

I can't program and am not British.

**Names previously introduced:**

Feldral Stonegrip – Seeker, Unseen Path's mountaineering expert.

Lesha – habitually cheerful tauren second in command, druid.

Two kaldorei brothers – Lufar and Ladros Sharpfang.

Tjar and Neeva. Both tauren, Tjar is a Shaman with earth, and air elementals. Neeva is a shaman with two water elementals and a fire elemental.

Nealu, Shai – kaldorei. Shai was the one who fell the first time they climbed out of the Trueshot Lodge Valley, and is one of the best shots.

Lathariel – Quel'dorei Ranger

Sylina – Harry's current friend with benefits.

Acali- kaldorei with light skin, Feldral's friend

One as yet unnamed tauren – silent, stoic or gloomy.

Cassandra – harpy matriarch

Maria – oldest daughter. Only one so far introduced...

This has been edited by yours truly with Grammarly, Tomon, and Alex Crate. Both of them got the chapter back to me in nearly record time, letting me post the chapter here for Mother's Day. Say Happy Mother's day to everyone!

Two brief notes:

1. I have decided to, like in my Maseffect/Ranma cross, to not cap other races. I don't do it when I use 'Human' for race, so it makes sense.
2. I might have said this before, but it bares repeating: that nonsense about kaldorei being descended from trolls? Much like the time traveling orc, that did not pass my Sanity check, and it is not a thing. I will go into detail on the First Troll Wars later when we deal with trolls.

## Chapter 9: Voyage to Death and Redemption

*In retrospect, Harry reflected as he resolutely tried not to look up, perhaps using my translation spell on the harpies as well as the Songbird spell was a mistake. I should have realized that a gaggle of what amounts to teenage, college-age and mature women would not exactly be silent. And it isn't just the volume, but what they're saying. I've never seen a tauren blush so hard as Tjar did when that one mature one commented on whether or not tauren are proportional. And then there are their comments about and all the flirting with me.*

That had caused him problems several times already during this trip down the mountain. They were traveling northward and down the mountain, generally moving, hoping to chase down the source of deity-touched nature magic Cassandra had told them about, but it was hard going still. And throughout, the harpies flew above them, reveling in their new voices. All of them seemed to delight in speaking, showing that what Cassandra had told them earlier was all too accurate: that even to harpies, their voices were normally like screeches.

The sheer delight they seemed to take in their new voices was the only reason why Harry or indeed any of the unseen path members hadn't asked them to be quiet, or at the very least, fly higher so that the noise didn't distract the landbound members of their enlarged group as they tried to climb down what was, at the moment, a sheer rock face. One Harry had just begun to move down, now somewhat near the end of the column. Looking down the side of the mountain, he could tell the group had begun to climb down and under a lip in the stone, which he was not looking forward to lowering himself over.

*That, and perhaps Feldral and a few of the others are worried that they just might fly off, despite the harpies knowing my spells aren't permanent. It seems as if everyone is following the concept of 'accept but verify' when it comes to the harpies. Not that I can blame them. I don't have anything like the history of fighting harpies that they do, and even I would be a little leery of just letting them all fly off. If for the simple reason that most of them seem very flighty regardless.*

Considering that some of the conversations he heard from harpies since giving them the translation spell had been about a butterfly that one of them had seen somehow, a bird that another one wanted to chase down, races, and for some reason, dying clothing and that none of those conversations have lasted for more than a few moments before getting diverted, that was an on-point analysis, in his opinion. *That's not even to mention the fact that at least a few of them are always hovering around me,* he thought, resolutely not looking up. He had done that once already at the most inopportune moment, and well...

**Flashback:**

“Why aren’t you flying? You could transform into your... Your male harpy form and **fly** with us.”

Harry looked up from where he was waiting in the line of climbers to go over the lip of the rock crevice, smiling at the middle-aged harpy who had addressed him. She was one of Cassandra’s two oldest daughters. In form she was much like her mother, with somewhat smaller breasts perhaps, but larger wings. Her plumage was bright red with seemingly random blue feathers in places, segueing into a vivid swirl on top of her head.

It was a most striking feature, yet to Harry, it reminded him of a frozen fruit pop he’d had back in his old world. *And worse, I think her name is Icsy, or Icee, maybe?*

“I am willing to use my magic to help the group along if I am asked to. But flying when Sylina and the others can’t, that’d seem a little too much like setting myself apart. My magic is a part of me, like a talon or wing would be to you. But it can’t be my first recourse to **every** problem, especially when using it would set me apart from my fellows without reason.”

Several of the nearby kaldorei nodded or twitched their ears in approval at that, while Lesha nodded from his position at the back of the column. This caused Harry to snicker internally, as it was in fact, only part of his reasoning. By this point, Harry was used to sticking out. But given the looks the harpies were giving him... well, there were other reasons why he didn’t just want to fly off...

Ignoring that line of thought for a moment, Harry shrugged. “Besides, this is all a learning experience for me. I’ve never gone rock climbing, let alone for so long in the past, and I want to learn everything I can about it, about traveling through mountains like this without turning to magic to help with every problem we face. After all, there may come a time when magic can’t help me.”

The woman blinked at that, then laughed, shaking her head, her expression becoming even brighter as she heard the sound. “That seems silly to me! Your magic is your magic. If your companions think ill of you, then is that not their problem for thinking that in the first place, for being jealous? Or for just not having magic?”

She shook her head, and winged away, still laughing even as her sister chased after her, shouting about how she thought that Harry’s point of view was quite admirable. Cassandra and many of the other harpies were higher up in the air, with one or two of them diving down below Harry’s line of sight to possibly report what they were seeing to Feldral and the others. While he had been through this area of the mountains before - *and isn’t that an astonishing thought*, Harry reflected, *someone moving through this area of the mountains on their own for pleasure* - it had been a while.

The chattering of the harpies grew distant as they flew higher up into the air and Harry went over the side of the rock face, starting to climb down, with Lesha and Lathariel waiting above him for their turn. The order of the march had changed a bit by this point, putting Harry closer to the back than the front, but Harry was certain that at some point, it would change again, and he would be nearer the front if his magic was called upon.

But as Harry climbed down, the harpies came closer. One of them came even closer than any of the others, and Harry could feel her wing feathers brushing against his back and head. Then she was away laughing, flapping her wings heavily and gaining more air as she moved away from him out into the sky beyond.

“What was that about?” Harry grunted, trying hard not to react to the sensation of feathers brushing against his skin. *It isn't the first time I've felt that. A lot of the giant eagles the Skyhorn tribe used were friendly. But there was more... purpose behind that than I'm used to.*

This seemed to just encourage them, though, and two more harpies flew down, their wingtips brushing against him, sending shivers down his body. They weren't unpleasant shivers. The harpy's feathers were quite nice, oddly softer than any but Hedwig's he'd felt before. But, well, he had to concentrate right now, and they were really distracting.

Deciding that he'd had enough, Harry shouted, “Excuse me! But if you all don't stop doing that, I'm not going to renew the spells on you! I'm kind of busy here!”

He looked over his shoulder just in time to see another harpy, this one around what he would term college-aged, basically the harpy equivalent of Sylina, pull up quickly. Flaring out her wings, she let herself fall backward in the air for a second before whipping around and flapping hard. “That's no fun!”

“I'd rather not fall, thanks. You can tease me once I have my feet on at least semi-flat ground,” Harry retorted.

That seemed to warn off the harpies for a little bit. But just as Harry could look down and see where they were going to be shifting direction again along the rock face to the small lip in the rock he'd seen earlier, his words seemed to lose their potency. And in a most spectacular fashion, too.

There was the whisper of feathers in the air, and one of the harpies said, “Potter wizard! Look at this.”

Like anyone would when someone told them to look at something, Harry looked up. Above, a harpy, another one of the college-age girls, had undone her top, letting her breasts bounce freely. How the heck she had done so in midair, Harry had no idea and no mind to care about at the moment. Most of his mind was simply fixated on the site of her heaving, swaying

breasts, which was at least a size larger than Sylina's, capped with almost neon pink nipples, with large areolae.

Now, Harry was no virgin, not even in this new world thanks to his relationship with Sylina. But he was still a young man. It had been nearly a week since they'd last had any time together, and sudden boobs had their normal effect on him just as such a sight would any other young man.

"Guhhh..." Harry stared. A second later, one of his hands slipped, causing him to curse and scramble, not finding another one before his other grip failed in turn. The rope tying him to the rest of the climbers went taught, and he hung there, cursing as the harpy winged away, laughing victoriously even as protests rose from the rest of the Unseen Path members. Those who weren't laughing at Harry's expense, anyway.

### **End flashback**

Luckily, Cassandra had seen what had happened and quickly put a stop to such overt flirtations with her oldest daughter, a more mature, far more thoughtful sort than Icsy. Maria's plumage was mostly brown, flecked with several tan feathers here and there, and her eyes were the color of light hazel, reminding Harry somewhat of Hermione, although her body type was even more slender than even Sylina's. Since then, the harpies had kept their flirtations to quick visits down to whisper into his ear or to get his attention with a wink, but even so, it was still somewhat distracting.

"I am sorry about them," Cassandra said as she chased off one of her youngest, who had been making a beeline toward Harry again. "You have done us a great service today Harry, and they wish to repay you in the only coin that most of our people use in such things. Barter for food, perches and clothing, sex for life."

She said this so bluntly that Harry had to shake his head, reminding himself that the harpy's culture was completely unknown to him. Cassandra caught that movement, and laughed quietly, the throaty nature of it sending a tingle up and down Harry's spine (and the spine of Shai and Lufar climbing above and below him in hearing range). *She truly does sound like that Cher woman, or perhaps one of those high-end dance club singers, the ones with slinky dresses and come-hither stares? Like in that one comedy with the strange green mask.*

"Understand something, Wizard Harry Potter. Even when Aviana was alive, we harpies did not have a very sophisticated culture. Why should we? We have no need to build houses. Our wings and the leaves of trees are enough to protect us from wind and rain and can let us leave foul weather or foe behind. We live with nature even more than the tauren and kaldorei. Money? Riches? Beyond the shininess of jewelry, it holds no luster for us, and even that is unimportant to most of my race. But Sex? Sex is always different, always interesting, and your

partner's body is a treasure waiting to be discovered as you share your own. Thus, sex itself becomes of great importance."

The harpy matriarch shook her head. "We never give our bodies lightly. There is always a purpose behind it, either for simple pleasure and affection or as payment for some great deed. For example, selflessly saving the life of another. Or, like in this case, performing an act of kindness that can never be truly repaid in a similar kind."

Parsing what Cassandra said through her stilted, old-fashioned kaldorei took Harry a second. At first, he thought that maybe harpies could be likened to succubi from back on Earth if they were so open about using sex. But after listening to the rest of what Cassandra said, it almost made sense. *I understand more why the harpies never developed a deeper culture. I suppose you could say that tool use and the need to cooperate for safety or to combat nature are the basis of the rise of any civilization. And I like how she said that they weren't free with sex, that it held importance, but even so, that is a way of thinking I have never come across. It's like that free-loving nonsense from the sixties but also not. Strange. But then again, I'm not a harpy. And wouldn't it be even stranger if harpies, kaldorei or tauren had the same kind of society?*

"What you did for all of us," Cassandra said, pulling Harry from his momentary musing, making him realize he had almost missed a handhold. Even as he scrambled though, he was still able to listen to her as she continued. "I know that to you, giving us voices like this does not seem to be a great thing. But the value is based on the thoughts of the receiver, not the giver. To no longer have voices that make our own heads ache and others to either flee or be annoyed with us is something beyond any worldly value. So even those among my little flock who have not shared their bodies with anyone before are eager to do so in your case."

*And that is only what most of my flock sees. All but Maria do not think long term or deeply enough. True, we might have survived if we had fled right off the bat, but if he had not told the Unseen Path we had surrendered and accepted it, they could have killed most of us easily. Which is small feathers in comparison to the giant feather bed of what this alliance with Wizard Potter and the Unseen Path could mean for our future...*

Watching from the side as Harry began to frown and open his mouth Cassandre set aside those deep thoughts to have a bit of fun, cutting in quickly before he could speak. "And it doesn't help matters that you are quite handsome and young yourself. And exotic, with your short stubby ears and your strange skin color, so like our own and unlike that of the kaldorei. Your reactions are also quite enthralling to watch from my daughters' perspective, and will fuel more openness, more flirtations. Although, if you did choose one of them to mate with, the others would back off."

“Well,” she amended, her lips twitching as Harry very resolutely concentrated on his hand and footwork so as to not react to that. “They would cease flirting with you, anyway. They’d almost undoubtedly question your chosen mate to distraction.”

“Speaking of questions, I have several.” Harry changed the subject as soon as he could regain control of his voice, and not show his own mixed feelings on that score. He also didn’t react to Quetzal’s hissing in amusement from his position in Harry’s front pocket. “If hovering nearby isn’t too troublesome for you, could I ask you some of them?”

“Mah, making a play for **me**, Wizard Harry? That’s most bold of you,” Cassandra teased before answering more seriously. “Ask away. But I withhold the right to not answer if your questions become too personal or too painful. I believe I have earned that, at least.”

“I understand and will accept your silence at any point. Most of my questions have to do with harpy magic and... I know this might be a sensitive topic, if you know how other harpies get in touch with or are corrupted by the Old Gods or the demonic Fel magic,” Harry began delicately.

At those words, the Unseen Path members on either side of Harry along the line froze. Both kaldorei, they twisted their ears to better hear Cassandra’s reply even as they continued to climb.

“I do not know about how my folk get in contact with Fel magic. I certainly wasn’t going to ask Lendosa or the rest of them about such as that! I have to assume that it has something to do with meeting satyrs or other creatures like them, the things that came from elsewhere during the War of the Ancients. As for the Taint of the Old Gods, that... I have seen.”

Cassandra shook her head as she continued to speak, going slower now, but pushing through whatever memory was bothering her for the moment. “As I have mentioned before, we harpies can sense the magic of the world around us to a certain degree. Old God corruption also stands out to our senses, much like deific-touched nature magic we are going in search of now. If a harpy comes in contact with such, they become aware of the power within. And after that, it is an easy explanation as to why such a harpy would become corrupted. A series of rituals, of sacrifices to the... the black morass and...”

At that, Cassandra trailed off, and when Harry looked at her, the matronly harpy’s face was twisted into a rictus of remembered pain. “Such... such happened to one of my daughters. She, Ivella, would be older than even Maria at the moment if she still lives. She and I parted ways when she started to enjoy causing pain, when Ivella wanted to try to corrupt me in turn. I parted ways with her and her daughters and took my newly birthed daughter, Icsy, away with Maria. I know not where she is now. Once a single harpy has touched such, the Taint spreads quickly among the flock. There are very, very few among my folk who would not willingly take

any kind of magical power that they could get their pinions on, regardless of the cost to body and soul.”

“Is it really that simple?” Harry had asked, half-incredulous and half-sorrowful. If it really was that easy for the taint of the old gods to corrupt harpies, then trying to somehow defend against such would be nearly impossible. *Both from the harpies case and others who might try to help them*, Harry thought.

“It is, Wizard Potter,” Cassandra smiled wanly at hearing the shared concern and sadness in his tone. “We desire magic almost as much as the Highborne were supposed to in the olden days of the Kaldorei Empire.

The two fell silent as Harry began to navigate a more difficult portion of the climb down. When he got to a point where Harry felt safe enough to split his attention again, he nodded to Cassandra, who, having had time to think about what she wanted to say, spoke up again. “You must understand, without our God, Harry Potter, my people lack any kind of magic of our own. Yet, we are a magical species. Deep down, even those like my youngest, born well, well past the time of our goddess, know that something inside of us is missing. Know that something inside of us needs to be filled.”

She looked up, hearing her flock chattering high above them, smiling tenderly before becoming serious as she looked back at Harry, watching the wizard toil away like any tauren or kaldorei who did not have access to magic. “That is the magic that we can gain access to if we come in contact with the Old Gods Taint or make agreements with demonkind, as the satyrs do.

Listening to that, Harry likened the harpies’ plight to a wizard suddenly becoming a squib. *They would know that something was missing. They would yearn for it beyond all reason. What kind of actions would someone like Filch, who has never actually been a wizard in the first place but has grown up among them, what would he do? What depths would he pursue to gain magic?*

“I... I can understand that kind of instinctual hunger, I suppose. But what if you were offered another source?” Harry asked.

“Something like the source of the wild Nature Magic we are trying to hunt down? Yes, that is why I was most interested in trying to discover it for my flock,” Cassandra agreed. “If we could but use that then...”

“No!” That shout came from several throats, all of the members of the unseen path within hearing bar Sylina. She was three men down from Harry, having shouted in unison, and although that was within a kaldorei’s hearing range, she looked just as confused as Harry felt.



“No,” Nealu went on more calmly. “If the spea... that is, the source of the large concentration of Nature Magic Lady Cassandra told us about, if that is what we think it is, it belongs to the Order.”

Harry frowned at that but shrugged his shoulders and simply stated, “Well, there’s also the Sunwell. Perhaps being around it would also serve for the harpies.”

“I am quite positive that if Lathariel was in hearing range, he would react very badly to the idea that his folk would welcome harpies among them.” Lufar snorted from below Harry on the line. “Your spells have done wonders, Harry, it’s true, but no offense to you, lady Cassandra, but the majority of your people do not seem to understand what hygiene is or the need to... Defecate only in assigned places, shall we say?”

Most of the members of the unseen path and taken to calling Cassandra ‘Lady’ Cassandra, either because she simply gave off that kind of air or due to sheer respect for the fact that she had kept herself and her flock clean of either of the corrupting magical elements that they could so easily have come into contact with. For his part, somehow sensing that Cassandra didn’t actually like being addressed like that, if only because it seemed as if her daughters liked to tease her about it, Harry did not follow the general attitude of the group in that area.

“Perhaps, but such things can be learned. Although I have never heard of this Sunwell. Nor have I ever seen a kaldorei so pale or limited in the ears areas as that Lathariel fellow among you. That is quite amazing to me. Almost as amazing as Harry Potter himself.” Cassandra teased gently, looking back at Harry even as she moved with him, keeping within easy conversation distance, her wings flapping gently. “That I would live to see such interesting people. And be able to converse with them, too, without you all trying to run away or fight us. It is more than my heart can bear at times.”

“More seriously though, if somehow given the choice, do you think your people would be willing to try to search for a new source of magic?”

“Not many, I am afraid. Even those who cannot directly use the magic of the Fel or the Old Gods’ will have felt its touch. If such goes on for a long while, they will have been imbued with some of its essence simply by being around it. That was why I was so careful to keep my own flock mostly at a distance from Lendosa’s rabble. And it was rapidly coming time when we would have to move on or risk some of us, especially my youngest twosome, being twisted by the Taint through even that amount of closeness.”

