

Hey all!

This was actually a good deal of fun. I like the character interactions here, and how much of Tyrande, reluctant leader, willing adventurer, I show here. The brief interactions with her and her daughter were neat. But I am still adamant about shutting this fic down after this arc, guys. I need to spend a few days doing long term magical school building and planning before going on. This version of Harry isn't quite like any of the others I've created in many ways, and I need to make certain he remains unique and growing in terms of power and abilities.

With that out of the way, enjoy!

Chapter 14: Traveling Disasters

As the sun rose over the horizon behind her, Tyrande hummed faintly as she leaned against the Swift Breeze's railing near the prow of the graceful vessel. While as a priestess of Elune, Tyrande would always prefer the night and the light of Elune as she gently highlighted the world around her, Tyrande knew that life on the ocean was one that simply could not be set to a diurnal cycle even for kaldorei. Further, there was a certain beauty to the world in moments like this. *The colors of the ocean and the sky become more vibrant during the dawn, and I quite like how each dawn is different.*

Nor was remaining awake for long periods of time any kind of hardship for Tyrande. Kaldorei as a whole could go for long periods of time without sleep, as Nealu had shown conclusively on this journey. *No matter how much people like Fandral Staghelm might complain or Shandris oversleep, it's clear that Nealu at least can get by with only a few hours of sleep every night.*

Letting a wry twist come to her lips, Tyrande reached over and began to scratch Shy-Rotam behind the ears, causing the giant frostsaber to rumble in pleasure. *And let us not get started on our lone Tauren companion. Davo Bluefeather is a remarkable fighter who, despite a few of our folk looking down on him for his race, has pitched in every way he could while aboard and proven himself the equal of any of our druids or Sentinels in raw combat ability.*

Tyrande's tongue flicked out to lick her lips for a moment. *And he's proven to be the best fisherman aboard. That monstrous bluefin tuna he netted yesterday was delicious.*

It occurred to Tyrande then that she was having fun on this journey. Despite the seriousness of their journey, emphasized by the visions Elune had sent to her of troll-based trouble in both the north and the south, and the fact Fandral, who would never be someone she willingly enjoyed being around, was along with the expedition, Tyrande was enjoying this expedition, even more so on this leg of the journey than the previous one. There was not only something soothing about moving over the waters like this, but aboard ship, Tyrande wasn't in charge of anything

but herself and her training, something that had made the past two weeks almost like a mini sabbatical to Tyrande.

Someday. My people are slowly realizing that not all decisions need to be vetted by either the temple or the druidic lodges, and some of them are even realizing they do not need me to make the tough decisions, or indeed any decision at all. That they can rule themselves without my voice being the last and loudest heard, Tyrande thought, her lips twitching into a smile as she thought of how much progress her folk had made in terms of their overarching governmental organization since she had returned from her sabbatical.

Soon I will be able to step down as overall leader of my people and simply be the high priestess of the temple. At that time, I will only need to concern myself with the running of the temple and the spiritual needs of my people. Not politics and not our society as a whole. That is my true role, the role I was called to by Elune's light before the War of the Ancients. It has only been necessity and Malfurion's absence that has forced me into that role.

That was an old pain though, one made of regret, understanding and a feeling of neglect in equal measure, and Tyrande pushed it aside with the ease of thousands of years of practice. Her thoughts instead went back to the journey she was currently partaking in and why she was enjoying it so much.

The presence of her daughter was the biggest reason, although it amused Tyrande that Shandris was not dealing with needing to be awake during the day as easily as she was. Despite the fact Shandris had yet to ever wake up before noon since coming aboard, though, Tyrande knew that Shandris too was enjoying being aboard a ship, if only for the novelty. The younger kaldorei had only been aboard a river boat a few times in her life back during the imperial era before her adoption by Tyrande, and a ship only once before this centuries ago.

Ironically, that journey had also been to the same general location as the current expedition in order to deal with Andrassil after it had succumbed to the touch of Yogg-Saron, although that journey had been far more fraught from the very beginning. The oceans and the floor beneath them had taken centuries to settle down from the Sundering, and for centuries after there had still been odd waves, strange eddies and dangerous quakes before everything finally settled down, which had only happened after Vordrassil had been dealt with.

At the time, there had even been concerns that the storms and odd ocean currents had been a sign of that vile creature's influence on the mortal plane coupled with the corruption of the world tree. Since then, those who studied the earth had said it was not. It had simply been the aftershocks of the destruction of the Well of Ancients, as so much else had been.

"While no one can deny that the climactic end of the war weakened the prisons of the ancient evils which the Aspects warned our race of in days past, it was the world as whole that was

truly wounded sorely,” one learned professor who specialized in the study of soil and rock had pontificated a few decades after the High Borne had departed. “Even with the Aspects helping to mitigate the energies involved, it will be ages before the final reverberations of that disaster finally stops. It is to our benefit that northern Kalimdor will be among the first areas of the world to settle down.”

The man had then gone on with a supercilious twitch of his ears and lips to announce, “The High Borne, on the other hand, might not have as much luck as they try to make their home on the eastern continent.”

Tyrande hadn’t needed to hear that at the time and could have done without the scorn or the low grade anger she had heard from the crowd at the time. Despite that, at present, this whole trip was acting almost like a sprinkle of sugar on top of the donut that had been Tyrande and Shandris’ mending closeness and familial relationship for the past few decades. And on board the ship, training, politics, and the past did not dominate their conversation as it did all too often when Fandral and the rest of their group were around. Rather, the future did, as well as Harry.

Before this, Tyrande had of course spoken about the young ‘human’ that she had met on her sabbatical to Shandris several times. It was Harry who had given her the idea of the present she had given her aide Alyssa, and it was only right that Shandris knew about Harry, not only as a friend of her mother, but as a magic user given her position as Sentinel General. The Arcane was a very touchy subject and would undoubtedly remain so for the majority of her people for ages yet. But since meeting Harry herself, Shandris had evinced more interest in him as something beyond a mere curiosity which she hadn’t before.

During this discussion, the campaign against the Frostmaul giants came out in greater detail, along with the trip to the Highmountain tauren and the battle against the black dragon, which Tyrande hadn’t mentioned at all before. That had earned Tyrande a good shaking by Shandris, as well as an hour’s long questioning. For all her experience against satyrs, Shandris had never fought a dragon before, and after seeing Versera after she transformed to fly south, Shandris had been noticeably curious on that score.

Beyond Harry, though, plans for the future dominated the discussion, not just Tyrande’s hopes for the future of their people but for the two of them personally. Learning that Shandris had actually been secretly learning about interior design and architecture had been something of a shock to Tyrande, as it, as Shandris had pointed out like the black dragon, hadn’t come up in discussion before even as the pair renewed their familial bond. Still, Tyrande was more than willing to allow Shandris to redesign the interior of her suite in the temple of Elune. Indeed, Tyrande was looking forward to what her daughter could do with shades of red, silver and blue,

especially with the natural lighting that the temple's pools allowed for. *For someone who doesn't like being awake during the day at all, my daughter has certainly been inspired by the sun and the views we see on a day.*

"Rocks ahead!" Came a shout from above, interrupting Tyrande's introspective moment. "Many rocks ahead! We've reached the Shoals of Jagged Teeth, captain."

The captain, who had just taken over the wheel, frowned, then shouted, "Baratus, find Yara and get him out with the sounding rope. Sailmaster Shardbrook, I want our sails at half. The wind is coming from astern, make it so."

As the crew around the main deck jumped to obey Shardbrook's orders, Tyrande shifted towards the prow of the boat, raising a hand to cover her eyes as she stared ahead, her ears shifting this way and that in interest. It had been more than a thousand years since any kaldorei had come this way, and she wondered if the Jagged Teeth had changed all that much.

At first, Tyrande couldn't see anything, but as the shoreline to her left began to slowly curve away over the horizon, she started to see them. By the time several other members of the expedition were on deck, though, Tyrande could see a few of the large, jagged rocks sticking out from the ocean. They were dispersed, with none of them looking quite the same, not in height or size. Some had multiple sharp points thrusting out of the water, others stood alone. One in the distance seemed as large as two of the largest oaks of Ashenvale one on the other, while others just barely poked out of the water.

As the ship drew closer to the first set of rocks that had been spotted, a sailor approached, and with a nod Tyrande and her companion moved away. The man thanked her, then tossed a heavy, weighted line overboard.

"I'm taking soundings, Lady Tyrande," he explained, holding the rope at specific points marked out by colored string. "We've no idea how deep it is around here, and with the Jagged Teeth, it's clear that might change quickly."

"I understand. I will get out of your way, sailor," Tyrande said, moving further back from the man, but remaining near the prow, staring forward. As she did, the ship slowly started turning. Soon it moved between several of the rocky outcroppings and the shoreline, which had been a small strip of green to the port side, had shifted beyond the aft of the ship, and the vessel had moved in between a few of the large Jagged Teeth.

From there, the ship began moving north towards Northrend, following the remnants of the land bridge that had existed there after the initial rumblings of the Sundering had begun.

A part of Tyrande felt it was somewhat sad that her folk were not adventurous enough to try the voyage from Northrend directly from Danaviea. It was supposedly far harder than going to

the Broken Isles, with a lot of storms and contrary winds, but the main reason was that the kaldorei were just not natural navigators. Yes, they had a tremendous amount of knowledge of the stars thanks to being a mostly nocturnal race, yet even so, navigating by day or night did not come naturally to them when away from land-based markers.

Thus while a few captains were willing to make the somewhat easy journey to the Broken Isles, a route all of them had done for thousands of years, no mariner was willing to cross the open ocean straight to Northrend. Traversing the Shoals of Jagged Teeth, as dangerous and as slow as they had to move, was still seen as a better option.

The sun was almost above them, and Tyrande was looking forward to seeing Shandris joining the rest of them on the main deck (her daughter had the most amusing bed hair these days and never failed to get ear wagglingly embarrassed about it when Tyrande made jokes about it) when one of the druids of the Talon nearby twitched. The movement caught Tyrande's attention, and she looked on as he began to stare down into the water near his position by the railing on the starboard side. "I just saw something in the water, large, scaled," the man called out to the others.

Fandral, who had yet to bother her that morning, frowned. He'd been noticeably quiet since coming aboard, almost annoyed-seeming but not quite, although given the fact he and the other druids of the Claw had been able to master water-based transformation, Tyrande wasn't certain what about their journey bothered him. She and Shandris had joked about it possibly being his stomach, as it was known many could not take to the life aboard ship, but Tyrande felt it was more likely to be the fact he wasn't in control of their travel that bothered Fandral, who had always preferred to be in control of everything around him he could. An odd frame of mind for a druid, to be sure, but Tyrande had always put it down to the way the man had lost his wife.

"Chacel, Leofar, transform," Fandral ordered, naming two druids of the Talon who had mastered the seagull form. For long term hovering, it was easily the best the Druids of the Claw had come up with for out in the ocean. "Give us some eyes in the sky. Everyone else, prepare to transform and go over the sides."

He looked over to Tyrande, but she didn't countermand his orders. They had yet to meet up with any of the murlocs, but they knew that they were in the waters around Kalimdor, and the reports they had seen from the trio of ships that had returned from this route before indicated this area might be their main hunting grounds. Instead, Tyrande turned to a nearby sentinel. "If you could get my daughter and the rest of our troops up and moving? And bring me my weapon."

Tyrande was already wearing her armor, something she had gotten into the habit of doing while away from the temple. Now, Shy-Rotam raced off, bounding to and down the nearest hatch. Within moments, she was back, holding Tyrande's moon glaives in her mouth. Tyrande took them, thanking Shy-Rotam before shifting back toward the man taking soundings.

The crew too was quick to arm themselves. The time spent in Danaviea had allowed the captain to purchase many long spears and bows for his crew, which they and the sentinels had quickly taken to training with. Now that it came to it, though, this actually caused a bit of a jam. There were only two hatches on the vessel leading down into the decks below, and now they have become natural bottlenecks. Several druids, sentinels and crewmen got caught in a crowd there.

Hearing this and seeing only a few sentinels pushing up through the throng as the sailors continued to try to go below, Tyrande shook her head. "Drills. We should have had drills before this, so that everyone knew what they were about when it came to preparing for combat, not just fighting aboard the ship. We thought about weapons and tactics drills but not drills to actually prepare for battle."

"A thought that we all should have had well before this," Fandral grumped as he shifted toward the aft of the vessel, making for the captain and one of his officers who were conversing there.

As the groups below slowly sorted themselves out to commands of their officers, Tyrande took a moment to assign the two sentinels that had already reached the main deck the task of protecting the helmsman and the captain. As both were armed with their typical glaives and bows rather than the long spears, that made sense, though again, Tyrande lamented the fact they hadn't planned properly for the leadup to battle. The first sentinels on the main deck should be armed with spears, their animals out of their totems and waiting, not still stored within. *If the murlocs could attack us so quickly, we would already be on the back foot and taking losses.*

As if summoned by her worries, before the pair of younger women could reach their new guard position, one of the Druids burst out from the scrum from the main hatch. "We're sensing a large amount of nature magic moving underneath the waves. Someone, or a group of people, are using nature magic to do something below us."

"Murlocs!" A lookout along the starboard bow shouted on the heels of the druid's words. "I have ten, no fifteen of them moving in a school over here!"

"More behind!" one of the two sentinels Tyrande had ordered to the wheel shouted, staring down over the prow at the back of the wheelhouse's roof.

“Grr... we can’t wait. Claws, over the side!” Fandral ordered, before leading several of the Druids of the claw off the side of the ship, transforming mid leap into their strange new water-based forms. As Fandral had wanted, these forms were an amalgamation of several forms rather than a direct spiritual connection to one beast whose form the druid in question then borrowed. No, these forms were made for one thing only rather than being any great representation of the personality of the druid in question. These forms were made to fight underwater, that was the deciding factor.

Each aquatic combat form was different, pulling from the instincts and shapes of a different animal. Fandral’s was large, so large that he actually pushed two other druids of the Claw away from him midair as he transformed. When he did so, he had the body and head of a killer whale, but the arms of a vrykul in size, webbed hands and feet. Another had strange, almost crablike body, with multiple legs, and two large pincer arms, the only addition being that the feet of the crab in question were larger than normal and had flippers, allowing the crab form to move more easily in the water. Another looked like a sea otter, except its limbs had been lengthened and it was larger than that already large breed.

Taking her weapons, Tyrande moved to the railing of the ship near where she had been moments before between two sailors armed with long spears. Behind her, as the water below the ship began to turn deep, dark almost blackish red in places, Shy-Rotam stalked back and forth, her tail swishing. Soon as the bonded pair watched, those scattered dots of darkness spread out like fist sized droplets of red dropped into the blue of the ocean.

Even as the battle underneath the waves began, one of the Druids of the Talon scowled, staring down at the deck and through it the water below. “What are they doing? That is a great deal of nature magic someone is using down there. More than any of us bar Lord Staghelm could call on. Some kind of ritual, perhaps?”

Turning away from looking down in the water, Tyrande looked over at the man, noticing that Shandris had just arrived on deck, looking irritable and yes, with bed hair. However, she also had her bow in hand, and was fully armored, with her moon glaive on her back and her bonded animal’s figurine hanging from her chest. “Can you tell us if this ritual is something that is affecting the water or--”

CRACCKSSSPLLUUSSSHHH!

No sooner than Tyrande had gotten that question out, then there came a loud crashing noise from below and everything went sideways. At the same time, there came a series of sharp *TWA-THWAK!* noise and several large ballista bolts fired out of the water with punishing force.

One of those bolts smashed into the rigging, and another crashed into the side of the ship high up its side, but those impacts were next to nothing in comparison to the impact from below. Something large had just crashed into the bottom and port side of the ship and was now thrusting the ship out of the water on an angle with so much impetus that the ship was already basically dangling there, ready to tip over.

Several sailors lost their footing, while the man in the crow's nest went over the side of the basket and into the rigging, where he barely grabbed a rope before stopping his descent. Four other men near her similarly stopped themselves with safety ropes, while Tyrande almost lost her footing, and Shy-Rotam had to dig her claws into the main deck to keep from being sent over the side.

Only two sentinels fell into the water along with one of the sailors with shouts of shock as the ship was sent almost onto its side from whatever had struck it from below.

Shandris might well have followed her fellows over the side, if not for her quick thinking. Even as she lost her footing, Shandris kicked out with one of her feet, wrapping her leg rapidly around a dangling rope.

When it went taut, Shandris used it to change her trajectory enough to grab the safety railing rather than miss it entirely as the others had. There she clung with several sailors and one of the druids as the ship creaked and groaned, its center of mass fighting against the impact that was threatening to toss it onto its side in the waters.

