

Alayne opened her eyes and immediately closed them again. "I'm sure there's a logical explanation for this," she whispered to herself, risking opening her eyes again. Deciding that closing them would not help, she stared at the ceiling until her vision blurred, unable to figure out how she had returned to her old room in Zerith and Dar'ja's home. "This is too good to be real," she whispered, taking hold of the rising joy welling within her. Squelching it with an iron fist, she flung the sheets away and sat up, letting her legs swing over the side of the bed and her feet hover a few inches above the floor. Sliding forward, she put her elbows on her knees and buried her face in her hands.

"This is absolute madness," she muttered, lifting her head and glancing around the room again. "Any moment now it will all change; it will be as it *should* be. As it *must* be."

Something in the corner of her vision caught her attention. Standing up, taking a moment to catch her balance on wobbly legs, she walked across the room. Her breastplate lay against the closet door, a hole punched clean through it. Her runeblade lay in shattered pieces next to the skull-and-rune adorned armor. "So, it wasn't a dream," she gasped, her legs giving way and depositing her on the floor. Closing her eyes, she waited, listening for the voice of the man she'd called Master for the endless months that she'd spent in Northrend. Hearing nothing, she shuddered with relief. "I am free," she sobbed quietly. "I'm free."

Her weeping cut off as suddenly as it had begun as she recalled the last battle. She had stood against her friends; against the two men she cared about most this side of life. "Light of heaven," she whispered, "did I...did I actually kill my father?" Rubbing her throbbing temples, she forced herself to remember that last hectic fight.

She'd felt Arthas's control over her waning as her divided loyalties shifted away from him and back towards Zerith, Dar'ja, Callie, "...and Ger'alain," she whispered, shivering. Finally, she'd been able to regain control of her mind long enough to protect them from the very attack she'd been part of. But the cost... her mind shied away from the thought of what she had done to save the very people she'd endangered. Clenching her teeth, she forced herself to face that relentlessly. Giving herself no excuse to hide behind, no quarter, she faced what she had done.

"I abandoned everyone I cared about," she told herself, "I threw away all of their love and friendship to chase after madness because I was a coward. I wanted them to always think of me as that sweet little elf maiden that I had been when I first came back to Eversong. I didn't want them to see the real me; the warlock who could roast an entire city because she was in a bad mood. The woman who could gut a man and cut him into scraps for touching her. I didn't want them to see that; I wanted to shield them from the sight. I wanted to hide *myself* from what I am," she forced herself to admit. "I lied to everyone and to myself and, by doing so, handed myself over to Arthas like a Winter Veil present.

So, what am I to do now?" she asked herself. Lifting her head, she propped her chin on her fist and considered her options. She could stay and try to make up for everything she'd done. "No, that's just another way of hiding," she said, discarding the easiest option. She could surrender herself to the sin'dorei government and be executed. "That would be just," she sighed, "but still too easy."

And what if he'd been right? What if they really were the cause of her madness? "No," she muttered. "He lies and lies and even when he tells the truth, it's a lie," she said. "Even if they did draw strength from me, I would give it to them willingly, without struggle." So...what was she to do?

Exile. Self-imposed exile from Zerith, Dar'ja, Callie, and Ger'alain. She would tonight, under the cover of darkness. She'd take only a change of clothes. Everything else, she would leave behind with a note explaining that they were to sell it all and keep the money against the debt she had surely incurred. Any money she gained while off, she would arrange to have sent

back to them. She could never repay them for all of the pain she had caused, but she would make the gesture nonetheless.

Letting her head drop back into her hands, she tried to ignore the sobs that stuck in her throat.

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Ger'alín settled in behind the bar, waving to the bartender and waiting impatiently for his drink. He'd become something of a fixture at the bar since returning from Undercity. It was the one place, other than working the forms with his sword, he could forget everything for a little while. Forget how still and quietly she lay in the bed, like one awaiting the grim touch of death. Since the fever had broken, she did not respond to anything; not their attempts to heal her, not his shouts and pleas for her to open her eyes. He'd even once thought of kissing her, minded of the old human fairy story about the sleeping princess. Grunting, he put it out of his mind. He'd come here to forget, for a time, not to pick at a wound that he feared would never heal.

The bartender set his usual drink in front of him and left. Ger'alín grunted as he slammed it back, feeling the welcome, numbing burn of alcohol as it sent tendrils of warm forgetfulness through his body. When the bartender set a second in front of him, he tossed it back without thought, and began to smile. A sight on the other side of the room took his breath away. Standing up, feeling a joyful, silly grin split his face, the Blood Knight sauntered over to the table. "Well, when did you wake up?" he asked.

"This morning," the woman who looked almost exactly like Alayne muttered dryly. Ger'alín blushed in humiliation and turned to walk away. "Fancy meeting you here. It almost reminds me of the first time we met," she called out after him. "Is this where you pick up your other victims?"

"Oh, Ta'sia," he groaned, recognizing the voice. "Look, I apologized for overreacting already."

"Well, if you want to try again, maybe you could get her name right," her friend A'sara giggled. Ger'alín shook his head as if to clear it and continued on his way out of the bar. Of all the women in Azeroth to run into, those two were top of his 'never want to see again' list.

"I wish you wouldn't bring that up," Ta'sia grimaced after Ger'alín left. "It's embarrassing."

"That's why I bring it up," A'sara laughed. "You were really enjoying yourself that night until he got your name wrong. I can't believe you're letting him get away with it."

"Oh, don't worry. I'll get back at him for that," the elven woman promised. "And I'll make you eat your words," she whispered beneath her breath. "A man who could forget me? He's not been born yet..."

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"I'm going up to check on her," Callie announced as she tossed her napkin onto her plate. "I thought I saw her eyelids moving earlier." The other three stared at her as they did every evening when she made this announcement. Ger'alín looked glassy-eyed from stopping off at the bar on his way home. He buried his face in his hands, tired of getting his hopes up every evening, only to have them dashed. Zerith just looked harassed; he'd been up all last night and most of the day helping with a difficult birth.

"I'd better come with you," Dar'ja said as she hastily swallowed the last bit of bread. "Awake or not, that room needs to be freshened. Zerith, you and Ger'alín take care of the dishes," she said by way of request.

Leaving the two men behind, the women climbed up the stairs and opened the door to Alayne's room. "Alayne, you're..." Callie started to say, "why are you crying?" she asked in confusion.

The elven woman lifted her head and quickly dashed away the last tears falling from her eyes. Steeling her face and squaring her shoulders, she stood up, not letting herself see or feel the welcome in her former friends' eyes. "I thank you for your hospitality and your healing," the warlock said formally, distantly, "and I apologize for any trouble I have caused you throughout the duration of my illness. The armor and sword will fetch a fair price at market; they were constructed of some of the finest – and rarest – components."

"Alayne, who cares about any of that?" Dar'ja asked, her hand clutching her throat in horror at the other sin'dorei's words and tone. "All that matters is that you're well again. Zerith will be delighted. Ger'alín might just fly into the sky. Let me run and go get them."

The warlock stopped her by grabbing her arm firmly. Continuing as if she had not been interrupted, she said, "They will fetch a fair price. I will take only a change of clothes when I leave; you may sell everything else that once was mine. Keep the gold. I know that I can never repay you for all you've done for me, but I will make this poor attempt nonetheless. Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I will change and be out of your home within the quarter-hour." The two elven women stood staring at each other for a long moment. Alayne's gaze was icy and determined. Dar'ja returned it with a heated stare of her own. Callie, uncertain what was wrong with the warlock, turned to leave. Alayne reached out to catch hold of her as well but Dar'ja blocked her, shoving the other elf woman away and kicking the door shut. Slamming the lock down, she shoved Alayne away when the other woman moved to stop her. With an angry grunt, Dar'ja kicked the heavy footlocker in front of the door, preventing it from being opened from the outside.

"Enough of this," Dar'ja growled.

"Indeed," Alayne said icily, moving towards the closet. "As I said; I will be out of your house within the quarter-hour."

"Going to run back to Northrend, to Arthas, are we?" Dar'ja spat.