Harry grunted a bit, bending himself in what, before his exercises with the kaldorei members of the unseen path, would’ve seemed an incredibly awkward position but, since then, had simply become difficult. He found his feet touching down on a surface basically hidden

underneath the jutting out portion that he had feared since first spotting it below him and then felt hands reaching out for him, pulling him down and under. A quick few hops actually brought him down to what amounted to a small pathway through sheer cliff faces on either side, winding further downward. In some ancient days, an underground river must have flown through here. The source of it had seemingly either dried up or been cut off, leaving behind a hidden path near the surface of the mountain yet hidden in such a manner that it would've been impossible to see even from the air yet natural looking for all of that. And here, there was enough of a hole to enter into the tunnel and follow it further down the mountain.

Cassandra hovered nearby, several of her daughters having landed on the same outcropping that hid this path from view, leaning over and peering down at Harry and the other members of the unseen path within.

As Harry moved out of the way, he nodded towards Cassandra. "In that case, I suppose we will have to see about figuring out how to grow the number of harpies that do not have any such change or corruption to them."

He really should've known better, especially with this crowd.

Instantly, several of the more experienced harpies hooted, laughing wildly. "Are you volunteering to help in that area?"

"All of us at once, maybe? Getting pregnant by a man the old-fashioned way rather than the egg-sharing way is supposed to be really fun! And don't worry, there are plants out there that you can eat to improve your stamina."

"Or are you offering for the rest of your fellows too? I wish to be with one of the tauren!" one of the harpies stated, her expression lusty.

"We'll share Harry!" Came a dual shout from the two youngest girls, causing the others to all laugh.

Nearby, at the top of what looked like a portion of the ancient riverbed that was a true chute straight down, Sylina had been just about to start her descent. Hearing this, though, she began to laugh and lost her grip on the lip of the semi-flat area, falling down rather than lowering herself slowly. Her feet subsequently missed the foothold below and she slammed her forehead into the stone before falling further, slamming into the next kaldorei in turn. The rope connecting her to her companions on either side of her had been shortened so as to not get in everyone's way, and this came back to bite them now as Ladros scrambled, bracing himself and straining against the weight of the two kaldorei below him for a moment before the ever-silent tauren took up the slack.

The incredibly loud cursing coming out of the chute shook Harry out of his embarrassment, and he shouted down to see if Sylina was alright. She was, but thoroughly annoyed with herself and was currently being remonstrated by Shai, a sharp contrast to how this trip had begun.

On top of Harry's earlier one that day, this near-disaster finally prompted a response from Feldral at the front of the group. After all, it was only the team's safety rope and the nature of the riverbed they were currently climbing down that had stopped the party from losing two of their members.

After a few moments, the mountaineering expert had climbed up the outside of the riverbed, no safety rope in sight as he seemed to move with all the assurance of a spider over an area Harry would have been hard-pressed to find any handhold, let alone move so fast. His expression thunderous, Feldral looked honestly angry for the first time Harry had met him, a glowering, ears flattened to his skull glare that had the harpies quailing.

"That is enough! We are on a mission here, and while moving through these mountains might be easy for you, it is serious business to us. If your folk cannot stop themselves from making trouble for my people, then I would ask you to take your flock ahead and leave us be, Lady Cassandra, or simply leave us entirely. If you do not wish to do that, then you must keep your flock from making trouble. I cannot have their actions or activities endangering my people."

This reaction caused Harry to frown and the harpies to go quiet. Most left their perches without a word, flying up into the air once more. A few apologized before following the others, and one or two remained, glaring back at Feldral. Knowing what they had to gain, Cassandra also didn't like the idea of them being sent away for what she saw as a simple accident. But now was not the time to make a big deal about it. Instead, she nodded her head once, the movement reminding Harry forcefully that the harpies were more bird than woman before she barked an order to the few remaining of her flock, taking to wing quickly.

Within seconds, the harpies were nearly gone from sight, and the journey downward resumed, with Harry frowning about how even Feldral now seemed so grim.

Around evening, the group made camp once more in an area where, unfortunately, some of their band would need to hang themselves in their specially prepared bedwraps. There were a series of small flat areas, and after a bit they were all interconnected by rope bridges or ladders. But while this allowed for several to sit or work on their equipment as the cooks prepped a meal, none of the flat areas were large enough for even Harry's hut to be set up. Which was a pity for those who had gotten used to using the toilet array.

The harpies had gathered on a few surrounding, even smaller, perches, and after a few who had been causing trouble for Harry were forced to apologize by Cassandra, Feldral relented and apologized in turn for his harsh words. "But you must remember, few of us have Harry's magic. We cannot recover from falls as quickly, and if we do not, then trouble might spiral out of control."

Eager to make up for the trouble they'd accidentally caused, many of the harpies cheerfully agreed with Lesha's suggestion that they go out hunting and bring something back so that all of the enlarged group could partake. While most of her flock flew off, Cassandra stayed, and after the camp, such as it was, had been set up and Harry had been told off for even thinking of taking on more cooking duties, he and Cassandra sat, talking quietly, with Harry asking questions as his brethren in the Unseen Path wondering again if they should be taking notes. By the end of it, Harry had more understanding of harpy culture, their life cycle and the harpy's magic.

Like the highborn, it seemed to Harry that most harpies were born with an ability to use a bit of magic, not in any particular school, like Shamanism, Druidism, or Arcane, but with an inherent ability to tap into magic. But unlike wizards, and again like Highborne, they didn't seem to have much of any inbuilt magical reserve.

Harry did, though, think that they might have **some** inbuilt magic and pointed this out to Cassandra, who looked astonished at the very idea. "Why do you say that?"

Smirking a bit, Harry quipped, "Well, while this might be a little gauche, or would in my society, can I ask how much you weigh?"

"...Why would that be cause for embarrassment?" Cassandra tried to work this out, then her eyes narrowed. "Or are you saying I am fat?!" She stood up, running her feathers down her body, pushing her top tighter against what Harry could not stop himself from thinking of as full Athletic MILF curves. "What part of me is fat?"

"No, that wasn't what I meant... and you know it, Cassandra," Harry intoned, noting a familiar glint in the woman's eye.

The harpy matriarch smiled winsomely, causing a pleasant shiver up Harry's spine just like her daughters had throughout the day but in a far more subtle fashion than any of them had been able to. "True. But as to your question, although I still do not know the point of it, I am around twelve stone."

Nodding, Harry gestured to her arms. "Which tells me that you are around the same weight as a kaldorei woman of similar build."

Cassandra laughed throatily while Sylina, sitting nearby, grumbled, letting a tiny bit of feminine jealousy rear its head. "As if there are any kaldorei that are built along lines like her."

Cassandra preened a little at that, smiling over at the younger seeming kaldorei in a somewhat superior manner, but not wanting to touch that comment with a tauren war staff, Harry spoke up before either of them could say anything to one another. "So unless your wings are a lot stronger than they look, they shouldn't be able to keep you aloft for very long. Have you ever watched large birds in flight and compared them to how you and your fellow harpies fly? There's a big difference there. Harpies seem to flap their wings more than the giant eagles I worked alongside in my time with the Skyhorn tribe. But you don't flap anywhere near enough to truly fly."

"Hmm... I do not believe any of my kind have ever truly examined how we can fly or do anything we do. Some kind of nature magic-based adaptation?" Despite wanting to tease Harry and Sylina more, there was absolutely nothing wrong with Cassandra's mind, and this sounded interesting.

"Larger birds, even the giant eagles, are not nearly as agile in the air as something smaller. An owl can't perform the same turns and twists a sparrow could. Yet you can turn on a dime, flip yourself up and over without seeming effort, and you can carry far larger weights than you should be able to."

Harry gestured towards the cooking fire. The hunters had returned at some point during the conversation, and now several harpies hovered, watching avidly as their catch, a large boar, was being roasted. Although it taken several of them to corral and kill the beast, as none of them had magic, it had only taken one of them to actually carry it up here through the air.

"I think, like the kaldorei, you have some manner of inherent magic that, as you put it, has helped you adapt to your bodies, pushing past the merely physical limitations you would otherwise face. I don't think you will ever be able to use that inherent magic to craft spells, but with training, you may eventually be able to use it consciously, as Shamans and Druids can, to strengthen and empower their bodies. And maybe more, although probably not to the point where you could use magic like the Fel or Tainted do."

*Specifically, I would wager harpies have enough inherent magic to use runes. Maybe a few low-powered cantrips,* Harry mused but did not say aloud. He didn't think introducing his runes to the harpies at this point would be a good idea. If for no other reason than he was already way too popular among the harpies without piling further on.

"That... makes some sense. And I will admit that it also can tie into the fact that while we do not use spells, we can shape the magic of the Fel or the Old Gods almost as well as satyrs are supposed to once we have access to it. Intriguing." Cassandra was distracted then as her

two youngest came down out of the sky, arguing heatedly with one of their older siblings who hovered above them, looking smug. With a sigh that almost reminded Harry of Molly Weasley, she pushed herself to her taloned feet and stalked over to them, her wings already raising to smack heads.

“So, how are you doing with all of your newfound attention?” Sylina asked, shifting over from her own camp place to Harry’s side, a bit of her jerkin she had been trying to repair in front of her. She had torn it rather badly earlier that day, thanks to her laughter-induced tumble. “I would wager that many a man amongst my folk would love to be in the position you find yourself in. Maybe even most among the tauren might be happy with it, too.”

“... I admit that this is something like going from famine to feast for me. But I was already inoculated against such things thanks to our own fun times since arriving at Trueshot Lodge,” Harry said obliquely, wagging his eyebrows at her ridiculously. Sylina snorted, and he went on. “It bothers me quite a bit, but I can at least understand where they’re coming from. I’m just grateful that none of them have tried to force the issue. Well, besides flashing me.”

That had happened only a few times throughout the day since that first attempt, but... while Harry wasn’t willing to act on the interest the harpies were paying him because he didn’t really need the complication and because he was already in a friends-with-benefits relationship with Sylina, that didn’t mean he was blind. Or that his powers of mental acuity had faded. *If you could empower a Patronus through memories of selfish happiness, I would probably be able to power one the size of this mountain right now.*

“If you’re worried about me responding to their flirting in any way, don’t. I wouldn’t do that to you, even if we aren’t in a serious relationship. Just as importantly, now certainly isn’t the time for it, or even you and I, to have some of our own fun time. Not given how serious everyone is right now.”

Grimacing, Sylina looked around, taking in the nearly grim faces of many of their fellows. “I see your point. Both of them.” She then smirked slightly. “Although I’m not entirely against experimenting in the future.”

Harry gaped at her, and Sylina shrugged her shoulders, looking away. “You remember my friend, Berena Snowglare? She and I had something of an arrangement. Something of the sort you and I have, although more on the emotional side of things. In a few hundred years, it might have become something permanent.

Remembering Berena and how their relationship ended, Sylina sighed. “When I decided I wanted to explore the world, Berena didn’t want to come with me. She tried to talk me out of it, and we had a terrible falling out.”

"I'm sorry to hear that. I thought you said the two of you had parted on good terms," Harry said softly, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

"That was a bit of a white lie. We did part on good terms eventually, but the argument ended whatever was between us before that point," Sylina elaborated slightly before tossing off her sudden bout of sadness quickly, a wicked grin appearing on her face as her ears began to waggle almost as much as Harry's eyebrows had a moment before. "Just, in the future, well, don't be totally surprised if you find one of the harpies waiting with me for you in your yurt."

Harry stared at her, then shrugged, deciding that this fell under the heading of much of the rest of their relationship. It was purely a friendship/physical thing. There were no deep emotions involved. Case in point, the idea that he might have objected to that idea hadn't seemingly occurred to Sylina at all. *Not that I'm going to, if she has no objections anyway, but still. It's the principle of the thing, I suppose. Why am I the mature one in this relationship? Seriously!* He mock-whined, knowing that his own body, currently the equivalent of around nineteen, pushing twenty or so, was at least a few years younger for human-type folk than Sylina was for her race.

"Regardless, I think we need to ask some questions about what this source of deific-touched Nature Magic could be. Even Feldral is almost fanatical about our pushing on to find it. Just look at how he left us all here to push on to see the route going forward. Before this, he was one of the few people I've met since we arrived in Trueshot Lodge who seemed immune to the general malaise that has seemingly effected both the lodge itself and the people we've met there. There must be more to it than simply a source of nature magic touched by a deity. Perhaps some connection to Ohn'ahra? Regardless, I think we have the right to know."

Sylina nodded, looking to where Lathariel lay nearby, one leg straight out, the other bent, with Tjar leaning over him, green healing magic around his hands. He looked exhausted from the day's work. Having banged his knee incredibly badly at one point, the limb had nearly been dead weight for most of the day, forcing Lathariel to use his arms to do most of the heavy work until they were able to stop and Tjar, who was better at healing than the others, could look at it. "Do you think we should ask Lathariel to join us?"

Reflecting that such a question would never have occurred to Sylina when they first began to interact with Lathariel, Harry nodded. *Not only has Lathariel improved a lot, but interacting with one another on a daily basis like this has rubbed most of both of their edges off.* He then stood up, making his way over to the Quel'dorei..

The blonde-haired Ranger agreed to join them, and after everyone had partaken of the meal, the trio moved over to sit beside Feldral. He looked up from his meal, and having shifted away from most of the others to have some solitude, he was about to bark at them. Yet when

he saw who was actually bothering him, he deflated, sighing. "I take it that you want to know why even I have become so serious?"

"We do. It feels as if this source of wild Nature Magic is somehow important to the Order, but whatever it is, we haven't been told about it before this," Lathariel said, shrugging his shoulders. "Not even I have heard anything of this spear, and I've been with the Unseen Path far longer than these two."

"These two?" Sylina asked, not liking the way the descendant of Highborne elves had spoken that term.

But Harry shook his head, looking at Feldral intently. "Focus, please."

"It is no wonder that no one has spoken of it to you. It is part of the secret shame of ours, a secret failure on the part of the unseen path as a whole." He glanced towards where the normally gregarious (for his race anyway) Lesha sat, his head bent over his work as he fletched some arrows. The tauren shaman's concentration was so total it was worrisome as was the grim cast of his shoulders and neck. "And for the tauren among us even more so."

Feldral sighed, turning back to gaze at the three Oathkeepers, seeming to steel himself before he asked, "Do you all remember the mural on the doorways into the central cavern? The one of two young tauren women, one of whom was wielding a spear?"

All three nodded, with Harry closing his eyes and bringing the heroic image of the two heads of what could be called the modern Unseen Path to mind. "Gardrel the diplomat and Arien the warrior. Both used weapons from their father, the man who led the Unseen Path and the tauren tribes in the War of the Ancients. The Hammer of Khaz'garoth, the sacred weapon of the Highmountain Tribe. The spear..."

He paused, nodding. "It's the spear we're after, isn't it? I can't remember being told a single thing about it, bar its name."

"Talonclaw," Feldral nodded. "Indeed. While the Hammer was a weapon made to combat the Old Gods and became a sign of the Highmountain Tribe's determination to always stand against such, Talonclaw, the Spear of the Wild Gods, is something else entirely..." Feldral sighed. "Like our Order, the spear has a history of two parts. Long, long ago, before we kaldorei had become an empire, long before the war of the Ancients, it was used by Moren Highmountain, a tauren chieftain of the Highmountain Tribe. He used it in battle against a force of fire elementals who had somehow been able to overcome and trap Ohn'ahra."

At that, all three listeners' eyes widened, and one after another the three, who had been standing in front of Feldral, settled onto their rears on the ground in front of him. "How?"



“No one knows. But air and fire elementals are often at odds due to the actions of the Fire Lord Ragnaros and his betrayal and slaughter of the Air Lord Thunderaan, and Ohna’ara is a god attuned with the wind and air. What is known is that without Moren, Ohn’ahra would have died. In thanks, the deity infused a portion of her power into Moren's spear, gifting it with magical abilities.”

Here, the normally silent tauren, whose name Harry still hadn’t heard, spoke up, his voice deep, almost subterranean such was his seriousness. “Moren carved Ohn'ahra's name into his spear in honor, and his tribe... my tribe... would take to calling it the Eagle Spear. To commemorate other heroes he encountered or enemies he slew, Moren carved their names onto the Eagle Spear.”

Harry looked up at the silent tauren in some surprise. He would have pegged him as a Bloodhoof tribesman given the silent fury with which he fought. *But perhaps it is the shame that the Seekers and Cartographers of the Unseen Path felt that caused him to be so stoic and grim?*

It certainly seemed to be the case now, as he now spoke far more words than Harry had yet to hear from him, speaking eloquently of this or that name carved into the Eagle Spear. For as Muren passed, the Eagle Spear and this new tradition was passed on to his descendants. “In this way, the spear became a living history of the Highmountain tribe. This was made even more important two generations after, when Eruna Highmountain received a blessing on the Eagle Spear from the Wild God Ursoc after fighting alongside him against the forces of the Old Gods.”

“Ursoc, the bear god? The original god of the Furbolgs?” Sylina questioned, staring at the silent tauren in awe of the stories he had just told them that went with some of the names carved into the Eagle Spear. “They transferred their worship to his son and daughter, I think.”

“Exactly. And so the Eagle Spear was blessed by two of the Wild Gods. A third was added when Omen, the double-headed wolf lord, blessed it before succumbing to demonic corruption. Many a hero’s name was carved into the Eagle Spear in that war, including Tyrande Whisperwind, Jarod Shadowsong, Malfurion and others, others whose names may not be as well known as those three, but were just as important to the eventual victory, such as it was, over the forces of Azshara and the demons. Huln, who was the spear’s wielder at the time, had his own name carved into it by his daughters after he took the eye of a Doomlord with it.”

As the previously silent tauren continued to speak of the names on the spear, Harry thought about what he had been told of Omen, as the rest of the story he already vaguely knew. Omen, though, he had only heard about from Cenarius. Another demigod, his realm had been the hunt and luck of all things, and his form that of a two-headed wolf. He had been

blessed by Elune, but the blessing had not been enough to stop him from succumbing to the madness-inducing Fel corruption. Huln had tried to save him, but then had to turn around and help seal Omen away when the corruption drove him mad. Unlike Ursoc, who had died in the war, Omen was still around, sealed in the Moonglade, specifically the lake there, by a mixture of Elune's power and Cenarius'.

"And at the end of the war is where the first half of the Eagle Spear's history ends, and the next half begins," Feldral took up the tale as the tauren Seeker fell silent. "As my friend Matar has said, the spear, like the Hammer, was passed onto Huln's daughters. Arien and Gardrel decided that keeping both weapons with the Highmountain tribe would be too much. Further, the spear could act as a medium that could be used to contact Ohn'ahra, the only surviving god of the three who had blessed it. Since Ohn'ahra was already the patron of our order, this split just made sense."

"With the help of Ohn'ahra, Gardrel separated the spear into two, letting the blessings remain on one portion, the speartip. The shaft was kept by Gardrel, the names on it a link to the history of the Highmountain Tribe. You might have seen it while living among them, Harry."

