

“Got it!” Alayne shouted in triumph as she hit the portal with a bolt of shade, causing it to lose contact with the Legion’s plane. She and Jez’ral had noticed the demonic portals almost immediately after exiting the Dark Portal into Outland. Callie wiped blood from her hands; they were slick with it from helping Alayne and Jez’ral’s minions hold off the demons guarding the portals while the two warlocks worked to destroy them.

“Same here!” Jez’ral hollered from further up the ridge. “That should slow them for a while. Alayne, get up here and help me catalogue what we’ve found.”

“What do I do?” Callie asked, half-serious, half-rhetorical.

“You can help me collect samples,” Alayne whispered in an undertone as she pulled several vials from her sack. Callie winced, wishing she’d kept her mouth shut, but followed the woman up the ridge. Working together, they collected blood, skin, and other samples from the demons they’d slain.

“What do you need this stuff for?” Callie asked Jez’ral as he studied the collections.

“To find out exactly what type they are, what their traits are, and how best to fight or enslave them,” Alayne responded quickly. She knew her teacher could be short with those not initiated into the art of shadow magic. “If we know their traits and weaknesses, we can possibly figure out a way to overcome them or, at the very least, stall them in the event of an invasion.”

“In brief, my dear Forsaken, we need this ‘stuff’ for our research,” Jez’ral said, glaring at Alayne. “Now, we’ve prevented them from getting reinforcements through these gates. Let’s head on to Thrallmar and see if there are any other areas of interest we should visit before we go to check the voidwalker spawning portals.”

The trio walked back down to the road where they had left their mounts and climbed up. Jez’ral heeled his fel steed to a trot, leaving Callie and Alayne in the dust. Alayne made certain her bag of vials was secured before leaping into the saddle. As she was about to ride off, Callie grabbed her by the arm, nearly pulling her off the fiery horse.

“We should have waited for Ger’alin and the others,” the Forsaken muttered.

“I don’t know if they’re coming at all,” Alayne said irritably. She’d had this conversation with the rogue three times already. “Zerith and Dar’ja may come along later. I know he’s curious about the plant life out here. He wants to visit the Zangarmarsh. Dar’ja will follow him because, well, let’s face it; they’re married and that’s that. I don’t think Ger’alin and Ta’sia will come. She didn’t seem very keen on the idea of visiting Outland or doing research out here when I mentioned it to her last night.”

“What do you think of her, Alayne?”

“She’s nice. I hope she and Ger’alin are happy together,” Alayne said smoothly, ignoring the pangs plucking at her heart.

“She’s not nice,” Callie said flatly. “She’s a...”

“Stop it, Callie,” Alayne said firmly. “She seems like a very nice woman. She told me that you don’t like her. I can remember when you didn’t like me too much at all either. Just give her a chance and stop being so protective of Ger’alin. He’s a grown man.”

“Okay, I’ll give her a chance,” the Forsaken muttered, heeling her horse to a canter. Alayne followed suit. “Give her a chance to show you exactly what kind of woman she really is,” Callie continued beneath her breath. Within moments, they were pulling their horses to a stop just outside the inn in Thrallmar. Alayne hurried inside and, getting her room key from Jez’ral, went to set the samples away where they would be safe until they were needed. Hurrying back downstairs, she tossed another key to Callie.

“Second door on the left. I’m the third,” the warlock said quickly as she hurried after Jez’ral. Her former teacher was striding across the small fortified encampment, heading towards the main building.

“Wait out here,” he instructed. “I may be awhile. If you want, there are several pilgrims over there who look like they’d like to speak with you,” he teased in a whisper. “You should pull the cloak back if you want to catch their attention. Besides, Mir’el would be very upset if you didn’t show off what he got you.”

“I think I felt less awkward before I knew everything,” Alayne said wryly. “I still can’t believe he actually said all of that.”

“Well, he did and he was serious about it too. So, get out there and see what you can do. Otherwise, he’ll start looking for you. Go on, I’ll be taking my sweet time in here,” he grinned, turning away and walking into the compound. Alayne stared after him, shaking her head. Pulling her cloak tighter around her, she waved to some of the pilgrims who were glancing her way and returned to the inn. Passing by Callie, Alayne muttered something about wanting to get started on a test and hurried up to her room, not giving her friend a chance to offer to help. Closing the door behind her, Alayne slumped against the wall and let the mask she’d been wearing since yesterday morning slip off her face.

“It’s got to be just spring,” she tried to convince herself as she sobbed. “It will pass; it must pass! It’s just spring is all!”

~\*~\*~\*~

“There it is,” Zerith said, pointing to the fortified town to the north of the huge road. “If we hurry, we might be able to catch them before they leave. If it is morning yet,” he muttered, glaring up at the crazed sky.

Dar’ja and Ta’sia followed him closely. He’d been surprised that Ta’sia had not been upset at all with Ger’alin for running off like that. He’d been gone from Silvermoon before the others had even had a chance to finish packing. Glancing over at Ta’sia, he thought that the mage must obviously be very much in love with the Blood Knight to not hold his actions against him. “He looks up to her so much,” had been all Ta’sia had said, sounding only slightly wistful. Zerith resolved to talk to the other man as soon as he could. This was no way to treat such a kind-hearted woman. Pulling their mounts to a halt in front of the stables, Zerith saw Ger’alin frantically saddling Lucky and cursing a blue streak.

“Ger’alin!” he called out, making the man jump.

“Trying to catch her can be like trying to trap smoke!” the Blood Knight raged. “I searched all over for her yesterday and never caught a trace! Then, when I came back here, I discovered she, Callie, and Jez’ral were all asleep in the inn! They’d been here the entire time. Now they’re off for Falcon Watch. They left hours ago, apparently. Before first light.”

“Ger’alin,” Zerith said in a warning tone. “You and I need to have a talk. But first, maybe you should apologize to Ta’sia for running off like that, without even telling her where you were going.”

“She came with you? Light!” he groaned, clenching his teeth. “I’d hoped she’d have stayed in Silvermoon where she belongs.”

“And miss getting to see Outland?” the mage said indulgently, smiling to herself the whole while. “Besides, I rather like Alayne. She’s such a nice person.”

“Good morning, Ta’sia,” Ger’alin muttered, struggling to remain polite. “I’m sorry about running off like that but...”

“Oh, I understand,” she laughed. “Still...she’s old enough to take care of herself. Did you not stop to think that maybe she and Jez’ral wanted some time to themselves? They seemed to be quite...friendly when I ran across them.” She felt a thrill at the disgusted look on his face while he pondered that. “Of course, they are working together. Perhaps it was just that,” she said, seeing an equally disgusted look on Zerith’s face.

“It had better be just that,” the priest muttered. “I’ll tear that bastard apart with my bare hands if he even thinks about touching her.” Ger’alin winced, just imagining the priest tearing *him* limb from limb should Zerith find out.

Ta’sia sighed in relief. She tucked that information away for later use. Relationships between teachers and students while, discouraged, weren’t unheard of. Especially among the warlocks. Still, it’d been a gamble that paid off. Ger’alin still looked as if he had been sucker punched. She began to turn her hawkstrider around and caught Dar’ja watching her with a weighing gaze. “Come on,” Ta’sia said lightly, “let’s head for Falcon Watch and see if we can find her for you, Gerry.”

“Don’t call me that!” he snapped as he finished saddling his horse and leapt up. “It’s bad enough when Callie does it but for you to...”

“Ger’alin,” Zerith hissed.

“My apologies again,” the paladin said, sounding truly contrite. “My temper has always gotten the best of me. I thank you for putting up with it.” He forced the bile rising in his throat down when Ta’sia winked at him and smiled tolerantly. Putting up with her until she got bored was going to be almost impossible, he thought to himself as the four of them trotted off to the west towards Falcon Watch.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Any luck?” Jez’ral called out from ahead. The three of them were wading through muck, searching for Arelion or evidence of his demise.

“Ew!” he heard Alayne squeal in disgust. “I think I found him!” Jez’ral waded back to more solid ground and jogged down the path until he was close to Alayne and Callie. They were bending over the slime-coated body of a sin’dorei man, wiping the muck and ooze away. “Is this him?” Alayne asked. Her face had taken on a decidedly green tint, either from the slimy swamp water or from nausea, Jez’ral couldn’t tell.

“It looks like him. I wish your brother were here. Is there any chance he could be...”

“No,” Callie muttered sourly. “He’s been dead some days now.”

“Is that his pack over there in the tree?” Jez’ral asked. He had waded through the muck again and stood over the corpse. Callie trotted to where he pointed and pulled a leather satchel out of the tree. She brought it over to the warlocks. Alayne tore it out of Callie’s hands, desperate to not have to touch the dead man. She began digging through it, her nose wrinkling in disgust when she pulled out a ruined box of chocolates, a slime-covered bouquet of flowers, and then a well-protected journal.

“I think we’ve found his research,” she muttered. “What do you want to do with...him?” she asked, gesturing towards the body.