"No," Alayne said slowly, speaking as if to one who did not have her wits about her. "Where I go is not anything you need concern yourself with. I've been enough of a bother to you; let me leave and you need never deal with me again."

"A bother? Alayne, the only place you're going if you're talking like that is to the sanitarium. What, do you think we believe you joined the Scourge of your own free will?"

"I did what I did, Dar'ja. I make no excuses for it."

"You did it because you were mad as a spring hare. You probably didn't even know what you were doing. Ber'lon says..."

"He's here, too?"

"No, but he ran into Ger'alín and Callie and told them about what was really happening. Do you know that Ger'alín was planning to go to Northrend to rescue you?"

"I didn't need rescuing, Dar'ja. I chose the path I walked; I've unchosen it now but that does not excuse anything I did. I surrendered to the Scourge because...no," she said, more to herself than to Dar'ja, "no excuses! I joined the Scourge; I fought alongside them. I submerged my will to that of the Lich King. I would have done anything at his command. Anything, Dar'ja, *anything*. I let him use me; let him twist me. I *let* him do it!"

"You weren't in your right mind!" Dar'ja screamed. "You were sick, Alayne. You had forgotten just about everything you ever knew from that Plague!"

"I still did it, Dar'ja!" Alayne shouted back. "I would have killed all of you!"

Ignoring the other woman, Dar'ja walked over and picked up the water pitcher from its basin. Hefting it, she threw it so that it crashed against the wall behind Alayne. "That's a lie!" she screamed in exasperation. "That's a lie and you know it, Alayne! If it were true, you'd have killed Ger'alın, and then Zerith, and then me and Callie the night of the attack against Undercity! Instead, you turned on the Scourge and you even killed your own father! That's the truth, husband's sister. You could never willingly hurt any one of us and you damned well know it!" Lifting the basin, she hurled it against the wall, making Alayne start in fright. "If you won't start listening to reason, I'll keep smashing things until you do!"

Alayne resolutely ignored the other woman, calmly and mechanically undressing and redressing in a set of old robes. She grimaced at how loosely they hung on her. Belting the sash about her waist, she reached into the closet to pull out a cloak to throw over her shoulders.

"Let me pass," she said firmly.

"No," Dar'ja replied in the same manner.

"Have you forgotten what I'm capable of, Dar'ja?" Alayne asked, turning her back on the other woman. "Do you not recall what I did at Stromgarde? Or in Desolace? I am quite capable of tearing you to pieces and burning this house – and all its occupants – to a cinder! Now, *let me pass!*"

"Do it, then," Dar'ja challenged. "Go ahead. I won't try to stop you. Kill me, kill Zerith, Callie, and Ger'alın. Come on, Alayne. I'm waiting."

"Don't tempt me," the other woman sighed, forcing the words around the lump forming in her throat. "You'll all be happier when I'm gone so let me pass."

"Happier? Alayne, I don't think you could have called any of the four of us 'happy' since we thought you had died. Zerith moped around for months, refusing to leave the house! Ger'alın and Callie ran off; they couldn't bear to be around so many memories of you. If you want us to be happy, you'll have to stay and explain what happened to you!"

"You thought I was dead?" Alayne said, her back still to the other woman. "Why did you think I was dead?"

Dar'ja opened her mouth to reply but was interrupted by the door being kicked off its hinges. Zerith, Callie, and Ger'alın stood in the hallway, all three trying to cram themselves through the narrow frame at the same time.

"What's this about you leaving?" Zerith asked.

"You're not going anywhere without me," Ger'alın said.

"You're not going anywhere, period," Zerith added. "Not for a long, long time. We've been wishing and praying for this day for too long, not believing it could happen."

Alayne bit her lip and closed her eyes, grateful they could not see her face. Choking back the treasonous tears that burned in her eyes and clogged her throat, she tried desperately to summon back the steel and ice that had surrounded her earlier.

"I," she said, a sob escaping her throat, "I...oh Light," she gasped, turning to look at them, "you thought I was *dead*? I...forgive me!" she said hopelessly, praying for something she didn't believe she could receive.

There was a mad scramble in the room as everyone tried to embrace everyone else. After long moments, once everyone had calmed down, Zerith turned to Alayne, hugging her warmly as if a prodigal had returned. "So, what's this about leaving?"

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"You're going to get yourself a bad reputation if you keep this up," Alayne teased Zerith as the pair of them set out a blanket in the front yard. It had been a week since she'd awoken and the first day she'd felt strong enough to venture out of the house. That morning,

Zerith had greeted her downstairs in the kitchen with a simple question: “How much bread do I need to buy for sandwiches? Ger’alin suggested three loaves. He says you can make *a lot* of sandwiches.”

Settling down on the blanket, Alayne grinned at her brother as he tried to set the glasses on the uneven ground. “Have you really never done this, Zerith?” she teased, reaching over and taking them from him to set them on the flattened rock she’d moved over from the garden. “Why the sudden interest?”

“Ger’alin told me about the picnic the two of you had. I remember you telling me about all the good times you had at picnics with your father. Excuse me if I wouldn’t mind sharing in the fun,” he retorted, laughing. “Besides, I’m probably the only sin’dorei who can brag that he has a beautiful wife who lets him keep a veritable harem.”

“Better not let Callie hear you say that,” Alayne laughed. “You’ll just give her ideas. If you wake up and she and Dar’ja have switched places, I will not be held responsible for it.”

“Note to self: lock the door and the window tonight.”

“So...what is the occasion?” she asked, sitting down and opening the basket he’d prepared.

“Can’t I just want to spend some time with my sister?” he chuckled. “Do I always have to have some ulterior motive?”

“Yes, you do,” she said slyly. “If this is how you tell me that you want me to watch the little one you are inevitably expecting, you didn’t need to go to all this trouble. I can set Azyal, the imp, to mind the wee-one.”

“I swear, you and Ger’alin both...this has nothing to do with any little sin’dorei – who by the way, are not in the picture yet. I missed you,” he said, turning serious. “It’s been so long since it was just you and me. I want to just have the afternoon with just the two of us. That’s why Dar’ja dragged Ger’alin out of the house and Callie has gone to depopulate the rivers and lakes. It’s been over a year since I had the chance to just sit down with you and just talk. I miss our old conversations, our old jokes.”

“Well...what do you want to talk about?”

“Anything. We could talk about why the sky is blue if you want.”

“...Or I could tell you what it is you no doubt want to know but are being too nice to ask me. What I couldn’t tell you before I...went away, why I stayed away, and why I’m back.”

“Or that,” he agreed.

“Look, if you get angry with me at any point, just throw something at me. I’ll understand,” she sighed. Passing him a sandwich from the basket, she pulled her knees up to her chest, rested her chin on them, and began to unravel her tale. “You know I was having bad dreams and nightmares. I was dreaming of Arthas. He was calling for me almost from the minute I came back to Quel’Thalas. I guess my father must have had something to do with it,” she said glumly. “Has anyone ever told you about what I did at Stromgarde?”

“The first or second time you torched the place?” he smiled.

“So, you know,” she said simply. “After you were shot, I just...went berserk. I wanted to kill every last one of them and hurt them as much as they’d hurt you; as much as they’d hurt *me*. I was so frightened, then. Up to that point, it had been a game, really. A few brave adventurers out to save the world like in the stories my father used to tell me when I was a child. Then, you were hurt and...I saw a side of myself that I didn’t want to see. I didn’t want you to see it either. I thought you would be as scared and horrified by it as I was. Mother always hated that part of me as well. I figured...it was normal to hate someone who was like that. It...frightened me, the thought of you turning away from me.”

“Have I ever told you about what I did when Valara passed away?” he asked, studying Alayne’s face carefully. “No, I didn’t. I wish to the Light I had before now. Maybe then you wouldn’t have felt so alone.”

“What are you talking about?”

“About seeing that side of ourselves that none of us like,” he replied. “The dark reflection; the shadow-twin. I suspected you might have gone through that but was too distracted by meeting Dar’ja and then going to Desolace to stop to realize it.”