Harry nodded slowly, looking at Matar, who looked pained. "I have. It's kept in the Highmountain family's hut. It's been joined by several others though, as they ran out of room for new names on the first one." *At least, I think it's the first one, it could have been copied.* "But you say the blessings remained on the speartip?"

"Indeed. The large blade, which looks almost more like a glaive than spear, held all the blessings of the Three Wild Gods, Ohn'ahra, Ursoc, and Omen, with Ohn'ahra maintaining a connection to the spear, empowering it further. It was through the spear that Arien, our first official Pathfinder, was able to find Talon Peak, and through its power, we created Trueshot Lodge."

That struck Harry and Lathariel more than it did Sylina, and both of them exchanged looks. *It's one thing to know intellectually that most of the kaldorei around me lived and fought during the War of the Ancients. It is quite another to be reminded of it.* Even Lathariel wasn't used to thinking like that, as few of the Highborne who had lived during the empire's time still lived. War, exodus, strife, and a lack of magical focus had taken their toll before the Sunwell's energies seeped into their being, giving them back their immortality, but too late for most.

"The Eagle's spear was renamed into Talonclaw at that point, and became the weapon of the Pathfinder. Arien's name was but the first to be carved into the spear's new shaft. But nearly two hundred years ago, Dorro Highmountain, a third son of the then chieftain of the Highmountain Tribes, became Pathfinder. Many of us felt he was too young at the time, but his knowledge and drive, it was thought that, coupled with his name, he could help lead us through

what had, up to then, been the lowest point the Unseen Path had seen. We had taken part in a small campaign against a still-organized group of Satyrs who had escaped to the south, and Dorro led us into an alliance with the southern tauren tribes and wiped them out. It was thought to be a sign of good things to come.”

“And then, Dorro disappeared on a random sojourn,” Matar ground out, his voice sounding like he was chewing on gravel.

Feldral nodded glumly, remembering that time, whereas Matar had only been told about it. “It was a simple mapping mission with his best friend, Topographer Andiel, more an excuse to get out and adventure than anything else. Both disappeared. No trace of them was ever discovered, not in the area they were supposed to map, not anywhere else on the Broken Isle. We just could not find any trace of them... or Talonclaw.” Feldral sighed, his simple words and frustration speaking of years, maybe decades spent searching for their former leader and the Talonclaw, only to come up with nothing.

“And so the Unseen Path lost its patron, lost its connection to Ohn’ahra. The only thing left to us was the feather, and while that was gifted to us, Ohn’ahra’s feather does not have as large a connection to the god to let us speak or otherwise communicate with our patron deity. Since then, the Unseen Path has been... listless. Not leaderless, but without spirit or morale.”

Harry digested all of that, then slowly nodded, understanding now why, at least in part, Trueshot Lodge felt slightly run-down, why it felt as if the entire Order was dealing with a kind of slow decline or deep regret. It was because they were. It was because they felt they had angered their patron god when Talonclaw was lost.

He couldn’t quite liken it to, say, a Christian feeling he had sinned or something like that. No, this was a far more personal kind of failure. Everyone in the Order knew it and knew that their god no longer having any actual contact with them was justified as they had lost the primary symbol of his favor in the Unseen Path.

“Well... I cannot say I understand how much the loss of Talonclaw has diminished the Unseen Path, I do hope that this source of wild Nature Magic is indeed the same, and that we can recover it,” Lathariel said. Sylina and Harry nodded in agreement.

Feldral smiled at them, then gestured them away, saying he wished to get some sleep and that they should do the same. “Tomorrow is going to be tough.”

This proved the case, at least for the morning. From here, nearly a third, or maybe more, down to where the treeline began, there was a sheer drop, one that even Feldral would take very carefully indeed. They were forced to use a rope and pitons far more in this area than

they had almost the entire trip prior to this point, and by the time the going got easier after midday, all of them were exhausted, sweating, sore and hungry.

Luckily, Cassandra and a few of the other harpies seemed to understand how tough this area was for the landbound creatures of the unseen path. The more sensible ones kept the rest of the flock away, with only a few staying nearby to help out as best they were allowed. This help came in the form of warnings that this or that piton seemed about to be coming loose and even once had zoomed in to help when Tjar had lost his footing and had been in danger of pulling several of the kaldorei around him off of the rock face with him. They had literally flew there, holding the tauren in the air so the rope didn't pull on those above and below until Tjar could regain his handhold on the rope.

They had even volunteered to help carry some of the equipment. That had earned the harpies many a wary look from the more experienced members of the unseen path, but Harry had simply nodded and handed over his backpack, as well as Quetzal, who he had been in danger of squishing several times to the hissing displeasure of the snake from his position around Harry's neck. The ability to speak to a snake had intrigued one of the harpies, and she had winged their way around and down to the forest far below with the rest, carrying on a conversation with Quetzal. Sylina had, after a moment, followed his example, as had Lesha and, after his near disaster, Tjar.

"I hope at least that my flock and I were helpful in some manner," Cassandra said, looking around at the exhausted faces of the members of the unseen path, who were lounging wherever they could on the admittedly quite steep semi-trail leading further down from where they had finally stopped having to climb the nearly vertical surface of the rockface. They were still all tied together, and two pitons had been set up at either end of the group, the guard rope looped between them, giving them all something to lean against the pull of gravity and the steep slope. It was a testament to how hard the day had been that this was positively comfortable in comparison.

"On behalf of Tjar and the rest, thank you. While tauren make light of such work, even they can't face a cliff face like that while carrying any kind of weight," Feldral intoned solemnly, with Nealu and Tjar adding their own words of appreciation.

"Have your folk ever developed weaponry?" Sylina asked as she took back her pack from one of the harpies, placing it on her back after pulling out her canteen. *If I ever see another cliff face like that one, it will be too soon!*

"No, at least, not to my knowledge. We harpies can barely make our own jerkins and blouses. How exactly would we make weapons?" Cassandra lifted up one of her taloned feet before waving her wings theatrically. "We are not exactly good at manipulating things like you -

bethumbed people can. We're able to make ourselves simple necklaces, make simple clothing and stir things like dyes, yet more than that is extremely difficult. Further, it isn't like we need anything like that. Frankly, I would be more interested in better clothing than what we can make ourselves than weapons."

"What about spurs like those the eagles of the Sky Horn Tribe use?" One of the tauren rumbled, scratching at one of his horns thoughtfully.

"That could be good," Maria said, nodding her head firmly, disagreeing with her mother's point of view. "Many a time we've fought monsters and hunted and come away with one of our talons broken or wrecked. Having some kind of gauntlet on our talons would be a great idea.

Nearby, Harry worked on a midday meal for them all as part of his rotation as cook. Now, he chuckled quietly, drawing the attention of one of Cassandra's other daughters. She was one of the younger set. Although not one of the two youngest, her chest was still on the smaller side than the others but almost unbelievably perky. To the point that Harry, after having her flash him once the day before, felt that you could actually lay a table across them and be assured it would not remain flat. "You look as if you have something to say about weapons for us harpies? Do you have some suggestions, ooh, is it more magic?"

"No, nothing of that sort. But Sylina and Maria are both thinking about closing with your enemy. But fighting harpy magic users, it is the fact you could fly and cast spells at the same time that makes them dangerous. Long-range combat like that is always preferable. But there are ways that even those of you who don't have magic can do something similar."

"You mean dropping things?" The harpy's face wrinkled, making Harry wonder how she could pull off being both just out of high school sexy girl-next-door and cute as a button at the same time. "I know several harpies who use their own eggs like that, which is frankly disturbing, or rocks, which is a little better. But they're hard to aim, and the bigger the rock is, the slower the harpy who is using it can move."

"But how about a whole group of you using rocks? You don't have to be very accurate. You can fly away from your target, then with one of you remaining behind as a spotter, come back, and all of you drop your rocks into a set area," Harry explained before going on to explain where the idea had come from, although he dumbed it down quite a bit. "In my world, we had something called bombers, devices that could fly, which could drop dozens of... exploding rocks, basically."

"That sounds more like it!" And now the harpy in front of Harry didn't resemble the sexy girl next door at all. Instead, she looked a little bloodthirsty. "That sounds like it could do a lot of damage."

“It can. If you’re accurate enough. Even better for you flying folk, it keeps all of you out of the range of your enemies. If you harpies had been able to gain enough altitude on us, even the spells of myself and the other spell casters would’ve been next to useless. Keeping yourselves away from the enemy is more important than accuracy. As long as you’re alive, you can keep trying to hit them.”

The harpy smiled at him, her stare becoming far more direct than it had been a moment ago as she seemingly set aside the idea of weapons for just a moment despite her seeming enjoyment of that topic. “But if we did something like that to you folk, you would’ve been able to fly after us. You and your male harpy form. When are we going to see you fly again? I would **love~ to fly** with you.”

Harry coughed gently but was saved by Cassandra from answering. “That sounds like an interesting idea, and we have proven that having eyes in the sky can prove very useful to you who are bound to the ground. So, what do you say, Feldral Rockgrip? Do you think that your Unseen Path will welcome us?”

The two leaders had spent much of the night before talking, and it turned out that Cassandra had heard of the Unseen Path during the War of the Ancients, and had kept away from the central island in the Broken Isles Archipelago because of that. She hadn’t known anything of what they had been up to since, but that had allowed Feldral to fill in some of the blanks, and maybe open up room for a deeper relationship between Cassandra’s flock and the Order going forward. It would, be beneficial for both, even setting aside the elephant in the room: the Talonclaw and what that could mean for the harpies going forward.

Feldral nodded. “I told you that the Unseen Path would willingly welcome anyone into our ranks despite our wariness of your species in general, and an agreement between your flock as a whole and the Order is possible. You have proven to be useful scouting ahead of us, hunting for food and helping us all along in various ways. I will put in a good word for you. Even if this chase turns out to be like trying to catch a cat that doesn’t want to be caught, you will continue to benefit from the Order... and contact with our young Oathkeeper.”

As Harry squawked at that, Cassandra seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, then nodded her head firmly. “Then I believe we have an accord. My flock and I will continue to help you with this search, and going forward. And in return, you and yours will aid us as best you may.”

OOOOOOO

The next day, the band of climbers and flyers stopped barely past midday. They had essentially left behind any of the better maps of the mountains the Unseen Path had access to yesterday and had been following Frandral’s memories of being near here at one point on what he called “A pleasant jaunt through the mountains.”

Harry and many of the others called him crazy. The going had been immensely tough, and more than once the harpies flying nearby had helped aid a kaldorei or tauren who lost their grip and could not recover. Each time, Harry could see some of the wariness towards them fading, the Seekers, kaldorei and tauren alike, becoming more open and welcoming to the harpies. Indeed, they even began to joke, and, in the case of Lesha and Feldral, to flirt back with the harpies, although no one was willing just yet to agree to let the harpies fly them the rest of the way down.

Thankfully, a hard day's climb allowed them to stop on a relatively large bluff. Having enough area for everyone to spread out quickly, many of the group did just that, setting up camp wearily, while others stared over the edge, for the first time since the journey began seeing green, if quite a ways removed still. Far, far below the group, a forest spread out from directly below them out to the horizon.

The group of Seekers and Oathkeepers quickly went about setting up a full camp, including Harry's yurt, which instantly began to get both gawking harpies shouting "It's bigger on the inside!" and people using the toilet array in the corner.

Besides Harry's yurt though, a lot of the things the Unseen Path's members were doing seemed to interest the harpies, who began to follow around members of the Unseen Path, watching what they were doing as they set up camp. In particular, the two youngest seemed interested in everything, asking questions. But perhaps because they were so earnest about it, or perhaps because they waited for an answer, unlike many of their older siblings, Harry noticed that the members of the Unseen Path those two followed around didn't seem as bothered as several of the others became over time.

For his part, Harry set up his yurt and then headed over to where Feldral and Cassandra were talking about their next move. He came close enough just in time to hear the final portion of something Feldral had been saying to the harpy matriarch. "...vertical wall. So I would very much like to see if that crevice truly has been covered by a recent avalanche, as you say."

"As far as I can tell it is closed and has been since my flock and I came into this area of the isle. But I am no expert. Perhaps you folk with your oh-so useful thumbs could remove some of the rocks?"

"What's this?"

Feldral turned at Harry's question, a smile quickly appearing on his face for the first time since the battle against the harpies. "Ask, and a solution might present itself. Harry, would you be willing to go forward with a few of Cassandra's flock and pave the way for the rest of us?"

“Remove a few boulders or what have you? I can, although I’m surprised you want me to use my magic right away like this.” Harry’s lips quirked. “How bad is it if we can’t go down the way you want us to?”

“I’ve only ever been this far north once before, nearly six hundred years ago. Then, this escarpment became a crack that led to another valley which quickly became a smaller chute than the one we faced yesterday, leading downward. I never followed it the entire way, but it could perhaps take us down to the edge of that green we can see below us. Without it, the way tomorrow is going to be incredibly difficult, especially for the tauren, as we will be faced with a practically vertical wall the entire way down.”

Harry nodded, understanding that with how much they weighed and the fact that the tauren’s hooves were not nearly as much help in climbing as a human or kaldorei feet were. The tauren always struggled in such moments, and facing an entire day or more of that would be immensely hard on them, even with the druids aiding them with Nature Magic. “Certainly, anything to help. And no offense to you, Feldral, but I think I would like to see more green around me than we have since we left Trueshot Lodge as soon as possible.”

Feldral snorted at that and waved him off, and Harry, with Cassandra beside him, took a few steps forward towards the edge of the escarpment, looking down, down and down some more. “I really hope that Feldral’s other way down isn’t straight down this! It doesn’t look like there’s anything below us straight down to the forest down there. We’d all have to hang ourselves like Feldral and the brothers did last night.”

Feldral had volunteered to hang themselves out between the small crags the evening before. The Sharpfang brothers had both lost a series of rock-paper-scissors games. Well, it was called rock-parchment-dagger, but still.

“There isn’t, but don’t worry, we would be able to go at least a few body spans downward before having to take to the sheer rock face again.” Cassandra pointed to the side, where the escarpment that they were camped on narrowed, then became a small chute on the side of the mountain face. *The tauren will probably have to crawl to fit in, but even so, it would be far easier than climbing down the sheer side of the mountain.*

“As Rockgrip said, that eventually opens back up into another small valley, one too small to sustain even a tree, admittedly, but then it becomes a rockslide-covered valley. I imagine you lot will need to watch your feet in that area, but it should still be easier for you,” Cassandra explained. “After that, though, is where the trouble might arise, precisely because of the rockslide that filled up that valley.”

Harry nodded, putting that together with what Feldral had just said about another tunnel-like area. *Luckily, none of the tauren are claustrophobic, or I would have to think that*



*many of them might opt to try the cliff face instead of putting up with another semi-tunnel like that. Or having me shrink them down. Stupid social quirks.*

Shaking off those thoughts, Harry closed his eyes for a brief moment, concentrating and as he did, Harry's arms slowly shifted into his phoenix wings. For a moment, as he concentrated, the image of the basilisk also tried to superimpose itself onto his mind, but it failed, and Harry shook his head, then his new wings, wringing them out to either side, causing a slight rustling as the feathers rubbed against one another. *I'm going to have to devote even more time to meditating on my snake side after we get back, aren't I? For just a moment there, it felt almost affronted that I wasn't choosing it, despite the fact that this job is most definitely not something a snake would be suitable for.*

With that thought in mind, Harry looked over to where Quetzal had taken the opportunity to ask Harry to enlarge him back to a semi-normal size, being only the size of a large boa constrictor. He was now curled around a small boulder set against the inside of the escarpment, sunning himself. More importantly, as Harry looked behind him, he found nearly the entirety of the harpy clutch behind him staring at him eagerly, or... Well, Harry thought of most of their faces as eager. One or two were downright lustful.

"I take it they are all coming with us?" Harry inquired, feeling a little worried about the attention once more. He was used to a certain amount of attention in his back on Earth. But not only had he had nearly a decade's worth of not being the Boy Who Lived, this was different. Some of it admittedly was almost reverential, which was somewhat similar, although in this case, it was taken even further, but most was sexual in nature and that he wasn't as used to. *That, and I am **grossly** outnumbered here.*

There were fourteen harpies that followed Cassandra. One was a pair-bonded couple who kept to themselves, the one who wasn't related to Cassandra being very leery of the Unseen Path warriors after what happened despite Harry's use of the songbird spell. The others ranged from the oldest, Maria, to the youngest, a pair of twins. But even taking the bonded pair and the twins out of the equation ten to one was still a lot.

Cassandra glared at her flock, speaking sharply in her own language, causing Harry to remember suddenly that he hadn't actually used a translation spell on her as he had the rest because she could already speak kaldorei. The responses she got from her daughters varied, but nearly two-thirds of the group peeled off, muttering amongst themselves about how 'it wasn't fair' or 'just because she was the matriarch, she got first dibs'. Harry very resolutely did not react.

"Irene, Viol, and Recca will accompany you. The others will stay here, and both Maria and I will stay here to mind them. If we don't, the rest of these birdbrains will be awing and

following after you," Cassandra grumbled. "Irene, you know the spot I want Harry here to look at, the area of many rocks."

"We found a few goats there a few days back, right? I know where it is." Unlike Maria or her red and blue decorated sibling, Irene looked somewhere between the college-age and fully mature woman stage. What that meant for actual age, Harry didn't know and wasn't going to ask. She stood with wings almost as large as Maria's, with a face more striking than beautiful, yellow eyes that reminded Harry of a hunting falcon, and a build like Sylina's. If Harry had to try to describe her further than that, it was that she gave off the air of someone who had far more energy than their age would normally allow for and a mind looking for dangers.

Viol and Recca were two of the more warlike-looking harpies among Cassandra's flock. They were the only ones who had marks on their faces, several scars on Recca's, which looked like a set of talons had raked the side of her face. That didn't detract much from her beauty in Harry's eyes, as the woman had a face that looked almost like a bust he had once seen in a museum: small upturned nose, aquiline features, and an expressive face, complete with deep purple eyes. At her neck, where the feathers faded away, there was a strange pattern of dots and small triangles made out in red. Viol was her seeming twin... or something. Harry wasn't really certain about that, except that her eyes were the same purple as Recca's. Really, most of the harpies didn't look all that related to one another, at least in Harry's opinion.

Except for the two youngest twins. Those two were practically identical.

Whereas Recca's markings on her face were from some ancient battle, Viol had several streaks of purple and green on her face, two each to either side of her face directly below her eyes, that looked almost like the talons of some creature. In plumage, all three were far more subdued than many of the other harpies, with simple brown and white feathers in Recca and Viol's case and black feathers almost like that of her mother in Irene's, making her look somewhat like a raven in terms of her wings.

They all nodded at him and then turned, leaping off the side of the escarpment, their wings flapping. They fell out of sight for a few seconds before they began to rise again, circling the area and waiting for him.

"Ladies of few words, I see?" Harry quipped to Cassandra, flapping his own wings a few more times to get ready.

