

**I can't program and am not British.**

**A brief note.** If any of you are aware of a character named Broxigar... POOF. He doesn't exist here. I loathe most time travel stories/uses with all the power of a thousand suns. The only exception is the Belisarius series.

**A longer note:** I decided to go back and cut out the last few paragraphs of the previous chapter. I wanted to introduce Feldral better than that brief moment, having come up with, I think, a very unique character here. I also felt that for the Unseen Path to take three days to gather supplies for the move was not a good idea. The last chapter now ends with the announcement of Feldral's return, which will be described here, as well as his first interaction with Harry.

This has been edited very lightly by [Alex Crate](#). Hopefully that means there aren't any lore mistakes at least.

## **Chapter 8: Of Climbing, Birds, and Nasty Smells**

Upon meeting the man, Harry decided that the Unseen Path's specialist in mountain climbing and mountain warfare was both middle-aged and easily the most exceptionally fit member of his race that Harry had ever seen. While Sylina and most of the Kaldorei he had seen were fit, and indeed Tyrande had been so toned as to put any gymnast in his old world to shame, Feldral Rockgrip had visible and quite large muscles for his race, with a far wider waist and shoulders than any other Kaldorei Harry had ever seen.

Like all of the other Kaldorei among the Unseen Path, he was very obviously a veteran, with several small scars on his hands and one large scar running over his head from just above one eye. There was nothing small about that one, though. It was large and malformed, making any attempt at having any kind of hairstyle impossible. Instead, Feldral kept his head shaved, something else that Harry had never seen from a Kaldorei before.

But Feldral's musculature wasn't why Harry felt the man was closer to middle-aged rather than as old as the other Kaldorei in the Unseen Path were. All of them carried themselves with a certain amount of gravitas and, like Tyrande, were not as emotive in terms of body language or facial expressions as younger Kaldorei, like Sylina, habitually seemed to be. Harry and Sylina had also spoken more than once about the almost beaten, grim guilt that many of the members of the Unseen Path seemed to feel.

While Feldral had the scars and stance of a veteran, he also smiled as he greeted the other members of the Unseen Path, his ears practically twirling in good humor as he clasped hands with a few of the Tauren and his fellow Kaldorei. His eyes also gleamed with good humor, and there were smile lines around his face. It was very obvious that this man, for all of the hardship he had gone through in the past, very much preferred to look on the bright side of life.

As the greetings continued, Feldral also made several comments about how dreary it seemed inside Trueshot Lodge, much to the annoyance of several of the others and not-so-subtle glares from more than a few. Harry noted that but sat, eating his meal, watching. Neither he nor Sylina were willing to interject themselves into what was very obviously a meeting of old friends.

Once the meal began to return to normal, Feldral joined Harry and Sylina at the table that had somehow become their official table in the weeks since they had arrived at Trueshot Lodge. Elsewhere in the cafeteria, the Cartographer that Feldral had been escorting slumped half-on and half-off one of the tables, with several of the other mapmakers patting him consolingly on the shoulders and head.

Harry gestured to that worthy before Feldral could speak, asking, "I take it you rode that one hard?"

Laughing, Feldral nodded. "One of the primary differences between a Copier and a Learner is endurance and speed, both in getting to an area that needs to be investigated, writing down your information, and getting back to the rest of the Unseen Path. I am afraid that it will be a few more years before Alun Redtoe is ready for that jump. You are Harry Potter, yes? And you, Sylina Sungaze? It is highly unusual that the Unseen Path gains two Oathkeepers at the same time in the past handful of centuries. And never one like you, oh diseased vrykul."

"Considering that you said that sarcastically, I will let it slide," Harry drawled. "Just know that I am in favor of using pranks to get back at people who annoy me with continued use of that term to describe me and you would look magnificent with a bright red nose and a wig situated on your head."

Feldral's eyes crossed at that image and he shook his head, becoming a little more serious as he dug into his food, seeming to enjoy the bread over the soup on offer today. "Regardless, I have been informed that you have some exceptionally abilities to you, not least of which is your own brand of magic, not like the normal shaman or druid Nature Magic, nor even the Arcana of our estranged brethren,"

Feldral glanced to where Lathariel was sitting with several Tauren around him, his gaze twitching over to where Harry sat occasionally. He was not as gaunt and twitchy as he had been when Harry first saw him, but the white-skinned elf still looked out of it, even with the enchanted objects Harry had made for him to drain. They were working to stave off the addiction but not really fighting it.

By his tone, Harry couldn't tell if Feldral had any personal thoughts about the High Elf or Lathariel in particular, although he seemed to be a little dismissive of Lathariel. His eyes also remained locked on Harry's, not judging, simply assessing. As gregarious as Feldral seemed, it appeared there was a mind in his bald head.

"I do. I do not need an external source of magic to use magic, nor am I addicted to its use. A large portion of my spells also can't seem to be replicated via Arcana, although I will say that there are several that can in the Nature Magic-based Shaman or Druid schools."

Feldral nodded thoughtfully at that, then asked abruptly, "I was told that you met Cenarius. Do all his children still get along?"

"I would say they get along as well as siblings with extremely different personalities can," Harry mused, remembering his interactions with Remulos, Zaetar and Lunara. "I didn't spend much time with Remulos; he was more busy with his wife and newly born son, Celebras. Zaetar and I didn't get along very well at all. He has what my people call a chip on his shoulder and a preponderance of ego. Lunara was easily the one I spent the most time with. She was a delight to be around, if often embarrassing."

Feldral's smile came back, a thing of gleaming teeth more than actual humor, before he nodded. "I had wondered if any of the others had asked you about them. I fought alongside Remulos during the War of the Satyrs and found him somewhat stiff but good-humored and respectful. Lunara, on the other hand, is indeed somewhat embarrassing to be around." Feldral glanced at Sylina, who was looking intrigued and snorted. "She is a dryad. For all that their upper bodies are covered in fur like that of a deer, there is no denying their womanly features. She is also extremely childish and..."

"Huggy," Harry interjected, shaking his head. "She was especially so with me occasionally. I never quite figured out if she simply enjoyed seeing how red my face could get or was simply hugging me like a child would a toy."

Sylina laughed at that, and Feldral let her for a few seconds before asking, again abruptly, about the experience the two of them had of moving through mountains. Sylina stated that she had only traveled up Highmountain when she arrived here and had never experienced anything similar back in Kalimdor. Harry's experience was much more varied, and more than one of the other cafeteria goers came over to listen as Harry shared the tale of his time with Tyrande in the Frostfang Mountains in more detail, with Feldral asking several pointed questions about travel, how he and Tyrande had moved through the mountains during their two-person war against the stone giants there.

"The mountains of Frostfang are inhospitable because of weather more than the formation of the actual mountains, but it is good to know that you are not a complete novice. If I had my druthers, Sylina, you would not be going with me on the attack on the harpy camp. Rather, you would be going with Vurg on his side of that errand. But he wants both sides to have as many fighters as possible, and you are young yet and thus can be taught."

Feldral continued on, uncaring of Sylina's narrowed gaze or the angry twitch of her ears falling flat to the sides of her skull as she glared at him. "And further, you, Harry, have magic. What do you think you can do to ease our way? Because let me tell you, I am not unfamiliar with the area that Milifiana believes these harpies to have moved into, and to say it is inhospitable to those of us without wings is an understatement."

"I have more than a few spells and abilities that can help us. For one thing, I have expanded pouches. I've been working on them on and off since arriving here in Trueshot Lodge. This includes the ability to pass written messages along via tubes," Harry said, explaining about those quickly, even as a faint memory of something in his old life came to him that was of a similar nature. *That vanishing cabinet... Could I create something like that? Something that could allow living people to pass from one entry point to another? Would that be so different?*

Shaking that off, Harry continued. "In terms of actual spellwork, I have several spells that should be of use in terms of helping us through nasty terrain. Weightless charms, sticking charms, and a spell that can point me towards any of you if someone gets separated from the group or if I do."

Feldral's large and bushy brows furrowed, and his face seemed to beam in interest. Seeing that, Harry explained about the Point Me spell, as well as its limitations. It didn't work over tremendous distances. It couldn't find a particular spot of land by, say, asking for the fastest route through a forest or whatever. The user needed to know a specific name. Descriptions didn't work. For example, the caster

couldn't use a Point Me spell to find a particular tree unless it had a name. And even then, the caster couldn't give a tree or something similar a name just to use it in the spell.

"Beyond that, there are a few spells I can use to protect us from the cold if necessary. Although I believe the Unseen Path has enough supplies in that area. I also have anti-bug spells, which Tyrande felt was a magnificent use of magic," Harry finished.

"So do I!" Feldral breathed before shaking his head and now smiling somewhat more wryly. "Especially where we will be going. One of the issues of traveling from Trueshot Lodge to that particular area of the island's mountain range is that there are bugs in several places along the way."

While still somewhat confused as to where the mountain range began and where Highmountain the actual mountain ended, Harry cocked his head to one side, staring at Feldral in confusion, a confusion that Sylina put into words. "You don't look the sort who would care overmuch about bug bites. Why do I think your concerns on that score imply an actual threat? I will admit that the bugs down in the jungle were annoying, but..."

"These bugs are not like anything you will have ever seen before in the lowlands of the Broken Isles or over in Ashenvale. For one thing, they are large, about as big as a Tauren's forearm and hand. They almost look like mutated wasps and will attack anyone who enters their territory viciously."

"I've never seen them before, not even traveling up to Highmountain Valley or within the Valley," Harry mused, looking over at one of the Tauren. "Have your folk run into them up there? Did I just get lucky and miss them? Because the very idea that danger passed me by is..."

"Sooooo bizarre as to make me question my hearing," Quetzal hissed as he interjected, causing everyone there to laugh save for Feldral, who nearly fell out of his chair in shock. Evidently, Vurg and the others hadn't bothered to tell him that Harry had a translation spell that could be used on animals, even though Harry had gotten so used to using a translation spell on Quetzal that it was part of his morning routine.

"He talks!?" Feldral gasped, and the laughter at Harry's expense turned to be at Feldral's.

Harry explained his translation spells before asking for more information about the bugs in question, understanding wasps of that size would be no joke. *If these giant wasps can move as fast and as randomly as normal-sized wasps, they will be a devil to fight in any kind of terrain, let alone when you are part of a line of people tied together going up a sheer rock face. Or any other types of terrain you can run into in the mountains.*

"The bugs in question can't live up there or down in the jungle. They can't seem to stand much in the way of heat for some reason." Feldral looked over at the chief librarian, who shook her head, although whether that indicated that bit of knowledge was beyond what Harry, Sylina, and the nearby Lathariel could learn as Oathkeepers or a lack of knowledge altogether, Harry didn't know.

"They also can't live where the air is thin, and while you might have lived among our Tauren friends for long enough to get used to it, even in the valley, that would be a problem the bugs could not survive. Hopefully, your spells will be able to keep them away, or if not, then at least make them easier to fight. The last time we had to deal with a swarm of them anywhere near Trueshot Lodge, we had a demon-cursed time dealing with them and then finding their hives."

“Well, I can’t say that many bugs have bothered me in this world overmuch. Most of them don’t seem to know what to do with me while I’m awake, and can’t seem to get enough of me when I’m asleep unless I use bug repelling wards or spells,” Harry joked, causing Sylina and the others to laugh. “The spells are a relatively recent creation of my own, a variant of a shaman spell and a spell from my own world. I use the gesture and the mental word of the one with the image of the other. But I believe that those spells will be able to work on any kind of bug, regardless of size.”

This time, the glance that the Vurg and chief librarian shared was very much of the type that hinted at secrets not yet shared. Harry didn’t let it bother him. After all, he had several lifetimes to move up from Oathkeepers to wherever he wished within the Unseen Path.

“That seems like enough questions for now. We will start gathering supplies after this meal. There are a few things I know that my fellows won’t have thought of. You can also never have enough rope on a journey like this. And if you are telling the truth about having multiple expanded bags, I am going to abuse that tremendously.”

“Abuse away, please,” Harry drawled, and the two men laughed, with Sylina joining in, happy that the two seemed to have bonded in some fashion. She then plied Feldral with questions about the terrain they could expect first and then interesting places he had been to in his life. Feldral was happy to answer, although he also plied Sylina with questions about living in Ashenvale, where he had apparently only stayed occasionally over the past few thousand years since the end of the War of the Satyrs, which members of the Unseen Path had taken part in.

And like all of the other Kaldorei among the Unseen Path, Feldral had also been part of the War of the Ancients, but unlike every other member of the Unseen Path Harry had talked to, Feldral had also worked directly with not just Tyrande but with the two brothers who along with Tyrande had led their people to victory, if such it could be called, in the war against the demons. “I got along quite well with Malfurion. As much as he was interested in the forests, I was interested in getting lost in them, in exploring out past the known borders of our land, which was quite different back then than it is today, obviously.”

This was an extreme understatement, considering that the lion’s share of the supercontinent that had been Kalimdor at the time had shattered during the Great Sundering. Harry wondered again now as he listened to Feldral talk about the cities and towns he had seen of his folk back then how many thousands, perhaps millions of Kaldorei had died back then. And how Tyrande and the others had been able to lead so many of their people to safety, regular Kaldorei and Highborne alike. *I know war and turmoil, conflict. But that has little to do with trying to deal with a natural disaster on that scale. It would’ve been like being an ancient Roman in the town of Pompeii when Mount Vesuvius erupted while a tornado was hitting, an earthquake was happening, and a tsunami was on the horizon. All while fighting a war.*

It was brought back to the conversation, however, when Sylina gasped so loudly it caught his attention, and he looked over to see her staring at Feldral while one of the other Kaldorei who had sat with them was rubbing his face with both hands, the very picture of someone who was dealing with someone else is put into it socially speaking. The fact Sylina’s voice was almost squeaky with shock was also somewhat telling. “What!!!?? Illidan Stormrage was courting Tyrande?! But, but, all the stories say that Malfurion and Tyrande were in love from the first!”

Feldral laughed gaily, seeming to enjoy his fellow's embarrassment as Harry also blinked, staring at Feldral in confusion, adding his own words to Sylina. "That's news to me, too. Tyrande never really talked much about her relationship with Malfurion, and she certainly never mentioned that both Malfurion and Illidan were after her hand. Nor did Cenarius."

*In fact, Cenarius barely told me anything about Tyrande or Illidan, really, Harry admitted to himself. Shand'o is not the kind to gossip. Even most of what I was told about Malfurion was based on the training he was giving me and the broad overview of the War of the Ancients he gave me.*

"Ah yes, I am aware of the stories that have sprung from Malfurion and Tyrande's relationship, such as it is. Although, I have to wonder if Tyrande is? Those kinds of tales are not the sort she would enjoy hearing, nor her adopted daughter. And I have always found it fascinating that there are such tales in the first place, considering that, to the best of my knowledge, Malfurion and Tyrande have not even wedded yet." Feldral looked at the other Kaldorei man sitting with them. "Or did that change at some point, Cular?"

The man so addressed pulled his hands away from his face, his expression deadpan as he looked back at Feldral. Looking at him, Harry recognized him by the small scar on his chin as one of the two Kaldorei who had gone out of their way to not introduce themselves to him, still being leery of Harry's magic. They seemed to accept him as an Oathkeeper thanks to Pathfinder Vurg vouching for him, but simply could not separate Harry's brand of magic from their negative feelings toward Arcana-type magic. As such, they wanted nothing to do with him. "How exactly am I supposed to know that? But... I suppose that Malfurion waking up from the Emerald Dream would be big news among the Kaldorei. And I do not recall hearing of Stormrage waking since the end of the War of the Satyrs."

"Ah, well, with Malfurion that is almost to be expected, given the... issues within the Emerald Dream. He always put his devotion to nature and his duty as a druid over any other consideration, as Tyrande did her devotion to Elune and her position as a priestess," Feldral sighed, his ears twitching outward then back to their normal slanted position in a Kaldorei shrug. "As for the fact that in their youth, Malfurion and Illidan were both courting her? It is something decidedly private. I also have no doubt that even thousands of years after, Tyrande is embarrassed about how she could be seen as the reason the two brothers fell out with one another. She wasn't, of course. That was all Illidan's ego and Malfurion's desire to not be open with their relationship for fear of the reactions it might cause. But Tyrande is the sort who will always take on more guilt than one ought to."

The look on Sylina's face was complicated. She looked as if one of her most cherished preconceived notions had been destroyed, but also as if she wanted to learn an interestingly juicy piece of gossip. Harry hadn't taken her to be a gossip before this, but he figured this fed into her low-grade hero worship of Tyrande. Harry had learned over the past few weeks that she also felt something of the sort toward Malfurion Stormrage, along with many of the other notable leaders of her people. Harry put that down to her own young age, as well as how long such people had been in positions of power and how they had assumed that power due to personality and drive rather than voting or birth.

Feldral was willing to feed Sylina's interest, teasing her at the same time. "Astonishing as it might seem, there was a time when we were all young. Well... except for Miliana or Narvae. They were born old."

“I heard that!” The Master Cartographer barked. “I will get you back for that, Feldral!”