“Nothing that happened to me or that I did was your fault, Zerith.”

“I’m not saying it was. I’m saying that you shouldn’t have had to face it alone any more than Ger’alin had to or Dar’ja’s had to.”

“Well, let me finish,” Alayne said gently, scooting closer to her brother and leaning her head on his shoulder. He put an arm around her and watched her from the corner of his eyes, waiting for her to continue. “After that, after you were shot, I started hearing voices in my head. Not the normal one that says things like ‘okay, now I’m going downstairs to get something to drink and then I think I’ll go sit in the sun and read for a while.’ But one that argued with me, that terrified me because it was me; another me. She called herself Tal’ar’s daughter and she was. She was the part of me that Mother never liked or understood. The one that was a real tomboy; always in trouble and always getting into rousing fist-fights with the other kids. She was the part of me that wanted to protect and defend everyone from everything, up to and including myself.”

“Why didn’t you...”

“Say something? I tried to. I tried so many times to tell you. I couldn’t; she wouldn’t let me. Or I wouldn’t let me. I don’t know how to explain it, Zerith. It was like having another person living inside of me, able to control my body. Whenever I would try to tell you, she would slam my mouth shut and berate me, calling me weak and sniveling for wanting to bother you with my ‘little’ troubles.”

“I wish to the Light I had known...”

“I wish I could have told you before now. I wanted to. Light, how many times I struggled with her, begging and pleading with her to let me say something. I could see how worried you were; how scared for me you were but I couldn’t overcome her.”

“Alayne, stop,” he said, shrugging her off his shoulder and turning so he could look her directly in the eyes. “What you’re describing...I’ve heard of it before. I’m so sorry it ever happened to you.”

“Is it an illness?” she asked, looking confused.

“Not exactly. All I know is that Ma’iv has treated people who describe what you’re describing. He says that only time, introspection, and acceptance of both sides of yourself will bring healing. Maybe you should go talk to him. He’s got more experience with this than I do.”

“So, I’m scaring you, aren’t I?” she said, looking dejected.

“Yes, you are, but I don’t want you to stop talking to me. I just want you to go and talk to someone who can help you better is all.”

“Okay...well, to continue, then,” she sighed, keeping her focus on his face and looking for signs that he didn’t want her to go on. His expression was open, honest, and unjudging. “To continue; the fighting with her just got worse and worse. I couldn’t concentrate well, I couldn’t do much of anything well because she was always there, nagging at me. On top of that, the dreams and visions from Arthas continued. Then, one night, Ber’lon showed up. We’d been called, you see, called to go to *him*. I *had* to go. He said he would heal me. I wanted to be healed; I wanted to be well so that you wouldn’t be so frightened of me. I needed it; I needed to feel like I could protect you. Ach, it still confuses me,” she said, lifting a hand and rubbing her forehead. “So many things that made sense that don’t. Well, I

answered his call. And, he did heal me. I came back to myself in Northrend. Then...then he told me that *you* were the cause of my illness. That you and everyone else had been draining my life away to feed your arcane addictions. At first, I didn't believe him. I told myself that you and the rest would come for me. You had in Desolace. Then, the months passed and no one came. The Lich King kept telling me, over and over again, that the reason you wouldn't come is because I was of no use to you; that you had gotten what you wanted and thrown me away. Slowly, I came to believe it. I don't know why. My father would tell me the same things. Everyone said it. They said it so often that, one day, it just became the truth."

"They told us you were dead," Zerith said, forcing the words around the lump forming in his throat. "If I had ever suspected they were lying, I'd have been on the first ship to Northrend right along with Ger'alín. You know, he had planned an expedition to go rescue you once he found out that we'd been lied to. I almost didn't believe him. I thought he was out of his mind, delusional."

"Ger'alín? That man doesn't get 'delusional' unless you ply him with liquor."

"Oh, he changed after you vanished. Those were some of the darkest days I've ever seen from him. When they said you were dead...I think something in him died that day and only came back when you woke up here."

"Hmph," she sighed, shaking her head. "That doesn't sound like him at all."

"It was rather out-of-character, but then, I think he cares for you like I do. One of these days, we'll have to drag out of him if you remind him of a little sister or not," he teased.

"I'm everyone's sister," she grinned, letting the somber mood dispel. "Well, enough from me for now. I want to hear you talk. My voice is getting all scratchy from rambling on."

"I think I'll tell you something almost as shocking as what you've told me. No, Alayne, she's not pregnant," he laughed, seeing the look in his sister's eyes. "Back to what I was saying earlier about dark sides and dark days; I've never told you why I feel the way I do towards you."

"Because I remind you of Valara," Alayne prompted. "You've told me that several times."

"When I saw you for the first time," he said, ignoring her interruption, "I thought that the Light had given me Valara back. That I would have the chance to make up for my failures with her and my other sisters. That was why I started following you, even to the point of making sure I was in the room next to yours at the inn. Ber'lon accused me of having a crush on you, one time. No, I didn't," he snorted, seeing her start to laugh. "Not that you aren't attractive and that you lack anything in that sense; you just aren't my type."

"I'd better not be. Dar'ja would get *really* mad."

"Well, I saw in you the chance to set things right for myself. See, before I came back here, I'd lived with other survivors from the villages in what is now Ghostlands. We lived in the Hinterlands, near the Wildhammer dwarves. Well, while we were there, my sisters began to fall ill. Part of it was the loss of the Sunwell and no way to replace it. My sisters were all of the more magical bent. Father and I were priests. So, they took it harder than we did. I tried everything to make them feel better and nothing worked. Over time, they just...gave up. Valara, my youngest sister, was the last to go. She just stopped. She stopped eating, she stopped getting out of bed, she stopped speaking. I did everything I could to make her well; she was all I had left at that time. But...she died. The day after her funeral, I sat in my family's empty home, brooding. Mother had died that winter; she couldn't bear losing her children. Father was killed by trolls just after Mother died. I felt so alone. All of the others just told me that the Light would bring healing and offered their sympathies. I didn't want it, though. I wanted revenge. You look surprised."

"I guess I shouldn't be."

“Like I said; we all have our darker sides. Mine was that, after Valara died and before Prince Kael’Thas sent word of his teachings to us, I... well, the trolls attacked again; raiding our settlement. Valara wasn’t even cold in the ground yet and they attacked. I went out to try to help with healing our fighters but that wasn’t enough for me. That day, instead of reaching out to the Light, I grabbed for the Shadow, for the darkness, and I hurled it at our attackers. I could feel them, feel the blood boiling in their veins. They screamed... agonizing screams and I kept on, flaying them, striking at them... Even after they were dead, I kept on, not stopping until there wasn’t even anything left to drag away. After that, no one would speak to me. I felt like the Light was abandoning me; it had let everyone but me die and it wouldn’t even protect our people. I had just about decided to abandon my calling when Prince Kael’Thas’s messengers arrived. I came back here, thinking that maybe people here would understand. That they wouldn’t be horrified if I took a darker path. After all, weren’t we allied with the Forsaken? I was thinking of all this and then, I looked up, and there you were. I told myself that if I could just follow you, if I could help you, then the Light hadn’t abandoned me. That it had given me the chance to make up for everything I’d done in the past weeks. And, it did. That’s why I never want you to feel like you can’t talk to me or feel that you have to hide anything from me. I know you have a dark side, Alayne. The thing is, I also know that you have a side that outshines the sun.”

Zerith grunted when he hit the ground. Alayne had tackled him in a bear hug and wasn’t letting go. Smiling, feeling happier than he had in long months, he reached up and squeezed her just as hard as she was squeezing him, overjoyed to finally be reunited with his sister. There would be more to come, he knew, but for now, it was enough.

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Alayne grimaced and pulled her feet up, tucking them under her as she tried to finish the chapter she’d been reading. It was difficult with all of the eyes on her. The other warlocks stared at her, their gazes ranging from awe to horror. Only Jez’ral and Mir’el had accepted her back with anything approaching normalcy. Sighing in frustration, she stood up and walked down the corridor to Mir’el’s room. The man had promised her she could study there if the others bothered her too much. She growled when she found the door locked from the inside. Turning to leave, she heard it open and was startled to see a flustered Jez’ral lean out.