“We should take him back with us, at least. Callie, grab his feet. Let’s haul him out of here. We’ll load him on your horse. Alayne, go on up ahead and make sure the beast doesn’t get any ideas about bolting.” The warlock and the Forsaken hefted the man’s body and began carrying it as they waded back through the squelching, stinking murk towards Callie’s skeletal horse. Alayne had tethered the animal and, setting the book down on the ground, went around to help them get the corpse loaded behind the saddle. By the time they finished, all three were out of breath and more than eager to be away from the stench. Alayne picked the book back up and sighed as she started to summon her mount.

“Let’s take a little break,” Jez’ral sighed, knuckling his back. “Over there,” he said, waving upwind. The three limped over to the ridge and sat down tiredly. They’d been wading through the thick, viscous muck and were more than ready for a break. “Alayne, let’s see what he learned.” Alayne nodded and opened the book, holding it up on her knees so Jez’ral could

read over her shoulder. Callie leaned over the other shoulder, glad to have something to take her mind off the Light-forsaken odor from the swamp.

“That’s not research,” the Forsaken muttered.

“No, but it’s educational nonetheless,” Alayne said, sounding scandalized.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Jez’ral muttered, pointing to a particular passage. Callie glared at the man and then had to fight a smile when he winked at her, indicating that he was joking. “Hey, don’t turn the pages so fast, speed-reader,” he growled, tapping Alayne lightly on the back of the head.

“Yeah, go back. I wasn’t finished,” Callie tittered. Maybe Alayne’s teacher wasn’t so bad if he had a sense of humor.

“You both need to read faster,” Alayne muttered as she turned the page back.

“Hello over there!” Ger’alin called out from the road. “What are you three doing?” The trio looked up to see four sin’dorei walking towards them. “What happened to the fellow on your horse, Callie? What are you reading?”

“Research,” Callie said absently, her jaw dropping as she read on.

“What kind of research?” Zerith asked, kneeling down behind Alayne and peering over her head to read. “Oh my,” he laughed. “Dar’ja, come over here and get a look at this.”

Dar’ja walked over and sat between Zerith and Jez’ral, craning her neck over Alayne’s shoulder. “Oh goodness. What kind of research was this person doing and how to you sign up for that job? Oh no, you stay back,” she said, seeing Ger’alin walking up closer. “Married couples and women only. Ta’sia can come read if she wants.”

“I want to borrow that when you’re done with it,” Zerith whispered to his sister.

“Finders keepers,” Alayne said, turning the page.

“Go back!” all of the others shouted at her.

“Read faster!”

“Oh, I want to try that,” Ta’sia giggled.

“So do I. Ger’alin, do you have any rope we could borrow? No reason,” Dar’ja asked. The other Blood Knight clenched his fist and began grinding his teeth, certain he was the butt of some joke involving his distinct dislike of literary pursuits.

“Light, I’m not sleeping anywhere near any of you tonight,” Alayne grimaced, grinning and winking at her brother’s wife.

“This isn’t funny. What is in there?” Ger’alin demanded, hating the whine in his voice.

“Maybe we should let him...”

“No. You and Dar’ja are bad enough. Besides, he doesn’t like to read anyway,” Alayne said wryly, closing the book. “We really ought to be getting back to the Magistrix,” she said to Jez’ral. “The woman will probably send a search party out for us if we stay away much longer.” She ignored the protests and the groans from the people crowded around her as she stood up and began to walk far enough away to summon her mount.

“So, Alayne... what’s in that book?” Ger’alin asked, walking over towards her. “You’ll be nice and tell me, won’t you?”

“Research,” she grinned wickedly, winking over at Ta’sia. “I’m sure she’ll be glad to help you with it.” Climbing on her fel steed’s back, Alayne heeled the horse to a quick canter, desperate to be away before her mask slipped again. She ground her teeth in frustration; it was going to be very difficult to pretend to be happy all the time with both of them out here.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Magistrix Carinda,” Jez’ral said smoothly to the woman who had sent them out looking for sign of her husband or his research. “I’m afraid we have bad news.”

“Oh, Light,” she said breathlessly, seeing her husband’s body being carried up the path by Alayne and Callie. “At least his research won’t die with him; he won’t have died in vain. Let me see his journal,” she said, forcing her features to composure. Alayne blushed but handed the journal over to the woman. “It’s not about research at all!” the Magistrix said, sounding shocked. “I’ve never...oh, how could I have been such a fool?” she moaned. “‘Magical properties of fel-infused slime forms.’ He really had me going there. This journal does not deal with any sort of scholarly studies. It details his escapades with a young female blood elf!” Alayne blinked, looking shocked and disgusted. Callie just shook her head, muttering about the living. Jez’ral looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Unfortunately,” the Magistrix continued, “the floozy’s identity is not revealed in this journal. Aledis, a colleague of Arelion’s, was his best friend and confidant. Go question him and find out who he was having this affair with. I saw Aledis leave Falcon Watch for Zangarmarsh earlier.”

“Of course, Magistrix, of course,” Jez’ral muttered, looking very flustered. “I’m sorry that we were the bearers of such bad news.” Alayne followed after him when he hurried back down the road, looking for Aledis. “That was awkward,” he said. Alayne looked at him as if to say ‘statement of the obvious, genius,’ but said nothing. “I think that’s him,” her former teacher sighed, pointing to a man riding a hawkstrider back towards Falcon Watch. “I’ll just go...”

“No, I’ll take care of it,” Alayne said quickly. “Besides, it will give me a chance to practice.”

“Practice what?” Zerith asked. He grinned when Alayne raised her eyebrows at him, knowing that whatever it was, it would no doubt be entertaining to watch.

“Remember what Mir’el said...” Jez’ral started to say.

“I know,” she said, cutting him off. “Back straight, shoulders up, head high, and deep breaths. See? I do pay attention once in a while. Here, hold this for me,” she muttered, taking off her cloak and handing it to Jez’ral. Zerith snickered and Dar’ja began chuckling when Alayne squared her shoulders and began to glide down towards the road, waving to the man on the hawkstrider.

“What is she doing?” Ger’alin asked, sounding shocked.

“She’s gathering information,” Jez’ral replied dryly. “And she’s doing a good job of it, too, from the expression on Aledis’s face.”

“I might need to take a few lessons from her,” Ta’sia murmured. Ger’alin just stared at his alleged girlfriend, muttering beneath his breath. He stiffened when she cuddled up to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. He suffered her touch knowing that to do otherwise would just get him in more trouble all around. Zerith had already chided him for how he’d been acting. Ger’alin sighed, reminding himself of his resolve to be the perfect gentleman until Ta’sia got bored and lighted on to someone else. Forcing himself to put an arm around her, he kept his gaze focused on Alayne, wondering what she was saying that had the other man smiling like the fox who’d been invited into the hen house.

“Where did she learn *that*?” Jez’ral said, sounding stunned when Alayne took Aledis’s hand and, with a twist, threw him over her shoulder and onto the ground.

“Perfectly executed body slam,” Ger’alin breathed. “Light, that was beautiful.”

“Ouch, she’s got him in a headlock now,” Dar’ja winced in sympathy.

“Oh, good one!” Ger’alin cheered when Alayne let the now-unconscious man slump back to the ground. “I thought she’d never learn the trick for that hold,” he explained when the others turned to stare at him. “She never could put me under.”

“She learned that from you?” Jez’ral snorted. “I’m not surprised. Though, I suppose I should offer you thanks or congratulations on such effective teaching. Mir’el will roar when he hears about this. Good work, Alayne!” Jez’ral praised her when she stumped back up to the group. “Very interesting technique.”

“Can I have my cloak back now?” she growled.

“I suppose so,” he said wryly, handing it back to her and trying not to laugh when she pulled it back around her shoulders. “You do know that you’ll never catch any eyes if you keep covering up like that.”

“I don’t want to catch any eyes. I want to go figure out who Viera Sunwhisper is and then get on with our research. I’m out here to work, Jez’ral, not to find a mate.”

“Light, woman,” he sighed, “Mir’el will have kittens if he hears you say that. You know how much he wants... All right, you win,” Jez’ral said, raising his hands in surrender at the murderous look the woman was giving him. “Let’s get on with it. The rest of you wait out here. This shouldn’t take long.”

~\*~\*~\*~

Jez’ral and Alayne returned to the others, giggling and wiping tears from their eyes. Zerith cocked an eyebrow at them, wondering what was so funny. Jez’ral lifted a hand and then bent over, laughing so hard he couldn’t walk any further. Just as he was winding down and catching his breath, Alayne meowed and he fell to his knees, gasping for air as he laughed so hard the others thought he was losing his mind.

“What happened?” Dar’ja asked, eyeing the pair warily. Alayne grinned but shook her head, saying nothing.

“No more,” Jez’ral begged once he finally calmed his laughter. “You’ll give me a heart attack and then you’ll have to deal with Mir’el without me there to stop him.”

“If there’s a fate worse than death, you’ve just described it,” Alayne snorted, pulling her former teacher to his feet. “So, do you want to continue on, or should I check you into the nearest retirement home?”