Snickering, Feldral turned back to Sylina. “Well before the church of Elune began to have concerns about the growing corruption in Azshara and even before Cenarius warned Malfurion of the corrupting nature of magic and the coming of the demons, Tyrande Whisperwind was a young, extremely devout sister of the temple of Elune. Even then, though, Tyrande was reckoned a beauty among our people, drawing many an eye, both jealous and covetous. Some even whispered she was as gorgeous as the queen, which did not do good things for the tensions between the court and the temple, even if neither woman fed into it.”

Feldral shook his head at that before continuing. “Malfurion was the leader of a small sect of Nature Magic users. He had yet to make the acquaintance of the Lord of the Forest. He was a barely known entity at the edge of our nation, known but as more a curiosity and something to be wary of rather than an ally. The closeness we Kaldorei have with the Shan'do and with nature grew throughout the rebellion and the war and only grew faster after the Great Sundering. Illidan was actually far better thought of, a strong Arcana user who had caught the eye of many in Azshara's court, including Lord Ravencrest.”

Harry nodded at that while Sylina frowned a bit, nodding much slower as history lessons played out in her brain.

From his conversations with Tyrnade, who had a far more understandable understanding of the passage of time, the War of the Ancients played out for nearly fifty years local time. Lord Ravencrest was a high-ranking Highborne. Before the coming of the demons, he had been a veteran of the war against the Troll Zalandri Empire and vrykul raiders. Tyrande wasn't alive when the Zul Empire had been defeated and Harry had not heard a lot about that war at all.

More importantly, Ravencrest had become one of the first military leaders to first fight the demons and then later to understand that Cenarius's warnings about Azshara were horrifyingly accurate. He led the rebellion and the war against the demons for the first twenty years before dying in one of the worst defeats in the war, leaving Malfurion, Tyrande and Illidan to pick up the pieces and lead their people through the war.

In the end, the change of leadership turned out to be a good thing for the war and the Kaldorei as a whole. Malfurion was the one to reach out to the dragons, beginning to work with them, Cenarius, the Tauren, Harpies and Furbolgs. With their help and Tyrande rallying the normal Kaldorei against the reign of Azshara, the war shifted from a slow, grinding defeat to one where they actually won a few battles.

More importantly, Malfurion and Cenarius began training other druids, and with their help and the help of Cenarius' children, they were able to help the Kaldorei flee from the main cities, where the demons had congregated into the hinterlands and forests. Tyrande was even able to convince many of the Highborne to join the battle against their corrupt queen and the demon horde alike. This undoubtedly helped once the Cataclysm occurred, which itself was caused by the destruction of the Well of Eternity, thought up by Malfurion and enacted by the two brothers.

“But the Stormrage brothers were the only ones that she ever showed any favor towards, and simply as friends. They had grown up together, you see. I only met them when we were already in our

fourth centuries, but their closeness was obvious,” Feldral reminisced. “Even then, both brothers vied for Tyrande’s attentions. Malfurion did so by simply talking to her, sharing his knowledge of the land and his studies in druidic magic. Illidan though? He tried to impress Tyrande with acts of magic and daring, competing in many different physical exercises in times of peace and in any magical contest of craft or might that came along. When the war began, he fought recklessly, leading his fellow mages under Lord Ravencrest into many near-impossible battles, always trying to gain Tyrande’s gaze.”

“Never understanding that the battle he was trying so desperately to win was already lost,” Cular murmured, lost in memory. “Tyrande chose Malfurion long before they took over leading the resistance.”

Feldral frowned, also losing himself in his past for a moment, before shaking his head slowly, a certain somberness coming to his features that seemed out of place on his normally merry face. “There is more we could speak of that time, but with the coming of the demons, nearly all laughter fled the world. I will not speak in greater detail about anything from that moment to the time of the Great Sundering. I will simply say that it was his desire to have more power to impress Tyrande that finally drove Illidan to start using Fel magic, the magic of demons, against them, making him become the first Demon Hunter. It was finding Tyrande and Malfurion kissing that caused Illidan to switch sides. In so doing, he gained the knowledge that he and Malfurion used to close the main demonic portal over Zin-Azshari. It is most fascinating to think of how much of that simple rivalry and the different temperament of Malfurion and Illidan played in both the War of the Ancients and in the history of our people from that point to this.”

For a moment, everyone was silent, Cular and Feldral thinking of long-ago memories while Sylina was trying to fit this new knowledge into the histories she had been taught. Harry, though, had something else on his mind, and he spoke up about it now. “One point I’ve never understood is, if the Kaldorei were so leery of the demon hunters like Illidan, what happened to them after the war?”

This was not the first time Harry had asked that question. He had asked it of both Tyrande and Shan’do Cenarius. But all either of them could tell him was that the demon hunters were not a problem any longer. Harry supposed that the Kaldorei druids had somehow used their Nature Magic to craft a siphon of some kind maybe, that would leech the fellow magic out of the demon hunters over time? *Or perhaps a means of ensuring that the demonic Fel magic could not corrupt them further? Maybe just keeping them in the Emerald Dream or something?*

“... the answer to that question will need to wait, I think. It is one of the secrets of the Kaldorei, and it is a secret that we of the Unseen Path both helped to put in place and help to keep now. I will say that, regardless of how leery we were of the depths to which they were willing to go, many of the survivors of that war respected the demon hunters for that very fact. We were leery of them, extremely wary before even Illidan created the second Well of Eternity with the water of the first. For how much that act has helped our people, the Well of Eternity is still a sore subject even now. People are just not certain what to think about it,” Feldral answered.

Considering that the Well of Eternity was a major source of Arcana magic, and the Kaldorei had made the conscious and considered opinion to move away from all Arcana towards Nature Magic, Harry understood where that thought was coming from. The fact that the Well of Eternity was somewhat known to not be the source of their people’s longevity as the previous Well had been, but rather

something they simply had to hide from discovery would make it even more of a bittersweet thing to the majority of Kaldorei who had turned away from Arcana. Whereas the Highborne would see the very need to conceal it, to hide it away and not use it, as the greatest insult to them possible.

The meal continued on, the conversation turning more to Harry and his world, as well as his time with the Tauren and the Unseen Path up to this point, before Feldral finished his meal and stood up, looking over to where Vurg sat. "With your permission, I will start to gather supplies, and we can leave tonight."

With so many Kaldorei among the Unseen Path, it was no wonder that traveling by day or night was all the same to them. Beyond that, Feldral explained that he wanted to use a portion of the night to travel in the direction they needed to go so they could rest for a time at the base of a cliff they would need to climb the next day.

Sylina and Harry found themselves asked to gather a few supplies from the farming area, as well as put together several more bundles of rope from the supply stores. Both agreed, getting up from where they had been sitting and leaving quickly, knowing all up where the stores in question were already.

As the door to the supply room closed behind them, Harry was not surprised to find Sylina turning and moving into his arms, leaning up to kiss him ardently. Sylina had made a point of taking little moments like this to just make out with Harry, seemingly enjoying the spontaneity of it. Harry did, too, although he had never been the kind to enjoy flings or one-night stands. This wasn't either of those, but it also wasn't anything serious. Sylina had made that point plain from the start, and Harry understood. While she was interested in him for more than just his (to her) exotic nature, and they were decent enough friends, there was no sign of that friendship developing into love like it had with Hermione back in Harry's old world.

There, the shift from friend to girlfriend had happened so naturally that both of them realized they'd been dating for years before they had ever actually realized they were in love with one another. With Sylina, the physical portion of the relationship was the entire point, and didn't bring any kind of depth of feeling with it beyond friendship.

There was another difference, too, a difference in the dynamic of the relationship that Harry had taken a few days to realize. While Sylina was far more experienced on the physical side of things and Harry, Harry was more experienced when it came to actual feelings. He had been the one to point out that they shouldn't rub their relationship into everyone's faces. It might make things harder for Harry among the Kaldorei within the Unseen Path, and it would also be seen as rude regardless. Sylina had gone along with that reluctantly at first, but understood his second point enough to go along with things.

Now though, Harry found himself in the somewhat odd position of needing to act once more the mature person in the relationship. When Sylina pulled away to breathe, Harry held up a hand to her mouth, gently pressing his fingers into her lips, gasping himself for a second. "W, we need to set some, some boundaries, Sylina. Here at Trueshot Lodge, we have enough space to have privacy. That won't always be the case when we're on the road."

“Hmm, considering where we are going doesn’t include any roads, that simile doesn’t quite work,” Sylina said, her lips moving against Harry’s hand and her sentence ending with a long lick from the middle of his palm up to the tip of his middle finger. Kaldorei tongues were longer and thinner than a human tongue, not snakelike by any means, but still, the difference was very noticeable at times like this.

Sylina stopped licking Harry’s palms and fingers for a second to continue speaking. “I take your point. This will be the longest, most arduous patrol I’ve ever been on, but I have been on patrols before, along with other Sentinels. Including several who were in relationships with one another. I know what kind of thing we can get away with.”

The way Sylina said that made Harry wonder if she had been one of those in a relationship of some kind, but he didn’t press. Instead, he watched as she took his middle finger in her mouth and began to suck on it before he reluctantly flicked her forehead lightly with the finger of his other hand and just around them. “Come on, let’s get this done.”

The two of them were done quickly, as were the others, although Feldral and Vurg did not take part. Instead, the two of them were up in Vurg’s private quarters, arguing about something. When they all gathered in the main cavern.

Feldral soon appeared, looking quite annoyed. Looking at Lathariel, he gestured him over for a quick, sharp conversation. Despite the small, enchanted objects Harry had made him over the past few weeks, Lathariel still looked like a hard breeze would knock him over, his eyes twitching and glancing over toward Harry every few seconds. But he answered quickly, and his answers seemed to mollify Feldral. The older Kaldorei waved the youthful Highborne away, then gestured to Harry to come over.

Harry waited for Lathariel to join the others before moving to join Feldral, who began to speak without any preamble, something that Harry decided was simply part of his personality. “Lathariel is coming with us instead of going with Vurg. He’s supposedly a magnificent climber and one of the best shots in the lodge, despite how young he is. He is on probation with me, though. I don’t like Highborne much, but he requested the change, and Vurg is willing to allow him to go with us and overrode me even as he told me about Lathariel’s first response to being around you. Do you have a problem with his being around or supplying him with more enchanted items he can drain? If you do, I can still try to talk Vurg out of this or assign you to work with the Tauren. At least when we climb.”

What Feldral didn’t say was that Vurg had been almost to the point of trying to send Lathariel back to Quel’thalas before Harry began to help the Highborne. Lathariel had been caught a few times over the preceding months trying to touch or somehow connect to the Arcana in the tapestries or elsewhere before Harry arrived, and damaging the Order’s ancient relics was a crime none of them could put up with.

Thinking about it, Harry slowly shook his head. “While I’m not happy about the way he invaded my personal space as he did or the looks he sends me, Lathariel has kept himself under control for the most part. Whether that is distance and good planning by Vurg and the various trainers, I don’t know. I won’t have an issue with him... unless he tries to somehow feed off my magic directly again.” Harry’s lips quirked. “That is a bit too personal, especially given the way he tried the first time.”

Snorting at that, Feldral nodded, although by the slant of his ears Harry knew he still had some reservations. Still, he seemed open to being proven wrong, and so long as Lathariel didn't damage the group dynamic, Feldral wouldn't care.

By the time the sun began to set, most of the material was gathered. Despite Feldral's words, there hadn't been many more things he felt they would need that Vurg and the others hadn't thought of. Packing it all away was also easy, thanks to the expanded backpacks Harry had created.

Those were not the small belt pouches Harry had begun with while among the Tauren. They were full backpacks, like the ones Harry had seen back in his old world, but made with leather rather than more advanced types of cloth. Designed by two of the Furbolgs in the Unseen Path, they each had multiple pouches, with the main pouch being expanded, letting the wearer organize his gear so he could get at specific items faster from the smaller pouches and a second expanded one situated to the side and along the bottom of the backpack storing arrows for the archers.

Harry's own bag was even more special, with several separate expanded bags, although they couldn't be close to one another. For some reason, while you could put one rune-expanded item, like Harry's luggage, into another, the two runic arrays could not directly touch or be on opposite sides of a single separating piece of cloth. That was a little weird to Harry, but he had seen the results of that far too often to not make a note of it. Regardless, his bag had his hut in one backpack, the sword of Gryffindor in another, specially marked one, and food and other supplies from the Unseen Path in a third. A hatchet was in another, along with a buckler and a set of armor made for him by the Unseen Path, a set of underthings and a scale mail suit that went down to just above Harry's knees.

Soon, Vurg arrived, but to Harry's surprise, the ancient Tauren was dressed for travel with a pack on his back. "Is Pathfinder Farstride leading the second assault force?" He whispered.

Next to him, Davo Bluefeather nodded, saying nothing, and Harry remained silent despite being shocked at the idea, given Vurg's age and how slowly he moved most of the time. Yet saying anything about it would dishonor Vurg and question his ability to lead the Unseen Path, something Harry didn't want to do. Instead, he watched as Veldral was given a shoulder strap with a series of mouths on it in an intricate array, separated by different weapons etched into the dull black metal.

Looking around, Harry realized with a start that all of the metal of the weapons of the Unseen Path getting ready to leave was made from the same dull black metal. It was a type of Kaldorei steel made to let the wearer go unseen in the dark. *I wonder if I can do something like that to the sword of Gryffindor? I know my hatchet is made from the same kind of metal... and I just thought about maybe trying to work in some sort of automatic camouflage into the exterior of my hut. It isn't necessary given Notice Me Not arrays or charms, but... well, I was told there are places where magic doesn't work right in the world, and... but then...*

"We move!" Vurg barked, interrupting Harry's spiraling thoughts, making him wonder why he occasionally seemed to just fall into the rabbit hole in his own mind like that. Then he was moving next to Quetzal, heading out of Trueshot Lodge with the other sixteen members of the Unseen Path being sent on this mission.

For a time, the two bands moved together, heading in the same direction Harry, Sylina and Narvae had come from. Sylina's panther and one of the Furbolgs, the same one that Tricky had burnt

upon her return to Harry, ranged out to one side of the column. Quetzal was sent out on the other side, in his large form, showing all the silence of a natural predator, even though with his size, Quetzal could no longer act as an ambush hunter as a younger needlespine shimmerback could.

Even while in their own hidden valley, the members of the Unseen Path acted like they were in enemy territory. Every one of them, even Vurg, to Harry's surprise, moved silently and quickly, shifting through the forest with barely a murmur of leaves, leaving no sign of their passage behind. Harry had been trained since his arrival in moving quietly on top of some training he had gotten while among the Tauren. But he still needed spells to let him move as quietly as the others did. Seeing Sylina being as surprised by how quickly and quietly the Tauren and Furbolgs could move mollified Harry a bit, but not much. *By the time I'm old enough to worry about grey hair I will be as silent as they are, I swear it*, he vowed to himself.

Either because of the alpha predator's presence or the silence of their passage, the group didn't run into any trouble until the point came where the two parties would split. The attack force under Vurg would continue forward through the valley towards the far end, well past where the secret entrance from the Highmountain Valley resided, and then down to the jungle at the foot of the mountain. There, the group under Vurg would be able to make far better time as they made their way to the hunting areas the harpies frequented. That group was smaller than the group that would move through the mountains and included three Furbolgs and most of the Tauren, including Bluefeather.

"Meanwhile, we'll be heading north and east from here, through the woods of the valley here, for the rest of the night. By the time dawn comes, we should be at the bottom of the escarpment we'll need to climb to gain access to a series of natural pathways that we can follow for at least two days," Feldral explained as he strode off in the lead of the column as he had been throughout the march seemingly tireless despite having just returned to Trueshot Lodge from a long mission. "I would recommend that you shrink your friend here down again to an easily carried size, Harry. Even once we reach the pathways, it won't be easy going for a snake. Not for most of its length anyway."

"I am more than willing to be shrunk down again, so long as I can take some time while you all are resting before your foolishness to go hunting. Why all of you just won't have Harry levitate you all up there is beyond me," Quetzal said, shaking his head. To a snake, doing the work yourself of climbing a sheer cliff face seemed foolish in the extreme if someone else was around to do the job instead.

"Because it's been quite some time since I've traveled with many of my fellows here, and this will be a first for Sylina entirely. I want to see how well they do at rock climbing in an area where we know there is no threat first," Feldral replied easily. After his initial shock, Feldral quickly got used to Quetzal's intelligence and his own ability to understand the snake. If anything, Feldral seemed almost as intrigued as Sylina was with the implications of speaking to her bonded panther as the march continued.

"Well, as long as you have a logical reason for it, I suppose," Quetzal murmured, slithering along beside the group as they made their way deeper into the small forest that dominated this far smaller valley. Considering that it was so small that there were very few other large predators within it, the rest of the trip passed uneventfully, with Feldral taking the time to instruct Sylina in several of the knots they would be using to secure ropes for themselves as they climbed, showing her several while two of the Tauren took the lead, and Harry and one of the Kaldorei he had been introduced to bring up the rear.

Feldral had not been joking about them needing to climb for this first portion of their trip. The cliff face they came to was as sheer as any Harry had seen while traveling in the Frostfang Mountains with Tyrande and lacked any of the visible handholds or signs of people passing through that they had seen when climbing to the Highmountain Valley several years back.