“Yes?” he asked, sounding very displeased.

“I was just looking for somewhere to study,” she muttered, raising her hands in surrender.

“Oh. Well, we’re working on something rather delicate in here and can’t have any disturbances,” he replied. “Good luck finding some place to read. Swing back by here tonight; I’ve got something I’ve been meaning to ask you since you returned.” Without another word, the man slammed the door shut. Alayne blinked, wondering what they were up to, but knew better than to ask. Walking up the corridor and taking the spiraling ramp to the street, Alayne left the inn and began walking around the city, looking for a quiet place to read. After making a full circuit of the city, she began to wonder idly if it were possible to wear her teeth down to powder from grinding them so much. She stopped by the house she shared with the others, quickly removing it from the list of possible places when she heard Zerith and Dar’ja getting an early start on celebrating their anniversary. “Light, that’s in a week,” she muttered to herself as she pulled the door closed quietly. “I’d better find a place to stay that night. Okay, every bench in the city is taken over by lovebirds. My house is infested with them. Down by the lake it is,” she said decisively.

Alayne hummed to herself as she walked lightly down the road, letting her irritation abate. Spring was just settling in, bringing the scent of flowers and the songs of birds to the

air. Only the chill of the ground left any hint of winter, making one appreciate the warmth of the sun when sitting beneath a tree. Keeping a firm rein on her panic, reminding herself that the guards would not arrest her, she continued out of the city, climbing the path past Farstrider Retreat and picking her way down the slippery path towards Lake Elrendar. She felt her good mood beginning to evaporate and her irritation return when she heard grunts from the lake. Looking up, Alayne nearly swallowed her tongue.

Ger'alın stood near the edge of the lake, his sword dancing and singing as it cut through the air. He'd been there some time, venting his frustrations through sword work. Alayne stared at him, watching in rapt fascination as he continued his deadly dance. She'd never noticed how broad his shoulders were or how muscular he was. No wonder their spars had left her arms ringing for hours afterwards. The warlock could feel her face heating and wondered if a breeze would blow through; the sun had gotten very hot all of a sudden. She turned away, wrenching her gaze from him to stare at the side of the hill and tried very hard not to think about how nice he looked without his shirt on and his warm brown hair pulled back out of his face. Memories of all the times he had made her laugh, of all the times he had picked her up and wrung sense into her flooded through her as she came to a startling realization. She closed her eyes and began gnawing on her tongue in hopeless frustration.

"Ah, Alayne!" he called out, seeing her when he finished a series of flanking defenses. "Did you come down here for a spar?" he asked. The woman ignored him, staring off into the distance and looking as if she were trying to find the answer to a difficult problem. "Are you all right?" he asked, jogging up the hill to her.

"Oh, I'm fine," she said, a touch breathlessly. "I just came out here to get some reading done. Sorry to have interrupted you. Please, go back to what you were doing. Don't worry about me," she said in a rush. Ger'alın looked at her sharply, wondering if she were really well. Shrugging, he walked back down to where he had been and began working his forms again. Alayne glanced around and, finding a boulder to lean against, sat down, opened her book, and tried to keep her gaze on the pages in front of her. After a while, Ger'alın felt the familiar burn in tired muscles that told him he needed to take a break. Looking up the hill, he saw that Alayne was still sitting there, lost in her pages. Talking with her would be more relaxing than waving a sword about, he decided. Pulling on a shirt and wiping his face with a towel, he trotted up the hill to her.

Alayne had actually managed to put him out of her mind long enough to become engrossed in the treatise on the use of fel guards. She was chewing her lower lip in concentration as she tried to comprehend the methods of summoning them. "Hm," she would mutter occasionally, wondering if she would be able to force one out of the Nether at her stage in training.

"Is it interesting?" Ger'alın asked softly, sitting down next to her and trying to catch a glimpse of the pages by leaning over her shoulder. "Hm, fel guards. Are those the ones with wings?" he asked. Alayne gave a start and looked over at him. So involved in her reading had she been, she had not heard him approach or sit down.

"No," she said slowly, turning back to the book and trying not to think about how close he was sitting to her. "The ones with the wings are doom guards," she answered.

"So, what are fel guards, then?" he asked. "Are there any pictures of them?" he said as he reached over to try to flip through a few of the pages himself, his hand brushing against hers. Alayne slammed the book shut and jumped to her feet. "Is something wrong?"

"I've just remembered that I promised Jez'ral I would be back before now," she said quickly. "I'll see you later," she tossed over her shoulder as she trotted off. "It's just spring, it's just spring, it's just spring," she muttered to herself in an undertone, berating herself for being such a fool.

“Didn’t mean to run you off or annoy you,” Ger’alin muttered beneath his breath as she vanished over the hill. Sighing, he stood up, dusted himself off, and walked slowly back to the city.

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“You’re back rather early,” Jez’ral said wryly when he opened the door again. “Come in, come in,” he laughed, gesturing for her to enter. “I can ask you now, I suppose, since you’re back.”

“Ask me what?” Alayne said, still feeling a trifle flustered. She kept rubbing her hand where Ger’alin’s had brushed against it, still able to feel his touch. “It’s just spring. You’re not in love with your best friend in this world, other than Zerith,” she reminded herself silently.

“If you would like to face your final trial and then accompany me to Outland. I have research I’d like to conduct and I’m in need of a good assistant. Frankly, in the few weeks you’ve been back, you’ve shown that you’re one of the best warlocks around here and one of the few I trust,” he smiled. “You’ll find me a generous slave-driver. As well as paying any expenses you incur while traveling with me – within reason, of course – I will offer you wages of ten gold per day on top of a share of any profits coming from the research you help me with.”

“I’m honored,” Alayne said breathlessly, her legs folding beneath her and dropping her on the floor. “I need time to think about it,” she continued, wincing in pain. She’d managed to miss the soft carpets and had landed flat on the stone floor. “What is the final trial?”

“To summon and control a fel guard,” he replied, reaching out a hand and pulling her to her feet. “You may begin the trial whenever you feel ready. Simply come to me and tell me and I will make the necessary arrangements. You should probably take the time to read up on the procedure a bit more, though,” he said, pointing to the book she carried. “That’s a good one. Very thorough. Mir’el has a few other texts you can borrow to prepare yourself.”

“Thank you,” she responded softly. “Do you think he’d mind if I sat here and read for a while? If the two of you are working on anything, I can leave.”

“Oh,” Jez’ral laughed, blushing, “we’re *quite* finished with our work. Have a seat; stay as long as you’d like. He’ll be back with supper shortly; you’re welcome to join us, if you want. We can discuss some of the hypotheses I have.”

“Thank you,” she repeated politely. “I’ll just sit over here and finish my reading.” Sitting down on the couch, she flipped back to her place in the text and restarted her reading, still rubbing her hand and smiling to herself as she memorized the components and procedures required for summoning a fel guard.

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“Alayne, are you feeling well?” Callie asked as she watched the woman pick at her food. “You’ve been moping around for days.”

“I’m fine,” Alayne muttered. “Just... getting restless, I guess. Spring’s coming; people always start feeling odd as winter comes to a close.”

“You’re not... getting sick again, are you?”

“Light, no,” Alayne said, looking surprised. “I’m sorry if I’ve been worrying you. I’ve just been feeling the seasonal changes more this year. I guess it’s being back here again and not in Northrend where it’s pretty much winter year-round.” Shoving the plate aside, she stood up and began cleaning up the kitchen. “Don’t worry about me, Callie. It’s nothing.”

“If you say so,” the Forsaken said evenly as she began to eat what Alayne had left. “Though, you know, you’re never going to get your strength back if you don’t start eating more.”

Alayne said nothing but finished clearing away the dishes and, wiping her hands dry, went out into the hallway to grab her cloak. “Where are you going?” Callie asked.

“Murder Row.”

“Ugh. I’ll pass on following you. Maybe I’ll go see what Ger’alin’s up to.”