“Let’s finish what we had planned for the day. And no more animal sounds.”

“Rawr.”

“Dammit, Alayne!” he said, wheezing as he tried not to laugh.

“Warlocks are all insane,” Ta’sia whispered to Ger’alin. For once, the Blood Knight made no comment, beginning to agree with her. Alayne just stood over Jez’ral, hissing and purring, driving the man into ever-increasing fits of laughter.

“Have mercy, woman! I’ll give you a raise if you’ll stop,” he pleaded, rubbing his aching sides.

“Since you asked so nicely,” she said, relenting. Smiling, she summoned her mount and motioned for the others to follow after.

“What was that all about?” Callie asked, trotting alongside Alayne.

“I have been sworn to absolute secrecy about it,” Alayne answered. “Besides, if I tell you, you’ll tell everyone else and poor Jez’ral won’t live long enough to pay me that raise he just promised.”

“You two are strange.”

“We’re warlocks. We’re known for our eccentricities.”

“So, where are you two eccentrics leading us?” Zerith asked, pulling up on Alayne’s other side. Jez’ral hung back, waving off Ger’alin and Dar’ja’s concerned looks whenever he started giggling again.

“Void Ridge. Jez’ral wants to study some of the portals that seem to spontaneously form around there and to the south, near the remnants of the Alliance’s Expedition Armory. After that, we’re planning to observe the Shattered Hand orcs for a while, if either of us is still conscious,” she sighed.

“What do you mean by that? ‘If either of you is still conscious.’”

“I mean that this is going to be really tiring work. I’m glad you’re here, though. When we thought it would just be the two of us, Jez’ral thought we might have to hire guards to watch our backs while we worked. With all of you here, we won’t have to. You’ll keep the voidwalkers from pounding us into powder while we do our work.”

“Oh, is that all?” Zerith said sarcastically. “How many voidwalkers will we be keeping off you?”

“That’s a good question that I’m sure has an answer. You can tell me the answer tomorrow.”

“Alayne...”

“I honestly have no idea, Zerith. They could be attracted by what we’ll be doing or repelled by it. It’s fifty-fifty either way. We’ll either be swarmed or ignored and we won’t know which until it’s too late to do anything about it.”

“Sounds like fun,” Callie said quickly, before Zerith could protest.

“I’m glad you’re so eager to get going,” the warlock muttered. “Because, we’re here.” Alayne dismounted and waited for the rest to catch up. Jez’ral climbed down and took a deep breath, focusing his concentration and putting the earlier amusement out of his mind. Alayne did likewise and the pair dismissed their mounts. Jez’ral gave a very brief overview of what to expect and then strode off to the south, Alayne following on his heels. Once they were in sight of the shadowy balls of clouds and lightning, Alayne and Jez’ral sat down, leaning against each other’s backs. Summoning fel guards, the pair glanced over at the others. “Let’s begin,” Alayne said simply. Seconds later, she and Jez’ral were staring off into space, oblivious to everything around them.

“Oh, this is not good. Blasted warlocks!” Ta’sia moaned, rolling her eyes nervously and fidgeting.

“Why? What are they doing?” Ger’alin asked her.

“They are messing with things that are best left alone,” she replied sharply. “I don’t know why people tolerate their meddling. Warlocks are nothing but trouble. Ner’zhul, Gul’dan, Medivh...nothing but trouble.”

“Times have changed, Ta’sia,” Zerith said gently, keeping an eye out for approaching demons. “The warlocks of the Horde have foresworn their own selfish lust for power and domination in return for tolerance and protection. I can tell you that Alayne only delves into shadow magic because she hasn’t been able to sense the arcane since the Sunwell was destroyed.”

“While this sounds like a very interesting discussion, sweetheart, I think we might want to pay more attention to those fellows,” Dar’ja said, pointing to four voidwalkers moving north. “They look like the welcoming committee.”

~\*~\*~\*~

Hours later, Dar’ja knelt on the ground, catching her breath. She’d lost count of how many demonic swarms had tried to break through their barrier to attack the warlocks. Whatever the pair were up to, the shadow beings obviously didn’t like it. Ger’alin stood ahead, poised on the balls of his feet, ready and waiting for another wave. Ta’sia sat behind him, glancing down the ridge every so often but mostly glaring at the oblivious warlocks. Callie paced a perimeter around the group, keeping an eye to the south. The pair of fel guards flanked Ger’alin, their wicked axes wet with the same mysterious substance that coated her own blade.

“I hope they finish soon,” Zerith sighed, knuckling his back. “That last wave was almost one too many.”

“We’re finished,” Jez’ral said dully, distantly, as if he were not quite back to himself yet. Against and behind him, Alayne sighed, lifting her hands to her head and wiping sweat from out of her eyes. The pair were soaked, their sodden robes and hair slicked against them as if someone had up-ended a water bucket over their heads. Shaking, almost unable to move, the pair pushed themselves to their feet and swayed against each other, nearly toppling over several times.

“Still...need...more...” Alayne said, shivering with fatigue.

“I...don’t think...I could...” Jez’ral answered, sounding even more tired than Alayne.

“What...never mind. The only place you two are going is to sleep,” Zerith muttered.

“No!” Alayne protested weakly. Summoning her mount, she stopped, leaning against it for several moments. “We have to, Jez’ral,” she groaned, pulling herself onto the fel steed’s back. “We have to now. If we wait, we’ll lose it.”

“Then let’s go,” he sighed, summoning his own mount. With an effort of will, he managed to climb up on the horse’s back and set out after Alayne at a walk. The others jogged to their own mounts, saddling up and trailing the warlocks closely. Even after all the fighting, none of them looked anywhere near as fatigued as the pair. Alayne and Jez’ral led them back west and south, skirting hostile areas until they came to a place where the landscape was strange even by the unbelievable standards of the rest of Outland.

“Here,” Alayne said, pointing to a spot just a few feet away. Jez’ral nodded tiredly and limped after her. Once again, the pair sat with their backs against each other, quickly lost to the world as they conducted whatever experiment it was that had Ta’sia chewing her knuckle.

“Nothing’s happening,” Ger’alin sighed in relief after a half hour of calm.

“They’re mad, they’re mad, they’re mad,” Ta’sia repeated over and over again. “No one in their right minds would do this...my word...” she said suddenly, brightening. The other sin’dorei felt it as well; something only half-remembered from the earliest days of childhood. The sensation lasted only a few seconds before Alayne broke the calm with the sounds no one wants to hear.

“Uh-oh,” she said, her voice sounding a universe away.

“Oh shit,” Jez’ral said in the same tone.

“What...” Ger’alin managed to get out just as a huge voidwalker appeared right over the warlocks. Alayne and Jez’ral scrambled to get out of its way, moving slowly as their minds returned from the Nether. Alayne came back to herself first and turned on her seat, muttering the words that would send the demon back to the Twisting Nether. She grunted when the spell failed, feeling its backwash like a slap to the face that covered her entire body. Ger’alin ran past her as she took a breath, trying to steady herself enough to cast another spell. Slashing in with his blade, he hacked at the demon, forcing it to expend precious energy just to maintain its shape on this plane. Alayne cast a bolt of dark flame and then began working her hexes, sapping the creature of its strength. She glanced around to see Ta’sia staring at the huge voidwalker in absolute horror. Grimacing, seeing that the other woman wasn’t going to be of much help, Alayne staggered to her feet, moving in closer to cast other spells. Moments later, she lay, staring at the twisted sky, wondering what had happened. Ger’alin lay a few feet away from her, stunned, groping around blindly for his sword.

“It’s behind your head,” Alayne muttered helpfully.

“Did you know they could explode like that?” he asked.

“I do now. Any survivors?” she called out, raising her voice.

“We’re fine back here,” Zerith said, jogging up to the prone pair. “Jez’ral made it out of range as well.”

“I’m sorry, Alayne,” her former teacher sighed. “I tried to banish it before it blew up but...”

“It’s not your fault. If it’s anyone’s fault, it’s mine. That last probe of mine attracted it and when I tried to pull away, it followed me back here.”

“If *I’d* been faster, it wouldn’t have blown up,” Ger’alin muttered irritably. “I should have had it down before it destabilized so much. What’s with that look?” he demanded. “Do you think I learned nothing reading over your shoulder so much?”

“It’s not your fault, either.”

“Still I...”

“Ger’alin, if you are going to insist on apologizing over something that you didn’t cause, then you can make up for it by carrying Jez’ral back to Thrallmar. Don’t argue with me, either of you. Jez’ral, you couldn’t summon an imp right now and you’d probably pull the others out of their saddles.”

“Like you’re much better,” he muttered sourly.

“I can walk.”

“Only if you want to get back in time to meet Zerith’s grandchildren. You’re exhausted, Alayne. I am, too. I’ll admit it,” Jez’ral sighed.

“Enough of this,” Zerith cut in. “Callie, come over here and see if you can pull Jez’ral up behind you. Ger’alin, you take Alayne. That should get everyone back to Thrallmar without putting too much strain on any of the beasts.”