Now knowing what had been done, the Druids of the Talon reached out to Nature Magic sending cutting blasts of wind, attacking the base of the giant spike of rock that had just shot up from beneath them. While most druids didn't really have all that many offensive spells, as Harry would have used the term, they did know a few, and at least manipulation of elements like this was something that kaldorei druids could do almost as well as summoned elementals, even if it took quite a bit more out of them, and a good deal more time than it would an elemental.

"Everyone to the port side!" Nealu shouted. "We need to balance the ship the other way! Grab your companions and get to the port side!"

"Ropes!" Davo shouted from where he stood in one of the hatches. One massive hand grasped the sill of the hatch, while in the other he held a hawser of rope, which he flicked down towards Shandris and the others. Each of the kaldorei on that side of the ship soon found themselves hauled up the incline that had become the main deck, the tauren proving strong enough to pull them up one-handed. Soon Shandris was climbing up and over him onto the higher deck above the wheelhouse, tying herself in place before looking around, trying to find some target she could fight.

From where she was already clinging onto the port side near the prow of the boat, Tyrande could tell that shifting their weight to the port side like that wasn't going to be enough. Nor were the druids still capable of concentrating on attack spells doing enough damage to the mass of rock that had risen up out of the sea. Even as another two kaldorei joined the others on that side of the ship the whole ship creaked and started to tip further to the starboard. Soon, it would pass the point of no return, and there would be no chance to right it again.

Almost balancing on the safety railing on the port side of the vessel as it wavered in the air, Tyrande reached down and cut her safety rope. Now freed, she barked, "Shy-Rotam, keep an eye on me!" and leaped over the side down not towards the ocean, but the pillar of rock underneath them.

She leapt, calling on Elune for one of the few blessings that she could use during the day to make her weapons extra sharp. Around each of her moon glaives' blades, a small sliver of a moonbeam appeared, and within seconds, she was hanging on the rocky spire, one weapon stabbed into the rock to give her purchase, while Tyrande cut it into it with her other weapon.

All around her in the water, the Druids of the Claw did their best to try and protect their fellows, but there were far more than the fifteen murlocs that had been spotted. At least a hundred or more had risen from the depths to accompany the large spire of rock. Four sailors who had already gone over the side were dead, their bodies floating in the water, while one of the druids of the claw had perished, his form torn asunder by the murlocs. The others were still fighting, but given the dire straits the ship was in, they were the only ones.

However, none of the murlocs saw what Tyrande was up to until the badly listing ship started to settle back down as the rock underneath it crumbled under her attack. Soon, she had shorn it down to a mere nub, and above her, the kaldorei rushed to engage with the attacking murlocs as best they could while the rock beneath Tyrande began to grow again under the demands of the murloc shamans.

The remaining Druids of the Talon aboard the ship turned to one another now. "We need to counter their ritual. Take command of the water around the pillar, tear it asunder with our own ritual."

Under the direction of the druids, the water quickly began to spin wildly, going fast enough to tear the rock asunder. It also tore several nearby murlocs into pieces, but that was beside the point. The murloc shamans sensed this, and their ritual ceased instantly. Instead, they concentrated on chilling the water down and directing the two exceedingly primitive ballistae that the murlocs had created out of flotsam and jetsam under the waves.

The cold water didn't do much to most of the druids of the claw in the water, their forms being able to handle the sudden drop in temperature. But it did force two of them back to the ship.

One was the same otter-like creature Tyrande had seen diving into the water near her previous position, while the other was a frog-like creature that almost looked like a murloc itself.

The murlocs surged forward, pushing the druids hard in the water and reaching the ship. There, they started to stab into the side of the vessel but also came within range of the long spears the seamen and sentinels had been training with for this moment. Spears stabbed and arrows flashed down from on high along with smaller throwing spears, with Shandris shouting orders for a moment, eager to be more than a passenger, so much so that for a second she forgot her mother and her precarious position at present.

As the stone she was clinging to stopped growing, a massive wave crashed over what was left, threatening to break Tyrande's grip on her weapon, so much so her other weapon was smashed out of her hand. Flailing, Tyrande brought that hand to the rock, where she clung, refusing to let go of either grip or weapon, but she was forced a second later to jump clear as the bottom of the ship came down rapidly towards her position, threatening to crush her between the rock and the bottom of the boat.

"Nothing for it!" Tyrande cursed as she dove into the water, and almost instantly regretted this decision. The reason she hadn't seen any of the sentinels or sailors trying to fight back once they were in the water became quickly apparent. Not only was the water so bitterly cold at this point it actually began to hurt her despite the fact she would normally not feel the cold, but the strength of the local current nearly overwhelmed her before she could get her head back up above water.

There, Tyrande barely had a second to breathe before the undertow took her again, dragging her downwards and away. Tyrande found herself scraped along the root of the large spike of rock below the waves, then torn away from it and the rest of the fighting. It was all she could do to keep one hand on her weapon.

Away Tyrande was sent, her body almost imitating a ping-pong ball as she was slammed in between rocks along the bottom of the ocean, which here was indeed dangerously close to the bottom of the ship. She found herself twisted sideways, her back slamming painfully into one rock after another.

However, Tyrande's sudden plight had not been missed by her companions. Shy-Rotam had been watching her closely from the moment she had gone over the side. Now, instead of tossing a rope to the already beleaguered Tyrande, she followed her bonded companion. With a prodigious leap from the prow of the ship, the frostsaber tiger landed near where Tyrande's hair could be seen, rapidly being pulled away from the rest of the ship.

Near the surface of the water the current wasn't quite as bad as underneath and Shy-Rotam was able to reach down and grab at Tyrande, pulling her up by a claw grip on her forearm that

drew blood, but Tyrande was in no position to complain. The next second, Shy-Rotam wrapped her giant furry body around her partner, protecting her head and upper body even as she too became overcome by the current.

Grunting in frustration as her arrow didn't penetrate the water enough to hit her target before it could dive away, Shandris remembered her mother, and turned rapidly toward the prow. Racing in that direction she stared down into the water, looking around wildly before she saw the giant ball of wet fur as it was sent careening away from them. Seeing her mother's upstretched arm still holding one of her moon glaives, Shandris realized what had happened.

"Lady Whisperwind has been pulled away from us!" She looked over to one of the Druids of the Talon who had previously been working towards a spell to try and remove the obstacle that Tyrande is so quickly done. "Get in the air, Shadesprite, we will need you to direct us to her if we can."

As neither of the other druids who had been ordered into the air had time prior to the ambush to follow Fandral's orders, that druid nodded and shifted into a seagull for a moment, winging his way upwards even as his fellows were forced to use the preparations they had begun to combat another surge of nature magic from below the depths. With the cold attack not doing much, and the ballista also only doing a little damage to the ship, the murloc shamans had tried their hand at the same trick as before.

As another spike of rock barely had time to lift the ship upwards, the ocean around and above it tore the rock to pieces directed by the druids. At the same time, the holes in the ship created by the murlocs' ballista bolts, but another druid was already using another spell to waken the wood of the ship, merging it with the ballista to stop the ship from taking on much water. There were still a riotous amount, and fully half of the crew were busy with the damage or helping the pumps, but the ballista alone would not be sinking the Swift Breeze.

The ship still rocked from the surging water beneath it, but no one else was lost over the sides. Meanwhile, the battle in the water continued, with the last three Druids of the Claw flinging themselves out and down into the water to join it, replacing the two who had been forced to retreat. The water continued to churn and turn darker and darker with blood as the murlocs continued to attempt to cut into or climb up the side of the vessel, with no end to the horde in sight yet.

OOOOOOO

Swiftly finding herself nearly out of sight from the main battle, Shy-Rotam grunted and growled as she was slammed into one rock after another. It hurt, but Shy-Rotam had been put through a lot of training over the past few decades. She might still act young occasionally in comparison to other bonded animals, but Shy-Rotam was a warrior. She dealt with the blunt force trauma

far more easily than Tyrande. Better, her fluffy body was, thankfully, capable of keeping her and Tyrande above water, which allowed Shy-Rotam to keep one eye open at all times.

When Shy-Rotam felt the current start to ebb away for a second to her right, she instantly kicked out in that direction. Breaking the current in total took a lot of effort, as she could only use her back legs, her forelegs being locked around Tyrande's body, but she still did it.

Soon, Shy-Rotam found herself in a small eddy, an area of relative calm created by a strange rock formation nearby. It was a single built up point, but one that seemed to split into two large rootlike formations that continued down into the water from the main spire, spreading to create what amounted to a crescent shaped wall just underneath the water. There, the rock kept the majority of the current away from this small area, although the breakers flung salty spray everywhere.

Shifting away from her partner and releasing Tyrande from her grip, Shy-Rotam quickly grabbed at the back of Tyrande's armor with her mouth and slowly made her way to the center of the rock formation. There was a small area where she could actually crawl up onto a flat area of rock for a second. There, Tyrande quickly began to grab at the rock herself, pulling herself away from Shy-Rotam's mouth. She then returned her glaive to its proper position on her back as she reached out to Shy-Rotam with gentle hands.

"Thank you, dear one. Without you, I don't know what would have happened," Tyrande said soothingly, running her hands over the frostsaber's flanks. "You don't have any broken bones, do you?"

"Rrrrr... I don't think so, bonded," Shy Rotam said, shifting to rest her head in Tyrande's lap, breathing deeply. "I'm sore, and exhausted, but that's it. Who knew that just swimming around could tire you out even more than a full day of training in full armor?"

"Indeed, and I am very glad we decided armor would be a bad thing while aboard the ship," Tyrande chuckled, causing Shy-Rotam to purr in agreement.

Once she was certain that her companion hadn't taken any serious wounds, Tyrande pushed through her own pain – which consisted of lots of bruises and a few deep cuts on her arm that thankfully were no longer bleeding much - to look around at where they had wound up. She soon realized that wherever they were, this rock had previously felt the touch of tool users. It had several steps hewn into it, the bottommost of which she and Shy-Rotam were sitting on right now.

Those steps, which were wide and shallow, led upwards. and above them she could see some kind of table, the edge of it barely visible. It seemed to dominate a flat area up there. She could also see where the gray and brown stone was stained with blood. *An altar?*

With the edge of the table blocking more detail from view, Tyrande moved to stand up, gently pushing Shy-Rotam's head off her lap. She looked up at the temple, hissing a moment later. For there were very obviously skulls up there, one of which looked like that of a kaldorei.

Seeing that, Tyrande moved up the steps to investigate further, with Shy-Rotam moving after her, but with difficulty. While she didn't have any broken bones as the frostsaber tiger had thought, she had still taken a lot of bruising. While she was tougher and far more durable than any natural tiger could be thanks to the link between them, that and her fur wasn't enough to keep her entirely safe from the punishment she had taken. Although at least in comparison to Tyrande she wasn't suffering from being wet to the bone.

Tyrande's earlier thoughts on this place were quickly proven correct. The top of the rock had been flattened by murloc hands and made into an altar of prodigious size, although besides the pile of skulls, at first, Tyrande couldn't figure out what central figure, if any, there was to the place of worship. Indeed, whatever Gods the murlocs prayed to, she did not know. No one did, as to the best of Tyrande's knowledge, the murlocs, who had been around for as far back as kaldorei society could remember, did not communicate with kaldorei or tauren.

And if they communicated with trolls, who could say? It wasn't like the kaldorei and trolls had ever had peaceful relations, at least not for very long. Regardless, the altar was primitive, disturbing in a way that Tyrande could practically feel. Despite it being the early afternoon, she could feel the revulsion of her goddess within her to this altar and whatever deity it represented.

"Whatever deity that might be, it has seen quite a bit of blood spilt on its altar," Tyrande mused, staring at where the top of the altar and the two steps directly underneath it had been stained dark red with blood.

Then she spotted something, a skull hidden below others. The majority of the skulls here were murloc, wide mouths with eellike teeth, big widely set eye sockets, and thick bones with small nose holes. What skulls weren't murloc were kaldorei. But behind them was another skull.

Feeling a bit of sudden concern, Tyrande pushed a few of the skulls aside, only to grunt in anger at the skull beneath. "A Nathrezim!?"

The skull was twice as large as any of the other skulls, with two horns which had been broken off close to the skull. It was a bit more built up around the jaw than a kaldorei, although the area around where the ears would have been was equal to the kaldorei skulls.

On the surface, the horns and the jaw should not have been enough to make Tyrande feel such revulsion. But she knew what this creature had been when alive. All too often, the Nathrezim,

shapeshifting members of the Burning Legion, had infiltrated the rebel forces, hamstringing their efforts.

Tyrande backed away, a fury building within her to destroy this place. How that skull had come to be here, she had no idea, nor why it was central most on the sacrificial altar

To one side of the altar was a large ornate bell, around the size of Tyrande's head including her ears, perhaps. It looked as if it had been in the water for a good long while, the copper having turned green, and was certainly not of murloc make. Tyrande wondered what the story had been before they discovered it, turning it to their own purpose, before she turned her attention to the ocean and her and Shy-Rotam's temporary safe zone. Beyond that there were several stone and metal daggers and a large wooden mallet with a copper head on it.

In the distance, Tyrande could barely make out the ship, rocking in place, but now with more of their crewmen armed with bows or halberds. Even in the daytime, kaldorei eyesight was incredibly acute, and she could tell that the battle had started to become more of a seesaw than a true ambush. The attacking murlocs still had a tremendous advantage in numbers, but the Druids of the Claw were fighting them about as well as anyone could in the water, holding the line, while the sentinels, the two members of the Unseen Path and the crewmen of the ship rained down arrows and spears into the water. How much help those were, Tyrande had no idea, and wondered idly if perhaps Shandris should have listened to Davo and Nealu when they said that crossbows or spears would have been a better bet.

Nealu's throwing spears and Davos's tauren-sized arrows will certainly be having an easier time punching through the water, Tyrande mused. Then she turned her attention back to the altar, thinking for a moment, before deciding on a course of action. "Do you think you are well enough to fight?"

"I'm quite sore, but I do definitely desire to taste fishman flesh!" Shy-Rotam growled, her claws unsheathing again, before she looked over at Tyrande's forearm, where those self-same claws had dug into Tyrande's skin. "But are you sure you're all right?"

Tyrande saw that look but waved it off. "I've been wounded before. Remind me to tell you of the time I had retreated from one battle during the War of the Ancients only to have our column ambushed by Doomguards and had to fight with a broken arm and both ankles throbbing in agony. At least here, these wounds let you save me from further battering," Tyrande said, reaching down to gently stroke her fingers through Shy-Rotam's matted fur.

The next second, Tyrande picked up the hammer that had been lying on the table. She then smashed it against the side of the bell several times, creating a loud clamor that reached far and wide, easily overcoming the little amount of sound from the distant battle she had been hearing before that.

All around the ship dozens of murlocs twisted around in the water, staring towards the sound of the distant bell. And nearer to Tyrande, the six murloc magic users all flinched as the noise reverberated down into the waters. The group had been concentrating so hard on the battle with the druids aboard the kaldorei vessel they hadn't even noticed Shy-Rotam and Tyrande passing them by.

Their concentration broken, the group twisted in the water to stare toward the sound that had just come from their altar's bell. The altar to the stone god that they had begun to worship when they moved into this territory, the one that allowed them to move not just the waters of their ocean home, but the stone that made up its walls and floor.

A moment later, two of them surfaced, staring in the direction of the altar, wondering what was going on, and when they did, the pair saw a kaldorei standing there. While murloc eyes were not nearly as good at range as even a vrykul or Tauren, they were close enough to see the kaldorei turn and start smashing the altar into pieces with her blade.

"KIIIIYAAASSSSSHHH!!!" the two murlocs screamed, furious at this sacrilege.

Tyrande flinched at that scream but did not stop her work. With blade and hammer, she smashed skulls and the bits of wooden flotsam that had been used as the top of the altar, sending bits of bone and wood in every direction. The final thing she destroyed was the head of the demon, smashing the skull to pieces with a certain amount of vindictive pleasure. *'So I will do should any of your shapeshifting, infiltrating kind remain within Kalimdor if I find you!'*

OOOOOOO

Below the water, the other magic users screamed as well, but not just with their lips. Rather, they all pulled out special conches, which amplified their voices so that all the murlocs in the battle space could hear them. As they did, dozens, then still more of the embattled murlocs twisted away from the ship, racing instead towards the altar, desperate and horrified at Tyrande's invasion of what they thought of as one of their two most important temples.