"Irene has always been like that. Quiet and dutiful, I wish I had more like her," Cassandra said, turning the last words into a barb sent her other daughters' way, causing many of them to grin or smile sheepishly. "The other two are still pondering what to make of you. At least... I think they are. Of all of my flock, those two are the ones who I can never quite get a proper read on."

This was once more reminded almost painfully of Molly Weasley and how she had interacted with the twins, the two of them never quite fitting into what she thought of as her worldview. He smiled nostalgically at the memory but didn't let it stop him from moving forward, leaping out into the beyond, his final thought on the score being *well, I'm certain that the twins would think my entire life at this point a great tremendous joke. A joke on who, though, is up in the air.*

It took him a few seconds, but by the time he was hovering, Harry had finished groaning aloud at the impromptu pun his mind had come up with there, and he quickly moved up behind Irene, shouting, "Let's go!"

Irene flipped over onto her back, somehow still being able to fly despite that, a move that few birds would've been able to do, to look up at him. This brought her chest prominently into display, but she didn't seem to notice, simply watching him for a few moments as if she was still uncertain whether or not to believe what her eyes were seeing. Then she nodded once, twisted around, and flapped hard, heading to their left and slightly down, following the terrain that Cassandra and Feldral had previously pointed out to Harry back on the escarpment.

The other two came up to either side of Harry, examining him from head to toe even as they flew. They then looked at one another over his head and swiftly began to shift position around him as if doing an aerial dance of some kind. Harry tried to ignore it but swiftly found this impossible, as the one below him, Recca, rapidly flapped her wings, coming up directly below him so quickly that Harry couldn't pull back. Her own back, particularly her rear, smacked into his chest and stomach, and she craned her neck to look at him from barely a few inches away, her deep purple eyes suddenly seeming deeper, now more sensual.

Then she fell back and away, and her sister suddenly pressed down from above, so quickly that Harry almost flinched, almost pulling his wings back in. Viol's chest, amazingly perky and firm, pressed into his back, their wings beating as one as Viol copied his movements. Her breath was hot in his ear, but she said nothing, simply nipping at his ear suddenly before he could twitch away. Then, she was flapping away, and Harry had to rapidly flap his own wings until he was once more gliding along. *Well, I don't think I need to wonder about their interest any longer...*

The two sisters pulled ahead of him for a few moments, speaking to one another in a soft tone that could not be heard from his present position, and then they split apart again, watching him carefully for a time, wondering about his response. Seeing that, Harry sighed. "This is going to be a long flight, isn't it? Now, how to warn them off..."

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Harry was once more having trouble with flirtatious harpies, back on the escarpment, Sylina mock-glared at the remaining harpies. While there were no deep emotions involved with her relationship with Harry, she still felt it **was** a kind of relationship, and despite their earlier conversation on this point, felt almost obliged to speak up and try to head off any further flirtations... at least of the too graphic kind, anyway.

This Sylina did in her own, somewhat bull in a China shop manner. "You know, at first, I thought all of your flirting with Harry was amusing, but now I'm thinking it's getting a little much. He and I are... um, in a kind of relationship, and I'd like it if you all backed off a bit." Realizing that both sounded indecisive and might also be mean, Sylina tried to make it better by adding, "At least, if you're not going to include me in the flirting."

The harpies all blinked, stared at her, then at one another, and quickly began a conversation amongst themselves, speaking over one another in such a way that it caused a loud chatter, so much so that Sylina could only make out a few words. Apparently, her words had struck a chord with some of the harpies. Two of them, Maria and, surprisingly, the harpy who had flashed Harry earlier that day, were willing to back off. Maria actually sounded apologetic as she shouted at the others for wanting to get in the way of a pair-bonded couple.

That sounded a little too serious a term for what she and Harry were, but Sylina didn't object and didn't have time to either, as Icsy spoke up, snorting in amusement at the very idea of "...A half-harpy man being with someone tied to the ground! That's about as stupid as the idea of pair bonding in the first place!"

"Not all of us think that sex is something that should be shared so easily, sister!" Maria shouted, which seemed to be something of an insult, judging by the way Icsy responded, hissing and thrusting out her head as if she were a bird towards her sister, her sharp teeth glinting dangerously in the light.

Others were also shouting, but few had the volume to match the two oldest. Only a few of them seemed to have realized that what Sylina had actually said was that she was not willing to let them continue to flirt with Harry without her involved. Surprisingly, the two youngest were among those. *Although, I doubt that Harry would ever go for either of them. They are far too young-looking, frankly, to show such interest in a man. Among kaldorei, anyway. Perhaps their minds are more mature than their bodies? But even so it is somewhat disturbing.*

The pair were quite striking. Looking like true twins, the only difference between them was their eye color, a light yellow in one case and a dark umber in the other. They had light blue hair and mostly blue feathers, with a few black feathers in a random pattern on their wings but not on their head, where their feathers were markedly shorter than most of the others, presumably due to their age relative to everyone else in the flock. They did not fit in with Maria

and the more understated group or Icsy and the incredibly colorful portion of the flock. Their bodies were also clearly that of pre-teens, almost coltish. They were noticeably younger than any of the others, the closest being the harpy who had flashed Harry, who looked as if she was around Sylina's own age and build.

Eventually, Feldral and the other Unseen Path members became annoyed by the loud argument, and Cassandra moved over from where she had been speaking quietly to Feldral and Lesha, smacking heads with her wings and even kicking a few of her daughters with her talons, the sharp talons noticeably folded inward. Yet Sylina was still a little surprised. Parenting among harpies apparently was far more physical than among her folk. *I can't even remember a time when my mother smacked my shoulder, let alone my head like that. And kicking like that is utterly out of the question.*

"I apologize for my flock overstepping their bounds," Cassandra said, nodding her head regally toward Sylina. Really, the way the older harpy carried herself reminded Sylina of some of the Sentinel commanders she had met occasionally while in training. Not Sentinel Commander Nightshade, but others who commanded respect simply because of how they carried themselves as if you could feel the weight of their history in their body language. It was enough to make Sylina feel a bit self-conscious. "It will probably take several weeks for them to get over the sheer pleasure of hearing their own voices, let alone the shock of a male harpy. At that point, the rest of your companions will probably also find themselves centers of attention of many, not just Colu."

She glared at her most colorful of granddaughters, who grinned back unrepentantly, her eyes switching over to where one of the tauren was sitting in front of his one-person tent, seeing to the tip of his spear with a whetstone. Rolling her eyes at that, Cassandra turned back to Sylina. "Eventually, they will get to the point where they will no longer bother you and Harry if that is your desire. Pair bondings are not unknown among our people, and such bondings are sacrosanct. Unless both parties consent, there will be no sharing, nor will there ever be any attempts to get between them, only to join."

"I would not say Harry and I are pair-bonded, as you put it. As I said before this argument began, we might want to talk about that whole joining thing in the future once I get to know some of you, maybe," Sylina said, smirking a little.

"We're willing to share!" The two youngest harpies said as one, getting the words out before any of the others could, serious about the offer or not.

It was very clear that both of these two were serious, and Sylina shook her head gently. "I'm sorry, but I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon."

“We have time,” one of them said, before the other spoke up, the two of them switching off speaking in a way that made Sylina’s eyes twitch from one to the other as if she was watching some kind of sports game.

“We harpies might not live--”

“As long as you kaldorei do--”

“but we are both young yet. We have—”

“centuries to grow up. And hopefully”

“centuries we’ll be around Harry!” They both finished, grinning.

Sylina sputtered, a bit stunned by that declaration on several counts. Her and Harry’s relationship, such as it was, was not something she felt would last longer than a century at most. Indeed, thinking longer term than a century wasn’t something she enjoyed doing, Sylina was very much a live in the now sort, which many young Kaldorei who had yet to see their second thousand years were. She wasn’t even certain that she would be a member of the Unseen Path for that long. But for her to simply remain an Oathkeeper, Sylina knew herself well enough to understand that she really wasn’t so much about facing the darkness of the demons as she was about exploring the world but being a member of the Unseen Path, to ascend to a greater level of responsibility and knowledge you needed to accept that burden. For another, she hadn’t even considered the idea of any of the harpies being interested in anything long-term.

Yet the harpy matriarch nodded her head sagely, glaring over at her other daughters. “You see, Rachel and Rose have between them showed much more maturity, and intelligence than the lot of you! While we do not know how long Harry has to live, we certainly know how long we do. Even I can afford to play the long hunt, then that goes doubly for all of you if you’re actually interested in more than simply repaying Harry for the multiple gifts he has bestowed upon us.”

“What if that is all we’re interested in? Would you still be all right with that idea?” Icsy asked, her tone slightly more serious than normal yet still playful and even flirtatious as she gave Sylina a very direct look. “Would you be willing to share then?”

“That is more in what I had in mind than what the twins are implying,” Sylina grumbled, shaking her head. “I would still like to get to know you a little better first. I’m all for fun, but not if fun needs to hurt feelings.”

Icsy nodded, as did many of the other harpies, understanding her point surprising Sylina. With all that she had overheard earlier, she would’ve thought that bad breakups, relationship

drama and so forth would have been the norm among harpies, given their general attitude towards sex. But apparently, they understood the emotional aspect of relationships just as well, serious or not.

*Well, my attempt to warn them off kind of backfired here! Now what do I do?* Sylina was not looking forward to the conversation with Harry that would need to come up soon, worried about how he might take her discussing their relationship, such as it was, with the harpies and the idea of opening up that relationship to the harpies in turn. *Especially not after his warning about this kind of thing.*

This proved quite prophetic. As the pair lay down in Harry's yurt that night, he stared at her incredulously. "I have many questions. Again. One, what were you thinking! Two, are you serious? And three, don't I get a say in this?"

Sylina was about to open her mouth to respond that most men would kill for such an opportunity, but the anger and Harry's last question got through to her, and she paused, causing Harry to nod. "Yes, that's a serious question. I understand that this is something of a male fantasy, which we spoke about yesterday. And I won't deny that a large part of me enjoys the attention. But not the majority of my mind, which can all too clearly see trouble arising. Harem-type relationships were not exactly unknown back in my old world, but they weren't normal either. And they were really hard to make work."

"Even if everyone was in it just for fun? I've made no bones whatsoever about my feelings in this relationship, Harry. We're just two friends having fun together in a different way. Neither of us has any command of the other's body or mind. It's just a way to have fun for a few decades. If the harpies enter into this relationship like that, with that knowledge already, is there any real harm?"

"Harm, no. Disrespect, a little. I would've liked to be included in that conversation. And what happens if, for example, one of the harpies who joined our relationship isn't fully open about what they want. What if they try to crowd you out? How will you deal with that? How should I deal with it? We will make a big deal about it, so much so that our group dynamic suffers? There are a lot of issues that can go wrong with this idea, Sylina. And I would've been happier if you had simply closed the door on any such thing. I don't doubt that the harpies would probably still have flirted, but perhaps they would've stopped being so in my face about it."

"That's an interesting turn of phrase, in your face about it. That's a good one." Sylina tried to lower the tension in the tent for a bit, but it didn't work, and she sighed. "You're right, and if I had gone into that discussion thinking I would have to have a serious discussion about relationships and everything in general, I would have consulted with you first. This relationship

of ours is a two-way street, after all. But I didn't. I went into there thinking that I would make my position plain, maybe have a bit of fun at the harpy's expense, and warn most of them off of pursuing you so ardently. I didn't expect several of them to actually be interested in a real relationship with you or to be open to the idea of joining our..."

"Friends-with-benefits package," Harry stated dryly.

Again, Sylina snorted, having heard that phrase before from Harry and still approving of it greatly. It truly did encompass their own relationship. "Exactly."

"... I'm still not happy about it. If we, that is, you and I, eventually agree that a few of the harpies who want to join our fun-and-games only relationship and everything goes well there, will that, in turn, harm our friendship with the rest of the harpy flock?" *Will that stop any of the others from searching for a real relationship with me? As fun as being with Sylina is, I think I would very much prefer to enjoy the emotional side of the relationship as well, not just the physical.* "Like it or not, I think Cassandra and the rest are going to be a feature of the Unseen Path... and my life for a long while to come."

"I don't know, sorry Harry, it looks as if I didn't really think this through."

Wondering why he had to be the more mature in this relationship, Harry answered, "No you didn't, but I suppose in a way you're right, so long as the harpies who continue to try to flirt with me realize that if they join our relationship, it's based more on fun than feelings, that's all right. But I'm still not open to the idea for now. Let's get back to Trueshot Lodge, have more time with the harpies, and figure things out from there."

Wincing a little at how... well, shallow, the term 'more fun than feelings' made her feel, Sylina nodded. "I'll make it clear to them tomorrow that nothing's going to happen on that score until we get to know them better. Friend or something different that at least is the same. I doubt that will stop them from flirting occasionally with you, but maybe they'll back off a bit more."

Harry nodded, and when Sylina leaned forward into a kiss, murmuring that that was enough of serious conversations for now, he didn't argue, simply putting his arms around her and, after making sure that the soundproof wards were up, began to pull her back towards his bunk. That was indeed enough time spent on serious conversations for now. *In the future, though, that is a different story.*

**OOOOOOO**

The next day's travel started hard, but once they got to the boulder field that had filled up the valley Feldral had remembered, the going was much easier. So much so that by the time the sun was pushing across the horizon, they had descended down to where they could almost



reach out and touch the trees. Soon after, the last of the group finished climbing down the final wall of stone to set their feet on the ground of the valley they found themselves in.

This was not like the jungle further south, it was a forest, and a huge one. Filled with all manner of birds, and Quetzal told Harry he could smell snakes, foxes, and more out there in the woods. Better, Tjar and Lesha reported something that had every Seeker in the group smiling happily. "The Nature Magic here is far beyond what it should be! There is a wildness and power to it that, although fading, is still affecting the environment here. I do not think from this far away I could discern where the source of the wild Nature Magic is, but even so, it has been here for a long, long time. We are on the right track, my brothers!"

"Spread out and search for anything unusual," Feldral ordered. "We are here now, and we will find Talonclaw if it is still here. Go quietly, and unseen as best you may. Whatever killed Dorro might still be here and in possession of Talonclaw."

Deciding that he could do more searching from the air, after acquiescing to Quetzal's request that he be returned to his normal size, Harry transformed into his half-Phoenix form. Instantly, he could feel the harpies who had yet to take to the air looking at him, but he ignored it for now, trusting that Cassandra's words would keep them from flirting over much and getting in the way.

From the air, Harry could see that, rather than coming down into an area that would eventually link up to the greater jungle of the main Broken Island, they were instead in the small northward-facing spur, a practically blade-shaped segment of forest between the surrounding mountains on all sides but that facing northward. There, Harry could see the gleam of water, although from as far away as he was currently, he couldn't make any details out of the land where water and earth met. *Hmm... maybe in the future, I should work on bettering this form, getting the eyes to match a phoenix?*

Around him, the harpies flew, gazing around, but few among them had any skill to detect nature magic like Cassandra could. Indeed, only Cassandra and her two oldest daughters could do so. Under her glares and barked orders, the group of harpies reluctantly split into several smaller flocks, each of them heading off in a different direction led by one of the trio, leaving only the two youngest behind with Harry. They stared at him, and Harry smiled at them, almost reminded of the appearance of a Japanese cartoon character he had seen once. "And what are you two up to?"

"We are to stay—"

"above Feldral —"

"and then direct them if we have to—"

“follow one of the search teams—”

“led by a Nature Magic user,” the two of them talked in twin speak, only for their eyes to widen slightly as they watched Harry look between them with a smile instead of a grimace on his face at their little act. It never ceased to annoy anyone and to see someone immune to it was startling, even now that their voices did not grate on everyone’s ears.

“That sounds like a good idea. I think I’m going to head west to the mountains there and then do a wide circle of the valley. If any of the others find anything, one of the two of you can come after me.” *Until then, I think I have earned a bit of a treat for myself.* The idea of flying around on his own for a time, just himself and the wind in his feathers, sounded amazing.

“Why do you not get—”

“annoyed by our twin speech?” The twins asked, flying closer to Harry before he could turn and fly off.

“I’ve met twins who do that kind of thing before. They were among my best friends for a few years. Perhaps I’ll tell you about them sometime after this mission is over. I get the impression that the two of you are pranksters in a way, and perhaps you would like to hear of the exploits of some incredibly good ones.” With a last wink, Harry twisted around and dove underneath the two twins, then flipped hard once before rising and ascending quickly above. Catching a thermal, he shifted to the west, soaring away, leaving two incredibly happy young girls chattering to one another about the possibility of story time, apparently enjoying listening to tales like that. *I suppose that with no real way to write, the harpies must have an oral tradition instead, even with their horrible voices.*

Around midmorning, one of the druids began to sense a change in the nature magic around them. He shot a fire arrow into the air, and one of the two twins dove down to speak with the tauren for a moment before the two rapidly passed on messages to the other group of Seekers around the area, bringing all of them, harpy and Unseen Path member alike to where the druid had discovered a shift in the local nature magic.

As Harry joined them, alighting on the ground and transforming back into his normal form, one of the shamans nodded in his direction, then gestured around them. “I sense that the Nature Magic here is very disturbed. What of you, Harry?”

Harry slowly closed his eyes, extending his senses around himself, feeling the Nature Magic around them. And almost at once, he understood what Lesha was saying. “There’s been conflict here, not just the regular predator and prey stuff, but a real battle, one that saw a lot of magic use. The trees and the rest of the plants are still stunned by it... and weaker than they

should be given the scale of the Nature Magic around here. I'd say the battle happened relatively recently as trees reckon such things...two years, maybe?"

Lesha, Neeva and Tjar nodded in approval at Harry's perspicacity. "That is about what we sense, yes."

"There are no trails on the ground here, although some of these trees are marked by claws. Felines use such things to mark their territory," Sylina's panther partner intoned solemnly. He waited until several of the others were looking at him before stretching upward, having to actually lean into the tree trunk to reach the marks in question. When he did, it was very obvious that not only was it quite a bit higher than any normal panther would make such a mark, but that the paw that did it was many times larger than the panther's.

"A tiger that large, heck, any large feline that size could not be that large naturally. Not only would it probably need to feed itself at least once a day rather than once a week, as most tigers or other felines do, but it would be impossible to move quietly. It simply could not survive in nature for very long," Shai said, scowling angrily.

"Which is quite ironic, considering it is nature magic that allowed it to do so," Tjar murmured. "But it also explains why I haven't seen any sign of apex predators around here."

"There are other signs here, strange ones. Ones that make me think of you, Harry, almost," Quetzal said from nearby. "Whoever came through here was not very careful about leaving any marks behind. Although moss has grown over some of these marks, I can still make out what looks like cut marks from different weapons and several booted feet."