“I’ll ride with Callie,” Alayne said stubbornly.

“No, you won’t. You would fall off before she’d gone fifteen feet. You don’t have the strength to hold on and ride behind her; Jez’ral, however, can at least stand up so he does have that much strength. Ger’alin, can *you* stand up?”

“I can. I don’t particularly want to right now, but I can,” the Blood Knight joked as he pulled himself to his feet.

“I’m walking,” Alayne repeated, trying to sit up and falling back down. “Give me five minutes and I’ll be on my feet fine.”

“No you won’t,” Zerith chuckled. “In five minutes, you’ll be asleep.” Bending down, he pulled her up and lifted her off the ground. She was too weak to struggle much, muttering that she could walk or ride with one of the others. “Alayne, be quiet. I made Ger’alin take a bath before we came out here so you’re not going to catch anything from him.”

“Oh, then that’s fine, I guess,” she said, going along with his joke. She even cooperated when he went to pass her up to Ger’alin who had climbed aboard Lucky’s back. Zerith glanced over to see Jez’ral managing to climb up behind Callie, throwing the Forsaken off balance. With a sigh, he walked over to them, leaving Ger’alin to figure out how to settle Alayne in front of him. Whispering to the Forsaken, the priest traded mounts with her, climbing up and using his weight to keep Jez’ral from pulling him out of the saddle. By the time the two were settled, everyone else had ridden off except Ger’alin.

“I’m afraid to *move*,” the Blood Knight explained when he saw Zerith’s questioning look. “She’s sound asleep.”

Zerith snorted. “Come on. Easy walk. Just one step at a time.”

“I’ll be along shortly,” Ger’alin grinned. “I want to wait long enough to see if she says anything funny in her sleep.”

“If she does, ask her what she was yammering on about a few nights ago,” Jez’ral muttered. “All we could piece together was something about chocolate and Naxxramas. On second thought, don’t bother,” he chuckled. “It’s more amusing to not know.”

“Don’t be long,” Zerith said firmly. “She’ll rest better in her room than on the back of a horse. Jez’ral, while I don’t quite hate you as much as I used to, I’d appreciate it if you held on to my shoulders and not my waist. Thank you,” he muttered as he kicked Callie’s skeletal horse to a walk.

“I am so glad you’re out here now,” the warlock said once they were away from the other two. Zerith said nothing, pressing his lips together in irritation. “For her sake. Something’s been bothering her for days now; something that has her crying herself to sleep every night. She won’t talk to me; I’m her slave-driver. You’re her brother, Zerith. See if you can get to the bottom of this.”

“Any idea what it might be?” the priest asked, setting aside his personal distaste.

“Not a clue. Just that she’ll mutter to herself ‘it’s spring; it’s only spring,’ when she starts to lose control of her emotions.”

“Women and their seasonal changes,” the priest snarled. “It’s probably nothing. Dar’ja gets the same way when the days grow shorter. All winter long she has to keep reminding herself that it’s only winter. Sometimes I wonder if being female causes a special kind of insanity; only one that’s guaranteed to drive *men* up the wall.”

“I wouldn’t know. Just talk to her and see what it is.”

“I will, I will. She’s my sister, after all.”

Back on the ridge, Ger’alin sighed with relief when Zerith rode off. He’d been praying for a chance to be alone with Alayne for days now. He gazed at her sleeping face, and sighed happily. Hugging her to him, he heeled Lucky to a walk, a slow walk, and just let himself enjoy having her close by. “I missed you so much,” he whispered to her. When she shifted and sighed, he clamped his mouth shut, terrified that he had woken her up. Holding his breath until his head swam, he relaxed only when he saw that she had just fallen deeper into sleep. Smiling, he pulled her sweat-dampened hair out of her face and nearly giggled with joy when she started babbling incoherently in an undertone.

~\*~\*~\*~

The next morning, Alayne paced in front of the door to her room, debating whether or not she should go down and join the others for breakfast. Her sleep had been filled with dreams and she could still feel herself blushing when she thought about them. She wondered if she had the nerve to go down there and face him or, more importantly, Ta’sia. Snapping her fingers nervously, she stared at the door and resumed pacing. A sudden, rapid knocking on the door startled her out of her anxiety. Jerking it open, she saw Zerith smiled at her.

“Good morning to you, too,” he laughed when she grabbed his arm and pulled him into the room, slamming the door shut and leaning against it. “I see you’re completely recovered from yesterday. I was worried that you might still be tired. Jez’ral’s down there, putting on quite a convincing old-man act.”

“I have got to talk to you before I explode,” she announced. “And if you say anything to anyone except Dar’ja, I will kick you so hard your great-grandchildren will be bruised.”

“I can hardly refuse you when you ask so nicely, Alayne,” he said wryly, pulling a chair out from beneath the room’s desk and sitting down. “So, what is it?”

“I...I...I...” she stuttered, stopping and restarting often enough that Zerith went from amused to concerned.

“It’s not *her*, is it? Tal’ar’s daughter.”

“Light no! Oh, never mind,” she sighed. “It’s really nothing important. If it was, I would tell you about it, Zerith. I’ve got a little crush on someone but he is with someone else and I...this is just ridiculous is what it is. Which reminds me...” Alayne sighed, walking over to the closet and throwing it open. Digging into the pocket of her cloak, she pulled out a well-worn journal. “Happy anniversary,” she grinned, handing it over to him. “If you decide to conduct any ‘research’ of your own, please try not to keep *everyone* awake. Now, let’s go down and see if I need to find Jez’ral a walking stick so we can go get our work done.”

~\*~\*~\*~

“How long are you going to keep this up?” Ger’alin asked the next morning.

“As long as I feel like it,” Ta’sia muttered.

“Look, would apologizing again do anything to convince you to leave me alone?”

“No. I’m not leaving you alone until you’re forced to tell your friends the truth about us, about that night, and have to see the horrified looks on their faces. That, and only that, will be payback for what you did to me!”

“Did to you? Wait, woman, you’re the one who came to me, not the other way around.”

“I only did that because of the way you smiled at me that evening.”

“You have to know that I only did that because...”

“I know. And, you know the saying, Ger’alin, about the woman scorned?”

Ger’alin grimaced but said nothing. Ta’sia smiled at the sullen look on the man’s face. Tormenting him was the most fun she’d had in weeks. Now she could see why A’sara enjoyed tweaking her nose so much. It was fun. She felt a thrill of exhilaration as she imagined the expressions on everyone’s faces once she had forced Ger’alin to tell them what a snake he was. She especially savored the image of Alayne’s face turning to shock and disgust and Ger’alin’s reaction to seeing the woman he loved turn on him.

“Good morning, you two,” Alayne said politely, startling Ta’sia out of her reverie.

“How are you feeling, Ger’alin? Not still sore from yesterday, are you?”

“Oh, no, I’m fine. I was fine five minutes after I got off the ground,” he laughed.

“Getting knocked down while wearing plate does cushion the blow. How are you feeling?”

“Fine, fine,” Alayne said quickly. “Jez’ral and I are going to go investigate the Outland orcs this morning. After that, we’ll be collecting more samples from the demons to the north of here and in the Pools of Aggonar if our suspicions turn out to be correct.”

“What suspicions?” Ta’sia asked, not liking the way that Alayne’s presence seemed to melt the tension away from Ger’alin.

“We think they’re still tainted by demonic bloodlust,” Alayne explained. “We’ve compared them, from a distance, to Horde orcs and found that the orcs here in Outland are much larger, much more aggressive, and more prone to fits of inexplicable violence than the orcs who follow Thrall. From what we understand, *all* orcs should have been freed from the blood curse when Mannoroth was slain. Either the orcs in Outland were not, or they’ve been...re-infected...somehow. We’d like to know how and by what agency so we can provide more information on how they could be approached, conquered, or controlled.”

“And what would this information be used for?”

“That is for Lord Lor’themar and Thrall to decide,” Jez’ral cut in. “Come along, Alayne. Callie has volunteered to help us. Let us leave these two alone.”

“Volunteered to help you with what?” Ger’alin asked, starting to rise from the table. Alayne and Jez’ral each put a hand on his shoulders, forcing him back down.

“Help us spy on the orcs,” Jez’ral said smoothly. “We do not need you today, Blood Knight. Stay here with your sweetheart. This is no affair of yours.”

Before Ger’alin could gather himself to protest, the warlocks had swept out of the inn. He tried to rise again, only to have Ta’sia tangle her hand in his hair, pulling him back down with a strangled grunt.

“If you chase after her all of the time, she’ll begin to think you don’t care for me,” Ta’sia said lightly, her voice thick with false sugar. “And what would that say about you, my noble warrior? What would she think of a man who completely ignored the woman he loves?”

Ger'alín reached up and gently, but firmly, pulled her hand from the nape of his neck. Glaring at her, knowing she had won this round, he let his weight settle back down on the bench and began wondering just how long it would be before he gave in.