So busy were the shaman in screaming out orders to their troops, that the magic users didn't even notice one of the druids of the claw coming up into their position from below. His form was a little different than most of the others, lending itself more to an image of a crab creature rather than a shark or some other swimming creature, but in this sort of water Para Deftclaw had proven quite deadly, before deciding to try and find the minds behind the attack.

Now, before the shamans could realize he was there, Deftclaw's giant claws struck, seizing and cutting two of the magic users in half, as he launched himself upwards with his many legs from the ocean floor, wide, manta-like mouth gaping as he bit down on the leg of another fish man, shredding it.

With the shamans at first being distracted and now dying, the efforts to push the ship up and onto its side instantly ended for the final time. With that and with the sudden loss of at least half of the murlocs that had been pressing in on them, the battle around the ship began to go the way of the defenders. This was helped further when Davo spotted one of the ballistae in the water.

Pulling off the string and redoing it at a tighter draw took a moment though, and before he could, the two ballistae got off one more shot each that slammed into the side of the ship. But the crew on duty below decks were quick to turn their attention to pushing it back out of the hole it had created, and just as quick to start patching while the sentinels on the main deck continued to fire down into the melee below, doing what they could. The other was more damaging, as it first hit a Sentinel, killing the woman easily, before smashing into one of the masts, cracking it near the base.

The next second, though, Davos's arrow slammed into the water and then the large ballista, shattering the wood.

The other ballista was destroyed by Fandral Staghelm, who was rampaging through the murloc horde with impunity, his blubber and sheer size meaning none of the murlocs could land a telling blow on him. And when he took a wound that began to bleed into the water, it closed quickly, glowing with the light green of Nature Magic. Such was his power and skill as the Archdruid of the Cenarion Circle.

At around the same time that the second ballista was crushed in Fandral's maw, the first of the murlocs had reached the altar where Tyrande and Shy-Rotam had taken up residence. Unfortunately for them, Tyrande had finished her act of justifiable destruction and was waiting for them at the 'shoreline' if it could be called such.

The first two murlocs to raise their heads lost them before they could do anything, Tyrande's Moon glaive slicing the top off one head, while Shy-Rotam's claws gouged into the eyes and sloping muzzle of the other. The next three died similarly, before the murlocs finally began to realize they needed to try to attack from different angles. More of them popped up all around the rock, climbing up and leaping towards the two of them, forcing Shy-Rotam and Tyrande to retreat so they didn't get flanked.

Shy-Rotam retreated entirely up to where the altar had been, lashing out with teeth and claws at any of the murlocs that came up over the other side of the rock, unable to fight on the slopes of the rock. In contrast, Tyrande shifted this way and that all around it, using her free hand to stabilize herself as best she could along with her feet.

Even as encumbered by the environment as she was, Tyrande moved her moon glaive with the ease of a master, the three blades seeking throat, eyes, head, chest, and hands, sending those

murlocs she did not kill outright screaming back into their fellows, encumbering them further. Each blow was economic, calculated with just the amount of force needed to make that specific blow, a sign of experience and body control that few could match even among the highest ranks of the sentinels. She moved and dodged, bent and twisted showing all the agility of a gymnast, taking hits on her armor rarely and always on her chest or back rather than her limbs. Murlocs fell by the dozen as they closed with her up the rock, which quickly turned as red as the altar above.

In contrast, Shy-Rotam was more like an immovable titan. She didn't trust her ability to move around the rock as readily as Tyrande was doing, but her heavily reinforced body was more than enough to allow her to take strikes from the tridents, odd-looking swords and spears of the murlocs without taking all that much damage. In return, her blows landed like the force of a falling tree, crushing skulls, spines, chests or whatever else she hit.

Her blows weren't nearly as economical as Tyrande's, and more than once when she bit down on the murlocs, Shy-Rotam couldn't stop herself from actually eating the portion of her victim she had torn away, tiger instincts being what they were. But even that added a bit to the psychology of the moment. It was one thing to watch your friends get bitten down and torn apart by a tiger, a beast that few murlocs would have faced before. It was another to see the tiger pause momentarily, taking strikes from your weapons, to actually gobble up a bit of its meal.

Soon the last murlocs around the ship died, and the Druid of the Talon that Shandris had ordered to keep an eye on her mother came winging back, directing the ship where to go. It was slow going obviously because they still had to take soundings, but eventually, the ship came within sight of the embattled pair. Two of the least exhausted Druids of the Claw jumped back into the water, transforming once more into their water-based combat forms, charging forwards into the greatly reduced horde from behind.

By the time they did, though, many of the murlocs had begun to run away screaming. Not even the quasi-religious frenzy that Tyrande's active sacrilege had worked them up to hadn't been enough to keep the entire tribe fighting. Especially without their magic users around to whip them into a frenzy, coupled with the fact that by this point, the murlocs attacking Shy-Rotam and Tyrande were being forced to climb over the few bodies of their fellows that remained everywhere they had been struck down rather than falling back into the ocean.

Soon, the battle was over, and a silence fell over the ocean for a moment. Beyond the sound of wind and wave, the loudest sound was the screeching of seagulls as they began to descend to feast, as ravens would on a battlefield on land.

Not thirty minutes after the last murloc retreated, Shandris barely set her oars into their holders before leaping ashore, where she quickly began tossing bodies off of the rock and into the shallow waters around them. Tyrande had been doing the same from the other side for some time, and a moment later, the last of the bodies on the steps was pushed aside, and Tyrande smiled at her daughter fighting an urge to slump down, exhaustion nipping at her heels.

Despite that, she put in a bit of insouciant ear wagging as she quipped, "Well, what kept you?"

With the mechanisms to lower the ship's boat having been a casualty, it had been simply pushed off the side of the vessel through a section of railing that had been destroyed during the battle. Getting both the ship's boat and Shy-Rotam up onto the deck, therefore, took a goodly amount of muscle and planning, but with Davo and one of the Druids of the Claw providing the muscle, the seamen proved to be quite up to the task, masters of pulleys and ropes as most of them had to be given their chosen profession.

Eventually, Shy-Rotam was curled against Tyrande as the pair of them were being seen to by one of the druids, who was using healing magic on them.

"How many did we lose?" Tyrande asked, looking over at Shandris.

"Four sentinels, two Druids of the Talon, four Druids of the Claw. The battle underneath the ocean was horrendously violent," Fandral answered for Shandris, scowling angrily. "My folk have also gotten soft in the centuries of peace we have had and have forgotten to always use nature magic to not only empower our forms but also heal ourselves of damage during battle."

"Keeping a spell like that going while you are in your war form must be difficult given how much your mind changes when you are in the body of an animal, especially one that is chimeric in nature I would presume," Tyrande commiserated. "Regardless of your opinion on that particular matter though, I would say that you all performed magnificently well."

"Perhaps. If not for so many of the murlocs leaving and letting us get to those two ballista though, they might've been able to eventually sink our ship, and if they had, I doubt more than one out of every ten of us would've been able to make it to shore," Fandral grumbled. "Even with myself and the other Druids of the Claw protecting you all."

Fandral **really** did not want to give Tyrande credit for that, but the sudden shift of nearly half of their numbers towards Tyrande and Shy-Rotam had been the final turning point of the battle. And then to see that Tyrande and Shy-Rotam had between the two of them killed a significant number of that horde before the murlocs finally broke was sobering to the ambitious Archdruid.

I knew that Whisperwind had taken up training at least half of every night before this, seeing for myself that her wartime skills are back is something else entirely. Dammit all, if only I had a way of sidelining her as I have already done to Stormrage! Fandral thought, keeping his thoughts from showing with literally thousands of years of practice. *Still, Tyrande's own machinations will eventually allow me to work against her. When she gets what she craves most, the ability to stand down 'knowing; our people have a government that can operate without her, that is when I will step forward and take the reins of power that she has so graciously decided to set aside.*

Fandral had been telling himself that for a while now. Tyrande's ongoing efforts to create an assembly that ruled their people in her stead had borne quite a lot of fruit and was well on its way to completion. Fandral estimated that after another decade or so Tyrande would indeed be able to step back into the role of being simply the high priestess of the temple Elune, one, albeit loud, voice among many. Much like his own voice, which Fandral would be able to use to control the rest of the assembly.

But that understanding hadn't made many of the other changes to their society Tyrande had pushed for any easier to deal with in his mind. And Fandral knew that many of those changes were to be there to stay, more's the pity. *Yes, it is indeed a pity Tyrande cannot be dealt with as I did Malfurion.*

However, he set those thoughts aside for now. As ambitious as Fandral was, he knew that there were greater things at stake than just his own ambitions. "For right now, we have recovered the bodies we could and stored them below under Nature Magic to stop them from rotting or smelling. That is all we can do about the battle from our end, but the captain wants to talk to us."

Nodding, Tyrande stood up, leaving Shy-Rotam where she was, and with Shandris and Fandral accompanying her, moved to the wheelhouse. Why it was called the wheelhouse when the wheel was actually on top of the built-up area at the aft of the ship was a mystery that Tyrande hadn't yet asked about. Within she found the captain, speaking quietly to several of his officers and Nealu. Davo was elsewhere, helping to deal with the ongoing efforts to bail out the lower decks of the ship.

He turned, and then bowed from the waist, his ears still set flat against his skull in the approximation of anger and annoyance but his voice calm when he spoke to the trio. "Lady Whisperwind, Archdruid, General. I regret to inform you that I don't think our ship will be able to make Northrend. I'm afraid we need to turn back and make for the shore at the very least."

"Considering we had barely left the sight of the shoreline behind us when the murlocs ambushed us, that won't put us too far beyond our schedule, captain," Tyrande mused.

“Although why is this necessary? It looked as if you were well on your way to repairing most of the damage the murlocs did.”

“That is only on the surface, Priestess. The keel and the overall hull of my ship were also badly damaged in that battle. I know that some of your druids are able to work well with wood, but we’ve gone through our entire allotment of spare beams. And even then, we’ve lost most of our foodstuffs as well thanks to how much water we’ve taken on in the lower decks. We’re slowly clearing it out, but...”

He shrugged. “The journey to Northrend and from here without needing to anchor down and ride out a storm would take us about three weeks. With our rigging damaged, and our sails badly torn, even one storm would destroy what sails we still have up at the moment. We can see to all of that, but it would be easier to do it while tied to the shoreline rather than here in the ocean. And there’s no way we can find fresh fruit or vegetables to replace what we lost.”

The captain shook his head. “I also lost twelve of my crew, so we’re going to be understaffed going forward. And I don’t think that we can trust to be able to deal with any further attacks like the one we just did if we run into sea monsters or other murlocs colonies without further losses. With all that, there’s no way I could consider continuing this journey.”

Fandral desperately wanted to push on quickly to the ruins of Vordrassil, to learn what they could of Andrassil’s fall as had been their initial reason to go there, and also to deal with whatever threat the visions Tyrande had seen warned of. Then he could go back to forcing Tyrande to allow the Cenarion Circle to continue their world tree experiments to combat the saronite threat. That was his real goal right now, and before those visions he had resented even the need to go to Northrend on what he had seen simply as Tyrande’s attempt to humble him by reminding Fandral of his past errors and the minor war that had resulted.

The very idea made him furious and guilty, although the guilt was far less powerful than the fury he felt at being so humbled. Few druids had died in the conflict against the bugbears, and they were not kaldorei, so while he understood they had their place in the world, Fandral wasn’t saddened by their loss. And when it came down to it, Fandral had done far worse to see his plans through than the mistake with Andrassil. *And I will do far more in the future. This mission might have a real goal now, but the outcome I am looking for hasn’t changed.*

Yet even Fandral agreed with the captain’s words. “Waking up the spirit of the wood, imbuing it with nature magic in order to allow it to grow further, we could do and thus repair the vessel given time. Indeed, it is one of the things we do most often in peace time, when we help with various construction projects. However we wouldn’t be able to create food. Not unless we have plants or seeds to work with.”

“I also want to add to our numbers to make up our losses.”

Tyrande frowned for a few moments, thinking, then nodded. "When it comes to feeding your men and various damages done to the ship Captain, I will take your word. We will turn back to the shoreline, but we will not retrace our route entirely. Fandral, ask two of the Druids of the Talon to come in. We'll need to send out a few messages to get the aide we require, as well as reinforcements."

OOOOOOO

"Well, correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems we would be better served to spend another day holed up here than venture into that," Harry quipped, as he, the currently transformed Versera, and Recca stuck their heads out of the flap leading into his yurt. Harry was between the two women, with Versera sticking her head out from one side below him, and Recca from his other side.

The flap leading outside though wasn't exactly a wide aperture at present. Because of this, Harry was trying very, very hard not to notice how both women were currently crowding him. While feathers, despite the fact that he was part phoenix did not really do much for him, having Recca's blouse-covered chest pressed into his shoulder was still something that he had trouble ignoring, to say nothing of keeping his eyes from looking down to where Versera, the very definition of a short stack, standing across and down from him, leaning over very slightly, seemingly not noticing how several of her blouse's buttons had burst open during the night as she stared out into the heavy rain coming down outside with scant favor.

Harry just knew if he looked down, he would have the most glorious view of Versera's cleavage. *Green those hills might be but that definitely doesn't detract from how good they look,* Harry thought with some amusement, wondering idly why he was waxing poetic currently

Outside, heavy raindrops slammed into the ground with so much force that Harry wondered if it would actually hurt if he stuck his hand out there, considering how big the raindrops were and how fast they were coming down. Worse, there was also a **lot** of lightning playing around there, lighting up the day despite the heavy clouds blotting out the sun while thunder boomed continuously, loud enough to rattle the tauren-style tent.

"I'm so glad we brought along your hut, Harry," Recca grunted, pulling back and away from Harry, moving over to join Quetzal deeper inside. The snake had previously stated that he had no desire or need to see what his ear canals and sense of smell could already tell was a very wet day. "A day like this would have the flock looking for any kind of shelter we could find, even abandoning any nests we might've made to do it. Hunkering down in that kind of rain, we'd be soaked through and miserable within seconds, to say nothing of the lightning."

"Agreed on that point. I can ignore snow and rain even if both would affect my eyesight just as much as it would the two of you. Lightning on the other hand is a danger even for me," Versera

mused, still staring out into the wet, wet world beyond. "Lightning is dangerous more than because of its simple heat. I do not know why, but that is fact," Versera shook her head.

Chuckling, Versera continued to stare out into the world beyond Harry's portable hut. "I can remember a time when a few blues, or was it a bronze group? Well, some of my folk experimented with lightning, using magic to create it and trying to figure out how hot it really was and why lightning does what it does, sending out the spasms it does in someone struck precisely. Although I can't remember anything about their findings."

Listening to that, Harry debated on whether or not to explain what electricity was. Neither the kaldorei nor the tauren had shown any understanding about electricity, although they had a very good grounding in terms of nutrition, diet and physical energy. Indeed, he also knew that the kaldorei and the Unseen Path had a good understanding of geology, metallurgy and mineralogy although the only term they used among those three was metallurgy. The other two they called something else which Harry could not recall right now.

Before he could decide one way or another, Versera went on, snickering slightly as she pulled away from Harry to kneel down on the ground in front of the entrance, reaching her hands out to touch the ground beyond. "What I do remember was my first run-in with lightning as a young drake. I was instructed in what to do if caught out in a lightning storm, obviously, but I flew close enough to one that I could feel a slight strange tingle in my bones. It was a most unusual feeling, almost pleasant. Hah, I know several of my sisters actually quite like the sensation and will brave being struck directly by lightning to feel it for some reason. I've never seen the appeal myself."

She knelt down as Harry lost his mental battle and looked down his eyes pulled towards her chest almost like that magnificent green valley, which in terms of cleavage was probably the equivalent of Highmountain valley when it came to its size in comparison to most he'd seen on any kaldorei, had a magnetic pull on all on its own.

Unfortunately, while Harry had Occlumency, he still wasn't the best when it came to using that mental discipline to halt certain physical reactions. Thus he had to turn away very quickly to avoid Versera noticing his wizard's staff rising to the occasion without any prompt from his brain.

Thankfully, Versera didn't notice anything, being engrossed in pushing her fingers into the ground, frowning thoughtfully. "I haven't studied the earth and soil as much as some of the other Cartographers have, but this soil is getting saturated. We've been stuck here for two days now because of this weather, and by this point, it almost feels as if this whole area is going to become a quagmire soon."

She stood up, smirking a little as she wiped her fingers off on her pants. When she had transformed this time, instead of the dress she normally conjured up after the transformation was over, Versera had created a set of loose pants and tight fitting shirt, half of whose buttons were open in order to let her breathe. "Have I mentioned lately how happy I am that all of us can fly?"