The group quickly set up camp, with two of the Kaldorei being put on patrol even here, while the rest bedded down for the rest of that night and a portion of the morning. And if the two Kaldorei on duty saw Sylina exiting her own small one-person tent and joining Harry in his own enlarged yurt, they didn't say anything. She was gone the next morning before the call to breakfast to rise and get breakfast came from Feldral.

Feldral went from one person to another as they ate, quizzing them on the usage of climbing equipment and how they would secure their rope harnesses, making certain that none of the other members of the Unseen Path had forgotten their training in this area before once more concentrating on Harry and Sylina. "For this part, Harry, I would prefer you to not use any of your spells unless someone is in danger of falling. As I said, it is meant to be a learning experience," Feldral warned.

Harry nodded at that, this not being the first time Feldral had brought that up, and he agreed with the idea. "Sure. I understand. In fact, I'm looking forward to seeing how I do. Climbing was never something I ever went into back in my old world. Although I did take it up occasionally while I was staying with the Skyhorn tribe. It was impossible to not do so, frankly. And occasionally, Tyrande and I would not use magic for short climbs while in the Frostfang Mountains."

"Other than the magic needed to levitate or shrink me in some fashion anyway," Quetzal said dryly, shaking his head as he looked up towards the sheer cliff face above them. His head pushed out from within the boughs of the trees around them, higher and higher still, until he was almost balancing on the end of his tail, at which point Harry heard him mutter, "Ah, there it is," before settling back down again. "I could almost act as a climbing bridge up to that point if I wished to. But as I do not, I will leave all of you to your four-limbed foolishness."

With that, Quetzal turned and began to slither away through the trees, his tongue flicking out as he began to smell the area around him for prey.

"Your friend has a quite condescending sense of humor, but I think we might actually make use of him in that manner in the future," Feldral quipped, smirking a little. "I may even thank him for putting the idea in my head. It will certainly help speed our journey along for certain."

Harry snorted at that and then moved over, helping Sylina tighten a few of the straps on her rope vest that she was wearing now so that she could get at them rather than have them on her back. Then she did the same, and they moved over to join the others at the base of the cliff face, where small bags of some kind of tacky substance were passed around. It wasn't tar or anything similar to that, but Feldral explained it would keep their fingers from cramping and also help them slightly with their grip. Harry wasn't certain on that score but was willing to give the expert the benefit of the doubt.

When everyone was ready, Feldral and a Tauren that he had designated as his second took up positions separated by twelve feet before they began to climb. The Tauren was slow and methodical, careful, using a lot of handholds and few footholds as his hooves made that almost impossible. Feldral

was fast, almost daring but not quite, using legs and arms equally, climbing with all the surety of a spider.

Each man carried two long coils of rope on their back. This would be released behind them as they made their way up the cliff face and connected them to the group of climbers behind them. The group with Feldral was all Kaldorei and Harry, including Lathariel, while the group behind the lead Tauren was the three other Tauren with them.

Harry had been somewhat surprised that the High Elf had been able to keep up with them. In fact, he had been able to do so just as well as the older Kaldorei and without any help or looking toward Harry more than a few times. He didn't blend in at night as easily as the dark blue or purple-skinned Kaldorei, but he was about as good at it as the Tauren. *Much better than me, really, when I can't use magic to help.*

Lathariel seemed to feel Harry watching him and turned, looking back. His eyes still looked far too bloodshot, and he twitched and shifted on his feet, but he nodded back and then turned resolutely away, looking back up at the two climbing men. Harry did the same, watching closely, fingers twitching as he prepared to cast a levitation spell just in case.

At first, the pair of them made their way without using any of their equipment, finding small handholds or cracks that could take their weight as they moved upwards and further upwards. It was only when they started to ascend above the top of the treeline that the Tauren began to use a small hammer to create a first pylon, which he looped the rope through in a slip knot so that the rope was both loose and yet tied to the pylon in question. Feldral continued on for two more body lengths before doing the same, and then they were moving upwards again, and the next two were climbing up after them as the ropes between them all began to slowly go taut.

Harry and Sylina were in the middle of the pack, the least experienced of the climbers there. Behind Harry came Lathariel and a last Kaldorei, while two more were in front of Sylina. That Sylina going ahead of him made it almost impossible not to gaze at her rear as they climbed was not lost on Harry even before the climb began, and Sylina certainly didn't seem to care one way or the other. At first, Harry was too busy trying to find handholds to notice, but when he did, it became almost dangerously distracting. Sylina seemed to notice his attention somehow, and began to wiggle her rear at him and the others behind her in a most distracting fashion.

"UGH... are all Kaldorei women so... unreserved?" Lathariel grumbled below Harry.

"Not really. Sylina seems to have decided to explore more than the world since joining us, hasn't she, Harry?" The Kaldorei behind him, a man named Nealu Riverskim, snickered as Harry nearly missed a hold and turned to stare down past Lathariel at him. "You thought we didn't know? We do. But among Kaldorei, so long as things are kept behind closed doors and everything is consensual, what happens between lovers does not matter to Kaldorei. I can't say I personally approve, but bringing it up is not our way."

It took Harry a few seconds to get moving upwards once more after that little revelation and still more time to think up a reply. "What goes on between us is Sylina's and my business."

“Good.” Harry couldn’t stop himself from turning to stare down at Nealu while Lathariel seemed to be blotting out the conversation if the way his eyes were very obviously clenched was anything to go by. “That is the way it should always be, a mutual discussion. And keep it to yourselves. That is all we ask of any relationship. That, and that any children be planned and loved.”

“Ah. We will be certain to do so,” Harry answered slowly, feeling the whole conversation was somewhat surreal. “As for children, I don’t even know if our people are compatible in that manner, but I was using a magic spell to make certain nothing occurred, anyway.”

“Can we please stop talking about this!?” Lathariel whisper-shrieked, an amusing linguistic feat that was perhaps his attempt to keep Sylina from hearing. It was in vain, though, as from the tenseness in Sylina’s body language, she had heard almost all of their conversation. Certainly, she stopped trying to shake her rear at Harry, her body language almost becoming closed in from Harry’s perspective, reminding him of the way she had been when they first met.

Unfortunately for Sylina, her attractive rear did not save her from a near disaster. The Kaldorei ahead of her in line missed a handhold and flailed, his second handhold loosening enough that he skittered down the small crevice he’d been using as a way upward. “AGGHHH!” he cried out as his palm and inner fingers were rubbed raw before he lost his grip entirely.

He fell down, the rope linking him up to the next Kaldorei above not being taut enough to stop him, causing a chain reaction as he smacked into Sylina. One of his knees cracked into her shoulder, and the rest of his body slammed directly into the top of her head and shoulders. The impact nearly broke her neck but did succeed in tearing her away from the side of the cliff in turn. “AKK!”

*Fuck it, I knew as soon as Feldral mentioned using my spells in a life-or-death situation we would see one!* A hasty sticking spell on his body allowed Harry to cling to the rock face with his feet and one forearm even as his other hand flashed out, grabbing onto Sylina’s wrist, grunting at the weight. “FUCK I did not think this through!” He nearly shouted, feeling his shoulder nearly be pulled out of its socket and hearing his jerkin tearing. “Brace!”

But thankfully, Sylina hadn’t been knocked out from the weight of the other Kaldorei to the head. Better, she hadn’t entirely flopped or flipped as she fell and was still upright as Harry caught her. Fingers scrambled, and she found two handholds in front of her even as the other man fell past them. “Sticking Charm!”

Harry instantly cast the same spell over her body as his own, and when the rope tugged at them and the other Kaldorei, they froze, holding in place, grimacing at the tug but holding on easily.

Working together, Nearu and Lathariel reached out, grabbing the other man by his rope vest. While the two men above Harry and Sylina clung on grimly, Nealu worked to unhook him from his position on the team rope, hooking him back to the guide rope directly between himself and Lathariel. Nealu called out what he was doing as he worked.

It took quite some time for the group of Elves and one human to resume moving upward, with Harry remaining stuck to the stone of the cliff face until Sylina had climbed back up and into position above him. He waited until the former faller had held up his wounded hand, using the Episkey spell on the man’s hand to heal his injuries. By that point, he had already used a numbing spell on Sylina’s

shoulder and neck where the man had hit, earning a mumbled thank you from the still somewhat embarrassed Sylina.

Thankfully, that was the only mishap the group ran into as they climbed. Soon after, the Kaldorei and the two hangers-on began to climb upward once more. Feldral reached the ledge leading into the series of pathways, if they could be called that, they would be taking on their route through the mountains. There, he began to haul on the rope, taking on himself some of the weight of the men climbing below him, making it easier for them. And even with the trouble they'd had, the group of Kaldorei finished the climb before the second Tauren could join his fellow up on the ledge. With their wider fingers and hooves, Tauren had a much harder time climbing sheer rock faces like this than the Kaldorei did despite their far greater physical strength.

And by the time the last Tauren joined them, he was gasping and wheezing for air, his arms trembling as he hauled himself up the last few feet, refusing all aid as he went.

Feldral let them all rest for a time, pulling out a metal flask from his belt. He dropped some kind of dust into the flask before shaking it, then handed it off quickly to one of the Tauren. "Careful, it's hot. But Vosha'na will give you a surge of energy for a time. Two sips only. I only have so much to last us for this journey."

Harry took a sip when it was handed to him, blinking in shock. The flask was filled with some kind of hot liquid that burned like whiskey but didn't seem alcoholic in nature. Instead, it tasted fruity, like dragon fruit with a cinnamon kick. "Interesting. I've never run into this Vosha'na before. What is it?"

"An old drink that mountaineers and goat herders developed long before the War of the Ancients. It renews the body's breath, and adding the herb calza to it lets the Vosha'na soothe aching bones," Nealu explained. "We haven't found a source of calza in the Broken Isles, so the herb is very hard to get."

Harry indicated he understood that, and the group fell into small conversations, glancing at the so-called path ahead of them. The view out from the ledge into the valley beyond was picturesque for certain, but the so-called pathway was barely wide enough for a Kaldorei, little alone a Tauren. They would need to go single file and shuffle along instead of walking straight ahead. It almost looked as if it became a cave at one point, but Harry reckoned that it was simply a strange wind made hole and the rock there that would open up around the corner. There looked to be a bit of green right there around the bend of the pathway, but from here, Harry couldn't tell if that was the green of a rock or a leaf.

Feldral's voice brought him back to the troop leader as Feldral examined them all, nodding slowly. "All right. I know where all of your abilities stand now. Shai, you haven't been practicing climbing as much as you should."

The man who fell, Shai Broadoak, grimaced. He had initially been one of the members of the Unseen Path who had been standoffish towards Harry but had mellowed considerably after Harry spent so much time with the Master Cartographer. Shai had several long scars on one shoulder and a piece missing from his ear, and was one of the best when it came to the use of spears or any kind of polearm. But he couldn't argue with Feldral's words. "True. I always put more effort into my martial skills rather than pure exercise-type things like climbing. My grip strength is not what it needs to be, and my ability to spot handholds has been negatively affected too."

“Good to see your grasp of reality has not faded as well,” Feldral snarked, causing a groan from Shai and chuckles from his fellow Seekers. “You’re in the middle now, along with Harry. You’ve got good strength, Harry, and balance and coordination. But you’re slow to spot handholds too, and I wouldn’t trust you in the lead or tail end.”

“I’m certainly not going to argue,” Harry snorted, although he wondered how even a Kaldorei had been able to see so much while also concentrating on his own climbing. “Considering I never went rock climbing until I came to this world, and that was easily the longest climb I’ve made without using magic to help me along.”

“Then Nealu, you will help Harry to spot handholds and to think ahead. A good handhold doesn’t matter unless you can continue on after you leave it behind.” Feldral seemed to think, then looked at Sylina. “Sylina, you’ll take his place in the line. We will be going forward like so, two Kaldorei, one Tauren, two Kaldorei and so on. Harry, use your spells to help the Tauren along for a bit while they recover and be ready to cast that anti-bug spell. We should be able to see signs of the wasps being around before they spot us, but their spread is hard to predict.”

“That spell should last half a day, although I don’t know if our exertions will shorten that time. Remember, I made this spell up on my own, so its limitations will all be new to me,” Harry warned. He wasn’t exactly happy to be stuck in the middle but understood that while you had proven to be a decent climber, that position was more defensive than anything else. From there, Harry would be able to see the party both ahead and behind and use magic to help only at need. “But for now, I’ll start casting weightless charms on the Tauren.”

Feldral nodded, watching as Harry turned to the first Tauren nearest him, seeing the look of surprised amusement and delight on the Tauren’s face as his body suddenly became almost as light as that of a Kaldorei despite his near exhaustion. “Lesha, you will bring up the rear.”

Lesha was the Tauren who had led the way up the cliff face for the Tauren. Like all Tauren, he was broad-shouldered, and like most Highmountain Tauren Harry had met, his fur was a light brownish color with a darker-colored mane, but Lesha had a series of tribal markings on his elbows for some reason. Harry had asked him about them once, but Lesha had merely laughed, not giving him an answer. Like Feldral, Lesha was a man who liked to look on the bright side of things, although he didn’t seem as immune to the air of semi-depression and tiredness that most of the members of the Unseen Path, Seeker or Cartographer felt.

“Tjar will watch the skies along with Neeva and Lathariel. Acali, you and I will be scouting ahead at intervals.”

Acali had been directly behind Feldral when they climbed, an exceedingly thin but well-muscled man with the lightest skin color Harry had seen among the Kaldorei. Tjar and Neeva were two of the Tauren, both of whom were armed with massive warbows, while Harry remembered Lathariel was apparently one of the best shots among them. This left two Kaldorei, brothers by the name of Lufar and Ladros Sharpfang, and a Tauren whose name Harry couldn’t remember at the moment, an exceedingly silent fellow who Harry could not remember seeing speak at any time since arriving at Trueshot Lodge.

“The rest of you know the markers we’ll leave behind to indicate enemies or anything else that can call a halt to our progress. Our goal for the day is to reach a high butte, we’re going to be taking

where the ground is flat, and we can all spread out a bit and rest for the evening. We will be traveling mostly throughout the day until we are nearer our objective, at which point Harry will need to use the same spell he puts on himself at night on our Tauren companions. These mountains may contain monsters or other dangers. Keep your wits about you. Watch out for your fellows.”

“What is our rule of engagement?” Harry asked. “If we spot something threatening, like one of these super wasps, I mean. Use my spells to defend us from them, or have Lathariel or one of the others shoot at it?”

“If anyone sees anything moving to attack, they can act without my say. If not, if whatever monster or beast has not seen us, we freeze in place until whatever it is moves off, trusting in our ability to remain hidden,” Feldral answered.

Harry frowned at that, but looking around at the others, he realized that everyone but himself and Sylina had turned their cloaks around.

The interior of their cloaks had random gray and brown patches on them. Taken all together, this allowed them to blend into the background of the rock faces they would be climbing. Even now, just sitting still, the Kaldorei and Tauren all seemed to blend into the background to the degree that Harry was frankly astonished could be achieved without magic. He had heard of non-magical Gilly suits, camouflage gear and so forth, but this stuff worked even better than that, reminding Harry of an old book he’d once read about how large tigers could blend into the background of a jungle somehow.

Seeing that, Harry gestured to Sylina, who blinked, frowned and then looked around at the others, hastily pulling off her own cloak. Harry would trust his own spells and his invisibility cloak at need.

Snorting at Harry and Sylina’s quick actions, Feldral turned and strode off down the small crack in the mountain without another word. This forced Acali to hasten to catch up to him. The others remained silent, gathering themselves after their exertions, while Harry finished using his spells on them all, including the bug-repelling one. Then, one of the Tauren pushed himself to his feet and gestured to the others to start following him.

True to his words, Feldral led them unerringly through the mountains, using at first the small crevice they had climbed up to and then a series of exceptionally well-hidden climbing areas where handholds had been carved out of the rock that connected one portion of the mountain to another. And Feldral did twice call upon Quetzal to act as a rope bridge rather than stringing up new ones each time. The snake argued against this vociferously as having them all step on his quills was somewhat painful, forcing him to hang upside down so that the climbers would walk along his stomach to the other side. Quetzal lost the argument, though, and his help allowed them to hasten on.

By the time night was coming on them, they had reached a stopping point for the evening with a little bit of time to spare. This was under a rock that had fallen from further up the mountain but been caught between two cliff faces, creating both a means to easily walk from one to another and a hidden, if slanted, protected area directly underneath the large slab. Feldral led them to climb down into the area, pointing to a small, hidden emerald carved like a leaf that was set at the bottom of the hidden area. This showed it was a known resting place for those of the Unseen Path.

The only problem was the wind. It came in practically screaming from on high here, and it had been causing all but Feldral trouble. Down here, the force of it wasn't as bad, but the noise caused them all to need to shout to be heard.

"No campfires unless your spells can hide smoke, Harry," Feldral warned. "None but four-limbed folk like ourselves would use fire, and harpies can see as well as any falcon or other bird of prey at long range, and this wind will carry it far before dissipating it."

Harry shook his head at that. "I can hide the fire and our campsite via Notice-me-Not arrays. But the smoke will eventually leave the area protected by the ward.