~\*~\*~\*~

“If you tell us who did this to you, we will let you go free,” Callie growled, pushing her dagger against the orc’s neck far enough to almost draw blood. The orc said nothing, lying still as death.

“If you try to escape again,” Alayne warned, “we will make you beg for death before the end. Tell us what we want to know and no further harm will come to you.”

“I’ll tell you nothing,” the orc grunted, lifting his head, not even wincing when Callie’s dagger drew blood as he pushed against it.

With a sigh, Alayne closed her eyes, trying to block out the sight of what she was about to do. Lifting her hands over the orc, she cast a curse upon him. Callie backed away, scooting across the small shack until her back hit the wall. The orc arched his back, twisting and groaning against the chains that bound him. For moments, he writhed, feeling the agony of her curse bite into his flesh. Alayne swallowed hard, trying to keep the bile from rising further in her throat as she forced herself to watch. Sweat beaded on her forehead, running in rivulets down her face, mixing with the tears from her eyes. She hated being forced to do this to any living creature but they had to know: who?

“Be...be...betr...,” the orc gasped, his body going flaccid. Quickly, Alayne lifted the curse, gasping when she saw blood spilling from the orc’s mouth.

“Dammit!” Jez’ral growled. “The fool chewed his tongue. This isn’t going to work. Either they don’t know, or their loyalties are too strong for us to break.”

“What was he trying to say there at the end?” Callie asked.

“I don’t know,” Jez’ral muttered. “Still, I suppose we have enough to draw samples from since that’s all we can get out of them. Remember, Forsaken: speak of this to no one!”

“I’m not in the habit of flapping my tongue,” the undead muttered. Alayne cocked an eyebrow at her, “At least not when it’s important,” she added.

“Alayne, you draw from those two over there. I’ll get the other three. We’ll burn the bodies. Hopefully, no one will be able to figure out anything from the remains.”

Biting back distaste, Alayne did as she was bidden, wishing that they had been able to draw off the blood samples while the orcs still lived. “Will the Warchief be angry should he learn?” she asked.

“I don’t know. He claims lordship over all loyal orcs. However, he hasn’t uttered a word against those who slay traitors to the Horde. Perhaps he would see these orcs that way; perhaps he would see them as wayward brothers. There’s no telling what those green-skins will think from one moment to the next.”

“Jez’ral, we’d better hurry,” Alayne said, glancing out the window. Evening was falling. Night would be coming soon. “Zerith and the others will start looking for us if we’re not back soon.”

“I’m almost finished. You?”

“Done.”

“There then. Let’s get out of here,” he muttered, pulling the women along in his wake as he strode out of the abandoned hut. Once they were a safe distance away, he lifted his hands and cast bolts of flames at the interior, continuing until the entire building was ablaze. “By morning, there won’t be much trace left,” he predicted. “Come along. We’ve still got a few hours left in which to figure out how these fools were tainted.”

~\*~\*~\*~

“Ah, you’re back,” one of the Thrallmar guards muttered when the trio rode back in. “Nazgrel wants to speak with you.”

“Then let us be on our way,” Jez’ral said dryly, dismounting and walking quickly to the main building. Alayne and Callie followed after him, ignoring Ger’alin and Zerith when they tried to wave the women over to them.

“I want to know what’s going on,” Ger’alin muttered as they passed. Glancing at Zerith, he nodded and the two followed after, careful to keep their distance and seem as if they were just walking around. When the women followed Jez’ral into the main building, the Blood Knight and priest hurried after, careful to stay back just far enough to barely hear what was being said.

“You’ve stirred up quite a hornet’s nest,” an orc was saying, his voice harsh. “Though you closed down two of the demon gates, there’s a last point left to our north. Our scouts report that demons are pouring through it. They seem to be readying themselves for an assault against Thrallmar. The Warchief will not be pleased with you blood elves if you bring the Legion down on our heads.”

“Then we will go and shut down this gate as well, Nazgrel,” Jez’ral said.

“See that you do. You’ll need help, though. Dozens of powerful monsters have come through already.”

Ger’alin stared at Zerith, wondering if the other man was thinking what he was thinking. He didn’t have time to consider it before Alayne and Callie backed right into him, both of them falling to the ground. “Were you...,” Alayne asked, rubbing her knee where she’d landed on it.

“Spying on you? Yes,” Zerith answered, bending down and grabbing them by the arms, hauling them to their feet. “Where have you three been all day?” he demanded when Jez’ral rounded the corner, staring in shock.

“We’ve been working,” Alayne muttered, jerking her arm out of Zerith’s grip. “I told you we would be observing the orcs today. That’s where we were.”

“Dar’ja and I rode out around lunch time to see if we could find you; to see if you needed any help,” Zerith growled. “We rode all the way to Hellfire Citadel and saw no sign of you.”

“We saw you ride past,” Jez’ral lied quickly. “However, we were well hidden and were not going to give ourselves away just to spare you a little boredom.”

“Don’t leave me behind again,” the priest muttered.

“We won’t,” Alayne answered quickly. “Want to come help us shut down a demon gate?”

“I’m coming, too,” Ger’alin snapped.

“Of course you are,” the warlocks both said at the same time. “Alayne,” Jez’ral continued, “go out and see if you can convince the others to come along. The pilgrims. Try what you did with Aledis but leave out the head-lock.”

“Rarw,” Alayne growled, making the other warlock giggle.

“Yes, maybe you should do that,” Zerith said, looking his sister square in the eyes. “It might make you feel a little less...ridiculous,” he continued. Alayne nodded, understanding what he meant. Maybe Zerith was right. Maybe if she could focus her attention on someone else, it wouldn’t hurt her so much to see Ger’alin with Ta’sia all the time. Untying her cloak from around her neck, she handed it to Zerith, squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and walked over to where the sin’dorei pilgrims milled about.

“What is she doing?” Ger’alin asked, sounding strangled.

“Something effective, for once,” Jez’ral replied, clapping the Blood Knight on the shoulder. “Come on; you want to help her fight demons, you get to help her fight demons. Let’s go see who else we can round up.”

~\*~\*~\*~

“There are two main camps,” Callie reported a short while later. She had snuck up to get a view of the area. “One just has some little demons in it and a few succubi around the exterior. There is one giant monster who keeps a patrol around the camp. He looks like a gnomish engineering experiment gone horribly wrong,” she explained.

“Go on,” Jez’ral prodded. He had a pretty good idea of what they would be facing.

“The other camp, the one to the west, has several large demons in it. They have wings and swords and look like they mean business. There are a couple of six-armed women demons walking about and several dozen infernals. Not to mention those felhound things, as well. They’re all clustered around some gate thing; it looks a little bit like the ones we destroyed when we first got here.”

“Thank you, Callie,” Zerith said. Concentrating on the map she’d drawn, he began to try to formulate a plan. They had only about twenty fighters, mostly magi of one kind or another. He, Dar’ja, and Ger’alin were the only healers available. Ger’alin and Callie were the only ones who could fight in close quarters unless Alayne decided to pick up a sword and change clothes.

“The eastern camp is no problem,” Jez’ral said, pointing to the camp Callie had indicated was populated mostly by little demons. “Those little ones are engineers. They maintain the fel cannons on the perimeter. Left to themselves, they’ll run, not fight. If we can take out the succubi and the hulking patroller she described, the others will scatter.”

“And that would tell the others where we were. Not a good idea.”

“Then put most of our force here,” Alayne said, pointing to the area between the two camps. “That keeps them out of sight of the western camp but will create a wall keeping the engineers from running that direction.”

“Okay, so we clear out one camp. How do you propose we clear the other one? The one with the gate?” Zerith asked, not seeing any way to do it without getting a considerable number of them killed.

“We create a diversion,” Alayne answered. “Jez’ral and I will ride into that camp, stir them up, get them to chase us, and the casters will be repositioned here,” she said, pointing to the southern ridge. “We’ll just ride up and down that way, giving the caster groups a chance to pull a few of the demons off our tails while we keep it up.”

“I don’t like that idea at all,” Ger’alin muttered. “It’s too risky.”

“What would you do? Go in waving your sword and bellowing?” Alayne said sarcastically. “That might impress Ta’sia, but it will just get you dead out here.”

“And riding into their midst wouldn’t?”

“Okay, we ride into their midst, get them to chase us, and then set up a decoy down the path. It’s less risky,” Alayne muttered. “They’ll chase after us; we’ll be out of sight long enough to set up the decoys on the horses, and then the heat will be off of us. We’ll go back to the ridge and help you take down the ones guarding the portal.”

“I don’t like it, either, Ger’alin, but it’s better than anything else I can think of,” Zerith sighed. “Just make certain your decoys will work.”

“Oh, they will,” Alayne giggled. Jez’ral stared at her, wondering what she was planning, but said nothing. “Come on, Jez’ral. We need to discuss how to set up the decoys.”

“What do you think she’s planning?” Ger’alin asked after the two warlocks left.

