the corrupted zone and able to

be reinforced, we would've lost far more of our brethren than we did, and we already lost too many."

"I'll send one of my brethren to High Priestess Whisperwind and General Feathermoon to tell them what happened," his fellow druid agreed, leaping into the air and transforming as he did.

For a moment, Fandral stood there, as several of the nearby Sentinels continued on their way eastward back towards the base camp now that they couldn't be followed. None were there to see as his snarl of fury, angry and irritated by the amount of veneration the Druid of the Talon had put into his voice at the names of Tyrande and Shandris.

And this whole expedition won't have done my position any favors at all, blast it all! Still, it must be done, and there will be other centuries, other moments where I can make it clear that it is the druids and our ways which should be ascendent in our society over the temple and I should be the rightful ruler of our folk. I will never give up my ambition, damn you, Tyrande. No matter how often I misstep, my destiny is to rule, unlike you, who set it aside!

OOOOOOO

That same night Nealu had emplaced his own forces to the north, while Davo took an even smaller group, nine Sentinels and a single Druid of the Claw to the western edge of the so-called cordon. They knew that force was probably too small to do any hunting among the undead, but they could still scare off game, make certain that there was nothing edible in a wide swath east of Vordrassil, and perhaps ambush any living troll hunters.

In this, they were successful, but not two days after the assault on the base camp, Davo and his band were faced with another force similar to the one that Fandral had smashed to the south. However, this one was larger. **Far** larger.

"I lost count at nearly more than a few thousand all told, and I don't think that's more than a fourth of the forces down there," the young Sentinel named Faelitha Frostpetal said, trying hard not to shake her head or otherwise disturb the small hideaway that she and Davo were currently sharing. "Worse, I honestly didn't think there were that many abominations within the infected area."

There were at least forty of the large abominations within this host, which had to represent a tremendous amount of undead forces, or at least, Davo hoped so. While he knew a major furbolg city had fallen to the corruption of Yogg-Saron and been cleansed during the battle to burn Vordrassil several centuries back, he also knew furbolg cities didn't have half the population kaldorei felt comfortable with. Still, we have no idea how much power that damn priest has.

A few of the abominations were new looking, built around the giants from the ritual perhaps, their corpses turning to a new purpose soon after their souls have been devoured and then merged with others. They strode at the head of the column the abominations had formed. A few of them had been assigned to carry a wide palanquin,

in which at least six or seven of the lesser shamans sat. On each of their backs they had massive, decorated banners, with seven skulls on each, which radiated energy into the air around them.

That, and the number of large spears and hatchets down there among the undead camp worried and frightened Davo. All of it smacked of well organization, of planning, logistics. And that in turn made the as yet unnamed priest and his followers even more dangerous. Regardless of what this host is being sent out to do.

“Nor did I, and I’m not exactly happy to see it now,” Davo answered Faelitha’s words aloud. “We can’t fight a force that large. Even hit-and-run attacks would see us being enveloped quickly. They’d only need to break off some four hundred and they could pin both ourselves and Nealu’s troops in place with relative ease if they could close hard enough, then simply envelop us with the rest”

“But we can’t let them go either. That would be against her orders, and who knows where they’re going,” Faelitha protested.

“We won’t. Spread out and continue to scare the game away from the area here and further south and north of us, along with one Druid of the Talon. The rest are coming with me. We’ll trail that group and see where they’re going. I rather doubt they’re up to any good.”

End Chapter

Needless to say, this isn’t where I had hoped to cut the chapter off. The Harry segment grew, as did the Unseen Path segment, the battle at the basecamp and.... Well, you get the idea. So this work will continue to be part of the Patron Poll Rotation for two more chapters rather than one (That doesn’t mean it will show up in August, don’t ask LOL). Sorry, folks, but I really didn’t want this to balloon as big as the DC/Ranma cross did last month, so I can have a chance at finishing all three fics and at least getting them off to the editors before the 22nd. Which is said, because I was somewhat on the role with the warfare aspect, even if I think my take on Harry’s runic experiments are becoming a bit too ‘Author Powers Activate’ in scope.

Anyway, like I said on the first, I won’t have time from the 22nd to the 27th this month to do much of anything. If I can, I’ll use that time to look over FILFy, start the shift from Fanfic over to AO3, and other minor things like that.