“Didn’t he say he would be training the new recruits today?”

“Yes. I’ll go watch them. It’s always fun to watch him put them in their place. You should come with me some time. You’re better with a sword than most of them.”

“Maybe another time,” Alayne said hurriedly. “I need to get going else I’ll be late.”

Callie finished her and Alayne’s lunch and then, after clearing away the last of the things, walked over to Farstrider Square. She took the long way, avoiding Murder Row and enjoying the warming air. Eversong never grew cold but spring was blowing through on the light, warm breezes from the west. Passing through the vaulting gates, she soon arrived in Farstrider Square. Outside of the Blood Knight’s stronghold she saw Ger’alin admonishing and instructing a group of fledgling sin’dorei paladins. He waved to her when he saw her and then quickly returned to his class. She sat on a nearby bench to watch as the trainees fumbled their way through the beginning forms. Ger’alin moved among them, correcting their stances, demonstrating the correct grip, offering praise where it was merited. Since his return to Silvermoon, he’d quickly become one of the most respected instructors in swordsmanship. After a while, he dismissed his class and went over to sit and chat with the Forsaken.

“They’re doing well,” Callie complimented him.

“They’re eager to learn. Most of them have been dreaming of going out and earning a name for themselves. Still, it would help if some of them would lose their arrogance. You can never learn anything if you’re convinced you know everything already.”

“Well, I’m sure you can put them in their place,” she teased. Seeing him grin, she laughed. “What did you do this time?”

“Nothing that the young fool won’t recover from in a few days. I hurt his pride more than his arm. So, did you manage to get Alayne to tell you what has her so droopy and moping lately?”

“She says it’s just the seasons changing. I think it’s something else, though. Nothing serious. She just reminds me of a friend of mine who had this huge crush on Arthas. Alayne is moping around just like Natalie did until she finally got over it. Oh, don’t you go looking like that, Gerry,” Callie snapped. “I doubt it’s the exact same situation. First of all, Alayne doesn’t seem to remember she’s female most of the time. I seriously doubt she’s dragging around over that. It’s probably just like she says; the seasons changing. Some women can be sensitive to it, I guess. I remember when I was alive, at the dark of the moon, I would...”

“Thank you but could we please find another topic of conversation?” Ger’alin muttered, sounding strangled.

“Don’t tell me you forget that she’s female,” Callie teased. “She may be thin as a rail right now, but she’s still got a figure, if you could get her to wear something other than those oversized, baggy robes of hers.”

“So, how would you like a tour of our sanctuary?” he offered, trying to divert her.

“Nice try,” she congratulated him, “but I want some pay back for all the times you yelled at me or I had to comfort some weeping sin’dorei whose heart you’d broken with your whole ‘The only woman I ever loved is lost to me’ spiel. Now, as I was saying, she’s still got a figure...”

Alayne wished that Ger'alın and Callie would move away soon so she could get up from her cramped and uncomfortable hiding spot. She wondered what they were talking about. Callie was laughing and Ger'alın was turning bright red. She growled when he lowered his head, hiding his face. She liked looking at his face, seeing his bright smile, wishing he were smiling at her. Why was he hiding it?

"Light, listen to yourself, woman," she muttered. "What are they talking about that has him so flustered?" She felt guilty for spying on him like this but she couldn't help it. Thinking of him, just wanting to watch him so filled her thoughts that she couldn't think straight. She'd tried to act normally around him but was afraid she couldn't mask just how much she enjoyed hearing his voice, feeling his presence near her... "This would be a fine joke if I weren't the butt of it," she sighed. "It's just spring. It will go away. He'll never have to know and I'll never have to feel as much a fool as I do now," she muttered, trying to tell herself it was just physical and that she didn't long to hear his voice, talk to him about anything...just be near him...

Callie's laughter cut off suddenly when she glanced over her shoulder. Alayne froze, wondering if she'd given herself away. Callie began prodding Ger'alın in the shoulder and pointing towards the Blood Knight's inner sanctum, as if urging him to go inside. For once, Alayne agreed with her. The warlock's legs felt like icy lumps of meat from lack of circulation. Ger'alın looked up, glancing around slowly in confusion. Alayne gasped when a blonde elvish mage wearing stylish robes that clung to her form and did more than hint at what they hid, waltzed up to the pair on the bench and, without a word, dropped into Ger'alın's lap, threw her arms around his neck, and began kissing the Blood Knight. Before either of them came up for air, Alayne fled, stumbling through the shadows back through the alley, feeling as if she had been sucker punched. Her only thought was to hurry back home, to her room, where she could be alone and unseen. Ignoring the concerned or annoyed glances from the others on the streets, she stumbled until the blood returned to her legs and then she ran, not caring who she ran into, until she was safely back in her room. "It's just spring; it was nothing. Just spring is all," she told herself again and again.

Back in the square, Ger'alın had finally managed to pry Ta'sia's hands from his hair. "Light, woman, what is wrong with you?" he demanded breathlessly.

"I just wanted to see if you were as good as I remembered," she teased. "So, was it good for you?"

"What will be good for me is if you get off me and leave me alone," he said firmly. "Don't you have some other men to go bother?"

Ta'sia chuckled and twined her arms around his neck again. Ger'alın glared at her, wishing for just a moment that he hadn't learned the lesson about not hitting women. "You're so tense," she whispered suggestively, "Why not come back with me? I can help you...relax. You certainly enjoyed it last time."

"Okay, that's enough," Callie muttered, reaching over and grabbing the woman by the scruff of her neck. Hauling her off Ger'alın, the Forsaken dragged her several feet away before gripping the woman's arm with her other hand and letting go of her neck.

"I thought you were man enough not to need a nursemaid," Ta'sia laughed.

"Shut up before you need a nurse," Callie suggested. "Why are you bothering us, anyway?" she asked. "I'd have figured that you would never want to see him again after that morning."

"Oh, I like a challenge," she said gaily. "And, he came up to me in the bar not even a week ago, so I know he's back on the streets, prowling around like any other tomcat. I just figured I'd do all of Silvermoon a favor and housebreak him."

“Ta’sia, how many times do I have to tell you that I’m sorry for what happened but I don’t want you?” Ger’alin growled. “I know you’re not used to hearing ‘no’ from a man, but it’s nothing personal. I’m sure that, aside from being a complete tramp, you’re a lovely woman. I’m just not interested.”

The mage stared at him as if he’d spoken some incomprehensible language. Shrugging, she tried to wrench her arm out of Callie’s grasp. Anger stained her face when she saw A’sara grinning from the other side of the square. If Ta’sia couldn’t bend Ger’alin to her will, she’d never live it down. Taking a deep breath, feeling the heat leave her face, she sighed and schooled her face to indifference. Glancing at the Forsaken, she whispered that the woman could let go of her arm; she wasn’t going anywhere. “Could I ask you something, then, Ger’alin?” she said, sounding surprisingly calm. He nodded. “Are you happy with her?”

“With who?” he asked, trying not to panic at what he knew was about to come.

“Oh, come on. We’re all friends here. Just tell me who she is.”

“There is no she,” he muttered, trying to sound calm and failing.

“I see,” Ta’sia said evenly. “Well then, I’ll see you around,” she said with a wink. She had a name and, from the way he jumped, the woman was probably close by. He’d pay for embarrassing her like this, Ta’sia thought to herself as she began making plans for how to exact her revenge.

Ger’alin sighed with relief when she left. Callie sat back down by him, not saying a word. Both of them felt bad about what had happened with Ta’sia but it had been the woman’s own fault. “You ready to head back home?” Callie asked after a while.

“Not really. I’m going to have to tell her, aren’t I?”

“Eventually. Sooner will probably be better than later, though. I know why you’ve kept it to yourself so long but I don’t think this will be as bad as you fear.”

“She’ll be disgusted and Zerith will probably throw me out. I don’t know if I could stand that, Callie, to never see her again, even if seeing her and saying nothing is torture...at least I have that much. I’m terrified to losing it.”