“I have no idea,” Zerith admitted. “But, she’s not a fool, Ger’alin. She may come up with some wild ideas, but she’s no fool. Come on, let’s go see if we can get those idiots out there to understand what they are supposed to do.”

“I doubt that’s possible,” the Blood Knight complained. “Half of them are too dazzled to do anything other than show off.”

“Well, maybe once we explain that getting themselves killed is hardly going to impress her, they’ll listen.”

Just as the sun was setting and night began to fall, the groups lined up in their positions. Ger’alin, Callie, Zerith, Alayne, and Ta’sia strode up the ridge, moving east, keeping their eyes on the huge demon patrolling the borders of the camp. Once he had moved deeper inside, Ger’alin and Callie ran down, attracting the attentions of the succubi and pulling them away from the others. The engineers ignored them; too cowed or too stupid to realize what was going on. Ger’alin shook his head to keep it clear, refusing to let himself be caught in the demonesses’ seductive spell as he slashed in, his blade cutting through their whips and slicing their bodies. The succubi fell easily, if one could ignore their spell long enough to get at them. Jogging back to the others as the hulking demon made his patrol back near them, Ger’alin held his peace as Ta’sia and Alayne hurried past. Alayne was going to attempt to banish the demon; to exile it from this plane long enough for them to scatter the others. If that failed, Ta’sia was to prevent it from reaching either of them long enough for Callie and Ger’alin to take it down.

“And, it failed,” the Forsaken muttered as she saw Alayne jump as if goosed, signaling that her spell had backfired. The huge demon ran after them; the engineers continued their work, only one pair daring to do anything else as they turned the fel cannon they were working on towards the women and opened fire.

“Ta’sia, if you get her killed...,” Ger’alin whispered, seeing the mage start to freeze up. Alayne jogged past the woman, grabbing her by the arm as if to pull her back to the others. Ta’sia wrenched free and, surprising everyone, managed to freeze the giant to the ground long enough for her and Alayne to get clear. “Good work!” Ger’alin shouted as he dashed past, his sword at the ready.

“I did it,” Ta’sia said, feeling triumphant. Alayne nodded at her and took up position just in range of the demon, casting spells to weaken it as Callie and Ger’alin worked it over with dagger and sword. Once the creature was swaying on the verge of falling, Alayne ran back past them, waving her arms wildly and shrieking, scaring the engineers off. The little demons ran wildly, heading north and east, into the hills. “What are they so scared of?” Ta’sia wondered aloud.

“That is a very effective little trick of hers,” Zerith answered. “She’s used it against me before. If you were close enough to her, all you would be able to sense was a feeling of complete doom that made you want to run as far and as fast as you could.”

“I might like to learn that one,” Ta’sia giggled.

“I’m sure Alayne would be glad to teach you, if you have the talent for it,” the priest said. “And, if we ever see Ger’alin running out of his room in his underwear, screaming in terror, we’ll know it works.”

“Ooh, that sounds positively evil,” the mage laughed.

“It is,” Zerith agreed. “And, from the way he’s been treating you lately, it’d be no more than he deserves. If you want to get him good, just say the word. Alayne and I may not have Callie’s devious mind, but we can be pretty creative when we decide to be. Remind me to tell you about the trick she was planning to pull on the entire Disorder of Azeroth to get back at all of us for harassing Ger’alin back in Desolace.”

“I will,” she promised, grinning. “What are they doing now?”

“Jez’ral and Alayne? Collecting samples, it looks like. You know warlocks; if they come across a demon they haven’t met before, they want to learn everything they can about it. Type, magical affinities, poison properties, history, what kind of food it likes, favorite color...”

“You’re not serious,” Ta’sia laughed. “Favorite color?”

“Fel guards like purple,” Alayne announced as she and Jez’ral drew near.

“Voidwalkers are suckers for honey,” Jez’ral added.

“And succubi love long walks by the beach, chocolates, and fel guards,” the two said in unison.

“I see,” the mage giggled. She even spared a genuine smile for Ger’alin.

“Now, let’s get started with the next part,” Alayne said loudly enough for the others on the ridge below to hear her. She watched as they dispersed, re-aligning themselves along the southern ridge to the west. She and Jez’ral summoned their mounts and waited for Ger’alin, Dar’ja, Zerith, Ta’sia, and Callie to move into position before signaling a gallop and riding through the camp.

“Light, let this work as we planned,” Zerith prayed as the pair galloped past.

“It’s working, all right,” Ger’alin growled. Almost all of the demons in the camp began chasing after the pair as they rode back south, making a long loop that would bring them back north in several minutes.

“Then let’s also hope everyone in Thrallmar listened when we said ‘stay inside,’” the priest grinned. “Let’s move.”

The four ran into the now abandoned camp, working their way through the demons guarding the gate. One demon seemed to be in charge of the area, fighting like the fiend he was to prevent them from reaching their objective. Ger’alin and Callie were both knocked flat by the demon’s mighty, sweeping blows. Grinning foully, the creature moved past them, heading towards Zerith and Dar’ja. The woman ran in, her own blade flashing as she pulled it free and slashed through the monster’s guard. Seconds later, she was picking herself up off the ground and running behind the creature, desperate to keep it from reaching her husband and Ta’sia.

Ta’sia gulped when the vile thing continued to creep towards her and Zerith. Pushing the priest behind her, she reached out to the arcane energies that danced in the air and, transforming them into ice, encased the creature’s feet in a block of bone-chilling snow and ice that held it fast, giving the fighters behind it a chance to catch up to it while she readied another spell. Just as she let loose a bolt of frost and began hurling missiles from her fingertips, she saw and felt two bolts of shadow fly over her head, striking the demon on its chest, throwing it to the ground. When she turned around to see who had come to their assistance, all she saw was dust settling from the ridge.

Ger’alin wiped his sword quickly and, checking to see that everyone was uninjured, hurried down the ridge, sliding down and shoving his way through the crowds of casters picking off the remaining demons. “I thought they were going to use decoys!” he shouted, upset when he saw Alayne and Jez’ral being hit by all manner of spells as they continued to ride a circuit in front of the ridge.

“We are using decoys!” Jez’ral shouted, his voice coming from the east. “And, by the Legion, it’s cold out here!”

“Shut up before I warm you with a nice little immolation,” Alayne growled. Ger’alin shook his head and blinked, then dropped his sword and began rubbing his eyes, wondering if he were really seeing what he was seeing.

“Alayne, why are you two standing there in your underwear?” Zerith called down from atop the ridge.

“Decoys! We had to convince the demons we were still on the horses,” she answered, casting another bolt of shadow at one of the infernals a mage had pulled back to the ridge. “So, well, I summoned my succubus; Jez’ral summoned his fel guard. We tossed our robes over them and jumped off when we went through Thrallmar. It worked, so don’t you dare get angry at me.”

“I won’t,” he laughed, sliding down the ridge and tossing his cloak around her, much to the dismay of most of the sin’dorei males gathered around her, staring at her out of the corners of their eyes.

“I could use something to keep the chill off, too,” Jez’ral muttered jokingly as the last infernal went down. Alayne stifled a laugh when several sin’dorei women flocked around him, eyeing him appreciatively. Jez’ral looked at them, horrified, wishing he had kept his mouth shut.

“I’ll warm you up,” Alayne said suggestively, sidling up to him. He gave her a grateful smile when the others slunk off. “You owe me,” she whispered.

“I know,” he muttered, pulling away. Sending a mental command to his fel steed, he quickly pulled his robe off his fel guard and over his own head. Alayne had done likewise, but was staring at her robe incredulously. “Hm, that looks bad,” he offered.

“Looks like I’ll just have to go back to wearing my old ones,” she said, trying to sound disappointed but unable to hide her relief. “Did you get the gate shut down?” she asked Zerith.

“No. But, the area is cleared so we’ll go do it now,” he replied. Alayne nodded and hurried back up the ridge with him. “I don’t like Jez’ral, Alayne,” her brother muttered in an undertone.

“Neither do I; not like that, at least. Mir’el would have both our heads if we even thought about it, though.”

“Wait...Mir’el is a...”

“Yes, he is,” Alayne grinned. “And if you let Jez’ral know I’ve told you his little secret, he’ll skin both of us. Now, let’s get this gate shut down and then get back to the inn. Jez’ral’s right. It’s *cold* out here!”

~\*~\*~\*~

“Ta’sia, don’t make me ask you to remove your hands again,” Ger’alin sighed. He should have expected this. He should have insisted on separate rooms.

“If you don’t at least kiss me, I’ll explode,” she murmured, grabbing his shoulders and going on the tips of her toes.

“I’m not going to do this,” he repeated, reaching up and pulling her hands away and turning his head. “You’re not yourself right now and I’m not giving you anything else to hang over my head. If you can’t regain a measure of self-control, I’m going back out and sleeping somewhere else.”

“What? Am I that repulsive to you?”

“Honestly? No, you are not. But then, I was only ever attracted to you because I thought you were...”

“Don’t rub it in, Ger’alin,” she muttered sulkily. “But I’ll bet *she*’s not lacking for company tonight. Did you see the way all of those men were staring at her with their tongues hanging out?”