"Which would be enough for beings who know about magic to be wary," Feldral agreed. "Put those wards up, regardless."

"And I can at least do something about the wind," Harry added as Lesha stumbled in, grumbling and touching a shoulder gingerly.

The lack of a fire sharply curtailed what the group could do for dinner, but they had been well supplied with field rations. Those rations were not all the long-term can never-go-bad type that many of the Unseen Path members were used to, thanks to Harry's expanded pouches. The number of them they carried had allowed them to bring along quite a bit more in the way of food than would otherwise be the case due to simple weight issues.

Unfortunately, expanded pouches didn't preserve the food inside, and Harry had never learned preservation spells. Nor did either shamans or Druids have anything similar that could survive being within the magical matrix of the expanded area. All of them had spells to preserve the heat of a meal or the chill, but those spells seemed to unravel once the object they were cast on was put inside an expanded pouch.

Still, after the hard day's exertions, everyone was grateful for any food they could get, and there was much groaning and moaning going on as they all laid out. Even Sylina, the youngest of the Kaldorei there, was utterly exhausted. Harry, on the other hand, had enough energy to put up his yurt, there being enough room under the rock slab, even if it was at an angle. In turn, the yurt blocked the wind coming from further up the mountain, something that caused all of them to cheer.

"I also have warming charms in there for anyone who needs it, and it also has one of my toilet arrays, too," Harry stated as he gestured toward his yurt. And you'll be happy to note, Sylina, that I also put up those silencing arrays on the curtain separating the toiled from the rest."

Even the two Kaldorei who Harry knew was against any use of magic thanked him for that one.

OOOOOO

Despite Harry using his spells often enough to make many of his companions uncomfortable, making their way through the mountains was **not** easy. For one thing, after they left the first hiding place, finding a way forward was incredibly difficult and time-consuming. It had been decades since Feldral or anyone else had been through this area, and while Feldral could still remember what the safe campsites looked like, the territory between them was but a faint memory.

Several times they had to go well out of their way in order to find a way forward when faced with a sheer rock face that didn't have any handholds even Feldral could find and no place to attach a rope within sight. And the one time that Harry's offer of levitating them over to a ledge that could be seen in the distance, it nearly ended in disaster. Because that ridge was home to a nest of the wasp-like creatures that Feldral had warned them out of.

The wasps were like no bug Harry had ever seen in this world or his last, and he said so as dozens of them appeared from over the side of the ledge he was levitating Feldral towards. "They're called wasps!?! I don't know what wasps in this world look like, but if they look like that, that's horrifying!"

The flying monsters in question were indeed around as long as a normal Tauren's forearm from the elbow to the tip of his finger, which Harry had expected. What he had not expected was that the creatures had four outsized arms for their size than Harry had seen in pictures of bees or wasps and other flying bugs back in his past life. Harry also saw something dripping down from them, although from this distance, Harry couldn't tell from where. What he could see was that they were all colored differently from one monster bug to another, riding the gamut of all the colors of the rainbow from a deep dark blue to a bright, almost eye-searing pink.

"Less talking, more getting Feldral back here!" Lesha, the Tauren who had become Feldral's second-in-command of their expedition, barked. He was back on a ledge that the group had been following, standing at the only point where it was large enough for a Tauren to stand without pressing himself against the stone of the mountainside. Others were strung out between that ledge and the one where Harry, Acali and Feldral had been standing before Harry began to levitate Feldral over to another ledge they could see in the distance. To get to that ledge, though, you had to climb around eighty yards across the solid rock face. This meant that besides Lesha and Shai, only the group at the lead could really fight off the incoming swarm.

Lesha did so now, pulling back on his massive bow's string. The bow was as tall as Harry was, and like most Tauren arrows, the ones Lesha used would've done for Harry or most Kaldorei as a stabbing spear. Lesha's arrow missed, but Acali's didn't, impacting one of the other wasps. Next to Harry, Sylina also began to fire. She had

been working on her archery skills whenever Harry was tasked to work on his swordsmanship or stalking skills. She missed, causing her to curse volubly, but her target fell a second later from a well-aimed Starsurge from one of the druids who was still clinging to the rock with his other hand. , tied together and to their fellows by the guide rope. There just wasn't enough room on the small ledge for them all, and even now, Acali and Syrina were getting in one another's way occasionally as they tried to fire at the incoming wasps.

"Spread out your fire; don't let any of them through!" Lesha ordered, his voice now sounding far more worried than a second ago.

For his part, Harry didn't have any time to spare to help the defense. He was too busy concentrating on pulling Feldral back towards them as fast as possible.

This proved only slightly faster than the wasp-like creatures, who spread out to come at the whole group from both above and to the side. One of them nearly caught Feldral in the back with his

stinger. Feldral twisted in midair, trying to bring his weapon to bear, but would have failed if not for Harry hastily making him dive downwards, allowing one of the Tauren to hit the bug with a lightning bolt, a shaman combat spell.

The bug fried in midair, and then Harry was righting Feldral's flight, pulling him back towards the small outcropping. But a second later, Harry was forced to send Feldral dipping downwards again, where he surprisingly found a series of handholds right below the ledge.

"Your anti-bug spell, Harry!" Feldral ordered as he grabbed the side of the rock and began to pull himself upwards towards them. "Use it now!"

Raising his hands above his head, Harry moved his fingers through the wand movements from the original spell, a series of back-and-forth swishes followed by thrusting his fingers out in both directions along the mountainside as he concentrated on the image of the spell he had devised. Instantly, the anti-bug spray appeared all around him in the form of a wave of greenish gas in the air, which surged out from his body.

As that wave of gas passed the others, Harry looked at the bugs coming towards them, seeing them in more detail now. His earlier impression of their limbs being a little too big for their bodies was spot on. Indeed, it almost looked as if their arms and legs had an extra layer of the carapace-like armor that covered the rest of their bodies. And from between the two layers of carapace on the wasp's limbs, a vile greenish fluid oozed, its color almost reminding Harry of the color of Fel magic. The wasp's eyes were surprisingly small for bugs in Harry's experience, and they seemed to have six of them instead of the normal large bulbous pair. One was set forward, the other on the sides of the head, and two at the back of the head, only visible to Harry when one bug tried to dive down towards Feldral's current position. From the bottom of their carapace, a long stinger jutted, looking almost like a small punch dagger for much of its length before tapering wickedly to the size of a needle.

Unfortunately for the bug that was diving down towards Feldral, it got into attack range just as the wavefront of anti-bug gas passed over it. This bug did not, and Harry's spell proved its efficacy. Before the creature could stab Feldral in the side with its stinger or touch him with its poison-covered arms, the wasp spasmed its wings no longer thrusting it forward. A second later, the wasp fell down past Feldral toward the far, far distant ground below.

The rest of the swarm had time to pull up, instinct and senses alike warning them away circled the entire party now, more than a dozen of them buzzing angrily in the air. With the gas creating a visible miasma in the air around the band, the wasps couldn't get to them but seemed unwilling to leave either.

Seeing Feldral was safe even if he hadn't yet pulled himself up onto the ledge, Harry turned his attention to the wasps in general and began to fire out small cutting spells, his equivalent of an arrow. The wasps were too spread out and too fast for any larger spell to get more than one. Well, the spells he had that wouldn't possibly cause an avalanche, anyway. So Harry saw no need to exert himself for no good gain. *And unfortunately, I can't exactly hurl my gas attack forward. It needs to be anchored to an area, such as around us right now.*

Yet the anti-bug spell seemed to be doing its work. While the visible sign of the spell quickly disappeared, the smell was left behind, lingering on each of the Seekers, threatening to disable any bug

that came close. One of them did, shooting towards one of the two brothers. Harry couldn't tell which from this distance. But when the bug came within a yard of the Kaldorei in question, it spasmed, its wings flailing wildly, smacking into one another as the bug seemed to lose all sense of control, and then rapidly fell out of the sky, smacking once into the side of the mountain face and then rolling down it, leaving a bloodied trail in its wake.

Unfortunately, just as Harry had worried, the wasps were ridiculously hard to hit in the air. They could change direction on a dime, and seemed able to somehow sense his magic coming. Even when he used a spell like Immobilus, which didn't really have much in the way of a visual component to it, they sensed it coming and dodged out of the way.

And then, Harry noticed something. "Is it just me, or are they spreading out more above us rather than along the sides now, and... That green goop from their hands, watch out!"

Tiny droplets of green gunk fell from the wasps down towards the others who were clinging to the rock face, having nowhere to go and no way to defend themselves without releasing handhold. The three Tauren Nature Magic users had already done so, but firing a bow one-handed was an impossibility, and only the Tauren, two shamans and a druid, were able to do anything to defend themselves. Several of the Kaldorei began to grunt in pain as the green gunk hit. It burned through clothing and the light gambeson armor the Kaldorei favored while also causing large boils to appear on Nealu's face.

"Thank Elune, it isn't some kind of acid!" Nealu grumbled, grimacing as another drip hit him. "Just like in the archives, it's some kind of Fel-corrupted bile! Not strong on its own, but in larger amounts, it's going to get painful quickly."

Harry began to weave a shield spell across the entire group, watching as they continued to rain green gunk on them, spreading toward the group on the ledge with him and back toward Lesha. "Do you think they will start to run out of whatever that substance is?"

"I doubt it," Acali grunted, releasing another arrow from his bow only to curse as the bug he'd been trying to hit dodged at the last second, letting it whizz by before dropping still more green gunk toward them. "I've run into these wasps before. Rapier wasps like this are too aggressive to care about self-preservation even though that green gunk is partially made of their own life force, Harry. They'll probably die if they keep this up for more than an hour or so, but can you keep that shield in place for that long? And I know our brethren, particularly our Tauren brothers, cannot simply hang there in place for that long. We have to do something."

"They see my spells coming and are too far spread out for any area-of-effect attack spell I have to do anything that wouldn't blow back over the rest of us. Even if I held the shield up, any of those spells would collapse the shield instantly," Harry said, boxing a single wasp in place with a spell chain of cutting spells. Most went wide, but one clipped it, taking a wing off. "Other than outlasting them through spell use, I have no idea, but I'm open to suggestions."

Quetzal hissed in his ear, causing Harry to start, having forgotten that he had the snake in a small pocket on his tunic at present. "Get off the ledge and enlarge me. You might not have an area-of-effect attack that would not damage your allies, Harry, but I do." The snake paused before going on pedantically. "Well, one that won't damage them over much, anyway. No more than the bug's attacks can with your shield in place."

“Your quills? That could work,” Harry mused.

By this point Feldral had ordered several of the climbers down to his position underneath the ledge the others were standing on, using it as cover. The wasps had noticed this, and were concentrating more on the group on top of the ledge, unable to seemingly fling the green gunk in such a way that would have allowed them to attack from the sides rather than from directly above. Even Leshia had begun to move, leaving off any attempt to target the wasps on his own in favor of getting further under Harry’s shield.

However, there weren’t enough handholds down below for all of them. So Harry, Sylina, and Acali ended up clinging around the edges with the sticking spell while Harry’s protective shield above them protected them from further attacks by the group of buzzing, diving bugs. Even now, they were kept too far away from one another for most of Harry’s midrange spells to hit more than one, and with the others all around him and the danger of causing an avalanche, Harry wasn’t willing to use anything bigger. Thankfully, he didn’t have to.

Restored to a form around a third of his natural size, Quetzal took up the entire ledge coiling around himself. His back spines stood up straight and then fired off as one. It was like watching nature’s equivalent of a flak cannon, perhaps, or a flechette round going off. Whatever the terminology you used, it was decidedly effective against the bugs. Hundreds of small needles flashed out, filling the air above them to the point that none of the bugs directly above them could evade. Several of them were hit more than once, the quills impacting and punching through their carapace armor, showing that for all their danger, the bugs just didn’t have any armor to speak of.

*Which makes sense considering how fast they can fly and how mobile they are, Harry thought. If they had armor, too, that would be horrifying, almost as horrifying as if they had magical resistance of some kind.*

This left four of the wasps, all to the leftmost side, where they had been diving down at an angle to try and see if they could attack the group of climbers below the ledge. And for once, they had bunched up enough. A Bombarda hit one of them, exploding on contact and taking all three of the others down with it.

As the charred remains of the bugs began to fall, Harry quickly shrank Quetzal back down, unstuck himself, and then helped Sylina and the others back onto the ledge. “Well, that was interesting. So do we continue or find a way around?”

“Around,” Feldral bellowed from down below. “Where there is one hive, there will be others nearby. I also see a crevice in the rocks down below that seems to be heading north. If it is going in the right direction, it might even lead us to a tiny valley and from there, further up towards the harpies.”

Getting to that Valley was easily the hardest portion of the trip so far. With all of them wired up from the battle with the wasps and more than a few of them dealing with boils from the wasps’ bile, Harry was forced again and again to use his spells to help the members of the team cling to the rocks, making him wonder how well they would’ve been able to do without him around.

In actuality, without being able to call on Harry’s spells, Feldral would have taken only Acali and Leshia with him. A band this large moving across this portion of the mountain would never have worked.

The three of them would have been forced into a type of guerilla warfare, slowly cutting the harpies' numbers down until they fled.

When they reached the crevice, though, their efforts were rewarded. Small near the bottom, it quickly spread to the point where a Tauren could walk inside the crevice hunched over, giving their hands and upper bodies a rest. The moment it began to widen like that caused Feldral to whoop in delight, exclaiming that he was right. "This will start to dive deeper into the rock face and will become a chute leading upwards, where it will then become a tiny valley, barely three spear lengths across and ten deep."

"Good," Harry grunted along with Acali and Sylina. Thanks to the earlier position at the front of the column on the ledge, they were now at the rear of the group and had been warily watching the sky for any further attacks from the wasps. *Although I have learned that Acali likes one-liners, it hasn't exactly been pleasant wondering when we'll see another multi-colored swarm.* "And will we find wasps or other dangers in this valley of yours?"

"I do not believe so. I could be wrong, but I do not think so. The last time I passed through, several families of birds had taken over the valley, Eagles and owls for the most part. While such would be no match for the wasps if they wanted to move in, thankfully for everyone who has ever run into them, the wasps do not seem to spread very quickly. They seem to have a lot of trouble laying eggs. Only a few of their queens turn out to actually be able to do so."

Feldral looked between Acali and Nearu for their opinion. Acali had fought rapier wasps before, while Nearu had once thought to follow the Cartographer path, going so far as to become an archivist before switching to Seeker. They both nodded in agreement, indicating that his guess was right.

That was a relief to everyone, and the time spent first moving along the crevice and then up the shoot was far easier than the rest of the day had been, even though it was deep at night by the time they reached the bottom of the chute. The chute was more than wide enough for them all to perform the trick of putting their feet up to one side and their backs against the other and simply shimmy upwards. It wasn't easy by any means, and Harry knew his legs were close to giving out more than once by the time he could see Feldral and the others in the lead disappearing over the lip at the top.

How the Tauren did it with their heavier bodies, Harry didn't know, especially considering that at the start of the Chute at least they'd needed to only scoot along with their knees directly into their chests. But they still did it, impressing Harry once more on how extremely fit and experienced the members of the Unseen Path were. Indeed, not a one of the Tauren even asked him to help lighten their load, so to speak.

By the time Harry Sylina and Acali had reached the top of the shoot, all of them were utterly exhausted. Even Acali needed help to actually push himself out of the shoot onto solid ground.

Solid ground, which was covered with greenish moss and resided underneath a pair of trees. But it was still flat, which was all Harry wanted right now.

Slowly pushing himself to his hands and knees, Harry gazed around the small valley. Calling it that was being very generous, as it was now completely filled with their party, and Harry doubted that there was enough room for all of them to put up their tents. *Although we might have enough room for*

*their bedrolls. Certainly, there wasn't enough flat space to put out his own hut. I suppose the chute will have to perform double duty. At least we won't be coming back this way.*

Two trees grew out of the dirt that had accumulated here on either side of the tiny valley, creating a canopy of green above them. From within that canopy came the flutter of bird wings and the harsh screeching cries of predator birds. They sounded confused and worried about the large creatures that had invaded their territory but unwilling to give it up.

Turning, Harry helped Feldral pull first Sylina then Lathariel up. The high elf had been put between himself and Sylina when they started to ascend the chute for some reason by Feldral, a bit of maneuvering which had been extremely tough to do at the time but which had proven all too helpful. For all his previously twitchy attitude, Lathariel was actually quite strong, and Sylina had needed his help more than once when she slid back down the chute.

It was only as he reached forward that Harry remembered he probably shouldn't actually be touching the other man. But to his surprise, Harry didn't feel the telltale pull on his magic that he had when Lathariel had latched onto him that first day in the cafeteria. Instead, Lathariel just nodded his way, then took a few unsteady steps, having pushed himself to his feet faster than Harry before promptly falling forward, barely bothering to raise his arms up to cushion his face. "This is where I will sleep. If any of you Kaldorei mention moving on, I'm going to have to do something unpleasant to your bedrolls."