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Ger’alin stood uncertainly before the door to Alayne’s room. He lifted his hand to knock on it and let it fall back to his side for the twentieth time. Once again, he rehearsed what he wanted to say, wishing it didn’t sound so stupid. He would trade all his worldly possessions for something to calm the butterflies playing kettle drums in his stomach. Lifting his hand again, he actually made it as far as a few centimeters from the door before chickening out again.

“Looking for Alayne?” Zerith asked as he walked up the stairs. Ger’alin nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of the man’s voice. Turning sheepishly to face him, the Blood Knight nodded, trying to think of a plausible excuse for why he would be looking for her. “She’s not here,” Zerith continued, oblivious to the other man’s nervousness. “She left a little while ago. Said something about needing to go talk to Jez’ral.”

“Oh,” Ger’alin replied, feeling both crushed and relieved at the same time.

“What were you looking for her for?”

“Um...no reason. Just wanted to see if maybe she wanted some company is all.”

“That sounds like a very unconvincing excuse. Do you need a few minutes to think up a believable lie or do you want to tell me what she’s gotten up to now that has you looking like you’re going to be sick?”

“Option two sounds great to me.”

“Spill it, Ger’alin. The last two times I’ve seen you looking for her with that expression on your face, it meant trouble. What has she done now? Have the Blood Knights decided to round up all of the returning defectors or something?”

“Oh, no. It’s nothing like that,” he said quickly, confidently. “I just wanted to talk to her a bit. The two of you always have your heads together lately. I haven’t had much of a chance to talk with her since she...”

“Okay then, Ger’alin,” Zerith laughed. “Have it your way. Why don’t you come on down and help me get something ready for supper? Dar’ja should be home soon. How did your class go today?”

Ger’alin followed the priest into the kitchen, glad of the diversion and the fact that the man wasn’t going to demand a straight answer. He knew Zerith liked him well enough, but it was one thing to be a man’s friend. It was something else entirely when you announced that you wanted to court his adopted sister who reminded him of his real sister and who happened to sleep just two doors down from you. Pushing the thoughts away, he forced himself to act normally and tried not to flinch when Zerith began cutting the vegetables up for the stew. He could just see the other man cutting him to ribbons if he told the truth.

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Jez’ral said nothing but let the fel guard carry its mistress into the room. He’d been surprised when the creature appeared and Alayne had it under her control in less than a minute. His respect for his student had risen enormously, even after she’d collapsed in an exhausted heap at the creature’s feet. Motioning to the couch, he let the hulking demon set her down, making no moves towards her. Linked as they were, the demon would take pains to ensure that she remained safe; not out of loyalty, but out of sheer self-preservation.

“She’s amazing,” Mir’el whispered, not wanting to spook the fel guard.

“She is,” Jez’ral agreed, looking around for a blanket to cover her with. Mir’el noticed and, without a word, walked into the bedroom and took one from the closet. Holding it up so the fel guard could see that it posed no threat, Mir’el tiptoed slowly over to the sleeping woman and tucked her in, even convincing the fel guard to move a little so he could stuff a pillow beneath the woman’s head. Alayne slept through it all, not even rousing a bit.

“You’ll look after her in Outland,” Mir’el asked, making it sound like a statement rather than a request.

“I will. And, she’ll look after me. We won’t be gone too long, Mir’el.”

“You’d better not be. Outland is no place for a child like her. I don’t care what the other Master Warlocks and Magisters say; it’s a vile place to have spawned someone like Gul’dan or Ner’zhul.”

“You sound like a mother hen, Mir’el. Alayne and I will be fine.”

“We should have adopted her like I wanted to when you brought her home.”

Jez’ral clucked his tongue in irritation. He did not want to have this discussion again. “You can’t adopt a sixteen year old,” he pointed out reasonably. “She’s not a doll.”

“Speaking of which...” Mir’el muttered as he hurried back into the other room. He returned with a robe that was evidently meant for Alayne. Jez’ral’s eyes bulged when he got a good look at it. Low-cut, it would definitely put an end to the whispers from the other students about whether or not Alayne was a woman. “Do you think she’ll like it?”

“I’m sure she will,” he answered, shaking his head. “And, if she doesn’t like it, I can guarantee that most of the boys will.”

“You have to tell her, Jez’ral. She wears such baggy robes, especially now that she’s lost so much weight from her...travels. She needs to show off a little or else she’ll never catch any eyes.”

“Light, you act like you *are* her mother,” Jez’ral sighed. “Next thing you know, you’ll be wanting me to tell her all kinds of other things,” he said, shooting the man a pointed look. “She likes you well enough, Mir’el, but she’s my student and I don’t want my students...”

“If she’s passed her trials, she’s not your student any more. Her name will go on the list of Master Warlocks and she’ll be your equal.”

“In rank, maybe, but...”

“Where am I?” Alayne asked sleepily from the couch. “Oh, hello Mir’el. Thanks for letting me sleep on your couch,” she yawned, starting to push herself up.

“You just stay right where you are,” the man said lightly, but firmly. “You just spent over six hours performing a summoning ritual and subduing a demon. You’re not going anywhere without another few hours of sleep.”

“I should get home,” she protested. “Zerith will be worried sick about me.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Jez’ral said, striding out of the apartment in search of a messenger. “Besides, it will give Mir’el a chance to see what you think of his gift,” the warlock snorted as he closed the door, trying not to laugh at the looks on their faces.

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“Did you sleep out here in the hall?” Zerith asked when he nearly tripped over Ger’alin the next morning. The Blood Knight glared up at him blearily and shifted as if trying to get more comfortable. “I told you, she’ll be home when she gets home,” he sighed, shaking his head. “You’re acting oddly lately. Is something wrong?”

“No,” Ger’alin yawned. “I just thought maybe she’d be back before now and was convinced that if I got up and went to my room, she’d sneak back in behind my back.”

“Why do you want to talk to her so badly? Seriously, Ger’alin, if she’s in trouble...”

“She’s not,” he interrupted. “Stop worrying about her. She’s not in trouble.”

“Then what is so urgent?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Ger’alin said tiredly, waving the other man off. Pushing himself up, he stumbled to his room to catch a few hours’ more sleep before he had to teach another group of raw recruits how not to cut their feet off. Zerith stood in the hallway, chuckling to himself and shaking his head when he heard the broken snores and incoherent babbling that meant the Blood Knight was asleep. Walking downstairs, he waved to Callie, grabbed a biscuit from the kitchen, and turned to leave. With spring arriving, now was the perfect time for him to go out collecting plants to add to his stock. He opened the door, smiling in anticipation of a lovely day in the forests and nearly walked right over Alayne. His sister jumped back and stared at him, looking concerned, when he threw back his head and began laughing so hard tears streamed down his face and he had trouble breathing.

“What’s so funny?” she demanded, looking embarrassed. “It’s these robes, isn’t it? Well, it was Mir’el’s idea and...”

“Oh Light, no, it’s not that,” he managed to gasp out. “Though...wow. It’s certainly a change. Not quite sure what I think about them right now,” he chuckled, glancing over her and knuckling tears from the corners of his eyes. “I’ve never seen you wear anything like that before. Are you trying to catch someone’s eye?”

“No,” she said, blushing so much so as to scream ‘yes’ to anyone who knew her.

“Who is it?”

“No one. Mir’el gave these to me as a gift for becoming a Master Warlock. I’m not quite certain why, but he did,” she sighed, plucking at the skirt and wondering if Dar’ja could help her find something to cover the low-cut neck. She pulled her cloak around her, holding it shut at the throat.

“Maybe he likes you,” Zerith teased.

“If Mir’el liked me, we really would have a problem,” she snapped.

“Sounds like I struck a nerve,” he giggled. “Oh, very well, I’ll leave you alone about it. Ger’alin’s been wanting to talk to you since yesterday afternoon. I guess it’s important – at least it is to him – so you might want to go wake him and see what he wants. You’re not in trouble, are you?”

“No. I’d better not be. Jez’ral will be furious with me if I get tossed in a cell and can’t go to Outland with him.”

“You’re going to Outland?”