“That’s not the point,” Ger’alin grimaced, not wanting to recall the scene that had greeted them when they returned. Several of the sin’dorei pilgrims had been hanging about, waiting for the chance to talk to Alayne. The warlock had looked surprised to see the attention

she'd garnered. Ta'sia had started pouting then, forcing Ger'alın to drag her over to the inn before she lost her temper, opened her mouth, and got him in hot water.

"Why do you insist on clinging to her? She doesn't want you, Ger'alın. She has plenty of others trailing after her now," Ta'sia pouted. The Blood Knight sighed and rubbed his hand over his face. This was such a twisted tangle to be caught in.

"Again, that's not the point. What she does is up to her. Who she is with is up to her. Will you please keep your hands to yourself?" he groaned. "Have you honestly never been in a battle to not expect and be able to deal with this reaction?"

"I just want you to..."

"I'm not going to. You try to cool off. I'm going to go take a walk," he grimaced, turning and putting his hand on the door knob.

"Why won't you? You're the only man I know who would pass up this chance."

"Tempting as it may be, I'm not going to," he said gently. "Try to get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

Ta'sia growled and threw one of the pillows at the door as it closed behind him. Throwing herself into the padded chair, she kicked irritably at the air. She was not used to this kind of treatment. Always before, where ever she'd gone, she could have had her pick of available men if she wanted them. Now, she had to pretend to be dedicated to one man and he wouldn't even touch her. Meanwhile, the woman she hated more than anyone else, the woman Ger'alın had confused her with, she had half of the men in Thrallmar wrapped around her finger and the warlock didn't even seem to notice!

"That's it!" Ta'sia muttered to herself. "I can't take this anymore." Standing up, she opened the door, glanced down the hallway, and, seeing no one, hurried out. Counting from the stairs, she stopped in front of the door to Alayne's room, scowling when she heard what sounded like the headboard of a bed beating rhythmically against the wall. "Oh, I see," she growled, raising a fist and beating on the door. "You'd better not be doing what I think you're doing in there!"

The door jerked open seconds later and Ta'sia's fist landed on Alayne's shoulder. The warlock ducked her head into the hallway and, seeing that it was clear, grabbed Ta'sia's arm and pulled the woman into the room. "What do you think you're... what were you two doing?" she asked, seeing Jez'ral standing over by the head of the bed. Both warlocks were fully dressed and the sheets on the bed were pulled tight as if it had not been touched since morning.

"We're even," Alayne said to Jez'ral. "It's clear. You can sneak back to your room now."

"Thank you," he said, sounding relieved. "I apologize for the indignity..."

"Just get off my back about it and tell Mir'el what he wants to hear. I'm serious, Jez'ral. I came out here with you to work, not to find a husband. I don't care what Mir'el said to you. You just tell him what he wants to hear and leave me in peace."

"I will."

"What were you two doing?" Ta'sia repeated after the man had rushed out of the room.

"Pulling ourselves out of the pickling kettle," Alayne grinned. "When we came up here, there were about ten women hanging around outside the door of his room. I wanted to get rid of the six guys following me, so I grabbed Jez'ral – you should have seen the horrified expression on his face, it was *priceless* – I grabbed him and hauled him in here, shouting down to the others that I preferred experience and wisdom or something like that, slammed the door, and told him that I would help him scare his admirers off if he helped me get rid of mine. We banged the bed against the wall until we thought we'd heard them leave and then kept it up for another five minutes until you banged on the door. I was afraid you'd go get

Zerith and that would have just been *awkward*,” Alayne laughed. “So, what did you want me for?”

“I was looking for Ger’alin.”

“Why would you be looking for him in here?” Alayne asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“I just thought he might have come to talk to you. We just had a bit of an argument. Lovers’ spats, you know how it is. Though, I am getting tired of him ignoring me all the time. There are times when I wonder why I stay with him. Maybe he’s with Zerith or Callie.”

“He’s not in Zerith’s room,” Alayne said slowly. “And knocking on their door would be a bad idea right now. They like to...celebrate...their victories,” the warlock said, blushing. “Callie said she was going to take a walk and try hunting hell boars. She left just after we got back. Do you want me to talk to Ger’alin for you? If he’s ignoring you, someone should talk to him.”

“The man is incorrigible, Alayne. We’ve fought about this often enough before now. I’m beginning to see that the other women – what? You didn’t know about that? They told me he was more in love with adventuring than he ever would be with a woman. I guess I was just fooling myself to think I could ever hold his attention. He doesn’t care about me anymore. Sometimes I wonder if he ever did or if, like others, he just wanted...well, never mind,” she sighed, then forced herself to smile warmly, sadly, “Good night, Alayne,” Ta’sia said, turning and leaving the woman’s room. She smiled, savoring the stricken look on the warlock’s face. Just a few more days and Alayne would probably never talk to Ger’alin again. While it wasn’t the exact revenge she wanted, Ta’sia was willing to settle for what she could get. Keeping up the matronly act was wearing thin already. Striding through the inn’s main room, she turned her head at a familiar sight. Ger’alin was seated at the bar, lifting his head only to slam down a drink. She stared at him, wondering if this was his idea of a walk. Biting her lip, torn between going outside to find some company or watching Ger’alin torment himself, she walked over to the bar. She could always find someone later.

“Leave me alone,” he said when he saw her. “I’m not in the mood for any’shing right now.”

“What has you so upset?” Ta’sia muttered, taking the stool next to his and ordering a cup of wine-punch. Ger’alin looked absolutely miserable and, in spite of her personal feelings, she recoiled from him, wondering what had happened to him in the past few minutes.

“Nothing. Ever’thing’s perfec’,” he slurred. “She’s up there with shomebody and that’s just dandy. Heard them as I walked pasht. Ye were right about dat.”

“Well, you don’t have to be alone,” Ta’sia said, moving closer to him.

“Don’t tempt me,” he muttered, his face in his hands. “I’m going to sleep,” he sighed, sliding off his stool and stumping upstairs.

Ta’sia watched him go and sighed. Glancing around the room, she saw several sin’dorei men smiling at her welcomingly. “Well, if Ger’alin doesn’t want to...,” she muttered to herself, “might as well not waste the night for him.”

~\*~\*~\*~

Alayne slunk down the stairs of the inn the next morning feeling exhausted. She hadn’t gotten a wink of sleep, spending the night crying and feeling horribly guilty. When Ta’sia had said that she and Ger’alin had had an argument, Alayne had felt as if she were soaring, hoping that they would fight and the mage would leave. She’d squashed the feeling almost immediately and had spent the long night berating herself for wishing such a thing. “I

wish they'd go back to Silvermoon where they could be happy together away from me," she muttered.

"Who could be happy?" Callie asked, sitting next to the warlock.

"Oh, never mind," Alayne sighed.

"I never do. What's bothering you, Alayne? Who do you want to be happy?"

"The whole bloody world," she grumbled. "Go up and get Jez'ral, would you? The sooner we head over to the Pools of Aggonar and get the final samples, the better."

"What's the matter with you?"

"I'm tired, I'm cranky, I didn't sleep well. Zerith and Dar'ja," she muttered, hating herself for lying but knowing that if she told Callie the truth, she'd dissolve into a heap of tears and melt away.

"Ah. I'll be right back down with Jez'ral, then. The sooner you're done, the sooner you can perform that magical act called a 'nap' that transforms you from an ogre into an elf." Callie dashed up the stairs, banged on Jez'ral's door, and, barely checking to see if the man were dressed or not, pulled him downstairs. "Let's go, let's go," she chanted.

"Where is everyone else?" he asked, seeing that the room was virtually empty.

"Asleep," Alayne answered tiredly. "Battle plus victory equals celebration leading to sleeping in."

"You sound like you could use some 'sleeping in,'" Jez'ral said, glancing down at her.

"I'll sleep later," she sighed. "Let's go."

"Without the others? My dear, we may need..." Alayne shot him a disgusted glare that made him take an involuntary step backwards. "Okay, without the others," he said, raising his hands in surrender. "You should leave a note for them, though, so they won't think we've run off to parts unknown." Alayne grunted and then walked over to the innkeeper's desk. Scribbling a quick note, she folded it in half and put Zerith's name on the outside. Dusting her hands and looking expectantly at her patron, she waited to see if he had anymore busywork for her to do before he quit stalling and got on with it. "Maybe you should go say hello to..."

"Jez'ral," she interrupted, "I still know how to use a sword and I will give you a demonstration by cutting you into tiny pieces which I will then proceed to jump on while wearing those abominable heeled boots Mir'el gave me if you don't get outside, summon your fel steed, and follow me to the Pools of Aggonar without saying another word in the next fifteen seconds."

"Zerith and Dar'ja," Callie explained as the woman stormed out of the inn.

"There's more to it than that," Jez'ral whispered. "I could hear her crying all night long."

"Crying? I wonder what she was crying about. Do you think whoever she was with last evening..."