The panther lopped off in that direction, sniffing the air and then pressing his nose into the ground for a second. "Musky, grease, dirt, sweat, some of is recent, some of it not. I would say a hunting party of some kind has come through here recently, **far** more recently than the signs of the battle. Yet there is something underneath it, some scent that **bothers** me. It is not one I have run into before, my rider, yet it disturbs my instincts all the same, telling me to flee." The panther growled. "I don't like it. And it was also present at the battle site, far stronger there than here, to linger so long."

"Split up the party again," Feldral ordered as Sylina frowned in confusion, wondering what her friend was smelling. "Harry, you and the other magic users, do you think you could follow the trail of the tiger back despite it being so long since it was here? Marks won't lead you anywhere."

"The disturbance of the nature magic would allow for that, yes," Cassandra said, stepping forward demurely on her taloned feet to stand beside Harry and the other magic

users, followed by her two oldest, with Icsy winking at Harry. "The rest of my flock will take to the air once more to be on the lookout for any trouble."

None of the others had any objections to that, and the flock of harpies rose as one, their wings causing a susurration of sound for a moment before they were up and pushing out from the top of the trees. Below them, while Harry and the other magic users moved in one direction, Feldral and the majority went in the other, with the panther and Quetzal in the lead, the two animals arguing about how long ago the trail had been made. Eventually, they seemed to agree on the idea that the trail had been made within the last two days or so and by twenty or more individuals.

Large individuals, too, perhaps as large as tauren or so, perhaps even taller, though they stepped much lighter than a typical tauren. After so long, there were few enough prints left behind, but the feet looked almost like kaldorei, except for their size, which put those of the Unseen Path who had fought them in mind of Trolls. A thought that did not sit well with any of them.

Eventually, that group followed the trail back to the ocean that Harry had seen from the sky earlier that day. The knife-like valley abutted into a small cove with surprisingly calm waters, given how close the broken islands were to the Maelstrom, reminding Sylina of the small port she had passed through on the western side of the island. Feldral and the other senior members of the Unseen Path agreed that the entryway into the cove probably faced in a northwest direction from the Maelstrom, protecting it from that whirling madness.

Stretching up out of the water line, there was a track, a deep groove that Feldral didn't immediately recognize the cause of. Nathan did, though, and kneeled down, looking at it thoughtfully, then out to the ocean. "A boat's been here. I can't tell the size, but I would wager it was rather heavy to leave a groove after so long even in large pebbles like these."

The beach here was not a gentle one of sand and surf. Rather, while the surf was gentle, the beach was made of stones of various sizes and largish pebbles, large enough to be used in a sling.

"A hunting party of Drogbar? Or are we really dealing with Trolls?" Shai questioned, grimacing and crossing his arms moodily. "Honestly, nothing good comes from such creatures!"

None of the other kaldorei or even the tauren with him disagreed with that, making Sylina go through her mind as she remembered what she had been taught about the ancient control wars and how the two species, kaldorei and Troll, had been unable to coexist back when Kalimdor had been whole, long before the creation of the Empire. How that had led directly to several sharp wars that had shattered the ancient Troll empire and seen the rise of Azshara, the Highborne, and the kaldorei Empire.

“There’s no way to tell, although if they are Trolls, they are all wearing extremely well-made boots, which implies they’re not primitives.” A few of the more well-traveled members of the Unseen Path glanced at one another uneasily at that, much of their annoyance at the idea of Trolls being on their island disappearing into sharper concern. But looking around at her older peers, Sylina could tell instantly that this was something that she wouldn’t be told just yet, and she decided to not try to inquire.

As she thought that, several of the harpies suddenly zoomed down towards them out of the air, landing quickly. One, the one called Icsy, Sylina thought, pointed out of the cove into the distance. “Look! When the sun comes up, you might be able to see out past the entrance into the cove to another island out there!”

Sylina and the others turned to look in that direction, and as the cloud that had been covering the sun for a moment as they arrived on the beach moved, they could indeed see something in the distance, a greenish pump rising out of the ocean.

“Could that have been where the boat was going?” Fandral asked.

“Ship, not boat,” Nealu answered absentmindedly, nodding his head. “It could well be. Although, that could lead to further complications for us. But let us hope that the others have better luck trying to hunt down the source of the Nature Magic.”

Unfortunately, this proved to be wishful thinking. Guided by the harpies, Harry and the others were able to meet up with the rest of their band on the beach, at which point Lesha reported their findings. They had found a gigantic sabretooth tiger’s den, a cave worked into the side of one of the mountains that surrounded the valley. They had found nothing there save for ossified old bones and a large sabertooth fang, so big it could have been a sword for a tauren.

Shaking his head as he gestured around. “But that hardly matters. Because this area also reeks of nature magic. Whoever has the spear now was here recently, far more recently than the battlefield we discovered earlier.”

“Which leaves us with only one question. Do we assume that whoever has the spear, their real base is over on that island? And if so, do we follow them? Or, do we wait here and send another message through the speaking tube to Pathfinder Farstride for reinforcements?”

The debate on this score really wasn’t much of one. The older Members of the Unseen Path could not turn back now. Not when the chance to find and retrieve the Talonclaw was within sight, no matter how far they were actually looking at the moment. Even Feldral and the tauren could not argue against this urgency. Not five minutes later the debate, such as it was, ended. To Harry’s surprise, Feldral then formally turned over command of the group to Nathan,

who had actually been a boat builder before the war of the ancients. This shift in leadership was astonishing to him, and he knew that a human group would never have ever thought of doing something like that. *Put Nealu in charge of the shipbuilding project, sure, but actually shifting command entirely over to him for their group, no.*

That wasn't to say Harry disapproved. The idea was sound, and it showed both the lack of ego the members of the Order had and an enviable flexibility. He was just surprised it seemed so commonplace for the Order.

But despite that, Harry had a few questions about the current course of action. Not least of which was why they were going through the bother of building a ship at all.

Having watched Nathan give out orders and send out everyone else, Harry waited until he had finished before moving over to him, his lips quirked in a wry smile. "Why do I think that you have forgotten about my magic? I could lighten us all, and in that way, we could let the harpies take us across easily. Why are we bothering with making boats?"

From what he had seen, the Harpies could lift any of them, even the tauren were but he didn't know they would be able to. And by this point, Harry knew he would trust any of them (the more serious ones, anyway) to do so. But he also had no idea how long it would take them to cross that distance, or the weather they would face along the way.

"Two reasons," Nathan answered crisply, waving off the Brothers Strongbow that he had been talking to before looking at Harry thoughtfully. "Point one, while at this point, Lady Cassandra and her flock have earned a good deal of trust and respect, trusting them that far is a bit much. Not because I think that they would betray us, but simply because we don't know if they are all up to that task, even if all of us allow you to use your featherweight charm on us."

Harry thought that was a bit of a disservice to the harpies, but he understood that despite none of them having outright said it, many of the members of the Unseen Path who had fought with harpies in the past were still a little leery of the girls. It would take time before the harpies were fully accepted as allies rather than simply not a threat.

"Second, if your magic should fail, the harpies may be forced to choose between dropping their burden or going down into the waves with them. Out there, there is no chance of any of us being able to swim for more than a few seconds. The cold would almost shock us into immobility, the power of the undercurrent would drag us under, and we would drown in short order. I have seen it happen several times."

That caused Harry to frown even deeper. "It sounds as if you are expecting my magic to fail. It does over time, but not quickly."

“We are near the Maelstrom, and magic behaves incredibly oddly near it or just simply doesn’t work at all. Mind you, none of the Broken Isles are within that area of effect, but the waters around the Broken Isles still are not the most magically friendly of areas. The notes we saw from the expedition of the Highborne to the Eastern continent made that very clear when they passed through these waters. They’d begun to deal with strange problems with their magics long before they hit the Maelstrom itself, where all their magic simply failed.”

“Huh.” Harry thought about that for a moment, thinking about what he’d learned of the Maelstrom already. “So the Maelstrom affects the water coming in and out of it? An effect that itself eventually fades the further away from the Maelstrom that water is carried?”

Now, it was Nathan’s turn to look thoughtful. “Perhaps. Like some manner of touch-based corruption that becomes weaker which impacts the water that is in contact with it. But because all the water of the world is interconnected, that bit of water is then dissipated, thus weakening the corruption through the water the further away from the Maelstrom. Considering how the Maelstrom was created, that makes sense.”

“I suppose that makes some sense, and we know for a fact that even solid stone can eventually become corrupted. How else would the old gods be able to make her taint known even from deep in their prisons,” Harry mused, remembering the strange piles of corrupted stone that somehow had created the stone giants he and Tyrande had fought in the Frostfang Mountains. “But in that case, I can offer my help to at least make the boats.”

Nathan nodded at that, and Harry was put to work as the first group of surveyors came back with a downed tree, an ancient thing that must’ve shattered under its own weight recently. At first, he got to work with the others chopping off the branches of the tree, and then, he used a spell from the Australian survival book that he had been given by Hermione to suck all of the moisture out of the tree trunk. This filled the entire group’s canteens with fresh water in an instant and turned the wood from Greenwood to dried within seconds.

This he did three more times, then a fourth on a smaller downed tree. He noted as he worked that none of the trees had been felled themselves. Every trunk or massive branch had been found on the grounds and showed marks of having been knocked down in some natural manner rather than the axes of the tauren or kaldorei.

While the harpies, Lathariel, Sylina’s panther, and Quetzal were assigned hunting duty and overwatch, the rest of the group spent all of that day working on the boat. Nathan knew a good deal about boats and explained how they would need to lay down the keel and every other aspect quickly and succinctly. Even without Harry’s magic to aid them, Harry estimated that it would only have taken them six or seven days to make a serviceable skiff. With his magic to bind each of the segments of the ship’s hold together, to dry the wood appropriately, and to

help transfigure specialized tools at Naelu's bemused, wondering commands, it took them barely a day and a half.

The ship they built was admittedly quite small in comparison to the ship that had taken Harry to the Broken Isles in the first place but was serviceable enough and large enough for all of the ground-bound members of their large party. The vessel almost looked like a Roman trireme Harry once seen in a children's book. But instead of having three decks of rowers, it only had one, and the underside of the boat seemed sharper than the image that Harry could remember. The front of the ship, which Nathan called the prow, also looked sharper.

As they moved around the boat looking for any issues, all of the Unseen Path members quietly thanked Harry for his help. While they were very leery about the idea of becoming dependent on it, all of them understood what Harry could bring to the Order in the long run and were doubly astonished at how much **utility** his magic had in comparison to the large-scale enchantments or grandiose projects of the Highborne that the kaldorei among them had seen firsthand before the War of the Ancients. It was just another sign that Harry's magic was fundamentally different from anything they had ever seen before.

After finishing the boat, the group rested the rest of that day, and then set off that night, hoping to use the cover of darkness to reach the other island without anyone seeing them. While none of them were certain what they would find over there, the marks of a boat having been pulled up onto the shore spoke of a more organized opponent than a bestial one. Organized opponents routinely had silly things like lookouts posted. Worse, while Feldral had never been to the northern island, both of the Strongbow twins had been there on a mission with a Cartographer centuries ago. According to them, the northern island was much smaller than the main one, with a massive hill that dominated the island and allowed for a lookout on top of it to see quite a ways in every direction.

They helped this process along by painting the entire boat black after creating a very primitive paint mixing a series of different colored leaves in a concoction that Harry hadn't looked at too closely, simply because the smell of it had kept everyone but those working on it away. And those working on it were quite miserable until Harry offered to give them each Bubble Head charms. Afterward, Leesha went so far as to give him a tight hug, one that nearly broke his ribs in thanks for freeing him from the horrible smell.

Getting the ship down into the inlet was tough going, but eventually, the ship slid smoothly into the water, and the group began to pile on. Two of the tauren came last, with one mighty shove, had the boat up off of the sandy bottom of the inlet and floating, held in place by some of their fellows, who used long poles to fight the current for a second as the last two clambered aboard.



Harry sat near the center of the ship with Sylina, Lathariel, and Feldral, each of them with a partner on their long oars. Since none of them had been on rowboats at all before, they were set in a place where they would be able to match the rhythm of the rowers all around them. All of them would have to work at it, something Nathan had warned them about early on in the construction of the skiff. Harry once more tried to convince the others to let him use his magic to help things along but was given the same as the first time. None of them were willing to trust magic out on the ocean. Not this close to the Maelstrom.

At first, moving around the inlet and getting used to the tempo of the group was easy enough. But almost instantly after they left the protected inlet, the ocean's waves began to batter them, pushing the skiff backward and almost into the side of the rocky outcropping that served to protect the inlet from the starboard side. Working together, the group fought back, pushing the ship away and into the incoming waves, fighting through them to get away from the rocks until they were pushing out and away toward their target. But the ocean wasn't done with them yet. Instead, it simply shifted tactics. Instead of trying to smash them against the rocks, a mighty current began to tug them to the east. Wind and wave began to batter the ship, waves so large that they dwarfed the ship entirely, making Harry wonder if perhaps his entire venture had not been as well thought out as he had hoped.

Waves crashed over the side of the ship, spray smacking into faces, chilling their bones. Yet they had been warned about this, and the same clothing that had seen them through the coldest of days up in the mountains served them well enough here. Much of the Unseen Path's clothing was also somewhat waterproof, although, after an interminable time rowing, Harry could feel that the water was beginning to seep into his gloves and under his neckline. Looking at Sylina across from him for a brief second, all he could spare from his concentration on the rhythm they had to maintain, he saw that she looked just as miserable as he felt.

Rowing like this was one of the most strenuous physical activities Harry had ever done, and it took all of his concentration to keep in rhythm with the rest of the rowers, so much so that he could barely even think of trying to use a spell. The one second he tried to cast a spell on himself to warm his body up, his concentration faltered, and he nearly caused an accident, his and his partner's oars a bare instant from smacking into the oar of the pair ahead of him. The spell also failed, though Harry had no idea if it was because he had to turn his attention to his rowing so quickly or the impact of the Maelstrom.

The seas were so rough and the going so tough that all of them were almost exhausted by the time one of the harpies landed astride the prow of the ship, balancing there for a second. "Most of my sisters and my mother have gone ahead. There are no watchers, but I do not think you will like what we have found. I am to guide you in, but you must be quiet as we go. The island only has one protected cove where you can land."

From his position in the first group of rowers, Nathan grunted, his teeth pulled back in the strain of the ordeal. "Lead on!"

The harpy turned them a little northwestern from the original almost straight northerly course, which made it even harder going against the current, pulling the ship eastward. Eventually, the vessel was in the lee of the island, the rocky mass of the island protecting them from the worst of that current, even as they had to fight against some of it for a bit until the ship entered what looked like a similar inlet to the one they had left behind on the larger island to the south. The inlet led directly into a forest on three sides, but on the fourth, a large cliff loomed, the side of a hill that gently sloped down into the rest of the island, which was probably all forest, dotted by massive trees rising out from among their smaller brethren here and there. More importantly than that though, was the sight of a wide wooden wall looming at the top of the cliff and presumably out of sight around it on either side.

Another sign of life was much closer than the palisade above, because the inlet was occupied. Not by people other than the harpies, anyway, thankfully, but by a ship. It was similar to their own in looks, if not in size. Because this vessel was even larger than the ship Harry had been on when he and Tyrande first came to the Broken Isles. *Damn, it looks like one of those personal yachts I sometimes saw back on Earth.*

He didn't realize the significance of that, nor did Sylina or Lathariel. The rest of the Unseen Path, though, surprised him by groaning in unison at the side of the ship. "Dammit! Of course. I should've realized what we might be facing the moment we saw the signs of a ship. vrykul!" Feldral groaned from where he was sitting next to Harry.

"Wait, what? Those half-giant folk everyone has called me a diseased example of?" Harry asked, intrigued. He wondered what they would be like and if they really did look like him despite their 'giant' stature. *The giants back on Earth had only superficially resembled normal humans really, and were anything but sophisticated enough to build ships, particularly ships of that size.* "They must be amazing shipbuilders to create something like that out of wood!"

"They are. Magnificent shipbuilders, magnificent fighters, magnificent bastards when angry or riled up," Feldral grunted as they began to pull on their oars once more. At Nathan's command they went more quietly now, shallower with their oars so as to not make much noise, with the harpies spread out along the shoreline and up into the air to keep watch. "Luckily, they don't have very good night vision."

Harry nodded at that, going over in his head everything he knew about the vrykul. Called half-giants for some reason, they were flesh and blood creatures unlike the stone giants that he and Tyrande had made war with in the Frostfang mountains, and smaller too. They came from

Northrend and were apparently excellent explorers and sailors. *And they are supposedly extremely primitive and warlike, but I will take that with a grain of salt,* Harry mused.

Soon enough, the ship was beached, the sound muffled by a hasty spell from Harry as best he could. Luckily, given the wet, soggy nature of the ground here, that was much more than would otherwise be the case with so many hundreds of tiny pebbles knocking against one another. The soggy nature of the ground meant that the motion of the pebbles was reduced, and therefore, the amount of sound that could escape from the area covered by his spell. As soon as that happened, the group began to go ashore in ones and twos, with the tauren first.

Nearby, the kaldorei could make out Cassandra waving at them. She gestured urgently for them to follow her into a forest, and after a moments recovery, everyone pitched in, grabbing at the boat and heaving it into the air. With the tauren spread out and the kaldorei (and Harry and Lathariel) spread out between them, they were able to move the ship along quickly, pushing into the woods and around several trees until Cassandra gestured them down into a dip in the ground, where the ship could be relatively well hidden just by setting it down and covering it with dirt and leaves if need be.

With that done, everyone else got off the ship and slumped instantly to the ground, Harry included. Even Lesha, Tjar and Neeva, who could use Nature Magic to imbue themselves with greater physical strength and endurance than their fellows, were utterly exhausted from the ordeal, and Harry ached in the muscles he didn't even know he had despite his own Nature Magic enhancements. "I don't care what anyone says," he mumbled into the ground. "We are not going back that way! We need to find something better, or else I am going to start using my magic and dare the Maelstrom to do its worst."

There were no arguments from anyone else, all of them incredibly drained from the ordeal at sea, so much so that even the most recalcitrant when it came to relying on Harry's magic was more than willing to lean into it in the future.

"That is for the future. Right now, I think you all need to think about some way of hiding yourselves while you recover if you need to. This island is far too small for the vrykul to miss you come daybreak, which is not that far off. If they leave their village at all anyway," Cassandra warned.

Feldral and Lesha both roused themselves at Cassandra's words and looking over to Harry, but Cassandra held up a hand. "I do not know enough about magic to tell you one way or the other, but I have to ask, would someone who was using Talonclaw be strong enough to detect anyone else using nature magic in the vicinity?"

Lesha paused, a scowl forming on his semi-bovine features. "Possibly. They wouldn't be able to discover Harry's magic, though. None of us can feel his magic unless we are very close

by when he casts the spell. Even his runic arrays are hard to discern, and only when they are activated.”

“Then I’ll hide us with magic as best I may, although given we don’t know anything about our enemy, even that might be trouble. Perhaps we would be better served hiding underground? I don’t know about you, but I don’t think summoning up an elemental and using them would be detectable by someone using nature magic.” He looked over to Tjar, who nodded firmly.