Versera then looked up at Harry, noticing that he had turned away, and poked his side, causing him to look back down at her but not turn his body back towards her. "I'm going to head out there, I want to look around for a bit. I don't suppose you have a spell that can keep me dry, do you?"

Harry shook his head, before he quickly conjured up a simple parka for her. "This should keep you dry at least. Are you looking for something specific?"

"I just said this area might become a quagmire. I'm wondering if it's a normal thing, and if so, if there are rivers nearby. Are we in a delta of some kind, where a river has split off into multiple smaller rivers? Is this place in the process of becoming a swamp? I need to know for my maps," Versera answered as she pulled the parka over her head and shoulders, wiggling a little to get her arms into the sleeves, causing Harry to turn his head away again rapidly.

Dammit! The past few days of us being stuck inside have not been good for my self-control! I hope to Merlin that this isn't the start of some new fetish of mine for short big breasted people, or else I am going to be very, very out of luck going forward considering how tall most kaldorei are in comparison to me. It would be one thing if I had seen any sign of Versera being interested in me, but I haven't, which means this is all just pointless! Harry whined internally.

"Understood," he said aloud. "I'll have breakfast ready for you when you get back."

"Snake sausages?" Versera practically, licking her lips. "Mmm...who knew that would be so tasty?"

"Snake sausages, yes, those orange-like things we found a few days ago, and some fresh bread." Harry had brought along quite a bit of ingredients from Danavia to make all sorts of bread, knowing it was a filling and tasty ingredient that could be added to the rest of their supplies. As for the snake sausages, they came from the remains of the snakes they'd killed a few days ago, the meat seasoned with pepper, a touch of salt and a bit more. "Quetzal, you're still good for another day or two without a large meal, right?"

Quetzal was currently what was quickly becoming his favored size, that of around a third of his normal size, curling around the central fire pit, which in Harry's tent was not only an actual fire suitable for cooking over, but a runic array that warmed the entire tent. But at the moment, he showed no interest whatsoever in leaving that position. "I am quite content where I am, Harry.

While the rain does not bother me much, the idea of getting struck by lightning is not a pleasant one, nor is the idea of slithering through grassy mud. I am not a breed at home in swamps.”

Versera sighed theatrically at that, looking down at her feet, which were not covered by any kind of boot or shoe, before shrugging her shoulders, and, with the parka settled appropriately around her form, heading out the entryway. “I’ll be back soon, I hope.”

As Versera left, Recca looked down at the floor, tapping it thoughtfully. “Is the floor here going to be in any danger of getting soaked through? Or sink into the ground if it becomes too muddy for the ground to support the hut?”

Harry frowned, thinking. His yurt had a floor made of the same leather as the rest of the construction, thick and firm as the walls and ceiling, then covered almost from one side to another with furs. Because it was all of a piece, the floor also benefited from the various runic arrays that Harry had etched into the central stone that had been sewn into it.

“It’s not going to get soaked through, that’s for certain. The whole sinking into the ground worry, though, that’s a definite possibility. Being open like this cancels out the enchantments on the yurt that lightens its weight. Drat. Hopefully there won’t be any kind of subsidence like that for a while, but it’s definitely something to be aware of.”

Luckily for the trio, the lightning at least began to fade as the day went on even if the rain kept hammering the ground as if it was an invading army. Precisely like an invading army, given the severe amount of change that it was causing to the ground that Versera reported later that day. There were indeed a few nearby rivers, although she didn’t go far enough to discover whether or not they linked up and became one river deeper in land. But the ground between those rivers was definitely becoming soggy enough to nearly cause her to sink up to her thighs.

“I recommend that we move on. The lightning seems to have faded away, and we should probably get out and away from this area.”

Harry nodded agreement while Recca looked a little miserable. Flying in this rain was not going to be pleasant at all. “Finish your breakfast and we can go.”

As Versera fell on the meal with an eagerness that would have shocked the dragoness before she had met Harry, Harry conjured up parkas for both him and Recca. He then shrunk Quetzal down into his necklace size and made various preparations inside the tent he needed to in order to secure items within it before taking it down and so he could store the entirety within its specially enlarged backpack.

An hour later, Versera joined them outside where she changed and immediately began to curse as her new size and weight drove the green dragon into the muddy ground several feet almost

instantly. While she continued to curse, Harry took down his yurt and put it in his pack, and Recca stood there looking a little miserable still in her parka.

Thankfully for her, Versera allowed the two of them to climb up onto her back instead of forcing them to try and fly through the heavy deluge. Even Harry, who, with his fiery wings was probably better able to fly in this than Recca could, was thankful for that. With Harry and Recca huddled on her back and both of them hit with warming charms from Harry, Versera was soon winging her way southward.

It took the better part of that day and well into the night to leave the storm behind them, but eventually, they found a high butte, a cylinder of solid rock sticking out of the ground four stories into the air, to settle down on for the rest of that night. How far they had come in that time Harry had no idea, but apparently, Versera did, as the moment the yurt had been erected again, she had gone inside, flopped into one of the beanbags, and begun to write out notes on a large pad of paper that was one of the few supplies she had taken from Trueshot Lodge.

"I think we might've left the most dangerous area for flooding and rain behind us at this point. Did you notice though, I haven't seen a single tree since well before night fell?" Versera questioned as she settled in. She had been doing this every night since they had left Ashenvale behind but hadn't been all that enthused about it in the mountains. Now, while it still seemed something of a chore to her, Versera took to it with a bit more enthusiasm.

Harry blinked at her remark but hadn't been able to notice anything. Yet while he and Recca had been in no position to observe their surroundings such things, Versera had been flying low enough to be able to scan the ground quite clearly. "That's interesting, but I'm more concerned about how far you think we've come."

When Versera actually gave him a firm number a moment later, he blinked and stared at her, but Versera simply chuckled. "One of the skills of a Cartographer is to be able to figure out distances based on your specific method of travel. I'm certain that Shial Farhoof could tell you precisely how many miles it takes to get from one end of Highmountain Valley to the other, for example, by how many steps it would take him to walk it."

Shial Farhoof had the rather odd distinction of being the only tauren in the Unseen Path who was a Cartographer rather than a Seeker. He was only a decade, if that, younger than Pathfinder Vurg. He had not had anything to do with Sylina or Harry's training and seemed to disdain both of them as being far too young more than anything else, so Harry hadn't really even spoken to him all that often, let alone taken lessons from the man.

"In the same way, I can tell you how many miles I've covered via my wing beats in various weather. I'll admit that in that kind of storm it isn't as precise as I would normally like, but it's certainly precise enough along with the various landmarks I was able to make out. Also recall

that making more accurate maps of the coastline down here is part of the reason why I came along with this mission.”

Harry nodded at that, almost tempted to ask for a lesson on mapmaking. Thanks to the parkas he had conjured up, he and Recca were relatively dry, and hadn’t really done much of anything throughout the day beyond ride Versera’s back.

But as Versera turned her attention back to her work and began to actually draw out a map, she also began to mutter under her breath. It wasn’t a normal thinking sort of mutter, rather, it was a cursed diatribe as her brow furrowed, and she ground her teeth in concentration on the various lines she was putting down one after another. It was very clear that while notetaking came to her easily, putting those notes into a map form did not. Even if the maps she’d previously created of the mountains were remarkably accurate from what Harry had seen, along with estimated elevations and other details.

Deciding to set that aside, Harry looked over at Recca. “Should we try some night hunting, or would you prefer we eat from our supplies and head to bed?”

Over the next few days, their travel fell into a new pattern. At Versera’s request, they would stop early in the day, just as the sun began to set in the distance, giving her more time with natural lighting to work on her maps, taking the notes she’d made the day before and putting them into map form, then going on later that evening to write out new ones. Meanwhile, Harry and Recca would hunt around for animals and fruit to add to their collection.

With the various spells Harry had gotten from *G’day Mate! Spells You Need to Get Through Your Day in the Outback* that Hermione had given him years before he ‘died’ in his old world, Harry was able to pick out what was edible and what wasn’t and found a surprising number of strange and unique tubers, although very few fruits. There were a few bushes that contained things that looked like gooseberries but tasted like tiny oranges which quickly became a favorite of both Recca and Harry, but that seemed to be it in terms of fruits, and removing the rind would have been incredibly difficult without opposable thumbs.

Most of the tubers came in different shapes and sizes yet when they taste-tested them, they didn’t taste very much different. Harry supposed that all of them came from the same single-family, although he still couldn’t figure out if they would be termed carrots or potatoes back on earth. Most of them had the same color as carrots but the taste was closer to a potato, while the consistency was like a daikon radish back on Earth. It was very odd, but Harry was still able to cook with them well enough and fried near-potatoes became a hit with both Recca and Versera.

Meanwhile, Quetzal was able to hunt up a few animals, mostly boars, voles, and other easily identifiable animals at first. Some were extremely unusual in terms of the number of claws and

eyes they had, but they were still generally speaking from the same breed. They also tasted the same and even could be cooked the same, save for one lemur-like critter which tasted like chicken to Harry's shock.

However, on their fifth day out from where they'd left behind the rainy basin, as Versera later called it, the three hunters also began to notice a difference in the terrain. The terrain here no longer had any trees or even bushes, shifting entirely into green grass interspersed with odd bits of heavy rock, granite mixed with quartz and iron sticking up out of the ground.

At the same time, visible water began to be an issue as well. Versera had a few spells of her own that could find water underneath the ground easily, but there weren't any streams or ponds here. Perhaps because of that, there weren't also a lot of animals and Quetzal's hunting prospects began to dry up.

By that, Recca, who was the first to notice this, meant that there weren't any large or mid-scale animals. "I haven't seen anything larger than a somewhat large burrower of some kind that disappeared into its hole before I could kill it. It's extremely strange. This area, even with the lack of standing or visible water, is incredibly nice, and should be home to a normal ecosystem," the harpy pointed out, looking a little proud as she used the last word which she had learned from her time studying in Trueshot Lodge.

"Actually, I've also seen a few watering holes deeper inland. For something like a wolf, it'd probably take something like half a day's travel, maybe?" Harry told her, shaking his head. "I headed in that direction as you followed the shoreline further south. You're right, there's more than enough space and hiding places thanks to those large mounds of rocks. Coyotes or hyenas would make a place like this their home easily back on earth."

"I know coyotes are what the Unseen Path call minor wolves, but what are hyenas?" Recca asked, causing Harry to chuckle and explain what they were.

This minor mystery was solved by Quetzal the next morning. While Recca and Harry had turned in early from their attempts to hunt Quetzal had spent the entire night out hunting and only now returned, looking haggard and somehow in pain in a way Harry would've had trouble putting into words considering the whole fact that he was a snake.

"Quetzal, what's wrong with you?" he demanded, hurrying to his friend.

Quetzal wiggled a little, his movements more of a spasm, and he stopped well away from them for a moment. As he did, Versera twitched backwards and away, almost reentering the yurt for a moment even though it had been half disassembled by that point. "What is that smell!?"

While not quite as keen as in her dragon form, Versera still had a far better nose than Harry, Recca, or any normal kaldorei, and right now she was cursing that fact. "What did you eat?!"

"I...urp..." Quetzal gagged, his wide mouth opening, his tongue not flicking but rather flopping out as he seemed to dry heave, something that snakes really shouldn't do. He then seemed to flop onto his side. Before Harry could resume heading towards him, Quetzal slithered onto his chest again, pushing his upper body upwards. "I think I've solved the mystery about why there are so few animals around here. Most of them are poisonous."

With that, he slumped back down with enough force for his head to bounce off the grassy ground, and Harry hustled forward, using yet another spell from that oh so helpful book to diagnose his companion. "Observatio Profunda."

Admittedly, Quetzal isn't the type of animal that spell was supposed to be used for, but this spell doesn't care. A second later, Quetzal was glowing a light blue color, the color deepening over his stomach.

"There's no orange emanating from you, so you're not in danger of dying Quetzal, which is a good thing, considering how you should actually be somewhat immune to most poisons. All I'm getting from this spell is that you're going to have a major stomachache."

"That would be correct yes" Quetzal answered, trying to regain some of his normal insouciance before slumping down onto the ground a loud groan coming from him as he passed wind. The gas was almost visible, but smelled even worse, causing Harry to gag and retreat.

"What do you mean when you say most of the animals around here are poisonous?"

"I mean precisely that!" Quetzal grumbled, closing his eyes and willing the world to stop spinning for a moment. "I was hungry and spent most of the night hunting as I told you I would. I tried seven different animals around here, and all of them were poisonous."

"Normally poisonous animals have a lot of color to them to warn off people eating them. I haven't seen anything like that," Harry protested as he recovered from his near-gas experience.

Recca snorted, deciding to make a joke even as she gently stroked one of her pinion feathers down Quetzal's back in commiseration. Harpies didn't have a very good sense of smell, and she didn't notice anything different about the giant snake. "So does that mean you think most harpies are poisonous? We're normally the brightest flying things around after all. Well, us, or rocs."

"You could say that advertisement is quite correct in all too many cases for your race," Harry retorted, causing Recca to grin. "As for rocs, they're just stupid, and the bright colors just make it easier to avoid dealing with them. I consider that a gift from nature itself."

"I understand what you're saying about poisonous animals Harry, and many species do also have verbal cues to warn off predators. But not all of them. Further, bright colors aren't always

indicated of poison,” Versera stated more seriously, before rattling off several species that were both bright colored and not poisonous, and other species that were known to be poisonous but didn’t have bright colors. “What did these animals look like?”

It turned out two of the animals that Quetzal had eaten the night before were among those that the Unseen Path knew about. The third wasn’t, and Versera had a groaning, moaning Quetzal described the creature several times as she put down notes on it. When she finished, she frowned a little, looking all around them then ahead along the shoreline that they were following to their left. They had kept it on the horizon in that direction the entire time, so that Versera could take notes of the shape of the shoreline and makeup of the geography there.

“I wonder how far this poison zone, I suppose we could call it, goes and how it came to be? Having so many poisonous animals in one area that they have basically forced out any mid to large scale predator is fascinating,” the transformed dragoness mused.

The ‘poison zone’ actually didn’t last all that long, much to the eventual chagrin of Harry and the others because what replaced it was worse, although at first, it didn’t seem to be so. Barely halfway through the day, the three flyers began to see fewer odd bits of heavy rock sticking out of the terrain below them and started to see fissures in the ground. A few of those fissures had water in them at the bottom, heading out towards the ocean, but not all of them.

Several of them were quite deep, with the bottoms so far down that even Versera couldn’t penetrate the gloom to see the bottom. Several times she flew along the length of such before landing and actually sticking her neck down into it before rejoining the other two. The makeup of the ground itself didn’t change much, becoming simple grass, interspersed with a few bushes here and there, with the lack of trees continuing, but those cracks were an oddity.

When they stopped that night, once more, Recca and Harry and Quetzal did not see any signs of even hyenas or coyotes, let alone any larger kind of predator. Not even mid- tier snakes, the next size smaller than Quetzal’s natural size, were visible here. However, a few of the animals that Quetzal and Recca found weren’t poisonous, so Versera decided they were coming to the end of the poison zone but hadn’t quite put enough distance between it and their current position to start seeing larger predators.

She was proven wrong quickly as for another day and a half they still didn’t see any signs of large-scale predators. This mystery would be solved late that night as the group settled down for a nice rest in Harry’s yurt.

The first who realized something was wrong was Versera. She was asleep to one side of the yurt on her own cot, which had been added to Harry’s hut back when the group had still been back at true Lodge. She didn’t actually like blankets all that much, and simply splayed out, either on

her chest or on her back. Harry had made a point of mentioning that he preferred when Versera was on her chest, because then she didn't seem to snore as much.

It had nothing to do with inadvertent glimpses of her body or anything like that. Versera's outfit, which she could seemingly change on a whim, always became loose flannel-like pajamas top and bottom when she went asleep, covering her entirely without even a hint of cleavage. She still had a good deal of bounce to her, but that thankfully wasn't as prevalent when she was on her cot.

Regardless, telling Versera she snored had earned Harry a smack which had sent him to the ground with a neck so bruised that it had forced him to use a Healing Stream Totem on himself. Despite that, and Versera's insistence she didn't snore, Harry's observations were quite accurate, hence why he, Quetzal, and Recca all wore earmuffs that Harry had made over their journey from bits of fur and leather from the animals they'd added to their larder. Given the fact Harry's yurt was covered by a Notice Me Not array, there was no danger of being attacked while they were asleep, so the mufflers didn't matter in terms of needing to be aware of danger.