Many of the others around them laughed at that, although the joke caused several of them to wince while Harry continued to gaze at the high elf in some confusion. *He didn't try to pull on my magic. So, was it a conscious thing? I hadn't thought so at the time, but perhaps. On the other hand, is it just me, or does Lathariel seem more lively and composed these days?*

The trip up to this point had lasted four days, and while the change Harry could see in Lathariel hadn't happened all at once, over the past day and a half, it had become kind of obvious. It almost seemed as if the extra exertions of the climb through the mountains were doing what the exercises back at Trueshot Lodge hadn't, pushing Lathariel to the point where he forgot his addiction entirely. *Or is there something else going on here?*

Feldral pushed Harry and Sylina away from the top of the shoot, allowing Acali to climb out of it, at which point he rolled forward until his feet bumped into where Lathariel's layout. There he remained, staring up at the greenish canopy above them and threw it to the nighttime sky above. "I, too, am done for the night. You know me, Feldral, normally I'd be all for pushing on. But not after a day like this one."

"The thought of pushing you all to move on never crossed my mind. In fact, this valley was one of the resting places we were aiming towards today. It wasn't the best option, but with the bugs being a surprising place as they were, it will do. You will have all tonight and tomorrow to rest up while I go forward." Feldral pointed ahead of them to where the other side of the valley lay. There, another shoot lay, leading up and to the side.

In his exhaustion, Harry hadn't bothered to use the spell that would change his eyes to those of an owl, so he couldn't see much, but Sylina whispered in his ear what the other man was pointing towards. She lay directly next to him, something that had not been the norm since Shai Graystream had

shared the fact that everyone in Trueshot Lodge knew of their relationship. That startling revelation had caused Sylina to retreat back into the same semi-shy mentality that Sylina had when they'd first met.

Now, though, exhaustion seemed to have done what time had not, and she leaned into Harry's side as she explained what she was saying. "The shoot almost goes sideways for a bit, then up again at a sharp angle, almost like the side of a building. I think that the Tauren will have to just climb for a bit there at the turn and then upwards, always using the shute as a handhold rather than moving within the interior of the shoot itself. It looks a little too small for them."

"I'd offer to shrink them down a bit, but none of them will go for it. They don't even like my using my lightening charm on them, let alone that spell. It's a cultural thing," Harry confessed. "That kind of a climb is going to be tough, as today showed."

Harry then leaned sideways to bump his head against hers before Sylina began to giggle. He opened his eyes and saw several owls flying down through the branches, landing nearby on the roots of the trees that he and Sylina were using as headrests. They hooted and began to nip at his hair affectionately while the other headbutted hit his head into Harry's side, staring at Sylina hard until Sylina, snorting, moved a little further down Harry's body, leaning into his shoulder instead of the root beside his head. The owl moved forward and began to nibble at his hair just as the other had, while above, an eagle flew down, alighting on a branch directly above them to stare regally down at Harry.

"I've seen it before, but I'm always amused by how birds react to you, Harry," Sylina snickered.

"I do too. It occasionally has proven troublesome when the appearance of so many birds in one area gives me away during scouting practice, for instance," Harry said, reaching up to run his fingers through the chest feathers of one of the owls, causing its eyes to close in bliss. "But I love flying myself far too much to ignore such a connection to my fellow flyers."

"You've spoken of that a few times, something to do with your being a phoenix. Are you going to sprout wings on us? If so, I will demand a ride..." Sylina began before a few snorts nearby caused her to blush faintly, pushing her head deeper into Harry's shoulder.

"Enough," Leshia ordered. "She is young yet and will learn to watch her words more carefully, especially around an entirely male audience."

There were only four women within the Unseen Path at the moment, to begin with, and one of them was a furbolg. The other was the Master Cartographer. The other two were older women of an age with that worthy, and horribly scared and wounded besides. Only the female Furbolg was really in shape for Seeking and had gone with Vurg on his half of the attack plan on the harpies.

"For now, let us all get some rest. No campfires tonight; the wasps are still too close for that. We actually haven't covered that much in the way of distance from where we ran into them. No sense in borrowing trouble. And from now on, Harry, I think you need to start using that bug-repelling spell of yours every day."

"Come to think of it, how much in the way of leagues have we actually covered? It seems to me as if we have been forced to double back almost as much as we go forward." *Traveling through the mountains like this is not anywhere near as pleasant as with the Frostfang mountains*, Harry mused.

There, while there hadn't been any actual natural trails, the mountains hadn't been nearly as steep, simply tall. There had almost always been a way forward that wouldn't require Tyrande and Harry to climb up sheer rock faces for hours on end or rely on Harry's levitating them up, making them sitting targets, as Feldral had learned earlier that day.

"We're actually making far better time than we would without your spells, Harry. A group as large as ours has trouble hiding even with our cloaks, and those bugs would have caused issues for us well beyond what they did. So we would've had to go much, much further out of our way than we have here in order to avoid them." Feldral smirked. "although our method of learning they were in the area would have been far less... fraught."

"Or we could fight them on a ground of our own choosing anyway," one of the Tauren added.

"Ground? I'm not certain that's the right term to use to describe most of our route," Harry joked.

"Hah, true," Acali groaned from where he still lay out nearby, using Lathariel's lower leg as a headrest.

"Nonetheless, we are within... I would estimate five, perhaps six more days of travel before we are close enough to be worried about harpies spotting us as we near their eyrie." For a moment, Feldral scowled angrily, staring ahead of him at the far wall of the tiny Valley. "Trust me, the difference between the areas where the harpies control and the rest of the mountains will be obvious. Even if you don't know what to look for."

Nearby, Lesha decided to lighten the mood a bit. "Time enough to worry about the harpies when we enter the area they have begun to despoil. For now, you will forgive me for asking Harry, but even knowing about your chimeric side, you seem overly fond of owls. Is there a story we haven't heard about that from you just yet?"

"A good story will help us all fall to sleep, I think," Shai stated. Even Lathariel looked a little interested, making a great production out of groaning and moaning as he flopped onto his side to stare toward where Harry and Sylina lay, not incidentally kicking a snickering Acali off his leg. "So long as it isn't depressing anyway."

"I will keep the depressing parts of this tale to myself, for certain. Sharing them or even thinking too much about them isn't exactly healthy. But the good times with Hedwig far outweigh the bad." Harry tried to bring up his second arm to stroke the head of the owl on his right, who looked to be getting a little annoyed at all the attention Harry was giving his fellow instead of her. But his arm was pinned under Sylina, who made no move to allow him to regain control of it even as he tried to pull it out from under her.

Instead, Sylina reached down, clasping his hand with both of hers and putting it on her stomach as she further snuggled into his side. She had heard about Hedwig before, but that didn't mean she wasn't willing to hear about it again.

Sighing at that lost effort, Harry looked from one owl to the next as the owl who had been pushing for more attention from him began to nip harder at his hair. "Let me tell you all the story about Hedwig, and the man who gave him to me. A giant he was, taller even than you Tauren and just as

broad. Hagrid was the groundskeeper at Hogwarts, the school I went to back in my old world to learn magic and..."

OOOOOOO

Early the next day, with the two owls still tugging at his hair, Harry waited for his time to climb up the chute, watching as Lathariel made the climb ahead of him, with Sylina ahead of Harry along with Nealu. She was one of the few who had confessed to still having sore muscles from the exertions the day before. At one point, she had badly pulled her wrist and ankle. Because of this, the young Kaldorei was placed between two of the stronger climbers today, that being Nealu and Ladros.

Harry wasn't concerned about Sylina. With the others to watch her, he knew she'd get through, especially considering that climbing up a chute like this was far easier than climbing across a sheer cliff face, which they'd had to do several times over the days before. No, Harry was more interested in watching Lathariel. *Is it just me, or does he seem even better than he was last night?* It was a subtle thing, but it was there. He wasn't twitching anymore; his eyes didn't track over towards Harry as they waited, and today, he stood straighter, taller, with more confidence in his bearing than Harry had seen before this. *What is going on? He hasn't even asked me for a second enchanted item to drain.*

For the rest of the day Harry continued to subtly watch Lathariel and came away with the conclusion that the High Elf was just feeling better. It wasn't an act the man was trying to put on, to get Harry to lower his guard so he could try to drain his magic again personally, although really Harry hadn't thought it would be. No, this was something else.

The crevice that they were climbing up ended abruptly at a cliff face that was canted at a steep angle above their heads, separated from the next portion of the mountainside situated over and down by a considerable distance. Feldral had gone before them, though, showing it was within jumping distance, a fact Harry lamented he could not say he had seen firsthand. *And people at home thought I was a thrill seeker!*

By the time Harry could look past the feet of the Tauren in front of him, Feldral and the others had situated several ropes between the edge of the crevice and the next cliff face over, complete with nails already driven into the rock there. Everyone before Tjar had already made their way over by this point, and he watched in something approaching astonishment as two of the other Tauren helped Tjar to shift from the extremely thin rope bridge to the not quite-as-thin ledge that led out and around out of sight. "Note to self, put myself further in the front of the column. I could have used my magic to help them."

"So could Tjar. He is a shaman with an earth elemental companion. Has it ever occurred to you that we don't want to use magic for all but emergencies? And in particular, we don't want you to use yours," Shai questioned from behind Harry. Days after, he still sounded a little surly at his own weakness on that first day out, not that Harry could blame him. Being the first to run into trouble like that would grate on anyone's pride.

Turning to look down past his own chest at the other man behind him in the chute, Harry looked a little confused at the man's words. "What do you mean? Feldral hasn't exactly been shy about asking for help from me before."

“No, nor is he going out of his way to do so. The mission matters more than sensibility like that, and...” He grimaced, looking away, gesturing to himself and up past Harry to Tjar, not saying anything more and Harry nodded in commiseration. It was a fact that while Shai had performed the worst pratfall so far, more than a few of the Kaldorei had run into trouble, as had all of the Tauren save Lesha. Harry and Sylina both had done the same, along with Lathariel occasionally. It was very clear that the Seekers hadn't been keeping up their training as much as they probably should have, at least when it came to mountain and rock climbing.

“But the fact is, Harry, eventually, you will be gone.” With that, Shai gestured Harry upward again.

Harry grimaced, pushing himself to his feet with a lunge up towards the topmost rope, grabbing it and then sliding his feet along the bottom one. *It's just like balancing on my broomstick that one time. Just think of it that way, Harry. Don't think of the fall, and don't give into temptation and transform. This is about showing solidarity on your part, remember? Share their hardships and all that rot.* “You mean none of you want to fall into the bad habit of relying on my magic?”

“Exactly.” Shai pushed himself to his feet slowly, not parroting Harry's lunge maneuver but rather waiting until Harry was halfway over the bridge before beginning his own crossing. “It is not just because we of the Unseen Path are leery of Arcana. We have all gotten used to the idea that your magic is different than Arcana, Harry. Rather, or disdain for it is simply practical.”

“Practical?” Harry parroted, shifting his feet on the rope as he pushed himself forward closely.

“There will always be those of us who will have to do without your magic when we aren't on wanderings or missions with you. It is best to never get used to using it in the first place. The same goes for the use of elementals and other magic to help us. Magic can attract attention regardless of type, and there are places where magic will simply not work as intended. The Maelstrom is but the largest example of such.”

“I suppose I can agree with that,” Harry said, shouting now as the wind around them nearly blew his words away despite the two of them being within around 5 yards of one another. “I should just be grateful that Feldral understands necessity. And that I would sooner fight with one arm chopped off than not use my magic when it comes to sudden danger regardless of the source.”

Shai snorted at that, and the climb across continued.

The sun was still up in the sky the next day when Feldral called a halt. The group had spent the night before literally tied – and in Harry's case, spelled – to the side of the mountain, there being no place to rest. Tjar drew some good-natured flak about not using his earth elemental even then, but despite Harry, Lathariel and Sylina being very leery of the whole process, no one else protested this state of affairs.

But now, Feldral once more a wizard at finding places for them to rest. In this case, it was a cave that was far bigger on the inside than one would suppose.

The entryway was odd. At first, it just looked like a slab of rock had been torn out of the mountain, creating a two-foot-deep dip in the stone almost shaped like a cup. But if you stuck your head

into the large hole left behind and looked up, you could see that there was a larger area freed of stone there than that thought could be.

Climbing up into that larger seeming but still small hole, a person could stick their head entirely over what seemed the original back of the dip in the side of the mountain, where the emerald mark of the Unseen Path could be seen. Doing so would also allow you to see that the dip was actually a second layer of stone, separating the outside world from an extremely large cave. One that was much larger than any of the other resting zones. After removing an ancient, fraying net, there let Feldral and Acali leap down to the bottom of the cave.

On the other hand, Tjar held onto the handholds around the edge of the dip, staring up at the hole where the two Kaldorei in the lead had gone. "Curse it. I think my fellow taruen and I are going to need to avail ourselves of that horrid shrinking spell of Potter's."

Next to him, Lofar snickered at that, shaking his head.

The other Tauren, even Lesha protested at this when Tjar shouted it back down the line. But when faced with the reality of the situation, even the Tauren societal issues about their height had to be set aside. There was simply no way to enter the cave without their being shrunk down to the size of a Kaldorei, and even then, their horns gave them conniptions when it became time to climb up and then bend over the back of the divot in the mountainside.

But once they did and got up from the fall to the ground of the cave, Harry was more than willing to reverse the spell. He didn't even make any jokes about it, something that could not be said for Feldral or Sylina.

"I am thankful beyond words that the harpies haven't yet found this place. If Milifiana is right as to where their eyrie is, we are right at the edge of their territory, and a place like this would have been perfect for them," Feldral said enthusiastically, staring all around him through the darkness of the cave. Thanks to his night of vision, he could see just as well in the near-total darkness of the cavern as he could outside. "It is the last place I know of where we will be able to take a break before we run into the harpies. Therefore, we will rest the rest of today and into the night once more while I scout ahead of us."

"I will go scouting tonight with..." He paused thinking about it, then shrugged and pointed at Sylina. "You young one. Unlike my fellows here, I don't think you will need as long to recover now from last night's unpleasantness, and you have yet to face any harpies beyond that one small hunting group, correct?"

There were some grumbles about that but no real protests. While Kaldorei did not age past a certain point thanks to Alexstrasza's blessing on Nordrassil, it was a fact that an older Kaldorei had far more trouble recovering from exertions than younger Kaldorei. Only the fittest and most athletic could be said to ignore that norm.

For her part, Sylina still looked a little concerned at the need to keep up with Feldral, but shrugged her shoulders, and the group separated, spreading out around the darkened cave, the only light coming in from the small entryway. Feldral remained there and then climbed back up to that

entrance, showing no sign of the immense exertions of the past few days. He perched there, looking out and around just in case.

Meanwhile, Harry put up his hut, disappearing into it to meditate for a while. If they were this close to the fighting, Harry wanted to be certain that he could call upon his phoenix form or rather his half-Phoenix form anyway, with impunity. He was occasionally interrupted when others entered the tent to use the toilet array, but seeing him meditate, none of the others bothered him, simply going behind the curtains and using the array in question. They hadn't had access to it since that first night, and going to the bathroom had been a very annoying proposition.

This was especially for Sylina, who, in Acali's words, "No doubt envied how easy it is for us menfolk to take a piss while standing up. Or hanging against the side of a mountain, in this case. None of that annoying need to pull our pants down to our knees for us. We don't even need to squat. We just need to make certain Sylina doesn't catch us. Although I suppose Harry at least could use such a moment as advertising if Sylina hasn't already seen everything he has to offer."

Acali Bigbrooke was the first Kaldorei Harry had met yet who liked innuendo-laden jokes. Not quite to the point of dirty jokes, but certainly up there. And he seemed to delight in embarrassing people, his sense of humor coming out more the longer they were away from Trueshot Lodge. While he wasn't quite as free with smiles and jokes as Feldral, it was clear that, unlike the rest of the Seekers, he was able to push aside the sadness and subtle sense of deep shame that always seemed at the back of the minds of the Members of the Unseen Path.

Harry only exited his hut when it was time for dinner. The light coming through the entryway still allowed for some light, but a carefully contrived fireplace had been put in, constructed in such a way that there was very little in the way of smoke, and what there was would dissipate by the time it exited the cave. There, he found Lathariel speaking to Ladros and Lodar while Sylina and a few of the others concentrated on preparing the meal.

"I do not know why; I just know that this mission has done wonders for me. I cannot describe it. It is as if I was sick, but now I am well. I am no mage nor physiciain. I cannot tell you why I am feeling better, but it has nothing to do with draining Wizard Potter's magical construct. I still have the one he gave me when we left Trueshot Lodge. I only needed to drain it a little bit both before and directly after that first climb."

Lathariel paused as he caught sight of Harry, turning fully in his direction and bowing from the waist. "And I seem to recall that I have never apologized for how I overreacted to your magic, Wizard Potter. I apologize for that and for the necessity of forcing you to make those magical items for me to drain back in Trueshot Lodge. I didn't even know I could do such a thing before you handed me the first one, but it was of immense help."

Harry stared for a moment, then slowly, ever so slowly, gave him a thumbs up. That hand then shifted into an open one which he used to slowly slap his face. "You bloody morons!"

Everyone there turned at his shout, and Harry pulled his hand away to glare at everyone there. "You all are complete idiots! Did it never occur to any of you that Lathariel's problems weren't being caused by the distance between him and the Sunwell but because of the defensive Nature Magic you have within Trueshot Lodge?"