“I can create a cave with Dolmen, we have done that kind of thing before. Even if they detect the usage of the nature magic, we will be well hidden by the time someone can come after us, and once my Earth elemental is gone, the hole will still remain.”

Feldral and Nathan looked at one another, and now that the nautical side of their mission was done with, Nathan bowed towards Feldral indicating he could take charge once more. Feldral frowned a bit but nodded. “Agreed. Let us keep using your magic to a minimum, Harry, just in case.”

Harry nodded at that, and quickly, the shaman with the Earth elemental summoned him. Shifting down into the ground, it quickly created a tunnel-like structure, it created a cave several feet down carved out of the solid rock and soil, complete with a wide enough entrance for the ship to be pushed into for now. Later, once the ship was pushed into it, the entrance to the cave was closed quickly, and several small holes bore through the earth to let the members of the Unseen Path see out. It was very evident that Tjar and Dolmen had done this before.

Quickly, everyone began to work on moving the ship into the hole, which the Earth elemental quickly shrank behind them as the ship was set down. Once Lathariel, Sylina and Shai had returned, having covered the tracks of the tauren through the forest, everyone piled in after the ship, including Cassandra, Recca and Viol. Cassandra had taken that time to talk to Maria and Irene and had ordered them to take the rest of the flock back across the ocean to the other island and to wait for their return or a message from Cassandra. The trio of harpies would join them soon but had to give the report on what they had seen of the rest of the island and the giant settlement first.

“None of the others are as combative as Recca and Viol, and I wish for Irene to stay with the rest of the family just in case.” She looked over at her two daughters, or possibly granddaughters? Harry wasn’t certain. Although he was certain of the teasing note in her voice as she spoke to the two of them. “Although of little words, she is still the better leader of the three.”

This seemed to embarrass Recca for some reason, who ducked her head, and let loose with a whine of, “Grandmother!” which at least told Harry what their actual relationship was.

Viol stayed silent, not looking as embarrassed as her sister, but also leery of the cave in general, seeming to not like it's size or how quickly it had been created. Still, she said nothing, simply sidling towards where some of the kaldorei pulled out several small, incredibly well-crafted lanterns. Soon flint was set to the small wicks within, and light began to pour out into the cave, even as the Earth elemental finished closing the majority of the entryway, leaving only a few small slits for them to stare upwards.

Once that was done, Harry and the rest looked to Cassandra and her two granddaughters. "Now, tell us what you can of what we are dealing with here."

**OOOOOOO**

Luckily, while Cassandra's warning of their being easily discovered would probably have been quite accurate given the noise of a group of vrykul passing their hiding place by, the use of an elemental had indeed gone unnoticed. The group of hunters, four strong, trooped through the woods, grumbling in their own language. Unfortunately, everyone agreed that trying to use a spell on them, even one as low-powered as Harry's translation spell, would be more trouble than it was worth, so Harry had no idea what these giant humans were talking about.

Not, mind you, that he thought a conversation of four random hunters would be all that interesting. But Harry found himself oddly fascinated by the sight of humans, even the super-sized sort. Because, unlike the giants in his own world, the vrykul of this world were far more human in appearance, both in their faces and in how they dressed. They were also shorter by at least eight to nine feet, which was nice.

From the tiny holes left to look through and for air, at first Harry couldn't pick out gender by their bodies since all four wore leggings, thick and fur-lined, and armor, too. Yet as they came closer through the woods, at least one of them sounded like a woman, her voice deeper than a normal human woman's but still feminine as she seemed to argue with all three of the men, their own voices deeper and more baritone than even Hagrid's. As Harry looked at her, he saw she stood a foot shorter than her male counterparts, making her only eleven feet tall rather than twelve.

Finally, one of the vrykul moved around a tree, almost directly in front of the hole Harry was looking through, and Harry could see his face full-on from their hiding place.

A beard covered most of it, but even so, there was something almost poignant about seeing another human face after so long, the sight only bringing to mind the myriad differences between a human's face and a kaldorei's that Harry hadn't realized before this. In comparison, the human was ruddier, his face flatter and wider. His eyes were less expressive, a simple brown, the beard thick and curly, something that no kaldorei Harry had yet met could have matched. His ears were short, covered by long, lank hair that fell to his shoulders.

Trying hard to push through the sudden intense longing for the familiar after so long among those he had little in common with physically, Harry tried to make a joke of it. "A part of me is bitterly disappointed. I thought these people were supposed to be this world's Vikings, yet I don't see a single horned helmet among the four. I hope that is because they are out on a hunting trip and thus not armed for war, else I will have to assume those history shows I watched lied to me."

"I have no idea what a history show is, though it sounds fascinating. But why would anyone want a helmet made out of horns? If you're not trained with them, horns like that would simply get in the way and would be a little bit heavy, even for a vrykul. Unless they were hollowed out, which would make them very weak to strikes. You'd be constantly replacing them," Tjar answered in some surprise, his own volume as low as Harry's. Who knew how far sound could carry?

"Point. As for armor, chain mail it looks like. Fur-lined clothing, no cloaks. Three of the four are carrying spears and what I would call a short sword, while the fourth has a single-bladed axe."

"They might think it a dagger, but for us, it would be a short sword, I think, although not quite," Sylina mused, leaning into his side and looking out the same viewport for a moment.

At that moment, one of the hunters came closer, then quickly turned away, his spear lashing out at a small boar that had just burst out of the undergrowth. The spear struck home, bringing the animal down, squealing as the giant whooped to the shouts of derision and annoyance from his fellows. Harry would guess they thought he had gotten lucky and didn't like it.

"They are amazing at carving," Sylina said, staring in rapt amazement at some of the etched carvings on the metal vambrace she could see on the hunter from here. It looked like a fox face, but one shaped into a permanent snarl. "The sheer artistry on display is not what I would've expected from what little I knew about vrykul before this. No offense, Harry."

Harry's lips twisted into a scowl at that, but he said nothing as Lathariel spoke up from behind them. "Don't be too surprised. Something that stuck in my mind when we were told about vrykul in the past was that they believe that wearing either the talons or claws of killed animals or carved totems of animals that they personally slain gives them power."

Feldral and the rest waiting deeper into the cave looked at him, and the Quel'dorei shrugged his shoulders. "What? That is the kind of thing that sticks in your head."

Since none of them could argue that point Luthar turned the conversation back to the weapons they were seeing. "The vrykul call their dagger a seax or something similar,". "At least

from what I learned in our archives back in Trueshot Lodge. The curve of the blade is made for hacking and chopping, and it's good for close quarters like on a ship. The vrykul raid one ships quite a lot from what I know of them.

“Broad-leafed spears, small bucklers, heavier armor than most of my folk would like to wear out on the ocean, but not as heavy as some sentinels prefer to wear in combat,” Leesha added. “Heavy use of axes, too.”

“It is also doubtful that any of their weapons will be enhanced by magic,” Landros murmured, switching out with his brother as another huntsman moved in front of the viewing hole. “I wish we had some of the brothers who have actually journeyed into Northrend with us. They would be able to tell us more. I... don't think they have many magic users at all, let alone enchanters. Do I remember that right?”

When he posed this to the others, none could answer, since no one in this group had ever been to Northrend or studied the vrykul in any detail. After a moment spent answering in the negative, they all fell silent as the group of vrykul came even closer. All four were almost on top of the cave by this point instead of just in front of it, and Landros and Leesha quickly shifted everyone away from the holes, pressing some of the dirt from the floor of the tunnel into place over most of the holes. They waited in darkness for a time before Sylina and Landros signaled an all-clear, the group of hunters having moved off.

Those four were not the only group the hidden infiltrators saw that day. Each time, the cave defended them from discovery after a few tense moments.

That night, after having spent the entire day resting and soothing sore muscles as best they could with various ointments that most of the members of the unseen path brought along as a matter of course, the group waited until it was deep night, then exited their hiding place, heading towards the village, spreading out as they did, only coming back together at the base of the hill leading up to the village high above. Many had found bones of various monsters, the signs of old battles spread out around the island. And as had been the case the night before, the vrykul were so confident that they controlled this island that there were no guards posted on the walls of their village.

Although Harry felt the walls of their town were themselves a pretty good deterrent against most enemies. They were at least five stories tall, with the first story a shaped mound of dirt that looked to be incredibly thick, with the wooden palisade stuck on top. There was no sign of any guard towers, although one of the harpies had described a walkway up there, which would've given any defender a formidable height advantage against any monster or more civilized defender. Leading up to the only entrance, a large wooden gate, was a dirt road that led down into the cove and the waiting ship.

Yet, as tall as that palisade was, several of the trees in the forest that dominated this island were even taller. In fact, many of them were true monsters of the breed. Redwoods, oaks, firs, and so forth, not like the more exotic trees that Harry had seen on the other island, which made some sense. This island was an entirely separate ecosystem, one that had little in common even with the forest of the valley they had come out of the mountains into, which itself had been colder than the jungle that dominated the main island. Harry had no idea how far north their trek through the mountains had taken them, but it was obvious that they had gone hundreds of leagues between that and the horrible night out on the ocean.

Regardless, a few minutes spent climbing allowed Harry and the others to find trees out in the forest that allowed them to look almost straight ahead and even slightly down into the village. They couldn't see everything; buildings got in the way of that, but it gave them far more of a view into the village than any human builder in Harry's world would've been happy with allowing in terms of defense. *So is this place a temporary habitation, or are the raiders that arrogant?*

The buildings within the village matched the vessel below and the wall in sheer size. Each and every one of them was well-built from what Harry could tell (and knew about construction, which was very little, admittedly) but were built on a size that would have made even Hagrid think it was a bit much. But given the size of the people within, that was to be expected. The vrykul longhouses were mostly wood but also had stone in places, particularly in the form of chimneys and around the base of the buildings.

Dozens of vrykul moved around the village despite how late it was, and Harry took a moment to think about how many of them would fit into each house. It seemed to him that most would need to share houses, the longhouses that dominated the village, six in total. That was somewhat odd to Harry, as it was clear, both now and in the group of hunters from that morning, that the vrykul village was mixed-gender. *So, do they just make no allowance for such? Strange.*

Two more buildings seemed to be for cooking, given the hanging lines lined with fish outside them, and another two were special. One looked to be a tannery, once more shown its function by the number of skins left outside. The last was smaller than the longhouses but bigger than the others. Situated to one side of the large, open central area, it had what looked like a primitive standard outside it: a large stake driven into the ground, holding up a flayed animal skin and a number of different-sized skulls.

"There's too many of them moving around for this time of night," Jorvus murmured. He, Sylina, Leesha and Shai were sharing the same tree as Harry. The rest were spread out in the



boughs of other, equally massive trees, their current positions so well hidden that even knowing what to look for, Harry could not make them out in the darkness.

“There aren’t any children here,” Shai noted.

“I’m counting at least seventy vrykul, all of them armed. This isn’t a real village. This is a raider’s hideout,” Leesha answered, his tone worried. “Fighting that many... I don’t know if we have enough numbers on our side. Even with the element of surprise and magic, that’s a tall order.”

As Lessha spoke, Harry became aware of a kind of feeling in the air, almost the heady oppressiveness that was not quite anything he had faced before. It almost reminded him of the feeling that he had gotten around the satyr camp where he had freed several dryads and guardians. *Are we dealing with something tainted by demonic magic, then? But it doesn’t feel quite like that.* Strangely, while he couldn’t recognize it, whatever it was was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end, something inside of him taking notice.

Looking over to Leesha, Harry asked, “What are your nature magic senses telling you about the area around here? The village feels almost diseased to me, but not quite like the Taint or Fel magic.”

“Yet you describe it as well as I could. There is something wrong with the nature of this island, almost indiscernible unless I am looking for it, but it is impacting the background magic around and within. Something I’ve not personally run into before, a... a lethargy, a draining?” Leesha sighed a little, shaking his head. “I could wish that the ancient highborn who had joined with the unseen path during the War of the Ancients had been better about writing down impressions as to what the use of other magics would feel like to someone using nature magic. Alas, none of the kaldorei Druids of that time joined the unseen path. Whatever is going on though, it is taking from nature. That much is clear.”

Harry nodded and continued to watch the village, using his spyglass to look at specific faces for a time. As he did, he felt a certain amount of curiosity, a desire to talk to these near-humans, to get to know them a bit better. *I know this group doesn’t seem the most talkative, but perhaps...*

His thoughts were interrupted as two of the vrykul within the village began to beat on drums. As tall as Harry was currently (he still had a few years yet before he finished growing, or at least he hoped so) and just as wide too, those drums made a sound like rolling thunder, so loud even from here that many of the kaldorei winced at the sudden noise.

The vrykul began to chant, stamping their feet as they formed into a series of circles around the throne and the pedestal next to it. The chant was obviously in their own language,

but Harry felt that at least a few of the words were someone's name. This was proven a moment later as the chant ended, and one of the vrykul bellowed that last bit out loud.

In answer, another giant burst forth from this central log house.

He was tall, taller than any of the others, fourteen feet at least to their seemingly normal eleven to twelve, and Harry didn't need to look over to Leesha to understand that the man had possibly used nature magic to enhance himself physically. Yet as he looked at the chieftain, the man felt.... Wrong, somehow, to Harry's senses. His eyes narrowed as tension began to coil inside, all of his earlier thoughts about the vrykul fading into nothing as he stared with growing intensity at the man.

An intensity that did not grow any further as he thrust his spear upwards, and Leesha and Lewis both hissed in outrage. "That is the Talonclaw! That chieftain must have been using the magic within to augment himself. Either he is a shaman himself, or somehow possessing the spear is enough to give one that boost."

The man gestured, and dark, malevolent energy began to gleam in his eyes, visible even from here as a corona from each eye of deeper blackness, spreading almost like a flame to either side of his face. It flowed down his body and over the spear pulsing around it but not touching the spear, which in turn began to glow green, which disappeared as it touched the darker aura around it, which grew quickly. It was as if the dark magic was siphoning away the nature magic within the spear, fueling the man and the spell, whatever it was.

At the sight of the dark-colored magic, Harry's hand snapped up, and a spell began to form in his mind, a Rifela that would cover the distance between them and remove the chieftain's head if it struck.

But Sylina, seeing what he was about to do, grabbed his hand and pulled it back towards her, twisting Harry around so hard Harry nearly lost his footing on the branch he was standing on. "Harry, what the hell?! We can't just attack! We still don't know what we're dealing with here, and there are far too many of them for our band to take on anyway!"

Harry tried to pull away from her, but then, no longer seeing the site of the death magic being used, Harry began to regain control of himself. Furiously calling on his mental discipline, he began to push down that sudden wave of murderous desire that had pushed him forward.

As he did, though, an angry female voice resonated through his skull, so loud that it nearly caused Harry to black out from the pain of it, so loud that it seemed to shake the world, but only Harry could hear it. "**THIS IS A SMALL EXAMPLE, A SINGLE TINY MITE IN COMPARISON TO THE MILLIONS OF ANTS CRAWLING ALL OVER MY BODY, TAKING OF MY POWER, THAT**

**YOU ARE ON AZEROTH TO STOP. AND YOU FALTER AT THE FIRST INCIDENT THAT YOU COME ACROSS? HAVE I CHOSEN POORLY, MY AVENGER?"**

*"No. Death Magic pisses me off in general too, or have you forgotten, **mistress**, of some of my adventures back on Earth? But I'm not going to rush in without a plan."* The sarcasm in the term 'mistress' was palpable as Harry realized that DEATH could watch and even intervene in his life on Azeroth to make certain he did her bidding. That was disturbing and annoying as hell, even setting aside the rush of fury he had been feeling a second ago. *"How likely is it a spell from this far away wouldn't be seen before it could hit him? Before he could dodge or prepare a defense!? Then he would be warned against me, against my allies!"* Harry ground out, fighting his sanger for control of his body. *"Attacking without a plan is folly!"*

His argument seemed to work, and with an abruptness like the snap of a whip, DEATH's presence in his mind was gone without further word. The anger was still there, but he could push past it and nodded to Sylina, thanking her for her help, before turning and staring, wanting to know how powerful this shaman chief was and what he could do with the spear.

With the dark corona of magic all around him, the chieftain stepped forward, and as one, the entire crowd went to their knees, including one individual who was in chains. Harry hadn't noticed him before, but now, as the man began to undoubtedly plead for his life in their own tongue, the fact that he was chained and couldn't get away from his two captors became obvious even from this distance.

The chieftain gestured, and dark energy grabbed the prisoner, lifting him into the air by his throat before dropping him back down. The chieftain spoke something in a low tone, which, unlike the noise of the drums or the chanting, could not carry to them. It was a command, though, given that both of the prisoner's guards jumped to their feet, grabbing the prisoner by the shoulder and rushing him forward towards the altar. He fought back desperately, heaving this way and that, kicking out, trying to bring his elbows into play, shouting in their own language, staring pleadingly at his fellows, even picking out two or three in particular.

Yet none of the rest of the crowd moved to help him. Instead, they began to cheer, even the ones he had been looking at most pleadingly. Some of them began hopping to their feet in excitement, shouting out their chieftain's name again and again.

"It's as if they've all gone mad. This is what Fel magic or the Taint could do. But I would recognize either of those. This is something different."

"Death magic," Harry said in a tone that sent shivers down the spine of every listener around him. "The chieftain is using necromantic energy of some kind. He's using the power of the spear to gather Nature Magic and then converting it."

Sylina and the others all stared at Harry in shock, then Leesha nodded sharply. "It isn't something most talk about much, but the broken Isles were part of the central territory of the kaldorei. An area that had been fought and bled over for decades during the War of the Ancients, and where even the survivors of that war, highborn or normal citizens, could well have died in the hundreds during the Sundering. Gathering that magic to him would be difficult, but with the power of the spear's own abilities and added impetus, the amount of power he could gather from the Isles would be immense."

"Exactly," Harry said grimly, watching as the sacrifice was laid out on the altar. He didn't just look at the magic he was seeing but also took in how the rest of the group was responding.

They all looked eager to see what was going to happen, some of them even leaning forward, shouting in their own language, as if they were at a Quidditch game and were about to see the seeker catch the snitch. It was that kind of festive feeling he was seeing among the raiders, and it disgusted him.

*Well, I kind of figured the moment that I realized that was death magic that I'd have to kill them all, but it's always nice to see some confirmation that none of them should be spared. In fact, now would be a great time to figure out a way to use Fiendfyre. While Harry had fought against users of the dread flame, he had never learned how to cast it himself. Although, come to think of it, probably not a good idea. Not on a world with fire elementals, a world that has felt the touch of actual fiends. Thankfully, none of them seem to be around at the moment, but still. It's definitely not something I should get used to. Although right now it would be a tremendous way to take care of this little problem. Unless it could mutate out of my control.*

Harry was using thoughts of that and also real thoughts of what he was going to be doing shortly to control his gorge from rising at the site of what was going on below. Because the chieftain wasn't just killing the victim, no, the chieftain had prolonged it a few moments, carving marks into the man before waving the spear above the man from foot to head. Then, he began to chant a spell, and black energy rolled out and down from the shaman's other hand into the man, where it began to pull something out of him. Some energy or other, bluish in nature.