Tonight, Versera grumbled, shifting this way and that in her sleep, trying to get comfortable. But it didn't work, and Versera gradually began to feel as if something was shifting on the bed beside her, followed by the sensation of something touching her pajama-covered leg. Then something else touched her chest as she shifted from her side onto her back.

Still asleep, Versera struck out at whatever it was. For a second, the transformed dragoness felt something like fur but not quite underneath her palm before whatever it was became squished. The feeling of wetness on her chest caused her to slowly wake up, just as she felt other things starting to touch her while her pillow moved slightly under someone else touching it. Blinking, she looked to the side of her pillow, only for her eyes to widen as she stared into the multifaceted eyes of a spider around the size of her head minus the ears.

Versera's response was immediate and came from some deep cross-dimensional connection between all women everywhere when faced with something small and creepy crawly. "EEEEKK!" She shrieked, raising a hand rapidly and smacking the spider away with such force that it disintegrated in midair, painting the side of the yurt in green goo and bits of spider flesh.

In doing so, she had dislodged another spider from her arm, and looking down in shock she found others crawling on her back, rear, and leg.

"AH, get it off, get them off!" Versera yelled, legs flailing, sending two of the spiders flying, before she rolled, crushing another one beneath her. Another spider by her foot dodged her initial thrashing and then tried to bite down on her big toe, getting nowhere, thankfully.

While Versera's current form looked somewhat like a stumpy kaldorei, that was only on the surface. Versera had never seen the point of making her kaldorei form or even clothing as squishy as the normal kaldorei, and so her skin, along with her transformed clothing, acted more like the armor of her regular body than actual flesh in many ways. She felt the impact of the spider's fangs, but they couldn't penetrate, and the next second, that creature ceased to exist as her foot flicked out, hitting its body with enough force to cause it to explode.

Quetzal was the next to feel the creepy crawlies all over him as Versera jumped up onto her bed, kicking out at another creature. Unlike Versera though, when several of the spiders bit into him, they actually did damage, and he woke up with a hissing fury. "What is... spiders!?"

Several of the spiders were on his back, and this proved to be a disastrous position for them as he almost unconsciously launched his quills, the quills slamming into the creatures with enough force to bury themselves deeply into the far smaller spiders, all of whom were almost instantly paralyzed. Their sizes ranging from the size of a toenail all the way up to one of Harry's hands with a few being even larger, with the larger ones being the only ones who didn't die or were immediately paralyzed by Quetzal's quills.

It didn't matter though, as none of them were strong enough to not be crushed by Quetzal's convulsions. Soon, he was liberally covered in spider gunk, and hissing in fury reared and tossing off the pair of mufflers he had been wearing previously. "What is going on! Harry, Recca, wake up!"

While most of the noise was still not getting through to them, Recca and Harry slowly came to, with Recca squawking and kicking out at a spider that had just crawled up her talon. She had initially been safe from them because she had her own little perch set into the far side of the yurt from the entryway between a few of the shelves that Harry used to store ingredients in. However, several spiders had climbed up those shelves, and now leaped on her from either side, fangs extended.

"GAHHH!" Recca hastily beat them back with her wings, but two of them were able to cling to her feathers for a second, trying to bite into the flesh underneath. They weren't able to before she shook them off, but another was able to bite at her leg before she could shift it away. The gristle and bone there didn't allow the spider to bite very deeply, but almost instantly, Recca started to feel a little woozy.

Unlike Harry and Quetzal, she had no built-in immunity to and just that one bite was enough to cause her to droop. Another landed on her shoulder, And before Recca could bite it or shake it off, the jumping spider's fangs sank deeply into her collarbone. Instantly, the venom within began to spread, and as she twitched hard enough to send it away, Recca felt her body spasming, sending her sprawling off her perch.

Seeing that, Quetzal instantly moved to cover her with his body, as Harry finally woke up. He woke up to the sight of a spider about the size of his head crouching on his upper chest, fangs gleaming. It tried to bite him, but Harry reared his head back out of range, then headbutted the spider quickly, sending it toppling off of him, even as Harry kicked off his blanket, sending several other spiders off of his bed at the same time. His covers had saved him from being bitten up to this point, the spiders seemingly not realizing how thin his blanket was.

Wide awake and now aware of the danger, Harry called on his basilisk side. Covering his body in the scales from head to toe, this turned his fingers into lethal weapons, as fangs began to grow in his mouth.

Rolling off the bed, Harry hissed, and all of the spiders in the yurt froze, twitching around to stare at him, and Harry chuckled darkly. He remembered an adventure he'd had back on Earth, specifically the one in his second year, when he and Ron Weasley had gone into the Forbidden Forest in search of the giant spider Aragog in an effort to discover what the monster of slithering was.

"For the enemy of all spiders is the basilisk," he hissed, smashing the creature that still clung to his chest, despite his violent movements, into paste, then launching himself from his bed. The enclosed space meant that he didn't really want to use any spells for fear of hitting his companions, but thanks to his basilisk side, that didn't mean he was without recourse.

At his sudden movements, the spiders quickly got over their momentary paralysis. Most of them started to retreat towards the doorway, fleeing in droves, but the larger spiders, the ones the size of Harry's hand or larger stayed, launched themselves not towards Harry but towards his companions. They were able to overcome the instinctual, bone deep fear of the basilisk in them to stay and kill, but not enough to actually attack Harry in turn.

In response, Harry canceled the shrinking charge on Quetzal as he moved to protect the downed Recca. Instantly, Quetzal began to grow and grow to the point where he almost filled the entire yurt before Harry redid the shrinking spell to a certain degree, halting his growth in place. Now every movement that Quetzal did crushed spiders and shifted furniture around, to the point where he actually crushed a few of the plates and knocked over the cooking equipment by the fire pit, before pushing Versera's bed against the far wall, the movement of it almost causing Versera to topple off the bed where she had stood up, the better to lash out with kicks at any spiders coming her way.

At that point realizing the battle, if battle indeed could be called at the moment, was over, Versera's inquisitive nature came back to her. "I want at least one of them intact Harry! I've never seen spiders like this before!"

“Really? Large spiders aren’t exactly that unusual,” Harry said, using a stupefy for a moment on one spider that he had been about to squash with his foot. He leaned down, picked it up, and set it on top of one of the shelves, then went back to squishing the others with a certain amount of relish. *Although I could do without my basilisk instincts trying to warn me about how much good eating I’m wasting by squishing them,* he reflected ruefully.

“They aren’t, but this many spiders and all of them working together is highly unusual,” Versera rejoined, before going on coldly, “And I thought your wards would keep any kind of creepy crawlies away!”

“It never occurred to me to add spiders into the anti-bug array. Most spiders leave humans or kaldorei alone, and large spiders are intelligent enough to be impacted by the Notice Me Not ward,” Harry admitted as he tossed down a Healing Stream totem. *Learning how to make and empower those totems is easily among the top five things I learned among the tauren.*

“Evidently, these spiders somehow fall between the cracks. Not quite smart enough to be warded off like animals or enemies and not included in the anti-bug wards. I’ll figure out a way to solve that problem in the future, don’t worry.”

“Good, because I do not wish to wake up to a face full of spider again,” she grumbled, squishing the last of the large spiders within the yurt.

Muttering imprecations to himself Quetzal slithered outside, as Harry moved to help Recca up onto her perch again and Versera turned her attention to the intact spider that Harry had stunned. She first killed it with a simple pin straight through the head. Watching for a second, Harry noticed how her eyes seemed to change to more resemble that of her dragon body for a moment as she examined it with her magical and purely draconic senses.

At that point, Harry had to turn his attention to the mess that the spiders had made of the interior of his home. Sighing faintly began to use scouring charms, clearing the yurt of intestines and bug bits a yard at a time. *I’ll also need to use an air cleaning spell to get rid of the smell.*

Recca was fully recovered by the time he was finished with that and Versera looked up from where she had been dissecting the creature. “Well, these spiders are somewhat unusual. They have more sensilla than most spiders do, while their eyes don’t seem to be nearly as strong as a normal spider, especially not scaled up to this large a size. Their ability to sense movement is far more acute however, which is interesting. Their jaws and mandibles are also very interesting. They don’t just suck up their victim’s innards like most spiders do, these spiders have small curving teeth on the interior of their mouths that are made to tear out flesh. Their spinnerets are also smaller for some reason than they should be for their size.”

"How nice," Harry said sarcastically. "Yet another new species for you to catalog for the library. You'll excuse me if I'm quite a bit more interested in ways to keep them out in the future than anything that might set them aside from other members of their species."

"Completely understandable," Versera said, frowning a little. "But the... the internal construction of these creatures, they remind me of something. They are not however touched by either the Old Gods Taint or the Fel magic of the Burning Legion. I thought at first they might be, given how doggedly they attempted to attack us. But if there's any sign of the Old Gods being involved, it's too small or perhaps too far back in terms of generations for me to see it. Almost like the rapier wasps. Although unlike them, this species hasn't been categorized before."

"Where did they come from?" Recca said, brushing one wing along the other and then back again convulsively. The feeling of those spiders attempting to jump onto her wings, to crawl up her talons, was not one that was going to go away quickly. "I didn't notice any spider's webs or nests while I was hunting earlier. And if either of you think that I'm going to go back to sleep tonight you are gravely mistaken."

"Agreed. I think once you finish up with that spider we should move on, Versera. But at least a few more leagues between us and here before setting up camp again," Harry answered firmly. "It won't take me long to set up the anti-bug ward to keep spiders out as well as mosquitoes, gnats and tics." Harry could wish that there was a one-size-fits-all array to do so, but spiders did not fall under the normal anti-bug ward's purview, something Harry hadn't realized before this.

"Mostly done. I just want to examine the poison and take a few samples of it," Versera said, turning back to her work. "And then, I might be feeling a little peckish."

Harry rolled his eyes at that, thinking internally that Versera was getting a little spoiled when it came to food, especially when he considered what the others among the Unseen Path had told him about how often dragons ate along with their dietary needs. Regardless, he wasn't going to argue.

It took Harry about an hour to modify the anti-bug ward to keep out spiders as well, by which time Versera had finished writing down the notes she'd taken on the spider, and had also put a sample of the venom the spider used into a flask which was put into one of her expanded pouches after being wrapped with leather to make certain that the glass didn't break.

Harry could've used an impervious charm on the glass, but such charms didn't last very long once the item was put into an expanded pouch. For some reason the background magic of the pouch itself seemed to eat away at spells like that. Thus, It was better to be safe than sorry, and Versera had used similar covers before to protect glassware when taking samples of this or that plant along this journey.

The trio exited the yurt, and with Recca off to find Quetzal, Harry and Versera turned their attention to dismantling his home for a moment, putting it away in its special pack. As she worked alongside Harry on that task, Versera kept on glancing around, her eyes narrowed.

There is something here, something deep, but I cannot tell if it is Tainted or Fel-touched, Versera thought to herself, seeing no reason to share what were but vague impressions and feelings at the edge of her senses. *I would say that it feels more in common with the creations of the Old Gods as I theorized when I examined that spider, but its specific presence is so buried I can't get more from it than the feeling being unusual and unknown to me.*

I... why does that in conjunction with the spiders remind me of something. Something that I read in the library at Trueshot Lodge? No... no something I heard once, maybe? But what it is, I have no idea.

Shaking those thoughts off, Versera kept on helping Harry then, when they finished transformed into her dragon form. With Harry joining her in the air in his phoenix form, the pair flew around until they found Quetzal still slithering through the grass. Despite it having been several hours since the needlespine shimmerback left them, Quetzal was still irritated with everything and looking for something to eat or fight, with no real preference between either choice.

"I cannot get the smell of those spiders out of my nostrils no matter how hard I try! Their poison also didn't do much to me other than make me feel as if my scales are ready for another molting, which they very much should not be!" Quetzal complained. "I also have to inform you that I have discovered several small but incredibly dense pockets of spiderwebs all around this area. Lots of them."

"Well, we're leaving this area behind, so that hardly matters. As for the smell and the itchy feeling, let me hit you with a Scourgify. We'll see if that helps with the itching, and then maybe one of my prank spells can actually be turned to good for the moment and conjure a nice smell to overpower the spider smell," Harry snickered, while Recca scowled, angry at the fact she had missed such signs from the sky.

Quetzal found that agreeable, and although the itching sensation didn't fade away entirely, the spell did get rid of most of it. Similarly, Harry's prank, which he had routinely used to conjure up bad smells when he had gone pranking against his fellow magic students among the tauren, filled Quetzal's nostrils with the smell of flowers and grass instead of the spider smell that had dominated it previously.

"Do any of you think you'll be able to spot those spider nests from the air?" Versera asked, frowning a little as Harry rejoined herself and Recca in the air. "I've been looking around and I can't see any of them."

That made Recca feel better, and Quetzal shook his head sinuously from side to side from where he sat in Harry's breast pocket. When he spoke, Harry had to relay his words to the others, considering how low Quetzal's volume was thanks to his current size. "Which you should be able to. There are at least six of them around where you spotted me."

This meant that the next time they set down after putting several leagues between them and their former position, Quetzal was sent to scout around for a time. However he came back quickly, reporting that he did find still more spiders, although given the spider guts that once more covered his body his actual words on that score were unnecessary.

As Harry cleaned him off, Quetzal continued, speaking about a trench of some kind the likes of which they'd been seeing for the past few days. "It's not the biggest such trench I've seen, but it might be one of the deepest, though I certainly wasn't going to check. Its sides are completely covered with spider nests, and those... What do you call them, when spiders wrap prey in their webbing?"

"Cocoon maybe?" Recca mused, still scowling at how well the spider webs hid from her sight from above.

"That, yes. There are lots of those around that area. I can't tell if they are for prey, or for eggs, but I do not think either way it is a good idea to linger around here."

"Then we keep going until tomorrow night," Recca stated firmly. "I want us to put at least a dozen leagues between us and this spider-controlled land. If I ever see a spider again I am going to claw first, ask questions never!"

Thankfully, Quetzal reported a clean area when they finally set down early the next afternoon. Stopping earlier would give Quetzal time to find a body of water and get rid of the itching sensation he had complained continually about despite Harry's spellwork. Recca would also appreciate some time to sleep while Versera worked on her notes and maps.

Recca decided to head towards a nearby rocky outcropping, wanting to do a little bit of hunting as well as sleep in the sunlight rather than in the yurt, enjoying the sensation of sunlight on her wings. This left Versera and Harry alone, something both of them were aware of, although neither indicated that to one another.

While Harry had been aware from the first that Versera's kaldorei form, despite its shortness in comparison to most kaldorei, was incredibly attractive, Versera had gone to some lengths to not to react to Harry. His basilisk side's impact on his body was quite large to her senses though, especially after the night before given how he had called upon his basilisk side to deal with the spiders.

That was giving Versera issues at present adding to his basic presence, the feeling of powerful masculinity that Harry gave off. Despite some baser urges to the contrary, though, Harry wasn't about to act on those base instincts, for many reasons. While she didn't find it entirely reprehensible for dragons to take lovers among tauren or kaldorei, (or, more often than not these days, greens and blues among the high elves from what little gossip spread among her people about such things) as many dragons did, she also wasn't about to act on a base physical reaction like that. Courtship among dragons was a slow, drawn out and very delicate affair of many centuries, and Versera was definitely not the type to have physical relationships without a romantic connotation added to them. Which was something she was very much not interested in.

Despite her best efforts though, her body did start to react to the presence of a very powerful male, calling to her basest instincts. This showed in her kaldorei form in a way that Versera didn't actually recognize.

Harry did, although he didn't know the reason why Versera's nipples were so incredibly hard right now underneath her shirt. Worse, after the past few days, he was more than aware that Versera's kaldorei form had kept his libido going overtime. Almost to the point where he had on occasion wondered if he should take matters into his own hand, so to speak. However, he never actually had time on his own alone, not where one of the others couldn't see him anyway. And unfortunately, calming down his libido is not something either of his chimeric forms was able to help Harry with, nor was he the best at using Occlumency to do so.

Because of this, the silence between them was a little bit awkward for a time as they both worked on their tasks before Harry finished and headed outside to go hunting. He came back a moment later with a report that he'd found a small stream heading into the ocean and had already taken a moment to bathe.

"Ooh, goody!" With that, Versera set aside her work, hopping to her feet gleefully. While Harry had also hit her with a Scourgify she still didn't feel clean, although she had ignored that feeling up to this point. But now with an actual bath on offer, she gleefully accepted with both hands. So did Recca when she returned, and even Quetzal. By the time it was lunchtime, everyone was feeling far, far better about things than they had at any point during the night and rather than return to her work, Versera joined Harry and Recca in a game of Chinese checkers.