“Yes, as his assistant for a while. Oh, don’t get so angry. The pay is good, the chances to conduct my own research are invaluable, and it would only be for a few months. Then, I’ll get to come back here and teach my own classes and add to your and Ger’alin’s stories about thick-skulled students.”

“So, just you and Jez’ral, alone, in Outland. I don’t like that idea at all, Alayne. I know he’s your teacher and you respect him, but I don’t trust him one bit.”

“If you want to come, you can. You, Callie, and Dar’ja would be welcome to tag along.”

“Is Ger’alin not welcome?”

“Oh, I imagine he wouldn’t want to leave Silvermoon,” she said lightly, gaily, masking the way the words twisted her guts. “He’s got a girlfriend he’s not telling us about,” she winked. “I’ll bet that’s what he was so desperate to talk to me about. Probably wanted my advice on how to deal with her – as if I’d have the first clue about anything like that.”

“If I wasn’t going in a hurry to find the best plants, I’d ask you for more details,” Zerith laughed. “As it is, talk to him before he explodes. He stayed in the hallway all night in case you came home, terrified that you would sneak in right after he decided to go to sleep. And, you have,” the priest said, laughing.

“I don’t have time to wake him, wait for him to actually regain consciousness, and then chat,” she said, forcing herself to laugh. “I just came by to grab a few of my things. I’ll be staying with Jez’ral and Mir’el... shut up, Zerith! You don’t know what I know about Mir’el, so shut up. We’ve got some tests to run before we go to Outland. We’re leaving in two days. If you want to come along, we’ll be in Hellfire Peninsula for a while.”

“I’ll talk to the others. Maybe we’ll catch you up on the road. Meet me for supper tonight at the Keepers; I know Dar’ja will want to hear about Ger’alin’s sweetheart as much as I do. See you later, sis,” he said, hugging her and hurrying off, laughing to himself all the while.

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“What are you doing here? This area is restricted,” Jez’ral muttered to the group of mages who were hovering around the ruins of the Sunwell. Alayne glared at his back but said nothing as she set down the rods and crystals and studied the diagram he’d drawn.

“We just wanted to look at it,” one of the women muttered. “It’s part of our heritage. We’ve a right to see it.”

“You’ve a right to leave before I call for the guards who were supposed to keep you out of here,” he growled, irritated. The group turned to leave, passing by Alayne. The woman did a double-take at seeing one of the women and reached out, grabbing her by the arm.

“What do you want?” the sin’dorei woman, a mage by her dress, asked angrily.

“Do you know a Blood Knight named Ger’alin?” Alayne asked, studying the woman’s face. She could have been Alayne’s sister so closely did they resemble each other.

“Ger’alin? Yes, I know him *quite* well.”

“I thought you might,” Alayne said, forcing herself to smile warmly. “I saw you with him yesterday in Farstrider Square.”

“Oh, well, who are you? Are you one of his...friends?”

“I guess you could say that,” Alayne replied slowly. “My name is Alayne and...”

“So *you’re* Alayne. I’ve been dying to meet you,” the woman laughed. “My name is Ta’sia.”

“Alayne, we have work to be about,” Jez’ral said in an annoyed sing-song tone.

“Ta’sia, I’m sorry, but I have to work now. Why don’t you meet me and some other friends of Ger’alin’s at the Keepers tonight for supper? We’d love a chance to get to know his sweetheart,” she said, surprised at how well she kept her voice warm and welcoming. The mage nodded in acceptance of the invitation, eyeing the warlock speculatively, and then hurried off before Jez’ral had a stroke from impatience.

“You may not be my student anymore, but I expect you to...”

“Yes, Jez’ral,” Alayne sighed as she dashed about, placing the rods and crystals as specified by his chart. Within moments, the set up was complete. Jez’ral nodded in approval and settled down on one of the broken benches to begin his testing for resonance. Alayne sat on the ground near him, keeping half her mind on the task at hand while the other half fought over whether she should be happy to be meeting Ger’alin’s secret girlfriend or whether she should go home and strangle him right now. Sighing in frustration, she tried to focus on her work; tried to keep the memory of his smile out of her mind.

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“I knew it. I knew that the minute I went to my room, she’d come home and leave again,” Ger’alin growled angrily. He’d awoken, barely in time to make his class, with Callie telling him that Alayne had come back and then left immediately on some errand for Jez’ral. If he hadn’t had to teach, he’d have gone directly to the remains of the Sunwell and talked to her right then, while he still had the courage. As it was, he’d been ready to rush off after the class ended, only to be cornered and forced into an hours’ long discussion over the relative differences between the source of the priests’ and the Blood Knights’ healing powers. By the time he’d finally gotten away, the sun was already beginning to set.

“Ger’alin, why are you so upset about this? So, you didn’t get to pour your heart out to her yet. It’s not like she’s running off anywhere. You’ll get to tell her tonight or tomorrow. One more day isn’t going to make a huge difference. If you tell her at all. I have money on you wimping out again,” the Forsaken cackled. “Sometimes, the living can be so amusing.”

“Oh, well, I’m glad someone’s entertained by my problems,” he snapped. “Where is everyone?” he asked, opening the door to an empty house.

“Out, apparently,” Callie answered as she strode inside. “Hm, Dar’ja left a note saying she and Zerith were dining out tonight and that Alayne wouldn’t be home either. It says that there’s leftover stew to be warmed up if we want it.”

“Light,” Ger’alin moaned, turning his face to the ceiling, “what have I done to offend you so? I’ve tried to be a good and honorable man.”

“Stop being so melodramatic, Gerry. It’s not the end of the world. Sit down, eat something, and try not to make a bigger fool of yourself than you must.”

“Yes, try not to do that,” Ta’sia laughed, making him nearly hit the ceiling when he jumped and whirled around. The mage stood in the hallway, flanked by a smiling Zerith and Dar’ja. The priest took her cloak and hung it up on the wall, cocking an eyebrow at Ger’alin when the Blood Knight stood there, looking pole axed.

“You thought you could keep her a secret from us?” Dar’ja whispered into Ger’alin’s ear when she hugged him. “She’s nice. We all like her.”

“How...what...why...what’s going on here?” Ger’alin asked, looking extremely confused. Callie stood behind him, wondering the same thing herself.

“Oh, you don’t have to be shy around us,” Dar’ja grinned wickedly. “We know *all* about it now. Zerith, why don’t you show Ta’sia up to Alayne’s room and then give her the tour?” Waiting until the two were out of earshot, Dar’ja smacked Ger’alin playfully on the arm. “Why didn’t you tell us about her sooner? Alayne was shocked to her toenails that you would hide your girlfriend from us. I’m just glad she happened to see you two when she was getting some air yesterday over in Farstrider Square. Really, Ger’alin, how could you?”

“What do you know about her?” Callie asked slowly.

“That she must be a saint, for one thing,” Dar’ja laughed. “Any woman who would follow you so faithfully and let herself be hidden off in the shadows, never meeting your friends, because you were afraid we wouldn’t like her is a saint.”

“What has she told you?” Ger’alin pleaded.

“Everything. You know, Alayne really likes her. The two of them were as thick as thieves by the time we ordered dessert. If you hurt Ta’sia, you may have Alayne sending one of her demons after you.”

“...and that’s where everything is,” Zerith was saying, finishing up the tour. “If Dar’ja and I wake you up at night, just throw something against the wall. That’s what Alayne always does. She calls it her ‘remote volume control method.’ Not that it’s been very effective, mind you,” he teased.

“Ta’sia, could I talk with you for a few minutes?” Ger’alin asked, trying not to sound as shaken as he felt. The woman smiled at him, a smile that said he was trapped like a bear in a vice, and nodded. Taking her hand, he pulled her up the stairs and into his room, slamming the door shut and glaring at her. “What in the name of Sargeras and the Legion is going on here?” he demanded.

“What?” she asked innocently. “Why, I’m just getting to know your friends, darling,” she laughed, reaching up to stroke the side of his face. He pulled away, hissing as if burned.

“What is going on? They may seem like nice people, Ta’sia, but they will rip you apart when I tell them the truth.”