And as it came out, the man screamed, a scream of agony like he had been put under the Cruciatus. He spasmed, screaming and shrieking even as the crowd around him continued to cheer, howling their religious delight to the nighttime sky.

As the energy from the man was absorbed into the necromantic black energy around his hand, the chieftain shouted something. Waving his spear around again, all of his folk began to glow with the same dark energy, far less than he did, but still a noticeable amount. It faded quickly into their skin, white patterns suddenly appearing on their faces and forearms, the stark

whiteness apparent even from here. Then those faded, too. Looking through the spyglass, Harry saw that some of the color seemed to have bled away from the raiders. But the energy also seemed to energize them, and they shouted and cheered and roared their approval before an equal dozen of them moved out of the group, coming back with massive trays loaded with what looked like tons of seared meat dishes, accompanied by flagons of beer.

“Well, that’s nice. The raiders get their last meal, and they also get to drink themselves into a stupor, which will make it much easier for us to make it such,” Harry growled, turning around and beginning to climb down the tree. “I’ve seen enough.”

“So have I. We need to get back to the others and plan out our next course of action,” Leesha said, following Harry down while Sylina stayed still for a moment, closing her eyes as she tried to keep her stomach from coming up out of her mouth. Leesha waited with her, hand commiseratingly on her shoulder.

Both of their eyes widened, however, as Harry’s voice reached them from below. “Oh, I know what my next course of action is. I’m going to kill them all.”

Back with the others, Feldral and Leesha tried to talk Harry out of this calm, almost unfeeling statement. “vrykul are dangerous opponents. They are immensely durable both in terms of resistance to magic and physical damage, are amazingly fast for their size, and are so strong that no armor that hasn’t been magically enhanced any tauren or kaldorei can wear will withstand a blow from them,” Feldral argued.

“Worse are their numbers. If there were an even number of them to us, or perhaps even slightly more, I would be willing to chance it,” Leesha stated, shaking his head. “They only seem to have one magic user among them. We have several, we would have the benefit of surprise, elementals, and harpies. But the vrykul are not harpies, Harry. Seventy of them are a small army!”

“I understand your points. And I don’t care.” The coldness in Harry’s tone took Feldral aback, and Sylina reached out a hand gently to Harry’s shoulder, squeezing it. He looked back over his shoulder at her, smiling faintly, but when he turned around and spoke to the others, he still sounded like winter frozen over. “None of you, not even Sylina or even Quetzal, has seen my full repertoire from back in my old world, and I’ve added quite a bit to it since. You’re right. We have the element of surprise. We can plan, and I intend to do that. But I also intend to kill that entire village tonight.”

“Harry, their magical resistance alone would make a fight against them practically impossible to win, even if all of us join in,” Tjar argued, looking frustrated even as he played devil’s advocate. “I hate it! I hate the very idea of leaving the Talonclaw in that necromancer’s possession for even a moment longer. But...”

“The giants in my world were far larger than that and also had magical endurance. By the time I found myself transported to your world, I could one-shot them,” Harry answered bluntly. “A single cutting spell, the kind I occasionally used to help in plans for our ship, could slice one of those in half with enough power behind it. I am not going into this fight arrogantly or simply assuming that my invisibility cloak will simply see me through or that I can simply snipe at them from a distance. I know precisely what I’m getting into, and I can do it myself if none of you are willing to take the chance to fight with me.

Behind him, Sylina frowned, crossing her arms under her chest and staring at him. Something was riding her friend now, something dangerous, making him a little too reckless for her liking. She wasn’t about to say that he couldn’t do it. Harry had done a lot of things that Sylina, in her somewhat sheltered view before leaving the forest, had never seen before. But this seemed too abrupt to her.

But as Harry spoke, much of the resistance to attacking now faded among the Unseen Path. While Leesha and Feldral hadn’t shown much of the despair and sadness the rest of the Order had, the sign of their compact with Ohn’ahra was urging them on all the same, much like the rest despite their best efforts to play devil’s advocates. As Harry spoke, showing he did have enough tricks in his bag to offset the numbers advantage the vrykul would have, they quickly came around to the same conclusion as the others. The Talonclaw had to be recovered and they could do so now, with no need to wait for further aide. Soon, a plan was made, and preparations began with the slithering of snakes through the forest.

OOOOOOO

“Once more, Harry Potter, you do something that can change the lives of my flock... and thus renew my daughter’s amorous pursuit of you,” Cassandra mused in the harpy’s language, a giggle escaping her despite the seriousness of the task facing Cassandra and those who followed her. Currently, that meant her three warriors, Irene having joined her mother and daughters a few hours ago. Despite it being the deep of night, the group of harpies could see one another well enough thanks to Elune and Blue Child both being high in the sky.

“I know, right!” Viol said, flying almost wing tip to wing tip with her grandmother, smiling over at the older woman brightly, her facial markings gleaming almost as bright as her smile in the night. “I swear to the mother Goddess, if he wasn’t already in a relationship with that kaldorei, I would’ve barged into his tent that first night and offered myself to Wizard Potter there and then!”

“And you being such a prude most of the time,” Cassandra teased, one of her favorite pastimes when it came to her children and grandchildren alike. But considering that Viol was one of the few of her flock who had never lain with anyone, her teasing was on point, and she

watched in amusement as Viol blushed, ducking her head underneath one wing and trying to twist away, although Cassandra followed her easily.

In their claws, the four harpies held several small pouches. And within each of them resided several dozen shrunken pebbles. It had taken Harry some time, but he had put a runic array on the pouches that would cancel the shrinking spell he had used days ago on the boulders blocking their way down the last chute they had climbed down in the mountains. The harpies would have to hover to work a bit to pull the pouch open and then close it again so they only release a boulder one at a time but considering that the quartet could hover well above even spell range to do so, that was not exactly an important fact.

Screeches from nearby drew their attention, and they saw Irene and Recca soaring towards them. Like her daughters, Irene now sported a pouch between her talons, and the two of them moved into formation with Cassandra and Viol. "Is it about time? I want to start the fun."

Cassandra snorted at her habitually quiet daughter's words but shook her head. "We wait for the signal. Only then do we strike, girls."

Not ten minutes later, that signal happened. Tricky, Harry's Fire Elemental, flew out of the dark forest below, circling in the air before diving back down.

At that, Cassandra steeled herself, drifting closer to each of her family members in turn, letting the wingtip of one of her wings press into and merge with their own. She had heard a kaldorei once state that this was the harpy equivalent of clasping forearms, but she didn't think so. It had far more feelings attached to it than that act seemed to among the kaldorei. It was more like holding hands with a beloved friend, and it was a gesture that harpies used to convey a wish for health and good luck. "It is time. We drop rocks, and then if they attempt to fight us, we shift away. We are to draw their attention to us for a time, but I do not want any of you to put yourselves in danger. No amount of hope for the future is worth even one of you."

The three most warlike members of her flock all smiled at that but didn't answer verbally, the lust for battle growing in their eyes. Cassandra winced a little, hoping that none of them would take any foolish chances. *Irene has enough control, I think. Her daughters, I don't have as much faith in...* With a final sigh, Cassandra twisted away, leaving them in a diamond formation down in a spiraling descent towards their target.

It was pushing dawn at this point, the time of day when people throughout history were at their most vulnerable. The raiders below were not any different. Only a bare dozen were awake, cooks assigned duty that morning or hunters heading out early. A few of these hunters had begun to grab their supplies, hunting spears or vrykul-sized longbows. As tall as a tauren, with arrows to match its size, these bows looked deadly.

But the hunters never got the chance to even head towards the gate, as boulders began to drop out of the sky. One of them crashed directly into the head of a vrykul near the cooking huts, the large humanoid's head crushed to paste from the impact of the rapidly descending boulder, easily twice the size of its own head. Others crashed into buildings and smashed into shoulders, backs, tables, weapons and, most of all, rooftops. Not a single building was spared, having at least two boulders smashing into and through their roofs.

Carnage descended into the village, made worse by the suddenness of the attack, and the harpies all were able to just fly around, dropping boulders unimpeded for several seconds as the now waking raiders rushed around, trying to grab up weapons and armor, unable to figure out where the attack was coming from at first. Then, just as the first rays of dawn began to come over the horizon from the harpy's perspective, one of the hunters who had grabbed up a bow looked upwards, shouting out something in its own language and pointing into the nighttime sky. Several of the others with bows quickly strung them, pulling out arrows and firing up into the air at the harpies, shouting imprecations their way.

The harpies could not easily see the arrows, and Recca squawked in outrage as an arrow clipped her leg. Yet she proved her grandmother's concerns about her self-control were invalid as she instantly flapped her wings, gaining altitude as she shouted, "They know we're here, ladies! Get high!"

"Why does that line put me in mind of some of the herbs the tauren smoke sometimes?" Viol questioned, even as she, their grandmother and mother followed Recca's movements. Soon, they were much higher in the air, although they still began to dodge around wildly, just in case. That movement didn't stop their attacks either, as they continued to drop boulders from the small pouches on their talons, tugging at a rope tied to their other leg, one jerk to let a few pebbles drop free at a time.

Arrows continued to fly their way, and soon, spears were hurled upwards as well, but they didn't have anywhere near the range of the arrows and did more damage as they came back to earth, impaling one of the vrykul in the shoulder that had yet to pull on any armor. That one let out a distinctly feminine wail, twisting around and bringing up one of their vrykul daggers to charge towards where the spear wielder she thought had hurled that spear had come from.

Even better, several of the vrykul were shouting at one another, gesturing back into their longhouses. Seeing this, Cassandra suppressed a shiver, dodging an arrow that a truly powerful vrykul had been able to fire at her. *Ugh, those snakes that Harry summoned up.* Cassandra didn't have a problem with snakes, even giant ones like Quetzal, and indeed was somewhat intrigued to see the snake at his full size, which she hadn't yet. But the sight of



hundreds of scarlet snakes, venomtooths, shadow serpents and even more appearing suddenly in a fan around Harry, then listening as he spoke to them, had unnerved her.

Harry had sent them into the raider village with orders to poison any vrykul they could without being seen or caught. And since a lot of the vrykul had gotten drunk last night, the vipers had been able to take a toll, even if they'd had to poison each victim several times, given the size of the large humanoids. Still, for a Speaker, the snakes had done their best.

During all this, Cassandra missed the sight of the chieftain bursting out of his cabin, glaring around him, then over his shoulder to where several of the boulders had smashed into and through the roof of his log cabin. One of them had slammed into the side of the woman he had been sleeping with the night before, shattering ribs and stomach alike. She was dead now, her death's blood having splattered both the man and the bed in her death throes.

But unlike most of his folk, he had taken a second to pull on his armor and grab his spear as well as his other weapons. He had even taken the time to finish the woman off, siphoning her death into power for himself, adding to his already large reserves.

Now, the raider chieftain stared upwards at the circling harpies, shouting out in his own language-based long spell. Once more, coruscating energy, black and purple, seemed to envelop the spear, not touching it but surrounding it, connected to the man and connecting him to the spear in turn.

Then he thrust upwards, and then eight bolts of energy, each bright purple and dark blue shaped like a small ball of fire, shot up towards the harpies. They had the speed of an arrow but far more impetus than any arrow shot by even one of these giant raiders.

Irene howled in shock as one bolt nearly struck her, the heat and the magic of it making her feel both sick and as if she'd come too close to a fire. "Magic, up, up, we need more altitude!"

Cassandra and Irene's daughters obeyed instantly, getting out of the spell range and watching as the next few spells, different ones, flagged out below them. Those spells, including one that nearly hit Recca, who was flying lowest of the four, had almost looked like they were somehow tracking them. That was scary, something that Cassandra had never seen either Fel or Tainted magic users among her folk doing. The wizard had also somehow cast a kind of light ball around the area above the village.

"Blast it!" Viol hissed, her sharp teeth bared. "I can't aim that well from up here. The vrykul can see our boulders coming now, too, thanks to that light."

They dropped still more stones, but Cassandra wasn't paying much attention to what they were hitting any longer, scanning the area around the village. There, she saw Harry and

the others charging forward, with Harry stopping for a moment just as they were about to reach the gateway. "It doesn't matter, granddaughter. We've done our bit."

Below, Harry took a brief moment as he skidded to a halt in front of the gate to wave up at the harpies. *I hope they can see me, but it's the thought that counts.* With that, Harry turned his focus back to his first spell of the battle.

He slammed his hands down onto the ground, and a monstrous golem of earth rose beside him, as tall as the gateway, shaped like Harry's old friend, Hagrid. The stone and earth golem stood, waiting for an order and Harry quickly ordered, "Blast the gate down and then go on a rampage inside!"

The stone golem instantly turned and bodily slammed into the gateway, breaking it and several yards of the palisade to either side, shattering and launching pieces of wood like shrapnel into the village. Several of the bow-wielding vrykul went down, along with one of the other spear-wielders. Not all of them were dead, and two of them pulled themselves to their feet quickly, fast enough to actually get off shots in turn toward the golem. Yet their arrows simply sunk into the golem, doing no damage.

Using the destruction of the gates as a signal, many snakes who had hidden themselves throughout the village roused from sleep, still eager to do more to help the Speaker. Although they had downed around seventeen of the vrykul the night before, now they attacked once more.

More than a dozen vrykul screamed aloud as countless vipers' bit deep into their legs or feet or even, on occasion, the hands and shoulders of vrykul who had been knocked down previously. The vrykul had mostly foregone their boots in favor of weapons or armor, so the snakes were somewhat spoiled for targets, although the vrykul were quick enough that many of the snakes died.

As the night before had proven, their poison wouldn't be effective quickly. A regular king cobra or a venomtooth's bites were not strong enough to down a humanoid the size of the vrykul quickly just because of how large they were. And Harry had no doubt that these raiders would be further enhanced by the necromantic energy that their chieftain had shared with them the night before, protecting them from disease and giving them more vitality and endurance to pain.

While that might matter to the snakes that Harry could now see attacking in scattered spots around the village, it didn't matter at all to him.

A cutting spell lashed into the throat of one of the hunters nearest the gateway, who had pushed himself to his feet, spear raised to strike against the kaldorei and tauren who had

surged forward around the golem. The spell sliced halfway into the man's jugular, and Harry frowned just a little. *These vrykul do have some magical resistance to them. That spell would've cut through a tree the size of one of the redwoods we used last night. I'll have to remember that for the rest of this fight.*

While Quetzal widened the entrance into the village, Lathariel and Shai split off, racing to climb up the interior of the palisade, giving them an overwatch of the village. There, they began to watch Harry and the tauren's backs as they charged into the village, engaging the vrykul. The only tauren missing from this group was Tjar, and the only two kaldorei with them were Sylina and Shai. The rest, along with Tjar, were elsewhere, waiting.

Alongside the attacking tauren came three Water Elementals, two Air Elementals and one Fire Elemental. And as they came, Leesha and Harry tossed down totems. While Leesha had to pace himself, Harry flung his anti-magic totem into the rubble of one of the longhouses, and the anti-magic totem's aura flashed out, drawing in the necromancer's next spell blast up towards the harpies. Instead, the chieftain's eyes widened in rage as the spell bolts diverted almost directly above his head, flashing to ground themselves into the totem.

"Gratz zaol, FAGH!" the chieftain ordered, pointing his purloined spear toward where his spells had crashed down amid the rubble of the longhouse. "FAGH!"

*That doesn't need any translation,* Harry thought grimly as he began to dual cast, holding back for a moment to send out spells from both hands, something that had made him one of the deadliest fighters in the Wizarding World coming into play yet again in this new life of his. With one hand, he lashed out towards the vrykul, charging forward towards the attackers, while his other hand transfigured several large wolves in among the rubble of the longhouse. *But that's fine. An enemy whose actions you can predict is the best kind.*

The Fire Elemental sped past him and its summoner, slamming bodily into one of the vrykul, bearing her to earth. The Fire Elemental, in the form of a twelve-armed tauren woman herself, slammed fiery fists down into the other vrykul woman, lighting her skin and the fur clothing she was wearing on fire even as the humanoid woman plunged an axe into the head of the Fire Elemental. The elemental hissed in pain as its corporeal form was almost disrupted but began to melt the metal of the axe into molten magma which splashed down onto the face of the vrykul as the fire elemental screeched a battle cry.

Nearby, the first tauren to charge forward was nearly cut in two as he rounded a corner between two of the buildings, a vrykul there with a large axe having chopped around at him from beyond the corner. But at the last second, Matar saw it coming and ducked just enough to let the ax pass his horns. His own double-sided battle staff lashed out into the side of the vrykul's knee, causing him to cry out in pain and drop to one knee. A second strike nearly

decapitated the larger sentient, leaving him to collapse sideways, only a bit of skin keeping his head on his body.

Meanwhile, Sylina watched Harry's back, darting forward to engage two vrykul coming around the side of the building housing the anti-magic totem to one side as Harry concentrated on three more coming from the other side. A totem slammed down nearby them from Leesha, giving the attackers the benefit of Stoneskin on top of the added endurance from his first totem and the magical resistance totem Harry had put down. With that last totem set up, Leesha charged forward to join his fellows.

When it came to combat, tauren usually relied on their strength and endurance. Here, the tauren found themselves overmatched. Be it the benefits of necromancy or just their own physical strength, the vrykul in this fight were stronger than the tauren.

Nealu found this to his detriment as he tried to use his double-ended war staff to block the blow from one of the axes of their enemies. The blow nearly knocked him off of his hooves, sending him stumbling back.

The warrior across from him wielded an ax in one hand and one of their single-bladed long daggers in the other. Now he stepped forward with the dagger thrusting forward, forcing the tauren to use one of his elbows to try and knock the point up and off target. This worked, though it left a rivulet of blood to drip down from Nealu's elbow.

Nealu ignored it, twirling into an attack with his double-ended war staff again. That blow was stopped by the shaft of the other warrior's axe, which had rings of metal all the way down to its pommel, which stuck out well below where the handhold was, making it clear that the axe could be used with two hands at need. The tauren gasped as his powerful blow was simply batted away by a negligent flick of the pommel of the axe, and desperately had to fling himself backward to avoid a strike from the dagger and then had to roll away from a follow-on strike from the axe. Rolling on the ground, he released one hand from his double-ended war staff and hurled up a bunch of dirt into the vrykul's face, only as that vrykul faltered, to need to roll away from another vrykul who brought down an axe where his head had been a moment ago.

Both vrykul disappeared, their chest cavities exploding under the impact of Harry's spell a second later, and Nealu ruefully got to his feet, shaking his head. "My thanks, Harry. Everyone, don't try to go strength to strength with these folk. It hurts!"