Harry had made the game board at one point when living among the tauren. It had been a hit among them, and among a few of the kaldorei among the unseen path when he introduced it to them in turn. The harpies also got a kick out of it, especially when the marbles were large enough for them to pick up with their talons, although it would never replace quidditch as their favorite game.

The four of them spent the rest of that day taking it easy, joking, talking, and playing games, generally recuperating from the spidery surprise, before finally, and somewhat reluctantly, retreating into the yurt for the night. Luckily for everyone, Harry's addition to his anti-bug array worked perfectly, or perhaps there were simply no more spiders around as Recca had driven them to put enough space between them and where the spiders had attacked them.

After an easy day and a night of uninterrupted sleep, all of them were happy and willing to push forward when the sun rose again.

As they put more distance between themselves and the spiders, the ground began to change underneath them, becoming rockier as the shoreline curved westward slowly. Fissures and crevices in the ground gave way to a series of still pools, around which small but thriving areas of green dotted an otherwise rocky, sandy landscape.

It was here that they ran into their first organized danger in the form of a flock of harpies. Several flying birds in the distance resolved themselves into harpies as the trio continued to follow the shoreline and as the harpies spotted Versera, they quickly raced away and down, spooked and possibly even outright terrified at the sight of a flying dragon coming their way.

However, any hope that Versera's presence would keep the harpy flock away faded as their flight seemingly took them into the center of the harpy's domain. "I see about three or four dozen harpies coming up off of the ground somewhere ahead of us," Versera reported idly. "Odd, I would've thought that the area around here was too flat for harpies to enjoy, although with the ocean so close I guess they could go fishing."

"Certainly my flock wouldn't want to live in an area like this," Recca admitted. "It's got enough water, and I've spotted a few gazelle the last few leagues, oh, and no, my race are not good fisherwomen, we're too slow to take anything small and big fish tend to swim too deep for us to get at. This area's also far too flat, and I don't see any place where we would be able to set up a safe area for our nests."

Harpies were good fighters, to be sure, but they were best at ambush, at hit and run attacks. They couldn't sustain a drawn-out battle against a prepared enemy, not one that had any ranged capability, anyway. Being pinned in place to defend their nests against enemies, sentient or bestial, who could reach them, like they could in this area, would be a nightmare.

"Maybe they are just moving through?" Harry mused, as the harpies in the distance began to wing their way towards them.

"That's possible," Recca admitted. "Although now that we're getting closer to where those harpies flew up from, I'm seeing a lot more mounds of droppings than I would if that was the case."

“Noted, also something I’m very thankful you’ve not done near us at any point on this trip,” Versera snorted, a bit of fire coming from her mouth and nose as she prepared her second stomach, the stomach that housed a dragon’s flames, for battle. “If you had done so or worse gone to the bathroom on me I would have instantly discovered how you tasted when charred black.”

“Terrifying, but understandable,” Recca snickered back before starting to curse. Harry looked ahead of them too and sighed in agreement as she went on. “Well, there goes any hope for a peaceful solution.”

As the harpies closed, it had become instantly clear that this flock was also touched by demonic magic like the harpy flock Harry and Recca fought in the mountains. All of their eyes glowed the baleful fiery green of the Fel, and while none of the harpies within sight had skin the fiery red color the matriarch of the last group of harpies they’d run into had, but more than one of them had a distinctly reddish tint to their skins which became as visible as the fires in their eyes as they closed. But even stranger to Harry, they showed absolutely no fear of Versera and came on, hurling out the typical green fireballs of those who had looked to demons for power.

Harry and Recca dodged as a few fireballs came their way, but the majority had been sent towards Versera. Instantly, Versera breathed in and exhaled a stream of fire of her own, intercepting the fireballs coming her way and overcoming them easily.

“Why aren’t they afraid of you?” Harry shouted, exceptionally confused at what was going on right now, even as he continued to dodge what few magical attacks were coming his way.

Many of those attacks stopped as the harpies both heard his voice and saw him close up for the first time. Just like the harpies before, they were stunned by the sight of a male harpy, but this time, neither Recca nor Harry were in the mood to even try to talk. Before they could get over their shock most of the harpies who had attacked him were dead, bits of them falling to the ground after having been sliced in half by several cutting spells or exploded by Reductos.

“What, do you think that all creatures are simply automatically afraid of us dragons?” Versera questioned as she lashed out at one harpy which had closed with her quickly from above, its talons lined with green fire. A single claw was enough to shred the harpy in half, before another three of them were engulfed in another fireball.

“No, but I would’ve assumed that harpies were at least intelligent enough to know what a dragon is and thus understand they don’t have much of a chance against one!” Harry said, feeling a bit of guilt as one of the younger harpies he’d seen since leaving Cassandra’s flock dove down on him, her eyes bright green with Fel magic. To see someone so young-seeming and yet so corrupted was quite shocking and more than a little horrifying.

But Harry ignored that for now, rolling away to one side as the youngster flew through his previous position. Before she could turn, which again showed her immaturity and lack of experience, Harry removed the girl's head from her shoulders with a spell making her death as painless as he possibly could.

The next few harpies weren't so lucky, as Harry was able to hear their shrieks of "Capture him, capture him for mating! A real male, a male of our species, he must be special, must give us his seed!" over the tumult of battle. Instead, his own Incendio flashed over both of them, turning the pair of harpies into rapidly falling pyres in midair.

"They might be, but harpies are just as territorial as they are mean-spirited a lot of the time, no offense, Recca. I think were flying directly over their nests by this point, so even if they know to fear me, they can't fight their territorial instincts enough to just hide as I fly by, especially since they don't seem to have any chicks or eggs," Versera said, both apologetic towards Recca, and somewhat amused about the fact that these harpies simply didn't have any ability to harm her whatsoever. Even on her own, Versera could've slaughtered the entire flock.

With Harry and Recca, the battle simply ended quicker, with none of them taking any injuries.

"I can't say that I am happy about how many of my fellow harpies I've had to kill since coming back to Kalimdor, but I can't fault you or Harry for defending yourselves, Versera," Recca said, sighing sadly and grateful that her metal-covered talons had meant that none of the blood of her fellow harpies had actually gotten onto her feathers.

Recca had only killed four other harpies, which was almost beside the point in comparison to Versera, or even Harry in this fight. A lot of this harpy flock had seemingly been her own age or even younger and killing such had not sat well with her. She understood the necessity, and the fact that, once they had partaken of Fel magic, they would never be able to become wholly sane again, but even so.

"I think we need to make a point to try and stop such fights from occurring. If we could have avoided this one by going eastward for example, I would've done it before we realized these were all Fel-touched. There have to be other harpies out there somewhere that haven't been exposed to the taint or to demonic magic," Harry agreed. "I'm not expecting us to find someone else like Cassandra, an ancient who has lived since the days of Aviana and kept the majority of her flock from going insane or seeking out sources of dark magic, but still."

"Small families who have gone their own way, who shift from one tribe to another as we did, or even bonded pairs who have struck out on their own could merely be wild and feral rather than corrupted," Recca agreed.

Despite their voices making it so that even talking to one another was often quite painful for the harpies, they were a very social race which greatly preferred to be in groups of fifteen at the very least. Larger flocks like the ones they just massacred routinely numbered in the upper forties, with the group that they had fought in the mountains having had at least a hundred or more harpies following the single matriarch into soul-deep damnation.

"I'm willing to hold fire until they attack me," Versera said, her long neck moving in a sinuous draconic version of a shrug. "That should let you get close enough for you to converse with. Although I would say, Harry, that if we do meet harpies that are not noticeably tainted one way or the other, your Songbird spell should be the very first thing we use."

Recca nodded agreement of that, and Harry nodded his own understanding to the point. Even fighting harpies as they shouted and screeched at you was quite difficult at times given the sheer nails-on-chalkboard-times-a-hundred impact that their voices could have on the unwary. It would also be a tremendous sign of peace for any harpies they met that didn't automatically start attacking them. But even then Harry knew that it would be tough going to convince any harpies not to harm them. Even harpies that hadn't searched out sources of magic in order to fill that void of emptiness in their souls left by Avian had devolved to the point that they were nearly wild and feral as beasts like the wyverns.

That, however, did not mean that they couldn't be reasoned with. *With a sufficient show of force backing up any overtures of peace, anyway*, Harry thought ruefully.

The shoreline curved back east soon after that, proving the segment where they'd met the harpies had been a small cove. Near the end the land beneath them became easily the largest beach like area that Harry had yet to see in this world. In fact, it was almost idyllic, with literal acres of sand leading down into the ocean, backed by grassland and a few scattered rivers, smaller than the first river they had seen ages ago, but bigger than most of the ones they had seen since.

When they passed by the third such river, Versera looked towards the West. "It's almost a certainty that these rivers lead into one another deeper in land. I'm going to head in that direction for a bit."

"I'll send Tricksy out to lead you to us if you don't find us before we land for the evening," Harry agreed equitably. That method of communication, along with a Patronus to first find Versera, had worked to guide the dragoness to them before.

Nor did Harry have any concerns Versera would meet anything beyond another dragon that could bother her, or even Harry, really. The fight with the harpies, and before them the wyverns had been somewhat dangerous but not overmuch, and a large portion of the danger had been because it was happening so high above the mountains. Here, where Harry could set down and

use totems, his spells and Quetzal to greater effect, he figured they wouldn't run into anything too difficult until they ran into the trouble that Tyrande's visions had warned them of. *Well, she might meet another dragon, but anything smaller than that I think she could handle.*

However, he very clearly did not say anything of the sort allowed. *Thinking such things is fine. Saying them aloud is tempting fate.* This time, though, Versera came back quickly, rejoining them within a bare few turns of the glass.

The journey continued, and it was nearly time for them to set down when they left behind the amazing beach front area. A storm came up that night, but it didn't remain when dawn broke, and the group moved on for four more days, leaving behind the final bits of sand. Now, the land below and to the west everything was covered now by a simple grassy plain.

Staring out at it from beside his yurt, it reminded Harry of pictures he'd seen of the American heartland. Or at least, he thought that had been the term used: wide areas in the center of America that had been dominated by Native Americans who roamed the area on horseback at the time the picture had been set in.

Then again, it was in a kids book, so he wasn't really certain about anything. In fact he was mildly surprised that he could still bring that picture up in his mind thanks to his Occlumency considering how many decades it'd been since he'd read that book.

"Mind you, I can't remember any of the actual words that went with the picture, so take that how you will," he said to Versera as she set up a small chair for herself to one side of where the yurt had been, along with a desk she had bought in Danaviea, her drawing implements out in front of her. The frustrated look on her face was somewhat fetching, as was the view she was inadvertently giving him down her shirt at present, hence Harry's decision to linger rather than get on with pulling down his tauren-style tent.

"Your mental discipline is quite fascinating Harry. Although the warnings you've given me about it, about locking in bad memories and trauma, is very definitely a deep concern," Versera said almost absentmindedly as she set up her notes on one side to refer to.

Despite them stopping every evening rather than pushing until it was fully dark, Versera had been falling behind in terms of the actual maps she was making as they had gone along. How much that had to do with Harry and Recca's presence or the opportunity to play games with them at night pulled her away from her work, Versera wasn't about to say. But that morning, she had told Harry and Recca that she would be staying behind for a bit to try to catch up. Notes were all well and good but changing them from mere notes into map form while the images of what they had been seeing were still prevalent in her mind was far easier than going back and doing it later.

Versera looked up once she had her notes and tools where she wanted them, and while she did notice Harry's eyes had dipped a little too low in his face to be looking at her own, she said nothing about it. While she had no real interest in pursuing a romantic relationship, or even a physical one with someone who wasn't a dragon despite how masculine and powerful his presence was to her senses, she had no problem with him looking. "I would be very, very leery of your teaching that discipline to anyone, Harry, especially one of my people. And always remind them of the downsides that you personally have run into crafting your own mental realm."

Harry nodded ruefully. "Yeah, I certainly wouldn't want anyone to go through my own first so-called lessons in that discipline, even if they had Master Cenarius's aid to look forward to afterward. I still think that his help would've been much more beneficial to a kaldorei or a dragon than a human."

Versera made a disagreeing noise. "Oh do not even think about it. My folk are far too instinctual, far too passionate, if in very odd ways about things for Occlumency to do any good for many of us." She looked past his shoulder then, smiling faintly before shouting a louder voice, so loud that Harry actually took a step back, "And here comes the sore loser!"

"I am not a sore loser!" Recca shouted back, her voice sounding so annoyed that it almost sounded as screechy as a normal harpies voice was naturally. She landed a second later, having been out on patrol around them while Harry had been taking down his yurt after removing the desk and heavy cushion for Versera. "You just cheated!"

"I most certainly did not," Versera scoffed, crossing her arms under her prodigious chest, causing Harry's eyes to first widen, then snap shut as he turned away slightly. This time Versera didn't notice, simply smirking over at Recca. "Just because you can't bluff for the life of you doesn't mean I'm a cheater. I knew you were going to go for my Royal card and had kept that Reverse in reserve since the first deal."

Having gotten bored of Chinese checkers, Versera had introduced Harry and Recca to a kaldorei game of cards called high houses, a game of cards that, in Harry's opinion, was both far too convoluted to be fun, and had more in common with low-key medieval warfare than anything else. The game, which had a deck that Versera had apparently brought from Trueshot Lodge along with her writing supplies and had two hundred and fifty unique cards and eighty doubles in it, followed rules that Harry could barely follow even with his Occlumency, and a goal that more resembled that of Uno than anything else.

The only saving grace to the game in his opinion was that the rounds, as determined by going around the circle of players twice and then needing to get rid of half of the cards in your hand

and be dealt new ones to replace them, were limited to twenty. Thus games didn't last very long, although Recca had, oddly, taken to the game quite quickly.

How much of that had to do with the fact that she had won the first two games thanks to getting several good rounds in a row that allowed her to wipe out Versera quickly Harry wasn't about to say. Since then however, the two of them had taken to enjoying the card game every night before heading to bed, and to say that the card games got a bit bloody was an understatement. In Harry's opinion, if either Versera or Recca had been a kaldorei leading a noble house during the kaldorei's Imperial era, they might well have started civil wars.

Shaking his head, Harry held up his hand between them while in his pocket, he Quetzal hissed in amusement. "Ladies, you're both pretty. By which I mean, I think you both cheat equally."

Which was, oddly, part of the game, at least according to Versera. It was a very Slytherin sort of game, in Harry's opinion. *Or maybe Versera is just a very Slytherin sort of person given how often she's come up with new little rules occasionally to throw me off my game*, he thought to himself in annoyance, ignoring the fact that Recca had seemingly been able to almost always react better to the 'new' rules than he could.

Along with the fact that Quetzal, the few times he had tried to play the game, played very well with his cold-blooded logic and cool assessment of every hand. Despite not having hands let alone opposable thumbs to hold the cards, perforce making Harry help him with a conjured hard holder. That had been a tricky bit of conjuration considering the need to let Quetzal use his mouth to manipulate it and the cards.

"For now however, the days' getting on. Given how we haven't seen much besides grass for a few days, you probably won't be hard-pressed to find us later, but I'll send Trickxy and a Patronus to lead you to us if it becomes dark out before you do," he said to Versera, before transforming into his half-phoenix form. "Or if we spot something interesting and go deeper inland, whichever comes first."

He stretched his wings out to either side, luxuriating in the feel of the sun above. While his time with Cenarius and Tyrande had caused him to enjoy being up during the night, Harry's phoenix side had awoken in him a true joy in the feel of sunlight on his feathers. "Let's be off."

Leaving Versera there sitting on her soft cushion in front of her table, an incredibly incongruous site among the empty grassland all around them, Harry flapped his wings and ascended into the air. Recca followed him, still glaring balefully down at Versera for a few seconds, before catching up to Harry as the pair headed further south.

Around midday, Recca spotted movement to their west. Shouting this out to Harry, she turned in that direction and the pair shifted their course. They hadn't seen anything to add to their

larder in the last three days bigger than small wild boars about the size of three heads put together, and while Harry had found enough tubers and fruits to help that aspect of their diet, more meat was always a nice thing to have, especially fresh.

That first hint of movement turned out to be a lone gazelle, but before they came close enough to start hunting it, someone else already had. Recca watched as an arrow came out from the tall grass without any prior warning, slamming into the side of the gazelle's neck with enough force to push it up and onto its side, the strike killing it instantly.

A moment later, two tauren rose from out of the tall grass, having hidden themselves extremely well, leather and bits of grass having concealed their presence to Recca and Harry. They moved towards their kill, and Recca hovered in the air to the side and above watching for a second before looking over to Harry. "Do you think we should make contact? If tauren are in the area, they can surely tell us about the terrain ahead of us. Given my presence, though, and what you look like currently, I don't know if it's a good idea."