“No, they won’t. Alayne won’t, at least. If you tell her anything, she’ll knock you over the head and drag us off to be married herself. She told me about the one night you spent in her room and what you said the next day. She thinks you’re just the most honorable, chivalrous, kind-hearted...oh, I run out of descriptions for what she thinks of you! To listen to her talk, you and Zerith hung the moon and stars. She’s such a sweet, sweet little girl.” Clucking her tongue against her teeth, Ta’sia wagged a finger in Ger’alin’s face. “She’d be absolutely mortified to find out what you *really* think of her. For a warlock, she’s one of the most innocent and naïve women I know.”

“You can’t be serious,” he growled.

“Oh, but I am. The look on her face when you finally work up the nerve to tell her the truth – the honest-to-Light truth – about us will be more than adequate payback for the humiliation you’ve caused me! I intend to stick around long enough to see it!” she promised. Softening her features, she moved to the door, favoring him with a nasty grin as she went out. A few minutes later, Callie knocked on the door and let herself in, settling down on the floor across from him and crooning under her breath, trying to catch his attention without startling him. She’d never seen anyone look so upset in her life or unlife. Sighing, she stood up and sat on the bed, stroking his hair, careful not to tangle her bony fingers in it, while he sat staring off into space, a look of absolute horror and dread on his face.

“Of all the women out there, why did it have to be *her*?” he asked no one, sounding aghast.

“Probably because she looks almost exactly like Alayne. Because you were three sheets to the wind and didn’t know what was going on. Because I’d gotten bored with listening to your drunken mutterings and self-accusations and went off to go hunt raptors, leaving you alone and unguarded. And, most likely, because you have the worst luck of any single person I’ve known in my entire existence, up to and including myself,” Callie whispered gently.

“How can she... what do I do now? She’s got me trapped like a snake in a cleft stick! If I tell everyone the truth, they’ll hate me. If I go along with it, I’ll be miserable.”

“Ssh, now. Calm down. Ger’alin, think about it. If you go along with it, Ta’sia will get bored with you and will leave. That will make her the bad guy in this scenario. Just humor her, be polite, avoid her as much as you can without seeming to, and she’ll have her arms twined around some other man before you can blink. Then you can tell everyone the truth and no harm will be done.”

“I suppose I have no choice right now,” he sighed, standing up. “I’d better get down there and try to put on a convincing act. Wish me luck.”

“Break a leg, Ger’alin,” Callie said simply. “Oh, tell the others not to wait up for me. I’m going to go visit Alayne and see exactly what she knows. Maybe I can help you get out of this one faster that way,” the Forsaken muttered as she and Ger’alin parted in the hallway outside of the living room. “At the very least, I can try to keep her out of trouble. Light knows she finds it easier than anyone other than you, Gerry,” she sighed to herself as she headed towards Murder Row.

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“Alayne? May I come in?” Callie asked when the woman opened the door. Alayne glanced over her shoulder, whispering something in Thalassian and then pulled the door the rest of the way open to admit the rogue. Callie’s eyes bulged when she saw who Alayne had been talking to. “Is this some strange sin’dorei custom that I never heard of? Do your men routinely dress as women? Should we get Zerith and Ger’alin a get-up like what he’s wearing?” She asked, trying not to laugh at the man wearing a wig and lipstick.

“Oh, what? No, this is Mir’el seeing how much he can make me blush. I think he and Jez’ral have a wager going on who can make me melt first.”

“We don’t, my dear,” Mir’el laughed merrily. “But you’ve got to learn to entice men if you ever want to catch any and how better to learn than with one who’s perfectly safe?”

“Perfectly safe?” Callie asked, confused. Alayne buried her face in her hands in mortification, her shoulders heaving; whether she was crying or laughing was open for debate.

“Now, try again,” Mir’el was saying. “Remember to bat your eyes and pucker your lips a little this time. Like this,” he demonstrated, sending Callie into gales of laughter.

“I am not doing this!” Alayne said, dropping her face on the table and wrapping her arms over her head.

“You are or I will keep you awake bugging you about it until Jez’ral loads you on the wyvern to go to Outland.”

“You’re going to Outland?” Callie said, surprised.

“Yes, she is,” Mir’el replied. “And there are plenty of healthy sin’dorei men out there just begging to be picked up by a sweet little thing like you.”

“This. Is. Not. Happening,” Alayne growled, banging her head against the table with each word.

“Now, a fellow walks up to you in the main hall of an inn. You’re sitting alone. He asks to sit with you and smiles at you. What do you do?”

“Go back to reading my book!”

“No! Wrong!” Mir’el laughed. “Light, Miris was better at this than you are!”

“I’m not interested in finding a mate! And can we please not mention my mother!”

“You should be. With those cheekbones...I would kill for cheekbones like you have. Well, maybe not kill but definitely maim. Now, what’s the right answer?”

“The answer you want is that I invite him up to my room and test his stamina over the course of the next few days! Now, can we please discuss another topic? Anything other than this!”

“You *are* a shy one. You’re almost as bad as Jez’ral was before the Itchweed Incident.”

“Itchweed Incident?” Callie grinned. Mir’el grinned back at her. Alayne covered her ears and began humming. Loudly. Just then, Jez’ral entered the apartment, nearly turning and leaving again when he saw Callie. “Relax,” the Forsaken laughed. “I’m not here to eat you, I promise.”

“Eat him? So you’re the one who managed to scare him? Good going!” Mir’el laughed. “I wanted to bite him myself when I found out about what happened.”

“You *did* bite me. Quite hard as a matter of fact. I had to keep my collar pulled up for a month,” Jez’ral muttered, sitting down at the table. “What are you doing that has poor Alayne turning a rather interesting shade of red?”

“Trying to teach her about how to pick up men.”

“Tell her about the itchweed. That worked wonders for you, I seem to recall,” Jez’ral grinned. Alayne stared at him, horrified, her mouth opening and closing but no sound coming out. “You see, it all started when...Alayne, where are you going?” he laughed when she bolted deeper into the apartment, slamming the door behind her. He went after her, dragging her back to the table. “Stop being so shy. You’ll never catch a mate if you don’t learn a few things.”

“So, tell me about this itchweed. It sounds amusing, to say the least...” Callie grinned, grabbing Alayne’s arms before the woman could cover her ears again.

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“Outland,” he said flatly. “She’s gone to Outland.”

“That’s what it says,” Zerith said, pointing at the note. “I knew she was going to go out there with Jez’ral. I thought they’d wait another day or so before leaving, though.”

“Wait, you knew and you didn’t tell me?” Ger’alin demanded angrily.

“She mentioned it yesterday when she stopped by. It slipped my mind last night with Ta’sia here.” Ger’alin snorted and rolled his eyes, making Zerith stare at him. “She seems like a nice girl, Ger’alin. Not quite what I had hoped for, but nice nonetheless,” the priest said.

“Oh, she’s wonderful,” Ger’alin replied, his voice as warm as new-fallen snow. “So, Outland. If we hurry, we can still catch up to her before she reaches the Dark Portal.”

“What’s the rush?” Zerith asked. “She’s out there with Jez’ral. She can take care of herself. All they’re doing is running some tests or something like that. It’s not like she’s going to be raiding keeps, storming cities, or fighting anything other than boredom. Look, I know you don’t like Jez’ral. I don’t like him either. But he’s not going to get her killed. She’s too valuable to him. If she wasn’t, he wouldn’t have hired her to go out there with him.”

“I don’t trust him. What has he got her doing? The last time she went off with him, she got in trouble with the Burning Blade. The man will probably have her trying to sneak up to steal Kil’jaeden’s toenail!”

“Ger’alin...”

“Look, stay here if you want,” the Blood Knight growled, “but I’m going to go request a leave of absence from my teaching duties and head straight for Outland within the hour.”

“What about Ta’sia?” Zerith asked, looking confused.

“We’ll bring her along, too,” Ger’alin said, trying to mask his frustration. “Just start packing, Zerith. We’re leaving as soon as I can get it arranged.”