Even as Leesha and the others bellowed in laughter at their friend's deadpan delivery, Harry sent another spell rocketing down one of the 'streets' into one of the vrykul who was gathering in the center square. "Quetzal, peel off," Harry ordered.

From behind him, Quetzal paused, lifting his head from the body of one of the vrykul, tossing it almost negligently into another.

The nearby golem took the opportunity to smash both into paste with a massive fist, even as his other one batted aside two other vrykul who had ignored Lathariel and Shai on the nearby palisade to charge into battle with the large golem. It was as if spotting something larger than themselves, the vrykul couldn't help but challenge it, ignoring the far smaller yet just as deadly archers. Already, their arrows had been the difference between life and death several times for Matar, Harry and the other attackers.

However, the attackers were not going to have it all their own way. The first eighteen or so vrykul that they'd faced had slowed them down enough for the rest of the tribe to get a bit more organized. Few among them had taken the time to get the armor back on, and Quetzal had decimated a group who had been trying to do just that.

There were even a few, male and female alike, who were still naked, unwilling to take the time to get dressed. The raiders were all armed, though, and now, the vrykul, of which there were still around thirty or more, charged forward through the village toward the attackers.

And as they did, their chieftain followed more slowly, chanting something under his breath, one hand raised to his face, the spear they were here to acquire pointed down at the ground. Harry couldn't make out more than a brief glimpse of what they were doing after spotting that as several vrykul got in the way of his quick, hastily launched spell toward the chieftain. One of them died, and then the chieftain roared. "FALAG SAR!"

From the tip of the energy around the spear, a massive beam of dark green and purple energy flashed out, joined by green and purple lights from several of the newly slain along its route. The strike smashed into the anti-magic totem, shattering it in a burst of energy. And then the chieftain proved he could switch from one spell to another almost as fast as Harry could spellchain. The next instant, as he used the body of one of his men from cover once again, he thumped a magic-coated hand down onto the ground.

A pulse of green and purple magic flashed out, only covering half the area of the village as Harry had already tossed down another anti-magic totem. But that was enough. Soon, the newly dead began to rise. One moved for Harry instantly, moving with a speed that was astonishing from an undead. It was missing an arm and most of its neck and shoulder from Harry's first spell launched towards the chief but still swung the axe in his other hand as it shambled forward. Other corpses of dead vrykul began to rise throughout the interior of the village, including the vrykul that had died in their sleep due to the snakes. Although unarmed,

they were still hale and whole and moved faster than they had in life with complete disregard for their own bodies.

At the same time, actual skeletons began pulling themselves out of the ground. There were dozens, perhaps as many as a hundred or more such skeletons. All of them in Harry's line of sight looked like the skeletons of kaldorei, their hips and shoulders slightly different than those of a human's, their skulls a bit more pointed somehow, their fingers longer.

None had weapons, but they didn't need to have weapons to get in the way of the attackers: to bind their own weapons, to bring them to earth, and make them easy meat for the vrykul.

In response, Harry's teeth flashed in a snarl, the need to kill this bastard rising every time he used necromancy. "That was a mistake! Ossum Refringo!"

A slightly nasty curse from his old world, the slightly orangish spell, targeted bones, causing them to turn into small explosions. This was like shrapnel from a grenade but even faster and deadlier. Better, each bit of bone held the curse for a few seconds, able to pass it on to any bone they hit.

The hordes of skeletons shattered under his strikes, not even reaching the attackers and doing more damage to the vrykul than anything else.

"RAGGGGG!!!" The chieftain roared in outrage at that, but the shambling zombie vrykul and the regular vrykul kept on coming, even as an arrow smacked into the side of the chieftain's helmet. He hissed in anger and turned his attention towards the two snipers on the wall, who hastily dove off a bit. They needn't have bothered because his attack spell in response was redirected into Harry's second magic totem, making the chieftain roar even louder in fury. And the next second, an arrow from Shai hammered into the chieftain's protecting gorget, causing his next spell to flounder.

At the same time, Quetzal and the golem shifted. Quetzal coiled in around himself, launching practically every prickle on his back into the onrushing horde of vrykul and undead. The needles didn't do anything to the undead, of course, but five more vrykul fell to lucky needles through the eyes or throat. Howling and thrashing as they gripped their ruined eyes or bleeding throats, they got in the way of their fellows behind, halting their progress toward Harry's second anti-magic totem. The golem also charged forwards once more, leaving the entryway well behind to take up a central position in the charging attacker's line of advance.

Others winced or paused, protecting their heads and not looking where they were going. In one case, this meant a vrykul ate a flung spear from Sylina to the chest. The young

kaldorei grunted in pain after hurling the spear, falling back even as she flipped her moon glaive into her arms. "Those things are heavy!"

Of course they are! Why would you think any different?" Harry drawled as he moved to face the main onrush of the vrykul, a spell lashing out and into one of the undead, turning it into so much flying offal that was hurled in every direction and into the faces of the vrykul in particular, blinding them. "And do necromantic spells turn the blood black... that's disgusting."

The first vrykul to reach him attacked with his axe, but Harry ducked to the side, his blade flicking out viper-quick. The vrykul couldn't pull back his hand in time, and the back of his hand, completely unprotected, this vrykul being one who didn't have any armor, was slashed open. The vrykul laughed, saying something in his own language and bringing his axe around.

Harry rolled backward, letting the vrykul get in the way of two of his fellows. At the end of the swing, the vrykul's axe fell from suddenly nerveless fingers, and he fell to his knees, screaming, clawing at his chest, his eyes wide as the venom of the basilisk took effect.

"Yeah, I thought so. Regular snakes have nothing on the poison of the King of Serpents," Harry murmured while both his next attackers paused, staring at their fellow in horror, long enough for Harry to dispatch them in turn and move forward.

And behind and above, the harpies and Feldral attacked. The harpies had stopped dropping their stones as soon as Harry and the others had breached the gateway, not wanting to hit them. But now, as the back of the palisade at the top of the cliff face shattered under the blow of an earth elemental and Feldral, Tjar, Dolmen and the remaining kaldorei charged into battle at the back of the vrykul reapers, they flew down quickly. Aiming carefully, they began dropping their pebbles-turned boulders onto vrykul from barely twenty feet up.

While the attack on their rear instantly forced the vrykul to shift their attention in this new direction, relieving some of the pressure on Harry and his companions, coming so low down did remove some of the momentum of the boulders. Still, they hammered vrykul, knocking them off of their feet, causing their helmeted heads to ring, or breaking shoulders or skulls randomly.

Seeing this, Cassandra ordered, "Target the clumps, any group more than five working together! Stay away from that necromancer!"

Given the nature of the village, despite it being built to size for the vrykul, there were only so many places where more than five vrykul could move freely enough to attack the attackers. In between the buildings, among the wreckage of the buildings, and along the edges of the village, the attackers had a lot of advantages when it came to moving through the terrain. That didn't even mention that a few dozen vipers still survived, striking at the vrykul

any chance they got. Better, now they had pressed forward into the more crowded areas of the village.

Now thoroughly confused, the vrykul were no longer responding to any commands either from the chieftain or anyone else. Instead, they were responding as single warriors. And against the magic of the tauren and Harry, that was the worst thing they could have done. Now, several of the tauren fell back, letting Quetzal – who grumbled about it immensely, the golem and their own elementals take over the front line. Freed of the danger of personal combat, they switched to using spells, and soon Lightning and Fire Arrows and Solar Beams were lancing into the melee.

Even the chieftain seemed lost on what to do now. He shot out another overpowered necromantic attack that dealt with Harry's anti-magic totem but then dithered for a few seconds before lashing out with a new spell. Red-green, the spell flowed out from him in a wave, exchanging the bodies of his fellows even as blood burst from their eyes and mouths, causing them to move faster, almost manically. In contrast, Nealu and Acali were forced to flinch back, their hands spasming as they cried out in pain before the spell faded, causing the chieftain to snarl in fury and charge forward.

Harry had not retreated. He stayed in the thick of the fight, and now he charged forward, hoping to get close to the necromancer before he could use further spells like that last one. He ducked under the arm of one vrykul, flicking the sword of Gryffindor up and into the fellow's armpit, the magical blade stabbing deep into its, despite the scale mail there.

Then he grunted as a blow from another axe crashed into his side. It came from a vrykul he thought had been dead on the ground but had turned onto his side and chopped out at the human, shouting something that was probably a curse in his own language. That vrykul died a second later, Sylina's panther taking it in the back of the neck, her bite strong enough to tear away a chunk of flesh, if not actually break the spine there. Then the panther was jumping away from a spear, crashing down to where Nog had been a second ago. An axe flung in its direction was likewise dodged, although not entirely. The shaft of the axe cracked into the panther's side, bowling it over with a yowl of agony as ribs cracked from the blow.

"Harry, Nog!" Sylina shouted, having raced forward with her companion, redirecting with difficulty a blow from one axe, then hopping up into the air to bring her moon glaive around in a strike that ripped into the chest of the vrykul, causing it to fall back in pain, but not dead yet. Midair, Sylina twisted around the blow from the follow-on dagger strike that she had sensed was coming, bringing her weapon down into the top of her opponent's forearm, stabbing deep before wrenching her blade back out in an instant before the axe could claim her again.



Quetzal's tail lashed out then. His blow caught the vrykul in the center of the chest with such force that it was lifted up off of the ground and hurled up over one of the surrounding longhouses.

This still left two more vrykul who had just moved between Sylina and her friend. Yet to her shock, Sylina saw Harry rise, throwing his shoulders back and cracking his neck as he deadpanned, "Well, that hurt."

Then he was darting forward, another spell rising from one hand, catching one of the opponents right in front of him, causing the vrykul to scream as his entrails burst and began to reach for his throat. In Harry's other hand his sword flicked out to stab into the side of a vrykul who was engaged with Nealu to one side of a small intersection.

Then Harry was through and charging towards the chieftain, who stood in the main opening in the center of the village, once more pointing his spear down to the ground. He glared at Harry and instantly canceled whatever spell he had been about to use. Shifting into another necromantic one, he attacked with the same kind of multi-fireball type spell he had used on the harpies just as Harry lashed out in turn.

The necromantic spells hit a hastily raised Protego one after another, the last shattering the shield and the last going through to nearly hit Harry as he rolled forward. But his own spell struck the man clear in the center of his chest.

The chieftain's armor exploded. Simple and not enchanted chainmail was no match for Harry's Lightning spell. Yet the man himself stood unhurt, howling in laughter and thumping his chest with one hand. He then brought the spear down to point at Harry again and launched several necromantic attacks towards Harry, forcing him to dodge through them, or raise shields to block.

For a few seconds, that was all Harry could do, the spells from the man now coming fast and furious, not just towards Harry but towards his companions. Several of them took blows from the vrykul in their haste to dodge the incoming spellwork, but none were put down permanently, if only because so many of the vrykul had already fallen and the Barkskin totems doing their work.

Around twelve of the vrykul were still engaged with the golem, trying to hack down the earthen creature, thoroughly lost in a battle frenzy at fighting something so much larger and more powerful looking themselves. And like the golem, Quetzal too had garnered quite a lot of attention. Two of the water elementals were gone, but the others were still going strong. And the kaldorei under Feldral were dancing around the battlefield, dodging every attack or spell, cutting into the vrykul, killing them by inches. Panic began to settle into many of the raiders who were not lost in battle frenzy, with obvious results.

Harry gestured to one side, a summoning circle appearing and Trixie darting out. "Distract him!" Harry barked, not bothering to point at the vrykul chieftain.

The tempestuous spirit needed no further urging and darted straight towards the chieftain's face, then around his head, twirling so fast it almost caused a corona to appear like a halo of fire. The vrykul roared and raised a hand to cast a spell around himself to ward away the tiny Fire Elemental before realizing his mistake. He twisted back around, trying to switch to another spell as the Talonclaw came up, pointing toward Harry.

Too late. Lightning coruscated through the air towards the vrykul, even as two stone hands clamped down over his legs, holding him in place. The spear absorbed the lightning as the necromancer held it out, but Harry conjured several needles, hurling them toward the vrykul as well.

The chieftain saw this coming and tried to dodge, but with the hands clamped over its legs couldn't dodge fast enough. One of the needles went straight through the eye slit in its helmet, deep into its eye.

"ARGGH!" Spasming, the vrykul wrenched his legs out of the earthen hands enclosing them, charging forward, hate and madness twisting his bearded face as all

Harry dodged to one side, slashing at the arm of the vrykul, but the chieftain had obviously seen what happened to several of his fellows thanks to Harry's blade. Even in his madness, he flinched backward just enough for Harry's strike to miss. The butt of his spear hammered hard into Harry's chest, lifting the younger, far smaller human up off his feet and hurling him away.

Harry rolled, grateful for the protection afforded him by his Scaled Mail form, even as he launched another spell towards the chieftain. The chieftain again blocked it by simply holding up the spear, the necromantic energies swirling around the spear, still not touching it, but seemingly absorbing the energy within to grow stronger, equally absorbed Harry's spellfire.

The vrykul hadn't realized how much of his eyesight was now occluded by his missing eye, and Harry dodged into that area now, forcing the vrykul to twist around hard to try to track him. This lets Trixie actually settle down onto one of his shoulders for a few seconds, lighting the fur-lined remnants of the man's armor that still hung there on fire. While the heat of the flame didn't do anything much, it certainly distracted the vrykul, and he flinched.

This distraction once more allowed Harry to line up another spell. This spell cracked into one of the vrykul chieftain's knees, overpowered to the point where Harry could've used it to bore through several hundred feet of pure rock. This spell didn't just shatter the chieftain's knee. It carved through the knee, removing the chieftain's leg from the knee down.

Necromantic energies flared even as the vrykul chieftain fell, the butt of the spear being used to prop him up for a second as he raised another hand, trying to gather energies to strike at Harry. But Harry didn't let up. Another overpowered spell cracked into the forearm of the hand holding the spear, and the spear fell, to be grabbed, attached forearm and all by an Accio spell.

"Havaz, havaz luggoa!" The chieftain roared something in its own language, and several of the nearby vrykul, who were engaged with Harry's companions turned.

But they were too late. Harry lunged forward, his blade stabbing upward and through the vrykul chieftain's belly, right underneath the last portion of his armor that still clung to his frame. The man was dead before the poison even began to circulate through the system, and Harry wrenched his blade out, reached down, and very methodically broke the fingers off of the man's hand that was still holding the spear. Grunting a little with effort, he paused, watching with wide eyes as the man's body began to decay as if hundreds of years had passed for it in an instant. *Damn. Death does not like you a lot, does she?*

Shaking that thought off, Harry hefted the spear into the air. "That's bloody right, you arse! Necromancy doesn't pay!"

Now, while that wasn't exactly a warcry, it did do the trick, grabbing the attention of the remaining vrykul. Down to barely fifteen or so throughout the village, the last of the raiders' fighting spirit finally broke. They tried to run, but none of the attackers were willing to allow that. Cassandra led her trio of harpies down now, attacking with their talons at a group of raiders who tried to escape over the edge of the palisade. Lathariel and Shai downed several. Arrows took them in the back of the knee, temple or eye, the only areas that were truly vulnerable to an arrow from a kaldorei despite only one of their targets wearing actual armor. None of them allowed the retreat, and eventually, not even a single vrykul was able to get out of the village that had become their abattoir.

"Any wounded, come over here!" One of the shamans bellowed. The totems from the Leesha had worked very well, though. While many had bruises and several were limping, Nealu and Acali were the only two in serious pain, thanks to the necromantic spell that had caught their forearms in its area of effect.

None of the attackers had died, something that amazed Feldral as he stared around them, shaking his head quietly. "Amazing. And frightening. Harry Potter's magic might not be as flashy or as destructive, but on a small scale, it could perhaps be even deadlier than any of the magics we saw the highborn use in the War of the Ancients."

"I don't think so. I saw far too many cities and entire towns destroyed through magical means in the war against the demons to think that at any point. Yet even so, I have to admit

that I did not expect all of us to live through this madness,” Acali grunted, trying to suppress the pain spasming from his forearms, knowing that only time would heal it. *Unless Harry has something in his bag of tricks, anyway.*

“Don’t kid yourself,” Feldral said harshly, pointing towards Harry, who had lowered the spear and handed it over to Leesha, the first of the tauren to reach him. The two of them seemed to be examining the spear closely, and Feldral moved in their direction even as he continued to speak to Acali. “Harry could simply have conjured several thousand more snakes throughout the fight. That, more golems, and perhaps a few specially prepared runic arrays, and he could have won all of his own with just himself and Quetzal. It probably would’ve taken longer, and he might well have been forced to retreat for a little while to hide under his invisibility cloak as he recovered, but he could have won on his own. Against nearly a hundred and fifty vrykul. Enough to be a small damn army. Element of surprise or no, that is astonishing.”

He suddenly grinned widely, smacking Acali who was one of his better friends in the unseen path on the shoulder, knowing how much that annoyed his companion. Like most of their race, Acali did not see the point of effusive gestures like that, finding them both unnecessary and far too loud. “Don’t mistake me. I’m happy that we won and far more than happy that we have found the spear. And I am happier still that we, you, me, the rest, helped regain it. If we had not, that lack might well have gnawed at us, and the rest of us Seeker and Cartographer alike. This fight was as necessary for our morale, our honor as it was to just regain the spear in the first place. Yet I think we need to be aware of how dangerous Harry Potter is and be very glad he’s on our side.”

With that he reached Leesha, just as Cassandra landed nearby. Tjar also hurried in the direction. Together, the duo began to examine the spear closely. A silence descended on the now-dead village, broken only by the sound of the fires that had been started here and there throughout it, Trixie delighting in dancing around and causing still more. All of the unseen path and the four harpies stared at the two tauren working on the spear, even Harry watching on avidly. Waiting for the prognosis.

Eventually, after several minutes of work, Tjar pulled back, nodding to Leesha, who, after a second, nodded back, their shoulders slumping in relief. “It is clean of taint! The necromantic energies have not taken over the spear. Rather, as Harry and we supposed, the nature magic within was being funneled into the necromantic realm rather than vice versa. It is still pure, still a possible connection to Ohn’ahra. There is no connection existing yet, but it is still there and can be awoken.”

Cassandra hummed happily while her three flock members all gaped, turning from the spear to her and back again, staring at the item of deific blessing. Not even Irene had made the connection that this spear could be used to contact, to perhaps even make contracts with, a demigod. "Then this was worth it, I think."

"Truer words have never been spoken," Nealu murmured, shaking his head as he hesitantly reached out to touch the spear as if he thought it was just a fever dream that would disappear the moment he tried to touch it. "The Talonclaw. Returned to us at last!"

"Well, not quite. We have recovered it, at least. Returning it is another matter. I suggest we leave this village behind, and then... we will need to figure out how to get this relic home. Only then will our honor be fully restored," Feldral said, as smiles and even quiet cheers abounded throughout the group.

**End Chapter**