All of the Seekers, even Feldral, were privy to the decision to bring Lathariel over the ocean to Trueshot Lodge to experiment to see how well his people could do while away from the Sunwell. Now they looked at one another, then as one, groaned, shaking their heads.

Pulling away from the fire pit, Sylina broke out laughing, her ears twitching spasmodically, barely remembering to pull the ladle out of the soup she had been cooking before it could be lost within before she fell to her rear. "That, that is hilarious! I've heard of missing the path for the signs, but that, that takes the pearl for certain."

Sylina wasn't actually speaking of a pearl as in the naturally occurring gemstone. Rather, she was speaking of a kind of candy that was popular among Kaldorei. They were wide cookie-like confectionery, around the size of a Kaldorei finger, but bulbous all around the edges, with the interior sometimes filled with cream, fresh blueberries and so forth.

Not apples, though. Harry had asked. Apparently, while the Kaldorei were aware of apples, they didn't have them any longer. The portion of Kalimdor that Ashenvale resided in hadn't developed any apple groves before the Cracking of the World.

"It, it can't really be that simple, can it?" Lathariel asked, scowling and tugging at his hair, before looking at it, scowling again, and shaking his head at some hidden annoyance. "Is such a thing even possible?"

"Nature Magic on its own probably wouldn't, but remember, there is a major source of Nature Magic within the Trueshot Lodge. That feather of Ohn'ahra in the central. The touch of a divinity would certainly be able to block out exterior sources of magic, especially when it's tied into a Nature Magic enchantment designed to hide a location from scrying or other magical means of detection. Remember that the Well of Eternity is hidden similarly under Nordrassil and the blessings on it," Harry explained.

He paused, shaking his head. "And it certainly seems to be the fact that the Sunwell can somehow feed you magic even from so far away. I'm not certain about the how of that, but it is the only thing that makes sense in comparison to how you are acting at this point. My question is, why the hell has it never occurred to any of you to take him out of the Trueshot Lodge since he arrived! He's a damn Ranger!" Harry exclaimed, pointing at Lathariel angrily.

Here, Lathariel looked a little embarrassed, taking some of the heat off the older members of the Unseen Path, who still looked chagrined at their mistake. "I unfortunately never volunteered for any of the patrols. I needed a whole lot of history lessons. My folk..." He grimaced, shaking his head, breathing in, then admitting, "My folk have done all they can to completely sever our ties to the old world. The fact that we were once members of a larger Empire is no longer taught. Only a few families keep records of anything before the crossing. This is helped by the fact that it took centuries for our race to regain the longevity given to us by the Well of Eternity from the Sunwell. Several generations of children lived and died in that time, making erasing our past easier and the reason for doing so more bitter."

Lathariel gestured around at the Seekers around them. "I knew next to nothing about the greater Order, let alone the War of the Ancients, the Cracking of the World, and so forth. Learning it from those who were there was fascinating. So it never occurred to me to volunteer to do patrols, especially with all the physical exercise I was still doing within the Lodge's environs."

Harry scowled, having something new to be annoyed by. "That sounds all too like something the purebloods back home in my old dimension would've done. Simply not teaching the history of the non-magicals, trying to ignore the fact that the history of the non-magicals and our own intertwined. I could see that you don't agree with that, so I won't hold it against you, Lathariel." He held out his hand formally, a smirk appearing on his face. "It is good to meet you in your right mind at last."

Lathariel looked down at Harry's hand, then smiled and gripped Harry's forearm in his own.

Knowing that they would have more than enough time to delve into how the Sunwell was able to feed magic into Lathariel even over this distance once they returned to Trueshot Lodge, Harry would probably have let the conversation die there. The other Kaldorei around him insisted that Harry use his major sight, something which he had told several of them about during the time at Trueshot Lodge, to see if he could see anything now around Lathariel.

"... Surprisingly, I can," Harry reported, cocking his head to one side as his emerald eyes blazed with magic for a moment. It was somewhat disconcerting to Lathariel, but he made no effort to shift away, simply staring back stoically. "I can see an extremely tenuous thread of some kind of magic linked to his body that wasn't there when I looked at him back in Trueshot Lodge... I don't see any sign of his being consciously in control of it. I didn't think I would, considering he's a Ranger and not a magic user, but still."

"Point in the direction where it is going," Lodar stated, leaning forward eagerly as his brother broke out a sextant and a compass. A moment later, they all concluded that the tenuous connection of magic was indeed leading toward where the high Elven nation of Quel'thalas resided. Beyond that, they couldn't tell from this distance. Nor did they have the exact location of the Sunwell in any event. But Quel'thalas was known to reside at the northern tip of the new (for a given value) continent to the east of the Maelstrom.

More than that, Harry was interested to see that besides becoming more with it mentally, there was no other real change to Lathariel. He didn't suddenly seem able to use magic, and the way he spoke about it, the idea of using magic for himself, wasn't something Lathariel was enthusiastic about, despite being one of the High Elves, who were descended from the Highborne. Whose main difference in comparison to normal Kaldorei was the fact that they could manipulate Arcana to the point they were addicted to it. "And you say that only about one in twenty of you Highborne, that is, High Elves, continue to take practice magic?"

"Correct. And I have never seen or heard of anyone feeling the compulsion to use magic that is so prevalent in the archives detailing the old empire under Queen Azshara. Both before and after the arrival of the demons." Lathariel winced slightly, looking away from the Kaldorei all around them. "And in a way, needing to... well, fill in so many jobs to have a proper society ourselves forced many to take up those other roles rather than continue to teach magic."

"Studying how the Highborne went from being a large but still banished upper-class portion of one society into their own entirely separate society would be the study of a lifetime," Nealu murmured.

"Hah! I don't think they are all that different now than they were back then. Look at their name for themselves. High Elf. Implying they are better than other elves. Even when they are doing all they can to forget other elves exist," Acali snorted.

“If you expect me to argue back on that score, you will find yourself mistaken. I said that our mages are not compelled by their connection to the Sunwell to use their magic. I never said anything about us being arrogant or the position mages have assumed in our nation,” Lathariel retorted.

Harry hummed thoughtfully, thinking about this but concentrating more on the magical side of things than the many sad parallels he could see between the Wizarding World and the High Elves. “It sounds almost like this Sunwell is fundamentally different from the original Well of Eternity. Its effects on the people who imbibe it are obviously long-lasting. Do you people still remember how long it took them to lose their original shade of dark purple?”

Lathariel shook his head, and Harry scowled but continued on. “Regardless, it feels to me almost, and I’m using the word **feels** rather than I think because I still don’t have enough information to do so, but it feels as if the Sunwell is somehow more benign and less wild than the Well of Eternity. Its impact isn’t as sharp but is far more pervasive if every High Elf within Quel’thalas needs the connection to it to the point of addiction, regardless of whether the High Elf in question uses magic or not. If someone among them who has never tried to use magic or touched the Sunwell in person…”

Again, he waited for Lathariel to answer, and the young elfish shuttered, shaking his head. “Only the king is allowed to directly touch the Sunwell. There are numerous places to sit nearby, to watch its energies, to feel its magic. But you cannot directly touch it. And I have never felt the call of magic like that.”

“Whereas we could count on the fingers of two hands with at least a few fingers left over how many Highborne were not in some fashion magic users,” Feldral mused.

He had remained on watch through much of this discussion but now joined them for the meal as Acali took his place. He nodded slowly to Lathariel, the motion almost a bow of apology. “I apologize. I had several misconceptions about you in my head before this mission began. They started to rattle loose long before this, but seeing you now, without any sign of your addiction bothering you has knocked the last of them out. I expect good things from you in the coming battle, Lathariel.”

Lathariel nodded firmly, and Harry leaned back as the conversation quickly shifted. He still wondered about the differences between the two magical power sources, but this far removed, he couldn’t tell anything about either one of them. *I wonder if the chaotic magic of the original Well of Eternity doesn’t exist in the Sunwell? The original Well of Eternity was a naturally occurring phenomenon. The Sunwell isn’t. It’s like the difference between a water geyser and a water fixture, I suppose.*

It was deep into the night when Feldral gestured for Sylina to join him as he moved back toward the entrance. “Come, it is time. We will make one patrol today to figure out the route forward. If we are correct in where the harpies have begun to reside, we will see signs of it quickly. Following that, we will canvas the entire area before planning out our attack.”

OOOOOO

That first patrol went well. The way was difficult but relatively straightforward so long as you had the body-concealing cloaks of the Kaldorei to hide you from anyone looking down from on high as

the harpies would. Because within barely a single hour of leaving the hidden cave, they started to see bird droppings. No harpies yet, but there was certainly a lot of evidence that the harpies were around.

Soon, despite the growing amount of bird droppings, the two Kaldorei came within sight of the harpy eyrie. This was situated over a somewhat wide area, around the same area as three times the Seeker's current domicile, in Sylina's opinion. It was an extremely craggy area, with numerous spikes of rock jutting out from the rest of the mountain, providing numerous places for harpies to make their nests, although several of them had also gone to the trouble of creating perches. Branches of the appropriate width were situated between two rocks, letting the harpies perch on them rather than within their nests. There were several of those, creating almost a series of walkways.

If by the term walking, the designer meant flying from one landing point to another over a distance of 20 feet or so.

Those perches and the numerous nests should have made the area look even more interesting, even more otherworldly to Sylina's eyes, and they did. But above and beyond that, the place looked... Diseased somehow. It was very, very hard to describe, as there was not a lot of plant life up here to look diseased or sickly. The harpies had gone to extreme lengths to provide the branches that they did for their perches, carrying them up here from the barely visible forest down below.

But scattered throughout the area the harpies controlled were a few corpses. Skeletons picked clean, others recently. The very rock also seemed to have darkened in places in a way that made Sylina wonder if the magic users among the harpies had used those areas as target practice for their spellwork enough to leave an almost permanent mark of their control of the area. Other areas around several of the nests also seemed grayer, darker than the rest of the mountain for no apparent reason.

Then there was the smell. With the harpies so far away and the wind a constant howl, there was no way an odor should have been able to linger over an area so large. But it did. An almost fetid scent, with hints of burnt feathers, joined the overwhelming smell of bird poo to assault Sylina's nose to the point she had to stuff it with a few bits of cloth torn from her tunic.

Many of the nests also looked not wrong per se, but less than put together, almost slovenly in a way. And it bore repeating in Sylina's opinion that there were a **lot** of bird droppings all over the place, without any kind of organization as to where bird droppings should be allowed or not, which actually surprised Sylina. *Even Fel corrupted or Old God tainted harpies should be a little more organized than this.*

As she and Feldral observed from further down the escarpment, Sylina tried to count the harpies, and realized there were quite a goodly number of them, as much as a hundred or more. It was easier to count magic users than the total number of harpies, there being only around fourteen of those. One of them had lit on a nest, and another harpy had squawked indignantly from it, so whether or not the second harpy was magical, Sylina couldn't tell. The skin of the Fel magic users was dark enough to stand out even at night in comparison to the other harpies, and besides that, there was the telltale dark green glow around their talons and eyes.

"It is hard to see them fallen so far," Feldral said, his voice barely audible to Sylina despite the fact her head was within touching distance of his. "I used to have a friend among the harpies, you know.

Before the War of the Ancients, and before their mother died, causing the others to go crazy or search out other deities to worship.”

He gestured forward with a slight movement of one ear, a move holy unnatural looking to any but their own race. Now, the magic they are using is very much a part of what is corrupting them all. Fell magic from the demons, a holdover of the war. In my opinion, it makes them far more dangerous than those given to the old gods. Like the satyrs, they become a danger to call the demons back to this plane if they become strong enough.” Turning slightly, Sylina saw Feldral smile a wintry little smile. Thankfully, in this day and age, harpies are not very forward-thinking. Unlike the satyrs, they do not make good servants.

Sylina nodded, turning her attention back to staring up at the harpies. A few moments later, as she tried to help them again, she realized there were a dozen or so that seemed to keep to themselves. *And is it just me, or is that area of the eyrie cleaner?* With a silent hand gesture, Sylina brought Feldral’s attention to her, then to where she was pointing with her own you’re a second later.

Feldral stared, frowning in thought as he whispered. “A new group that has just joined up with the larger band, perhaps? But then, why is their area of the nest so much cleaner than the rest?”

His voice trailed off as two of the harpies in that smaller group began to kiss one another on the necks, ears, and then mouths before flying up towards the single large nest the group of a dozen or so seemed to share. He stared in their direction for a time, then looked around at the rest of the group, gaging their reactions to this other group slowly.

Meanwhile, Sylina continued watching the original group of harpies, her eyes locked on one of them in particular. *I knew that harpies become more beautiful as they age, but damn! That one looks almost as good as Lady Whisperwind!*

This harpy looked older than the others, but not so old as several of the magic users, and showed none of her scars or tattoos, which were ugly things among harpy kind in any event, made by their nails rather than any implement. She didn’t seem to be a magic user, indeed, as Sylina watched this group, she couldn’t see any of the telltale greenish glow around any of them of Fel magic.

And this one harpy, in particular, had a body Sylina had rarely seen equaled, with wide but powerful hips and a chest that made most Kaldorei look small in comparison. Lustrous black feathers, black as the heart of night, fell down from the top of her head to her midriff, contrasting sharply with a pair of swan-white wings.

As moans began to reach the group of harpies, many of them flapped off, including the one she was watching. And it could’ve been Sylina’s imagination, but it almost looked as if she was blushing, like many of the older mothers and womenfolk did when they heard about the escapades of the young back home. But seeing the look on a harpy was just a bit much, in Sylina’s opinion. She shook her head quickly, then looked over at Feldral, using her fingers to sign worried even more than before on sound carrying now that several of the harpies had taken to wing. “Have we seen enough?”

“Wait, hold, retreat in place” was his own hand sign response, interspersed with him holding up one hand and flashing his finger all his fingers three times.

How he knew to estimate that Sylina didn't know, but he proved accurate. The harpies in the air all alighted elsewhere throughout the eyrie, leaving the sky clear of anyone who could spot the pair from on high. A second later, the two of them were retreating quickly from their hiding place, heading back to the others.

OOOOOO

True to his words, Feldral allowed them all to rest in the hidden cave for most of the next two days, but that in no way meant that they were idle. After that first night with Sylina, Feldral would go out with a different group of three every four hours to familiarize them with the 'terrain' such as it was, coming back late that evening.

Harry maintained that terrain should probably not mean as much in the way of sheer vertical surfaces as there were around here, but when asked about it, he couldn't come up with another term other than 'rocky Hell scape,' which got a few laughs, but was a bit more of a mouthful.

Each day, the group of four would survey a different portion of the area surrounding the harpy eyrie. Given the fact that the harpies could fly, and they didn't want any of them escaping, it was essential to attack the harpies from every direction possible. Thus, Feldral and the others needed as good a picture of the terrain all around the harpy eyrie as they could get.

During their trip, Feldral had commanded everything, the line of march, scouting the route forward, when and where they would rest, and even what they would eat occasionally, when it came time to start planning the actual attack, he opened the floor to everyone to give suggestions. Most of those suggestions had to do with specific aspects of the challenge the terrain added to this assault.

To say that the geography around the harpy eyrie was inhospitable for anyone who would normally stand on two feet was an understatement. There was only one truly flat area around the eyrie, a small ledge on the other side of it from where the Unseen Path was approaching it able to look down at most of the eyrie. Only big enough for one Tauren or two Kaldorei, it was decided that Lathariel and Shai would be placed there. They were the best shots among the group, both in terms of accuracy and speed, and would be able to see a large portion of the eyrie from there. They had no overhead cover, though, which would make it dangerous for them once the harpies started to take to the air.

Down the mountain, which was to the right of where the assault team had approached the area, was a series of large rocky crags sticking out from the side of the mountain. On many of those crags, the upper portions had been crudely flattened out recently, possibly through the use of continued Fel magic attacks, which several of the scouts had seen as they familiarized themselves with the area. The fourteen harpies among the hundred and twenty-two that made their home here - there was undoubtedly more down at the hunting site, but that was all that had been counted over the past few days - who could use magic did perform target practice with it, as Sylina had thought.

There were several recently flattened crags there which were obviously intended for more nests. But right now, three of them were large enough for individuals to stand on. A group of three, two Tauren and one Kaldorei would take a position there and attack the harpies from there with magic and a bow. Lesha would command that group, with the two Tauren being druids.

There was simply no way to get at the harpies with hand-to-hand weapons, so bow, arrow, and magic would need to do the lion's share of the battle. The harpies were just too mobile in comparison to the slow movements the attacking team would need to use to close with them. Even with Harry's spells, there was a limitation to how stealthy they could be to even get into position to attack from long range, to say nothing about closing to hand-to-hand combat.

However, there were ways to turn the terrain to their own ends. As Harry had heard before, Tjar had an earth elemental and would be able to create a fighting platform out of the rock of the mountain face once they began their attack. It would have to be once the assault started, though, because there would be no way to hide what was going on. That would take care of the left side of the assault, which would be under the command of Acali and consist of Tjar, Acali and Sylina. Feldral would lead the rest in an attack from the same direction the attack force had approached the area. They would be at the most disadvantage and would attack last when Leshia's earth elemental could shift their attention over to that area of the battlefield and provide a second fighting platform for them.