"I think we should pull back, then I'll land, transform, and head in this direction while you remain as an eye in the sky." That term didn't need any explanation thankfully and Harry went on. "While the tauren here might be wary of strangers, they'll certainly be friendlier to a member of a race they haven't seen yet rather than a harpy."

Unfortunately for Harry and Recca, the two tauren that had come out to start carving up the dead gazelle were not the only ones in the area.

This was proven a second later as an arrow sped up from directly below Harry. It struck his leg, causing him to hiss in pain, and to nearly lose control of his wings for a second as more than a dozen other arrows flashed up towards Harry and Recca. Two caught Harry on the chest, bouncing off his rune-enhanced armor, but as Harry hadn't done much in terms of crafting armor for her, Recca found herself struck in several places by them, particularly her legs. Only one hit her in the midsection, causing her to cry out in pain and start to tumble out of the air.

"Recca!" Harry shouted, hitting her with a Leviosa that kept her in the air for a second before he raced down towards where the shots had come from. "Quetzal, get ready to land!"

A dozen tauren had flung off their extremely effective cloaks and now took the two harpies under fire from directly below and to all sides of them, the minotaurs pulling back on their massive bows with the ease of blooded warriors. It was obviously an ambush, one that the tauren had possibly put in place the moment they had seen something flying in the air, and Harry cursed himself for his negligence.

They hadn't yet run into anyone who could hide so well prior to this, and Harry had become complacent in the idea that they, as flyers, would be able to spot anyone trying to set up an

ambush before they could get into position. That was very obviously not the case here, and Harry resolved to remember that going forward even as he dove down towards the ground, a wide-angle stunning spell flashing out all around him and into the tauren below.

“We are not your enemies!” He shouted, as around half of the tauren fell to his spell work, their eyes rolling back in their heads and collapsing. Despite that, Harry was forced to wing his way upward to avoid another round of arrows from the remainder.

One of them hurled a totem into the ground, an anti-magic totem that absorbed Harry’s next stupefy spell. It couldn’t absorb the cutting spell Harry sent directly at it, overpowering the anti-magic properties on the totem easily, the next second, though.

Harry was then on the ground, and transforming, even as two tauren charged him, both armed with double-ended war staves. The massive axe heads at either end swung for Harry’s skull and one of them got close enough to make Harry duck away but was then blasted off his feet by a touch based Stupefy spell. The second one dove away, letting another Tauren launch a spear at him, which Harry was forced to duck under.

Several of the initial tauren that had been struck by his spell had been woken up by the same tauren who had hurled the totem down, and that Tauren now lashed out towards Harry with a Thunderstorm spell. Harry’s shield however absorbed the spell, including the knockback effect, and the next moment, he had tossed Quetzal to the ground, enlarging the snake to his full size as he shouted, “Dammit! We are not your enemies! I’m not a harpy as you can obviously see, and Recca is my companion! She is not feral, nor has she given herself to the Fel or the Taint!”

By this point, Harry’s initial spell to save Recca from a disastrous crash had begun to fade, but seeing that, Harry, after raising another magical shield to absorb a Chain Lightning spell, tossed a Healing Tide Totem of his own down. As she fell, Harry hit her with another hovering charm, grimacing as his shield shattered under an area of effect spell that rained bits of fire down on him and Quetzal alike. But even as the spell hit, both of them began to be healed by his totem.

Better, Harry had timed his second Leviosa spell well enough that Recca had just entered the dome of effect from his totem. This meant she was basically hovering in the air above the battle while healing, to the point where she quickly began to slowly pull the arrows that had struck her out of her body.

“You will not fool us shape changer! The only good harpy is a dead harpy, and any being who stands with them will die by the spears of the Steelrage Tribe!” The tauren who had been using magic shouted, lashing now upward towards Recca with another fire spell.

However before it hit a Protego from Harry caused a shield to envelop her, blocking his spell and then Quetzal was charging forward. Most of the tauren who had begun to recover thanks

to their fellow's aid from Harry's initial stupefy were now paralyzed again by his quills and the tauren who had been using magic was forced to back away rapidly, hurtling down another totem to give himself Treebark along with his fellows just before another group of quills struck.

The Treebark spell allowed the tauren to ignore the quills as they bounced off his now bark-like skin. But while his remaining fellows kept Harry hopping and even landed a strike to his shoulder with a war stave, eventually, the snake was able to close and bear the shaman to the ground with all the force of a pair of elephants. His weapon went flying, and the tauren found himself on the ground, looking up into the gaping mouth of Quetzal, who hissed at him furiously.

Since Harry had got into the habit of renewing the communication spell on Quetzal every morning to allow him to be understood by Recca and Versera, the tauren's eyes widened a second later as that hissing noise was translated to actual words. "I would recommend you stop fighting before Harry and I stop playing nice! I haven't had a living meal in a while, and you are a most tasty size when I am once more full-sized."

Whether or not the tauren might have replied to that was a moot point, as a second later, his totems shattered from a spell from Harry. At the same time, Recca landed on the last of the tauren, who had been charging Harry's back. He was one of the two that had joined the battle from where they had downed the nearby gazelle and had previously dodged a Stupefy spell to close while his fellow had not been so fast on his feet.

She bore the tauren to the earth, her war talons gripping the back of his neck with enough force to puncture straight through if she wanted it. "Cease moving, you bastard!" she screamed, but even so, her voice was far more dulcet than it should have been, causing this tauren's eyes to widen as his fellow's had. "I don't take kindly to being shot, and it is only by Harry's expressed desire to not make any more enemies in this area then necessary that is staying in my talons!"

That, Recca admitted, and the fact that Harry's Healing Tide Totem was so potent. The thing began closing her most grievous wound the moment she had begun to pull the arrow out with her teeth. That had not been a very pleasant process, but the only wounds that had yet to close entirely were the first one whose arrow she had pulled out, and the one in her hip. She felt a little weak and woozy from blood loss, but time and a good meal would help with that.

Regardless of type, healing totems would close wounds so long as the wounds themselves weren't instantly fatal. If someone was struck through the heart, that person would be dead before the healing magic would be able to repair the heart in question. Similarly with a throat strike or a blow that did significant damage to the brain or amputation of any sort. For anything less than that, the nature-based magic within the totems that Harry had learned to make

among the Tauren would see the wounded through. However, they could not replace blood lost from injury.

Growling, Harry rolled his shoulder in annoyance. Even through his armor that blow had hurt, and he shook his head at how insanely reactive this group of tauren had proven to be. Looking around, he made certain that all of the tauren he could see were either paralyzed by Quetzal's quills, or still down from one of his Stupefy spells. The only ones still conscious were the one that was currently being squeezed in Quetzal's coils, and the one Recca had captured.

Assuming that the magic user might also have been the leader of this war band, Harry marched up to him, leaving the other to Recca's tender mercies. *And I can use that phrase considering he's still alive*, Harry thought angrily. *Merlin, we could've wiped them all out easily!*

"Now, will you finally talk to us, or are we just going to have to leave you all here as you are?" he growled. "I don't know if there are any lions around this savanna, and we already wiped out the harpies to the north, but even so, there might be predators around that could find you before Quetzal's needles wear off."

Those needles had become quite a bit more powerful as Quetzal had aged. Thus Harry figured that since they had been effective against wyverns back in the mountains, they would last a good long while on tauren, who were not as large or heavy as the lion-headed flyers were.

The tauren simply bared his teeth at Harry, a gesture Harry had never seen before from a tauren bar the leader of the Bloodtotem Tribe more than two decades ago. "The enemy of my enemy is my enemy's enemy! You are an outsider, I do not recognize what you are, you pink skinned weakling and you fly with a harpy! Unless she can transform as you can? And even then, just because her voice is sweeter sounding, does not mean she is any less a harpy!"

Harry frowned, then decided to try one last gesture in the way of peace. "Quetzal, let him go." *Let's see if he calms down with a gesture of good faith.*

This was not the case. The moment he was free from Quetzal's quills, the shaman roared out a spell, and his entire body buzzed with magic causing Quetzal to rear back in shock and pain.

However, Harry wasn't born yesterday and had been ready for any kind of reaction. The next second, the man was flying backwards, an over-powered stupefy having struck his head and hurling him backwards and away to land in a crumpled heap. As the Healing Tide Totem Harry had struck into the ground was still active, Quetzal also began to recover quickly.

"Well, that's a wash, I guess. What do you think? Should we wait for Versera to arrive and help enforce a peaceable discussion here, or just move on?"

“Considering he said ‘all outsiders are enemies’, I doubt it. I don’t think these tauren are stupid enough to try and fight a dragon, but that probably means they’ll just clam up,” Recca observed, as she looks down at her prisoner, who was still trying to twitch this way and that, trying to move his hands up to where they could grip her claws only for her to tighten them around his neck every time he did. “I have to say that these tauren give the whole species a bit of a bad name, not just in how they attacked us without warning, that I could have understood given the fact you were in your harpy form at the time flying with me, but also in their sheer foolishness in pushing this fight.”

While seemingly still stunned at how nice Recca’s voice was, the tauren was also clearly not interested in what they were saying, not even the idea the pair was travelling with a dragon. “We are but one war band! Enter our territory further and there will be more, far more! We will not let any harpy or harpy-ally fly our skies!” he growled, struggling again until she squeezed his neck once more.

Sighing, Harry gesturing Recca off and away from him. The man collapsed a second later even as he tried to surge to his knees when Harry hit him with a stupefy spell. “Good grief, but Davo and the rest of them back on the Broken Isles would be banging their heads against the nearest totem if they met this lot. We just took all of them out with what were obviously nonlethal spells and tactics, and they still don’t want to talk peace? I am afraid you’re right, Recca, Versera’s presence might not be enough to force them to do so even if I think we have to try.”

Harry’s hopes on that score were indeed in vain. When Versera arrived late that evening, Quetzal had struck any Tauren with his quills showing any evidence of movement but the discussion with the magic user remained vituperative. He didn’t instantly attack them with Versera looming over the pair, but neither did he respond to any questions.

Eventually, Harry decided to just knock him out again with a stupefy spell, and then the trio left the area, flying through the evening and night to put some more distance between them and hopefully leave the Steelrage tribe’s territory. As they went, Versera pointed out some mounds in the distance to their west that she could see, which could be a tribal encampment of some kind, but they flew so high and so quickly that Harry hoped that the trio were able to quickly leave the incredibly combative tauren behind them.

In light of the fight against the tauren, Harry and Recca decided to fly higher in the air from then on, well out of the range of arrows or even most spells. Unfortunately, given how movement-intensive their flight was, Harry couldn’t just hide them despite having several spells that could do so. Even his Invisibility Cloak couldn’t do much for him while he was flying, as it would block his wings from moving correctly or would simply not be able to cover his entire body. An issue that Harry had run into a few times since reaching his full nature magic enhanced size.

Versera didn't. She had to fly close to the ground, barely four or five stories above it, in order to see enough detail for her maps. Although in this area, that was a remarkably easy thing to do, something that she remarked upon jokingly two days later. "Grass and sand with a few scattered streams and ponds make for easy mapping," she'd said jokingly, as she put her latest finished map away. Luckily for her, this time had allowed her to almost catch up to where she should be, and now she had a full map of the route through the mountains and several maps which covered nearly sixty leagues in from the shoreline all along their route.

However, perhaps her wish for something odd to occur should not have been given voice, for several days later, as the grassland began to ebb away to another rocky area. This one didn't have any of the large fissures in the land as the spider zone did, but the rocky nature of it was very similar, although there were a few rivers here and there, most of them shallow looking from the air.

Versera again turned her attention deeper inland, leaving Recca and Harry to continue following the shoreline in the distance. They had been idly flying over a group of goatlike creatures, wondering if they should hunt one or two, when the beasts suddenly bolted, heading deeper inland on a northwestern route.

"Did they spot us?" Recca muttered. "From this high up?"

"I doubt it, but—" Harry's words broke off as the ground beneath them began to quiver from one end of the horizon to the other. "An earthquake!"

With that, Harry dove down, skimming over the land only about two tree lengths above it as he watched in fascination.

The ground quaked, rocks and sand shifting as if something was heaving up underneath it in various ways for a moment. One of the rivers was suddenly diverted, disappearing into the ground as its sides shifted and heaved, crashing together as a hole opened up underneath them. A rock formation formed, then crumbled as Harry watched. A bit of steam escaped from a crevice for a moment before it was quickly covered over again, and then the river burst out from a different point to his left and down behind him, the sound of it causing Harry to fly in a small circle until he could watch, his eyes wide before he flapped his wings and gained altitude back to his companion.

"I've seen Transfiguration and transmutation of the ground before in a fight, numerous times. But this is... The scale of this," he mused as he rejoined Recca. "How far in every direction is this going on?"

"As far as I can see for certain," Recca said, gesturing with her wingtips all around her, twirling in place almost like a ballerina without losing any of her altitude somehow. "Be on the lookout

for steam vents. I can't remember seeing an earthquake myself before, but my older sisters and mother said the flock lived through several of them when I was very young."

"Steam vents can reach this high?" Harry asked skeptically. They were at least twelve stories off the ground right now.

"It's not just the steam, but released gases," Recca said, the words coming out slowly as she dredged up old memories. "There's some unseen gas that if you get too close to it, well normal harpies would be heavily impacted by it. It's not just the heat from the steam that can be dangerous."

Harry blinked, then shrugged, and the pair winged themselves higher, only to see Versera coming their way almost skimming over the ground. From their vantage point higher in the air they watched as there was a sudden explosion of steam just as Recca had warned Harry of, accompanied by a stream of barely visible blue through the steam that might've been another river bursting out of the ground underneath it.

But instead of trying to fly higher up in the air, Versera flew straight through the steam, warbling in delight so loud that Harry and Recca could hear it from where they flew. "Well, she is a dragon, I suppose that it makes sense she likes her steam baths as hot as possible," Harry said somewhat lamely.

Versera's words when she rejoined them a moment later bore that out. "Nothing like a nice hot bath on my scales! This is fascinating and also irritating. It means that this segment of my map is not going to be nearly as accurate as I would like."

Harry, on the other hand, frowned a little. "It's strange. I didn't think this area looked like an area that should've been susceptible to earthquakes. I wonder what's causing it?"

"You would have to ask someone who's made a study of such things Harry, and even then, it would probably take them years or decades to figure it out. I will say that the rivers we've been seeing break off from a massively powerful river. One which seems to lose a good deal of that power into an underground portion of itself deeper inland."

Harry nodded at that but still wondered.

Luckily, the earthquake subsided as quickly as it came, and not an hour later, the final reverberations had seemingly disappeared. The trio flew on, with the ground beneath them becoming even rockier. There were also a few ponds of water available in various places.

Another day passed, before Versera reported she could make out smoke in the distance. A lot of smoke. Moments later, the dragoness's better eyesight let her see a few things more, and she reported to the others that the ground ahead of them had begun to change again. When

she described what she was seeing a few moments later, Harry began to compare the area ahead of them to the Grand Canyon in America, another thing he'd seen in pictures.

In many ways this was somewhat accurate, as the land was quite cracked and broken, and there were numerous large chasms in the land below. But soon, any desire to compare the terrain ahead of them to anything on Earth ended. Because in no picture he'd ever seen of any place in America or elsewhere was there a single active volcano, let alone two. Each of them was different. One was a shield volcano, its slopes low and easy. The other had a gentle starting slope but with a steeper center, making it a composite.

As they closed, Versera quickly reported that the two closest were currently spewing lava in the distance, rivulets of red flowing down their sides into the ocean to one side, creating constant steam that rose up over the ocean. At the same time, other torrents of molten lava slowly trailed down their sides in other directions, adding to the size of the volcanoes slowly over time.

"Let's fly a little higher," Harry shouted, gesturing to Versera and Recca both to gain altitude. "I don't want to run into another ambush like we did with the tauren a few days ago. And since we know trolls might be around here, it's a distinct possibility."

Even as he took his own advice though, Harry could not look away from the view ahead of them as they closed with the place where his vision from the air elemental which had been giving him so much trouble had shown him. Indeed, the area was so like his vision it was almost overlapping in his mind despite the fact that he was coming in from a different angle.

As he mentally compared the two images though, he realized something was wrong. Some of the smoke and ash coming from those volcanoes were now moving oddly. "Versera, Recca, does that smoke look as if it's coming in our direction?"

Recca frowned, then nodded, abruptly pulling back up and away, before diving down. "It's moving against the wind! Something is directing that smoke our way, and I do not want to be anywhere near it!"