The idea that each portion of the multipronged assault would not attack at the same time surprised Harry, but he understood the reasoning behind it. Each time the harpies would be reacting to a small portion of the assault, not understanding the true nature of the attack until the final group began to attack.

"Harpies are not often intelligent, but all harpies are aggressive by nature, pairing a butcher bird's bloodthirsty nature with the group mentality of sparrows. None of them will realize the first attack is too small to take them on. All they will see is that someone has intruded into their territory and must be dealt with," Feldral opined. "If we attack first with the two shooters, Lathariel and Shai, then attack from the sides, they will be confused and continue to respond to each assault separately."

Here, Harry spoke up for the first time, holding up his hand and asking, "Aren't we overlooking something? What's to stop the harpies from simply flying higher into the air than our spells or arrows can reach, then attacking from up there by simply dropping stuff on us?"

"It's too organized a tactic for them," Feldral answered, shrugging his shoulders, looking over at Nealu. "Nealu you and Tjar have fought harpies more than any of the rest of us. Are they liable to take that approach?"

"We're attacking them in their eyrie. Their anger at that is going to override a lot of their intelligence or low cunning. If we were attacking them while they were on the move or on the hunt, it would be a different matter. Vurg is going to run into issues there, which is why he brought most of the shamans with him. Worse, those who are able to actually use Fel or Tainted magic are almost always the leaders among them. And that magic makes them the most prone to anger, not just violence. They won't be thinking straight," Nealu stated while Tjar nodded in agreement. "It's still a possibility, but it's a low one."

"I think it is still something we need to take into consideration. And I have a new magical ability that might be enough to keep the harpies from thinking about it entirely, and if not, closing that avenue off a bit." Harry saw he had the rest of the group's undivided attention now and looked around them all from where they stood around a model of the harpy eyrie that Dolmen, Tjar's earth elemental, had constructed, raising it out of the ground of the cavern. "As I've mentioned before, I'm not technically

human as those back in my old world would understand it. I am instead a chimera. Part of that which I learned while among the Tauren is that I can take on aspects of one or other of the basilisk or phoenix. While I'm not as good about the basilisk aspect yet..."

Harry concentrated for a brief moment, closing his eyes. In the center of his Mindscape, an image of his human body slowly appeared and then just as slowly was superimposed with that of the phoenix. The two images then emerged, and everyone within the cavern gasped as Harry's arms transformed into wings.

This was the hybrid form that Harry had created after getting in touch with his phoenix side during his time with the Skyhome tribe. He had only twice been actually able to go flying with it, but had practiced changing into his half-phoenix form many times in his hut after he first succeeded in forcing the change.

In this form, Harry's arms had transfigured into Phoenix wings, complete with bits of fire gleaming from the pinion tips, lighting up the interior of the cavern. The rest of his body hadn't changed, but somehow, the magic inherent in his Phoenix form, which, back in Harry's old world was known for being able to lift far, far more than his size would allow for, allowed Harry to fly. He demonstrated this now by flying around the large cavern that they were staying in. "I believe that having our own flyer, and one who can cast spells to boot, should be a big help, don't you?"

The others remained staring up at Harry for a few seconds while Feldral laughed. "Well, you always seem to have more tricks up your sleeves, do you not, Harry? Come back down here for now."

Pouting a bit, Harry obeyed. Harry absolutely loved flying and was eagerly looking forward to the time when he would be able to completely change into a bird form, although he was still having trouble balancing his three aspects of human, basilisk and phoenix.

"And you are positive that you will be able to cast spells and fly at the same time? Most of the shamans and Druids I have worked with need at least one hand free to help aim their spells," Feldral said, walking around Harry's hybrid form, while Sylina simply stared at it, her head cocked to one side thoughtfully.

"I can craft spells with my wings, although I do have to hover for a moment to do so. I can't concentrate on dodging and spellcasting at once, but a protective shield will give me the time to cast other spells," Harry admitted.

"You might wish to go back to the Skyhorn tribe to learn more about aerial tactics then," one of the Tauren said. He was easily the most silent of the group, Tauren or Kaldorei. He had a scar going down the side of his face, missing one eye and crossing over his large lips, as well as several missing teeth. He spoke with a lisp and seemed extremely self-conscious about it, remaining silent except for a few comments here and there that barely lasted more than two sentences at a time throughout their journey so far. Harry hadn't even heard his name, not since the journey began and not prior to this during his time at Trueshot Lodge. "As I understand it, aerial combat is all about gaining altitude on your opponent and constant movement. If you sit still, you become a target, and that shield of yours can be broken."

“My normally silent companion is quite correct,” Lesha stated, laying a hand on the other Tauren's shoulder and squeezing it, the younger Tauren nodding at him, straightening his shoulders a little. “You need to learn more about being able to move and attack at the same time, Harry. Maybe... and I realize this is somewhat strange coming from one of us, but maybe create a runic array that can put up your shield for you while you concentrate on moving. Coupling that with training to move and use spells at the same time would be a tremendous help.”

“I actually already thought of that, but I already learned quite a bit about the Skyhorn tribe's aerial tactics. Unfortunately, a lot of their training just isn't applicable to me in a combat setting because their partners handle most of the flying while the riders are attacking. I did learn their tactics about attacking out of the sun, always keeping a higher altitude than your opponents, and needing to watch for dangers from all around you, though.”

“So long as you are aware of your limitations, I will trust you to be able to work around them. The rest of us will have our own limitations to deal with, thanks to the nature of our opponents and the geography around us,” Feldral murmured, earning himself several mutters about understatement of the century, something that, coming from Kaldorei was not hyperbole. While none of Seekers Feldral had chosen for his team was unused to fighting in the mountains bar Lathariel, Harry and Sylina, only a few of them had ever fought in a terrain like this, with so much of the terrain being sheer rock faces. If not for Dolmen, a single assault would have been entirely out of the question. They would have had to change tactics to traps, snares, and ambushes, which would have been far more difficult and time-consuming.

Even getting into position would be a trial, but all of them had refused to allow Harry to use his spells on them. The amount of movement and exertion they would need to use to get to the four ambush points meant those spells would not last very long, and one of the druids had their own chameleon enhancement spell for the other Tauren. The Kaldorei would rely simply on it being dark as they moved into position, as well as their own general silence as well as their cloaks.

“You look like a male harpy, honestly,” Sylina said, speaking up for the first time since Harry had shown his new form. “I have to wonder how the actual harpies are going to respond to that, above and beyond being attacked by another flyer.”

That brought everyone else up short, with several of them blinking before looking over to Feldral and Tjar. While Tjar had fought harpies more often, Feldral was the only one among them who had ever had a harpy friend back before the War of the Ancients. His simple answer of “They will be shocked and impossibly befuddled” didn't tell them anything they had already known though.

“Actually, I think it will be incredibly disruptive. You're going to show the harpies something none of them have ever seen before, a male version of themselves. I won't say it will demoralize them or anything like that, but it will certainly shock them, maybe break whatever little organization they will have been able to gather during the battle. And that kind of befuddlement will only help us,” Tjar mused.

Harry winced a bit, scratching his chin. “Should we lean into that, maybe? Use some kind of psychological warfare on them? Maybe shouting about how I am a new avatar for their people or a remnant of Aviana. We could get them to actually start fighting one another if we do it right.”

The scowling looks Harry got in reply were honestly a relief, and he nodded. "I didn't think it was a good idea. I just felt I had to make the suggestion."

"One way or another, it might already be psychological warfare. There is no need to add to it more by having you do something like that," Tjar stated firmly. "That kind of manipulation is a bit of a slippery slope, and frankly, even though she was slain by the demons, I do not believe anyone here would be pleased with the idea of taking Aviana's name in vain."

Harry nodded agreement to that, understanding that they were lairs to those words that spoke of remembered pain and grief. When Acali and Feldral began to trade barbs back and forth, everyone was grateful for the chance of topic.

**OOOOOOO**

Harry was aware of the phrase 'prior planning prevents poor performance' but had never really seen it in action all that much. This battle would prove a textbook example of it. Because not only was everyone able to get into position the night prior to the attack, but the actual attack went off without a hitch.

As the light of dawn began to grow in the distance, Lathariel and Shai started the party. Just as the light of the rising sun began to rouse the harpies, two of them fell from the air above, screeching in agony, their cries ending abruptly in the case of one as she crashed into the side of the mountain. The other fell down upon one of the many sharp spikes of rock that jutted out from the mountain here, impaling herself through the lower stomach. Thankfully, blood loss and the arrow that had caught her directly under her shoulder right into her armpit would end that harpy's suffering quickly.

Roused from sleep, the harpies flew into the air in ones and twos, with one of the magic users being first, followed by the raven-haired harpy that had grabbed Sylina's attention on her first scouting trip. As the other harpies all flailed around, launching themselves from their nests, that one shrieked out a series of commands in their own language, not taking to the air just yet. Above them the harpies who had circled, looking for their attackers.

Several more fell to the precise shooting from Lathariel and Shai by the time the harpies realized what direction the attack was coming from. Between them, they had killed four more harpies and wounded two to the point where they had to retreat back to their nests.

One of the major issues for harpies in a fight was that their wings were... well, bird wings. Any kind of damage to them would have an impact on how well they flew, and if an attacker put an arrow into one of them, it didn't matter how much the wound bled, a hole torn through a wing would put any harpy down. This was a major problem here, where there were so very few places they could set down safely. In that, at least, the terrain worked to the advantage of the attackers for once.

Unfortunately, the first few to see where the shots were actually coming from were the magic users. Green fireballs flashed down towards Lathariel and Shai, forcing them to fling themselves off of the ledge they had been using. They did so trusting to the ropes they had latched into position on either side of it by a series of metal nails, and the rope was at least able to take their weight. The fireballs hit a second later, exploding, but by then, both of them were below the ledge, hiding underneath it.

The harpies would have seen the ropes and the nails driven into the rock there quickly, but at that point, the attack from further down the mountainside began. A lightning spell followed by a Solar Beam flashed out, aimed directly at two of the magic users. The lightning missed as the harpy screeched and dodged, but Solar Beam hit, completely enveloping the magic user and two other nearby harpies. They all screeched, unable to see, completely blinded. One of the harpies fell, while the others flew into one another, actually beginning to attack one another in their panic.

Meanwhile, several other harpies tried to organize their flock, flying high into the air above the others and screeching out orders. The only exception was again the raven-haired harpy. Her group was not flying upwards but was instead flying downward, putting themselves below the range of the two groups of attackers.

Just as she was in a position to rise and attack the group of three that had appeared below the eyrie, two more attacks struck.

One was from the angle that led further up the mountain, where a portion of the stone had molded itself out onto a ledge that was about forty feet wide. There, Sylina and the others quickly unlatched themselves from their harnesses and began to fire at the harpies, again causing confusion and chaos, with harpies going in every direction, most of what little cohesion they had disappeared.

And from above, Harry struck. Reductos and Bombards rained down from on high, causing many of the harpies to automatically turn their attention to what instincts told them was the greater threat even as more shaman and druid spells began to flash across the battlefield. Totems appeared, giving the attackers greater speed and power, covering them with Barklike skin as lightning, fiery, light-based attacks and spells that looked like starstuff flashed.

Yet even with all of that, their instincts told the harpies that the attacks coming from on high were more dangerous. The magic users among them spread out, replying with her own fireballs launched upwards almost blindly, while the other harpies rose into the air, screeching in anger and fury as, as Tjar had stated, anger continued to ride them all even through the multiple attacks.

But that anger and fury turned into shock as they flew close enough to see through the sun's glare to behold the being who was casting the spells. Harry's male body was obvious in the morning light, as was the fact that his wings were on fire. Not the green fire of Fel magic, or the black and almost sickly looking fire of those who had taken to worshipping the Old Gods, but the bright red and fiery orange of the sun itself.

Feldral, whose group had yet to attack, could hear much of their screeching, and thanks to his old friend, the mountaineering expert knew some of their language. Most prevalent among the screeches now were "What is that", "What is", "That's impossible," and so forth. Two of the group he was going to target right away, the group of more organized harpies that had flown below the area that was being attacked originally, were hovering there, staring upwards, talking amongst themselves excitedly, shouting about a male harpy. It looked as if, as Tjar had said, the shock of Harry's appearance was a psychological strike against the harpies without anything else needing to be added.

A moment later, Dolmen rose out from the side of the mountain, nodding ponderously to Feldral and the others who were strapped to the solid face of the mountainside there. While Harry's attacks continued to cause carnage, and the harpies began to strike back at him and the others, Dolmen

went to work, creating a second fighting platform out of the mountainside for the group, who quickly unhooked as much as they needed to from their harnesses, and began to launch arrows up into the harpies from yet another angle.

Feldral went to target the group of twelve flying below the eyrie, only to find them retreating, pulling back away from him and then upwards into the eyrie again. They seemed to be arguing with one another, with the oldest one, the raven-haired woman that had grabbed young Sylina's attention that first night, overriding the others. She even battered one of the girls upside the head as she made to argue until they were all once more alighting on the same nest they had been in before the battle began.

There, the group of a dozen or so hid, protecting themselves from Feldral's view, and he was forced to turn his attention to the others who were still up in the air above. *I wonder what is going on there? It is odd indeed to see a subgroup of any kind among a harpy flock.*

Higher up in the air, Harry desperately cast a Protego around himself, flapping his wings as several spells struck, causing the bluish energy of the shield to fluctuate badly. *That is something I'm still getting used to. Back home, there were very, very few people who could make my Protegos look as close to collapse like that, not with just three spells anyway.* Shaking that thought off, Harry once more crafted several spells, flinging them out as he flapped his wings.

Cutting spells erupted as the shield fell, and Harry was flying upwards again, dodging around and through several harpies who had gained altitude on him. Only one of them was a magic user, with the others attacking with claws, making them easy to dodge. Harry even kicked out of one of them, catching her hard in the wing, breaking it and sending her screaming to her doom. A second later, he rolled away from another, performing what would've been called the barrel roll in a jet.

Harry then came to a complete stop, dodging another fireball that passed right in front of him. He retaliated a second later with a Bombarda spell that caught the harpy in the center of her chest, exploding her body into bits.

At that point, Harry realized that several of the harpies had bunched up. A bone-exploding curse was the price of this mistake. The spell hit one of them, and the bones of that harpy exploded in every direction, turning the bones in his initial victim all into so much shrapnel, sending around seven other harpies to their death in an instant.

This opened Harry up for a return shot from another magic user who had just reached the same altitude he was at. The fireball caught him in the back, and he grimaced angrily. Not at the pain of it. The heat of the flame couldn't bother him, thanks to his phoenix form. But there was a foulness to that spell, as if corruption and toxicity were trying to seep into his body just from being hit by it. It reminded Harry of the feeling he'd had when he'd used a mixture of Legilimency and a Patronus to fight the Fel foulness in the dryads the satyrs had captured years back. *Is that what Fiendfyre would feel like if you stripped away the extreme heat of it? That's horrifying.*

Unwilling to be hit again and still feeling the wrongness of that spell somehow on his skin, Harry flew straight upwards, dodging through several other attacks before diving back down, throwing out fireballs of his own, a spell that seemed to come to him easily in this form, perhaps because the phoenix was just as much a creature of fire as wind. But instead of aiming at any one harpy, he aimed to disrupt

whatever small formations began to organize themselves. This kept the harpies from coordinating and spreading out away from directly above their eyrie in an organized manner.

Below, Lathariel and Shai climbed back up to the ledge they had used at the beginning. More arrows and more spells were flying into and around the harpies, and now even their own screeching and the shouted orders from the magic users were doing more harm than good to the efforts that might have allowed them to respond to even this level of assault.

More than that, though, Harry was utterly astonished at how well the members of the Unseen Path were fighting. Very few arrows or spells were missing, and every spell had seemingly been chosen well in advance. As he summoned Tricky into being and sent her out to cause havoc, Harry saw a small air elemental zoom out from Tjar as Lesha caught a magic-using harpy right above Tjar's position, hitting her right in the side.

Whenever some of the harpies closed with one of the positions, and all of the Seekers turned their attention to that group of harpies, slaughtering them before they could get into range with no word of command needed. The magic users continue to prove a bit of an issue, but even there, the Barkskin spells from the Druids and their anti-magic totem poles worked a treat. Unlike the fighters themselves, those totems didn't need to be set on solid ground. The totems could simply be hurled into the stone face of the mountainside, the magic of their forms allowing them to stick there, lasting just long enough to drag a few spells away before the impacts of the spells jarred them loose. Even Lathariel and Sylina were proving extremely deadly archers, although Sylina was the only one among them who missed, even if it was only once out of every four.

Dodging around a harpy that had gotten above him again, Harry lashed out with a cutting spell, cutting the harpy in two and then ascending through the air in a spiral, sending out smaller spells this time. These spells were aimed at the remaining magic users, of which there still were five in the air. One of the others had fallen into one of the nests and seemed to be trying to attack Lesha and his position. But even as Harry's own spell dealt with one of the other magic users, that one fell to an arrow straight through the side of the head as she tried to peek up over the edge of her nest.