Versera frowned and continued to flap her way towards the smoke for a few more wingbeats, before the outer edge of the smoke that had begun to move so oddly came close. Whatever was causing that movement didn't matter, as there was also something else coming with the visible smoke, some invisible gas then mixed with air so well that she couldn't detect any difference except by smell. It smelled like rotten eggs, like most volcanoes did, but there was something else with it, something cloying and sweet.

Nonetheless, Versera kept on her current course for a few seconds longer, staring hard down towards where that smoke was originating from.

It wasn't originating from any one of the volcano tops. Rather, it originated from an area halfway down the side of one of those volcanoes. Some kind of cavern rested there, out of which that smoke currently curled, and it wasn't just coming towards the three of them either. It was building up in the air over the entire area.

With that information gathered, Versera twisted around, heading back towards where Harry and Recca had pulled back, making a wide curve around the area dominated by two volcanoes further inland.

She started to report what she had seen to Harry and Recca only for Recca to screech a warning. "Look! From those pools ahead of us!"

Ahead of them, several shapes had just emerged from one of the larger rivers of lava. Fire elementals, all of them larger than Recca or Harry, rose out of the lava as easily as a man would step out of the kiddie pool. There were dozens of them, all different shapes, but after several seconds they began to rise into the air towards the three interlopers.

"Well, that's highly unusual," Harry said mildly, his eyes narrowed as he and Recca began to shift away from the elementals as they came upwards, trying to put still more distance between them by heading further west. There was a limit to how high such beings of fire could go after all before being in a different element would start to take a toll and force them back to ground. "Versera, can you see if there are any magic users down there of any kind?"

Versera had also begun to flap her wings harder to gain more altitude. "I did not, no, and I'm not going to stay there to find out. Fire elementals like your little Trixie are one thing. Fire elementals of the size that a few of those are could actually hurt me."

Versera was a green dragon. Her realm was nature magic. She could not withstand the same kind of heat that red dragons could, who she assumed were the only kind of dragon that would be at home taking on fire elementals without fear. Versera had heard from several older greens of how older red dragons developed the bizarre pastime of going swimming in lava for some reason.

Busy as they were staring at the fire elementals coming up towards them, Harry and the others didn't realize that there was still more trouble coming their way. Not until a bolt of Chain Lightning, less formed than the spells the Tauren shaman had used and yet still dangerous, came down from a clear sky above to slam into Harry with punishing force.

He screamed in shock and pain, the armor covering his back glowing as the runic array built into it tried to protect him from the sudden onslaught of electricity and heat. It succeeded but not before the lightning bolt had smashed him down almost to the level where the fire elementals

were. They immediately began to attack him, forcing Harry to dodge to the point he couldn't send any offensive spells back.

Meanwhile, cutting winds and gale force blasts, less shaped, but still powerful, blasted down as well. Recca dodged around one of them, feeling the change in the atmosphere coming just-in-time as she looked around wildly. Versera wasn't so lucky as she was caught in a Rain of Fire spell that caused her to hiss in pain. "Where in Ysera's name is this coming from!?"

From around one of the volcanoes came wyverns, on top of which several trolls rode.

Recca had never met a troll before or even seen a picture of one before she joined the Unseen Path. But she'd seen a few in history texts within the library there and could tell that these were normal trolls, although their skin seemed pale white or gray rather than the green and blue images she had seen there.

Trolls were tall, perhaps a little taller than a kaldorei. All of them had short, tusks jutting out from the bottom of their mouths, long ears almost like that of a kaldorei or harpy, but smaller than either and, judging by what Recca read they didn't move either. Their clothing was somewhat barbaric, harkening Recca's mind back to the type of clothing she and the rest of her flock saw on kobolds when they traded with them or satyrs when she fought them in the past.

Several of them were armed with throwing spears, with more than a few quivers hanging on elaborate heavy saddles, while others wielded magic in their hands, which glowed purple, white and red.

Harry had recovered by this point, and with a mighty flap of his wings, began to ascend up towards the trolls through the magma balls flung his way by the fire elementals, a ferocious scowl on his face. Before the fire elementals could rejoin the battle, Versera, Harry and Recca closed with the wyvern riding trolls, with Versera's flame going ahead of them, causing the group to scatter. One wasn't quite fast enough, and both wyvern and trolls screamed as emerald fire washed over them, turning them to so much charcoal.

The other troll riders turned the rapid expansion of their formation, if such it could've been called, into an offensive move, coming in at the trio from every angle. Spears were hurled at a distance Harry would've thought only tauren could achieve, showing that the trolls were deceptively strong for all their lanky nature. *Or does that have something to do with that other thing they are carrying? It looks like some kind of stick with a strange end piece to it.*

The wyverns also closed quickly, their tails rising up over the riders to strike, their mouths open to bite.

The most dangerous opponents were the troll magic users, though. Twice more blades of cutting air appeared around them, launching towards Harry and Recca, ignoring the dragon as if

they understood they wouldn't have been able to hurt her. While Versera barreled into and through their scattered numbers once more, Harry and Recca were forced out and away from their larger companion by these spells. Spears were little danger to either of the agile harpy like flyers, but those spells were almost invisible in the air and moved far faster than any spear.

However, even as they were being attacked, Harry struck back. Chakrams flashed up and out from his pouch and fire spells of his own washed out. The chakrams expanded like shrapnel in every direction around him, cutting wyverns in half and dumping their riders to scream all the way down to the ground. Fire spells hit, engulfing riders, searing them off of mounts almost as hot as dragon fire or simply engulfing both troll and wyvern.

Unfortunately, the trolls were not alone, and a second later, Versera screamed as bolts of magma slammed into her undercarriage from below, having forgotten the fire elementals for a moment. Scales seared away along with several underlayers of flesh in places and before she could scrape it away, the bolts of elementally created magma began to harden before it came loose.

Another bolt of magma hit her wing, searing straight through, but such was the magic of dragons Versera was still able to remain upright and in the air. Recca was nearly struck by a fire elemental coming up from below, but Versera's screaming warned her in enough time to barrel roll to the left and away from the strike, although she almost ate a spear instead.

It grazed across her front, causing a yelp of pain as it smacked into her modified chest plate, the reconstituted remnants of Harry's efforts to make her some armor, with enough force to dent the metal.

Realizing they were quickly losing this fight, Harry cast a Protego over Versera as the fire elementals concentrated on the green dragoness. Magma balls crashed into his shield causing the energy shield to ripple, but it held long enough for Harry to launch a modified spell forward and down at the mass of fire elementals. A spell he had come up with while sparring with tauren shaman who had multiple fire elementals, the Water Wave spell was an area of effect spell much like the Rain of Fire spell, but this version was a good deal more powerful and concentrated than the one Harry used in sparring matches. *Like comparing a tsunami to a kiddie pool!*

This attack smashed four of the fire elementals entirely out of the sky, putting out their fire entirely. Others were struck but didn't 'die' instantly, the impact simply causing them to scream in agony like someone shouting in a burning building as fire and water met, creating steam and sapping their energy and life force.

But the damage had been done. The next second, Recca was forced to land on top of Versera, her wing messed up by one of the element-based spells from the troll magic users. Versera's

wing in turn barely flapping, and her underside was a bloody mess of bleeding and seared-closed wounds. Harry was the only one who was still in any kind of fighting condition, and he could see still more fire elementals coming up towards them from below, as the fight with the wyverns had forced the trio down towards them.

Perhaps just as dangerous, that strange smoke and whatever it accompanied was shifting in their direction once more now that they had lost altitude. Harry had no idea what that was, or if Bubble-Head Charms would be enough to fight it, and knew that right now, what he didn't know could kill them all.

With a grimace, Harry dove down towards Versera. Landing on her back, he quickly transformed into his human form before he pulled out one of his Healing Stream Totems, planting it via a Sticking Charm on Versera's back.

The effect on Recca and Versera was immediate. Both of them gasped in relief as the pain began to ebb away, their wounds healing with the swiftness that resembled the regeneration trolls were supposed to have.

'Mind you, with all the fire spells I've been using, I don't think any of the ones I hit with those will be coming back. Although if they can regenerate from half of their upper body being destroyed, I'll have to tip my hat to them,' Harry thought, as he pulled out two more totems. A Wrath of Air Totem, and a Stone Skin Totem joined their fellow quickly, gleaming with white and dark brown colored nature magic respectively. The Stone Skin Totem wouldn't add much to Versera's durability as it would Recca or Harry's, but would add a little bit, but the Wrath of Air Totem would enhance her flying speed to an incredible degree. "Get us out of here, Versera!"

While Harry felt they might be able to turn things around here, Harry didn't know that this was a major force of the trolls here, or what other forces could be brought to bear. There were too many unknowns and Versera's injuries were too serious for Harry to want to try to fight them right now. *'For all my preparations and tools, using them while staying mobile in the air is hard, and we can all do better by coming back later after getting prepared.'*

Another threat appeared as Versera twisted away from the volcanoes, heading deeper inland away from the three peaks. This time it wasn't fire elementals, but rather several air elementals. All of them were mid-size, and looked extremely powerful, although not as powerful as a few that Harry had seen in a contract with this or that Tauren, let alone the even more powerful air elemental that he had inadvertently connected with whenever he tried to meditate on the elemental realms.

Most of them were somewhat humanoid in shape, or rather more like genies, with wide shoulders, exceptionally thin waists, and no legs to speak of but long funnels of wind. Although

unlike genies these elementals didn't have faces, rather simply glowing eyes set into small mounds where a head should be.

They powered through the air so fast they were almost on top of the three before Versera was finished turning away. Desperately, Harry conjured another shield spell all around them, and the air elementals attacks crashed into it, lightning and superfast winds making the previous cutting type wind spells of the troll magic users seem tame in comparison. Harry gritted his teeth as he powered his shield still further with one hand while he launched a spell into the midst of the air elementals.

That spell went off with a crack, and Lumos with all the power of a huge flare went off, blinding the air elementals. Despite being made of air, they still had to see their enemies, and now all of them reared up in place, their hands going up to their eyes in an extremely human gesture.

As they did, Harry's eyes narrowed, staring at their wrists and next. On top of the vaguely shaped air formation that made up their skin and the rock that seemed to act as clothing, there were thin bracers on the wrists of the air elementals, along with what looked like a slave collar. *I didn't see anything like that on the fire elementals...*

That was as much as he could make out before Versera began to power away from the volcanoes, each wingbeat driving them further and further away faster than she could ever have moved on her own without Harry's totems.

They kept on moving until well into the night, putting as much distance between themselves and the volcanoes as possible, before the group began to look for a place to sit down. This area was a mix of forest, hills and valleys, making Harry wonder if perhaps the three volcanoes were at the end of a small mountain range of some kind. *Or would that be a hill range?*

Versera touched down, and Harry and Recca flew up off of her back to land nearby, practically flopping into the tall grass. The trip out had been mostly quiet, all of them rattled badly by how quickly things had gone wrong, as well as Versera being rattled by being so badly wounded so quickly.

Recca was the first to break the silence, as Harry slowly pushed himself to his feet, and began to set up his yurt. "Well, we ran into the trolls from Tyrande's visions, and we've discovered the source of your own visions, Harry, the three volcanoes leading into the ocean. We also know now that the trolls and the rest of the denizens of that area seem to be working together. Why that is, I've no idea."

"I've never run into trolls before, but I know something of their religion from speaking to older members of my flight. I have to wonder if they might be worshipping one of those volcanoes, or all three, as manifestations of a fire loa. That would certainly explain why they were able to

fight alongside fire elementals, as I don't think that they had nearly as many magic users up in the air to explain the number of fire elementals as well as those air elementals. Not unless most of their shamans are very powerful."

"Yeah, what was with those?" Recca demanded. "I thought we were sent here by an air elemental, and now we have to fight some?"

"I don't think they fought us willingly," Harry said, shaking his head. "Those three air elementals, they all had cuffs on them, as well as what I think was a slave collar of some kind."

"...That would be a dangerous deed, but I can't say it's impossible. It's a wide world after all," Versera mused, frowning. "I think we need a lot more information, and I don't think heading back there in the air is going to do us much good. We've tried going in openly, it's now time for subterfuge I think."

"Tomorrow," Harry agreed. "Trolls are supposed to see in the dark almost as well as kaldorei can. But beyond that, yeah. I think it's time for subtlety. Violence will come later, once we learn where to direct it appropriately."

Versera chortled evilly, eager to get some of her own back, while Harry also chuckled a bit, his hands flexing as he wondered what kind of spell chains would be best to use against two different types of its elementals as well as trolls with their regeneration. If a part of him was looking forward to a fight that was in no way morally ambiguous, as it was with harpies who are very much in over their heads with the trio, or tauren who were far too belligerent for their own good, he made no move to mention it to his companions.

Recca stared at them, shaking her head. "What have I gotten myself into here?"

OOOOOOO

Despite the setback of needing to wait nearly two weeks for reinforcements and resupply, Tyrande knew that it was still summertime back in Kalimdor by the time they arrived at Northrend a little over a week after they had left behind the northernmost tip of that continent. However, here, that did not matter at all. It had not mattered for several days before they spotted shore, in point of fact. The weather had gotten decidedly colder and colder the further north they'd gotten, to the point that many of the kaldorei had been forced to wrap themselves up.

While kaldorei did not feel the cold nearly as much as even tauren and certainly not nearly as much as a normal human like Harry (yet also not given the term 'normal' there) would have, the chill that the biting wind added was very uncomfortable. As was getting soaked and wet as they had been more than once from a storm at sea by this point.

Thankfully, Shy-Rotam and the other bonded animals handled it much easier, their fur allowing the creatures to basically ignore the cold, to the point that the Druids of the Claw had jokingly stated that they were looking forward to getting ashore and transforming into their bear forms.

At the time Shandris had retorted, “just so long as none of you give into the urge to hibernate. The last thing we need is one of you falling into the Emerald Dream this far away from your caverns.”

Standing on the shoreline, Tyrande could see a vast snow-covered forest going from one end of the horizon to the other. It reminded her strongly of Ashenvale, and indeed she knew that this forest had at one point been a part of the forest in which her people now made their home. It was far sparser here though, with trees spread out far more, and all of it covered by so much snow that the scouts Shandris had sent out reported that they could barely make much headway before needing to ride their bonded animals.

“It’s exhausting going, general, I think we’ll all need to ride our animals for the majority of our time here. Which in turn will weigh them down, and slow our progress,” one of them reported shaking her head.

Nealu promptly shook his head. “Actually, I think your animals and you will find you’ll be able to make better time once we rig up some sleds. Load our supplies on them, have your animals pull them or maybe a few of the druids in their animal forms. Have only half of your animals all around the perimeter with actual riders.”

With that he pulled out a piece of parchment that Tyrande recognized. The man had been working on it on the ship on and off and now laid it out on a portion of a tree which the snow had already been cleared from. “We can make these quickly enough once we bring in enough branches. Thanks to stopping as we did, we have more than enough rope to go around without inconveniencing the ship too. But you’ll all also want to start bundling up more.”

“That’s well and good, but I’m heading back to the ship now,” the captain said, shaking his head. “We’ll need to pull away from the shoreline. I don’t think I can trust even our two reinforced anchors to keep us from going aground where we are right now if a storm comes up.”

“Fandral, continue the unloading. Shandris, we’ll use the Druids of the Talon for our only scouting force for now. The rest of us are at your disposal, Nealu,” Tyrande decided quickly. For all her reluctance to lead as a political leader, when it came to moments like these, she never hesitated.

This removed Fandral, who would probably be prickly at turning his hands to any kind of task or craft beyond that of being a druid, while also would allow for early warning of any trouble to

come. Any trouble that the Druids of the Talon wouldn't be able to deal with on their own, anyway.

A storm did indeed blow up even as the unloading continued, and several kaldorei nearly drowned or froze to death in the waters when their boats capsized. True to Nealu's prediction most of the kaldorei also began to feel the simple cold of the north far more than they had previously thanks to the wind and the snow. Tyrande still found herself to be somewhat immune to it, as did Shandris and several of the druids like Fandral, but many of the sentinels pulled on further clothing, as did most of the Druids of the Talon.

Indeed, the wind was so nasty and so cold that the Druids of the Talon were forced to rotate people in and out on patrol. Even those who had been in the Frostfang Mountains complained that this was far colder.

Yet eventually the unloading was finished. That night, in a large igloo Davo and a few others had created, Tyrande and the other commanders poured over the one map they had that showed the directions to Vordrassil, planning out their travel further. The first half of their expedition's journey was done. But they still had the second to go.

End Chapter