Then Harry twitched, seeing out of the periphery of his eyes a group of twelve harpies rising from within the nest. They moved at an angle up and away, pushing through a zone of the sky that Lathariel, Shai and the team under Leesha were supposed to be in charge of. But they had chosen their timing well. Both Lathariel and Shai had turned away from the battle for a second to reach for their spare quivers, and both Lesha and his fellow Tauren were looking the wrong way towards Feldral's position. This allowed this group of twelve to wing upwards and away out of arrow range.

Deciding that they were probably going to try to escape, Harry twisted around, racing towards them. Since harpies could propagate quickly, Harry had agreed with the notion that they shouldn't allow any of the harpies to escape.

To his surprise, the harpies didn't try to fly off. Instead, they continued to ascend until they were relatively close to his own altitude, at which point the group began to circle in place, with one of their number splitting off and winging towards him. From the descriptions he had been given by Sylina of the harpy, she had seemingly been a little jealous of, this was the same harpy, and looking at her, Harry would, in the confines of his own head at least, decide that this harpy had what could be termed the

best fit MILF type of body he had ever seen. Big breasts, gravity-defying breasts in point of fact, both literally and figuratively, a washboard stomach, and smooth, powerful thighs underneath the skirt leading to her talons below, with a heart-shaped, mature-looking face, full lips, and raven black plumage that almost glowed with reflected sunlight.

Harry had expected to see very pretty harpies. He knew that as they aged, harpies grew more and more beautiful up to a point, and he had seen attractive harpies even among the first group he had met who had fought alongside the satyrs back in the Ashenvale. Whatever Fel or Old god magic might do, it wasn't enough to take away from how good-looking harpies could be, only making them seem more feral, more evil villainess type of beautiful instead of just wild.

What he was not prepared for was this particular harpy shouting out to him in the Kaldorei language. It was somewhat different than what he had gotten used to, and not entirely because of the high-pitched shrieking type of voice she spoke in, but it was clearly the Kaldorei language. "Pirthee, I sue for peace for me and my clutch! We durst surrender unconditionally!"

That brought Harry up short, and he frowned, beating the wind with his wings as he shouted back, "You're not going to try to run?"

"We will not. We came to the Highmountain range for a reason, and only joined up with Lendosa's flock for safety in numbers. I kept mine self and my clutch free of Corruption and Taint alike, and I will not see that work go to waste here, our remains splattered against the mountainside below." The harpy then actually bowed in midair, crossing her wings over her chest as she did, somehow retaining her position in the air for a second in a move that would've proved to any onlooker, if more proof was needed, that all harpies had some intrinsic magic to them, some understanding with gravity that other birdlike creatures lacked.

Besides that, for all the horrible noise of her voice and even the archaic nature of her speech, the harpy carried herself with an air of dignity. Seeing it, Harry had to nod his head, both in acknowledgment of the woman's formidable seeming nature and her words.

Before he could speak, though, he caught a glimpse of a fireball rising from directly below him, shot his way by the last remaining magic-using harpy. A quick Protego covered himself, and the magic-using harpy twisted around, screeching something in her own language and hurling another fireball at the black-plumaged harpy, who dodged aside at the last instant, letting it pass up through her former position harmlessly.

That proved to be the last mistake the final magic-using harpy made, as it opened her up to a return spell from Harry. The Rifela caught her in the face, tearing off her entire head in a welter of blood and viscera.

Turning, Harry locked gazes through his still shimmering blue shield of energy with the black-plumaged harpy. "All right. You and your clutch fly up here for a bit, but when I order you to, you'll be coming back down with me to talk to the others. I'm not in charge of this group, so if you want to sue for peace, you're going to have to do it with them as well as me."

Harry didn't want to tell the harpy they were members of the Unseen Path, lest she be lying and make a successful getaway later. Secrecy was a major part of the Order's traditions, even though Harry wasn't really a big believer in keeping all of their knowledge secret.

The harpy nodded agreement, then gestured downward with a wing tip, showing yet again that special understanding harpies must have with gravity as she somehow was able to remain where she was even with one arm not flapping to keep her there. "We will be waiting down there. I do not believe, judging by what mine eyes can see, that we will be waiting long."

This was quite accurate. By the time Harry turned his attention back down to the rest of the battle going on, only ten harpies remained in the air. Five of them fell even as he watched, and three dived down and below the positions of the group ambushers to try and get away. But Sylina had been ready for that and leaned well off the side of the fighting ledge that Dolman had created, fired down at the harpies before they could escape, hitting one as the air elemental took the other two. The last two fell to spellfire from the druids.

The Kaldorei and Tauren then all turned their attention upwards to where Harry was hovering near the group of twelve Harpies, and Harry gestured them down to follow him down, watching as they did from above. The black-plumaged harpy seemed to understand what he was doing, and when a few of her small flock objected, she shouted at them in her own their own language, browbeating them into ship submission.

Two of them hovered back, staring up at Harry, not as if they were afraid of him but with something else very visible in their expressions. If Harry was forced to put it into words, it would be coquettish, and when they turned, they shook their rear pinions at him before diving back down to join the others.

Harry shook his head, wondering aloud to Trixie, who had just shot upwards to hover near his shoulder, "I wonder if I really thought this whole half-phoenix form thing through."

With the black-plumaged harpy shrieking out in the Kaldorei language that they were surrendering, none of the members of the Unseen Path shot at them, although all of them were tense, and Feldral ordered them to set down directly in front of his position. Dolman was sent around to create a series of small bridgeheads, connecting the four positions together where the harpies sat down in one of the central nests, jutting out from the side of the mountain.

The raven-plumaged harpy stood on her talons, her arms folded almost demurely in front of her stomach, while her clutch gathered behind her, none of them seeming as sanguine about what had happened as their mother did. The two youngest there, both of whom had white-colored plumage bodies that looked almost like that of high school level sprinters maybe or at least some kind of high school level girl, kept their eyes trained on Harry, watching as he descended. When he landed, several of them also turned to gaze at him, with several of them actually bowing towards him along with the black-plumaged woman.

A part of Harry enjoyed seeing that. While his escapades with Sylina had more than taken the edge off of his desires for female companionship, he was still a man and still enjoyed looking at pretty women. And all of these women were pretty, even the youngest. Even better from Harry's standpoint, they were built more along human lines in the chest area than most Kaldorei were, with the black-

plumaged woman reminding him of Narcissa Malfoy and two of the others being about as big as Susan Bones had been when they graduated.

Harry was not ashamed to admit the sight of Susan wearing muggle clothing at Hermione's insistence had been something he, like all the boys who had seen it, enjoyed. And the tunics that the harpies wore did not leave much to the imagination. Especially since, like most Kaldorei Harry had met, they did not seem to believe in the need for a bra.

"You wish to surrender. Normally, harpies would not be willing to do so, tainted by either Fel magic or the Old Gods who most took to worshipping after Aviana died," Feldral said, gently yet still bluntly. "Why should we believe that this surrender is nothing more than a trick to try and live another day?"

"Hold on a second," Harry said before concentrating, shifting back into his human body. While he was strangely at home in his half-phoenix form, using his arms like that worked muscle groups that he simply had no other way of working out as much. After so many combat moves, his shoulders in particular were extremely sore right now as the adrenaline of battle wore off.

His change drew gasps and murmurs of interest from the harpies. But the two youngest didn't look away, simply staring at him even more avidly, murmuring excitedly to one another, biting their lips and giving him what could only be described as bedroom eyes.

Their mother or grandmother, Harry really wasn't certain, spoke up, gesturing to the twosome. "My youngest daughters here wonder which form is your original body, and Maria wonders if you could transform them into... Whatever you are. You're not a Kaldorei, that is certain. But neither are you a vrykul. You're far too small for that."

"I'm what is called a human, and as far as I know, I'm the only one of my kind on this world. More than that, though, I will not share at this time. Rather, I want to see if I can... Well... are you aware of how your voice sounds to others? I wish to alleviate that before we begin talking."

"Like a series of shrieking birds paired with the yowling of mating cats, I believe is the way I've heard it described," the black-plumaged woman answered regally, although her eyes shone with eagerness. "But if you have spells of some kind that can help, I would be very interested to see them."

Then he nodded, and the others watched with tense grips on their weapons as he moved forward. The black-plumaged harpy moved through her clutch, standing in front of him as he gently reached forward, touching her throat for a second. "This spell is touch-based, I'm afraid. It's basically the equivalent of a spell that would be used to take away someone's sore throat. I'm wondering if it will work, but if not, I have another called a songbird spell."

That caused giggles, honest-to-goodness giggles among the harpies, and even their matriarchs smiled briefly while Sylina shook her head. "Songbird spell, really?"

"Yeah. Let's just say that the witches back home were extremely vain creatures. Somewhere along the line, a witch came up with a spell that would basically pretty up their voice to the point where they could hold a tune and sing with it."

The throat-soothing spell actually felt quite pleasant, but it didn't seem to do anything to the matriarch's voice when she spoke after Harry pulled his hand away. Cringing a bit, Harry looked between the older harpy and Sylina as he explained. "This next part is going to be a little more invasive, I'm afraid. I'm going to have to, er, put a finger into your mouth..."

"Oh my, and here we haven't even shared a meal together," she said, causing even more laughter among her children and for Sylina to bark out a laugh as well while Feldral and the other Kaldorei simply looked at one another, shaking their heads in some amusement both at Harry's now blushing face and the sheer oddity of what they were seeing. The Tauren simply looked on, thoughtfully, no longer wary of the harpies trying to escape, but more than one of them had the thought that the harpies trying to kidnap Harry was still on the table.

Despite her little joke, the matriarch opened her mouth, allowing Harry to settle two fingers onto her tongue, which was shorter and thicker than a human's. For a moment, the others saw a brief glow from inside her mouth, white and bright. The matriarch felt a tingle start in her tongue before spreading to her mouth and down into her throat, and she had to hold back a very involuntary moan at the feeling.

When Harry removed his fingers, she was blushing a little, and turned away from him demurely before speaking aloud. "Well I..."

She paused, her eyes crossing to try to stare down at her own mouth for a moment while all the other harpies froze, staring at her in shock. Because her voice had been nothing like her normal one. It was a smooth, almost sensual-sounding contralto. Harry likened it to a singer he'd heard once with Hermione, a woman from America called Cher or something similar. "Why, that's amazing! Is this spell permanent?"

"I'm afraid not. I might be able to teach a shaman. They have spells that allow them to sound like different animals, and in a way, this is simply a variation of that kind of spell. But it normally will only last around a week before you need to reuse it."

"Then I suppose we will have to stay close with you or a shaman that you teach the spell to. Hearing my voice like this is amazing." Harry looked at her in confusion, and she laughed gaily. It should've sounded like a harsh calling to his ears, but instead simply sounded like a woman's laugh. "Didst thou think that we harpies did not think we sounded atrocious? No, our voices are harsh, even amongst ourselves."

A second later, the matriarch was practically bowled over as her daughters all rushed towards Harry, screeching in their own language that they needed him to do the same spell to them. She pushed back harshly, twisting around and remonstrating with them as her wings battered at their heads and shoulders, shouting in their own tongue, which still sounded far better than it had before. Harsh sounding certainly, but no longer the next best thing to an auditory assault.

Before this chaos could continue, Harry stepped back, moving to stand beside Lesha, while Feldral clapped his hands loudly several times to gain the harpies' attention. "While I am certain all of you would benefit from Harry's spellwork, your matriarch surrendered you all into our custody, something which is unheard of. I will admit that by this point, I do not believe any of you are being

affected by either Fel magic of Taint, but is insanely rare among your folk. I would hear your tale from your own mouth, Matriarch.”

Glaring her daughters into silence, the black-plumaged woman nodded, moving through them once more until she stood in front of Feldral, whereupon she bowed regally from the waist, sweeping one wing tip down across the elemental-created stone bridge. “My name is Cassandra Moonflight. As you didst see, this is my clutch, my daughters. I wast born near the end of the War of the Ancients to harpies who had decided to make a home within the Kaldorei empire. I wast old enough to feel the death of Aviana but not quite old enough to be driven insane by it. Mine self and several others were of that age, but whereas they began to join their elder siblings and mothers in searching for other sources of magic, I had never evinced any real interest in magic one way or the other, then or now.”

Cassandra paused, once again trying to stare down at her own mouth, a brilliant smile appearing on her lips as she did before shaking her head and going on rapidly. “Mine self and my older siblings survived the Cracking of the World and remained within these islands as the cracking ebbed away. But as they fell to the taint of the Old Gods, the magic that was supposedly our birthright that was torn away from us along with our Great Mother simply didst not interest me. And I made mine self scarce whenever any rituals were done as well, avoiding any Taint.”

Feldral nodded as that somewhat tracked. While he hadn’t heard of any harpy among the Broken Isles who was completely free of the Taint, it was known that the Taint will of the old gods was more prevalent among harpies here in the Broken Isles. He had honestly been somewhat surprised to see the magic-using members of this particular group of harpies use Fel magic. “You must have gotten quite lucky.”

The laugh that Cassandra let lose this time was in no way humorous and was almost so harsh that many of her listeners thought that maybe Harry’s spell had already begun to fail. Luckily, it hadn’t. It was simply the harshness of her emotions at that sentence that made her laugh so. “I suppose from an outsider’s perspective at this point, it might seem so. Trust me, for much of my life, it did not. Not until I was old enough and strong enough to strike out on my own. Not until I had my first children.” She turned her head to gaze fondly at the oldest of the other harpies, the one whose red hair and proportions had put Harry in mind of Susan Bones moments before. “Until I began to have companions, my clutch, my family, I was on my own for several hundred years.”

The younger harpy smiled back at her, with the others all smiling at her as well, but Cassandra slowly shook her head and turned back to Feldral. “That is how I am not Tainted, at least. As to why we’re with this group, as I told...” she paused, her eyes widening, and she looked over the heads of the other harpies towards Harry. “Your pardon, mage, but I did not get your name.”

“Wizard, actually, and my name is Harry. Harry Potter,” Harry said, bowing from the waist towards the harpies, something that set several of them to giggle in their language.

“Lord Potter them. As I told Lord Potter, we were with this greater flock because there is strength in numbers. Moreover, I had been going toward the north of here in search of...” Cassandra paused, winced, and then continued. “In search of something, another magic several of my clutch and indeed myself had felt on occasion. A touch of Nature Magic which reminded me of the Great Mother.

This was, I hoped that myself and my daughters could perhaps begin to worship such, to keep the desire to have magic at bay so that no more of them would leave my side to search out the fel or the Taint.”

Cassandra’s eyes went far away for a moment, and the redhead and more than a few of the others shivered as they seemed to slump in place under the weight of old memory. “Not all of my children have chosen to follow me in turning aside from all magic. Most, indeed, have not.”

Next to Harry, Lesha stilled, and then his hand slowly began to grip the half of his bow so hard the wood began to creak. Other members of the Unseen Path had similar responses, while Feldral’s eyes widened, his ears standing straight up above his head before lowering slowly, a sign of shock followed by one of cold concentration. “A source of Nature Magic, one that has the touch of a god on it? That sounds fascinating. Tell me, exactly where did you initially feel this whisper of a deity?”

Cassandra looked back at him for a moment thoughtfully, then looked around them, orienting herself before pointing almost straight north according to Lordar’s hastily pulled out compass. “That way. My clutch and I were moving towards the shoreline and then along it, hunting fish at the time, when we began to feel the normal background Nature Magic starting to change. It was becoming wilder, more powerful. It was at this point that a patrol of these harpies found us. They outnumbered us, and I had no wish to fight them. So when they offered to let us join, I agreed. That was around... Five days ago?”

She looked over at a few of her daughters, who, after conversing in their own tongue, nodded their heads. She turned back to Feldral and continued her tale. “I am uncertain what caused that surge in Nature Magic. I could tell it was old, around perhaps three, four years? The initial surge of Nature Magic was beginning to fade, but we could all still feel it, as could the harpies of this flock. But beyond where we first discovered it, I’m afraid I cannot tell you more. We were newcomers and thus not trusted to go off on our own, and my insistence that we all stay together also prohibited us from leaving as a group unless we were part of a larger hunting party.”

“That is still enough for us to go on, isn’t it?” Tjar snarled, turning to look at Feldral. He looked almost frantic to the nearby Sylina, who backed away, staring first at that Tauren, then around at the other Kaldorei and Tauren, all of whom save Feldral looked almost desperate with need for a moment. It was hard to describe in words, but on the other side of the harpy clutch, Harry instantly likened it to the faces of a true believer who’d just been told that a holy quest was about to be handed to them. *One that might absolve all guilt... Does this have something to do with the maudlin, tormented air we’ve felt on more than one occasion back in Trueshot Lodge from the others?* On this trip, that feeling had dimmed a bit, but had never truly gone away, despite Feldral’s best efforts. Even Lesha and Acali were not immune to it.

Feldral simply looked back at Tjar, then around at the others, before nodding slowly, measuringly. It was evident that whatever was riding the others, it didn’t have nearly as firm a handhold on him. “Tell us more about the terrain here and about the numbers of other harpies that are away from the eyrie at present. We have another group that is due to hit your typical hunting ground down below, and I’d like to give them some numbers to work with. After that, tell me everything you can remember about this surge of Nature Magic and the territory it occurred in. I believe that this mission has just taken on new life.”

**End Chapter**