"She wasn't *with* anyone," he blushed. "That was both of us getting rid of attention neither of us wanted. She's made it pretty clear to me that she's not interested in catching any attention regardless of what Mir'el wants."

"Oh," Callie grinned.

"Are you two coming or should I just go ahead and do this by myself?" Alayne snapped angrily. "Never mind," she muttered, heeling her fel steed to a gallop and leaving them coughing in her dust.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Alayne, where are you?” Callie shouted. She and Jez’ral had scanned the Pools, finding neither hide nor hair of the sin’dorei woman. The Forsaken was starting to get worried. “Alayne?”

“I’m over here,” came the faint reply. Callie and Jez’ral both sighed with relief and hurried over to the sound of her voice. “Sorry for running off like that,” Alayne muttered, staring at an orc corpse on the ground. “I just want to get this done so I can sleep.”

“Did he make you mad?” Jez’ral asked, raising his eyebrows.

“What? No. I found him. I got here and there was this horrible stench. I decided to see what it was and found him,” she said, pointing to the corpse. “I’ve been trying to work up the nerve to turn him over and see what killed him ever since.”

“You living...always so squeamish,” Callie teased, bending down and grabbing the corpse by a shoulder. Flipping him over, she reached down and wrenched the battle axe buried in his chest out, taking a moment to wipe it on the dead orc’s pants. “Hm. Doesn’t look like one of Thrall’s to me,” she muttered, turning to the two elves. She laughed when she saw that they had jogged upwind and away from the corpse. Loping over to them, she raised it so they could see it better. “What do you make of this?”

“It’s an axe,” Jez’ral said lamely, staring at the Forsaken.

“It’s an axe,” Alayne agreed.

“Do you recognize any of the markings on it?”

“No. They look nothing like the ones we took off the orcs we captured yesterday,” Jez’ral said, looking at it more closely. “They do look similar to the ones I’ve seen some of the Orgrimmar soldiers carry around.”

“Right, but they aren’t the same,” Callie said. “If you two don’t need me, I’ll take this back to Thrallmar and see if any of the orcs there can tell me more about these markings. I’ll also carry him back so they can bury him.”

“There you three are!” Ger’alin shouted. “I was looking all over for you.”

“Well, here we are,” Alayne said, giving a guilty start. She’d hoped to be able to avoid him today, still feeling horrible for what she had let herself hope for last night. “Did you make up with Ta’sia last night?”

“What? Oh, well, we talked, yes,” he said guardedly, not knowing what was going on but sensing he was walking into quicksand. “Actually, I’d like to meet your sweetheart now,” he laughed, wishing he could scream.

“What sweetheart?”

“The one you had in your room yesterday evening.”

“Oh. That was me and Jez’ral trying to scare people off. I guess it worked.”

“Wait...the two of you?” Ger’alin asked, his face hardening and his hand reaching for the hilt of his sword.

“Light of heaven and ancestors forbend, no!” Jez’ral shouted emphatically.

“So...,” Ger’alin asked, looking confused.

“Didn’t Ta’sia tell you about that? She came banging on my door, shouting at me that I’d better not be doing what it sounded like,” Alayne explained. “She thought it was pretty funny. It worked, too. All of those ardent sin’dorei scattered when they thought they didn’t have a chance with either of us. Which they don’t,” she said pointedly to Jez’ral. “I am out here to *work*.”

“Speaking of work,” Callie cut in, “Gerry, help me load this poor fellow up so I can cart him back to Thrallmar. Since you’re out here, you can help these two finish whatever it is they need to do.”

“Certainly, my dear,” he said, smiling brightly. “I am always happy to bash things for Alayne.”

“Meet us down at the bend in the Pools,” Alayne said, swallowing in distaste when Ger’alin and Callie picked the corpse up and began hauling it towards her horse. Hurrying off, she saw Ta’sia and another sin’dorei man topping the rise, drawing near. Waving to them, Alayne stopped, waiting to see if they would stop. The pair did, the man helping Ta’sia to climb off her hawkstrider, smiling at her in a rakish, possessive manner. Alayne frowned, wondering just what was going on.

“Is Ger’alin here?” the mage asked. Alayne pointed behind her, back where Callie and the Blood Knight were loading the orc corpse. “Zerith said he’d probably be out here. I came to help as well and Sama’ar here insisted on tagging along to protect me.”

“I see,” Alayne said flatly. “Sama’ar, follow me, please. I think Ger’alin and Ta’sia need to have some time to themselves.”

“Oh, he won’t be staying,” Ta’sia said lightly. “He just came to see me safe since it was on his way to Zangarmarsh. Thank you, Sama’ar.”

“I don’t have to leave just yet,” the man said. “Perhaps I can help you two lovely ladies with whatever business you have here in this dreadful swamp.”

“That’s not...,” Ta’sia began, feeling panic gripping her throat.

“Perhaps you can,” Alayne said. “Follow me. We’re here to gather samples from the demons and oozes inhabiting the far end. Ta’sia, we’ll wait for you and Ger’alin at the bend. So, Sama’ar, what experience do you have with...,” Alayne’s voice trailed off as she, Jez’ral, and the other mage walked down the side of the swamp. Ta’sia stamped her foot in anger. This was not how it was supposed to be!

“What are you doing here?” Ger’alin asked, sounding surprised when he walked down the incline to the Pools.

“That is a very good question,” Ta’sia grimaced, looking longingly after the three others. “I had planned to come out here and insist on you coming back to Thrallmar with me but Sama’ar has other ideas, apparently.”

“Sama’ar?”

“A man who’s not foolish enough to turn down a chance with me when he gets it,” she snorted. “I should kill you for embarrassing me like that.”

“I think you would have been more embarrassed if I took you up on your offer and forgot myself again,” Ger’alin laughed. “Still want to continue this game or should I let you slap me, call me a cad, and ride off with Sama’ar? Or would you prefer it if I challenged him to a duel like a proper, jealous lover?”

“Oh, you’re not getting off that easily, Ger’alin. I won’t stop until she hates you so much that you’ll regret having spurned me.”

“Fine, Ta’sia,” he sighed. “Have it your way. I must say I’m rather surprised, though, that you’ve held out so long. Four days, at least.”

“You’re being surprisingly civil for a man I have by the throat. A few words from me and your friends will never speak to you again!”

“And what would making you angry enough to speak those words gain me? If you want to carry out the charade that we’re a happy couple, I’ll play along, woman. In front of the others, at least. But I know you; in another few days, you’ll show yourself to be exactly what I knew you were three minutes after speaking with you.”

“We’ll see about that,” she muttered. “What are you doing?” she hissed, seeing him fall to one knee and smile up at her.

“Forgive me if I have been ignoring you, my dearest. I have been pre-occupied with being out on the road and forgot myself. I’m begging you to forgive...oh, Alayne, I’m sorry. Are we making you wait too long?” he asked, turning to call out to the warlock who was walking back towards them.

“What are you doing?” Ta’sia asked, feeling disoriented.

“Giving you no excuse to leave,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth as Alayne smiled and waved at them, the frown she’d been wearing evaporating.

“Good, he’s coming to his senses,” she thought to herself. “I knew he cared for her, truly. He was just...afraid of something, I suppose. Disrupting his friendships. Maybe he thought we wouldn’t like her. What is she frowning so hard for?”

“We’re coming,” he said loudly, dragging Ta’sia after him. “Stay behind me and try not to get hurt,” he cautioned. “These fellows can be mean. I would hate for you to get hurt thought I wouldn’t mind having to take care of you,” he said, his voice thick with honey as they approached Alayne. Ta’sia’s breath caught in her throat when she glimpsed the warlock’s face. Beneath the plastered on smile, sparkling in her eyes...the woman was head over heels in love with Ger’alin! The mage growled to herself; she would need to revise her plans. Ger’alin was acting like a perfect gentlemen in front of Alayne, careful to never display his temper or his distaste for her in front of the warlock. She could just picture forcing him to confess only to have Alayne kiss him for it! That would never do. Thinking furiously, she pulled herself closer to Ger’alin. She saw a way out of her predicament and a way to gain what she wanted...if only she could make it work.

~\*~\*~\*~

“That,” Jez’ral said when the others finally joined him and Sama’ar, “is what we call ‘a whole lotta demon.’”

“He’s big,” Alayne agreed. “But, the bigger they are, the harder they fall.”

“You’re both insane,” Ta’sia muttered.

“Maybe if we worked together, we could enslave him long enough to take out the others he has gathered around him. They’d turn on him, weakening him for us.”

“That is going to feel like being stretched on the rack,” Jez’ral winced. “But, I don’t see any other way myself. You three, come here,” he said louder, motioning the others over. Ger’alin kept a firm arm around Ta’sia’s shoulders, making Sama’ar raise his eyebrows in wonder. Alayne grinned; the woman had obviously gotten what she wanted by making Ger’alin jealous. That must have been what bringing the other mage out here was all about. To remind Ger’alin that she was a desirable woman. Alayne made a mental note to remember that trick in case she ever needed to use it herself. It certainly seemed effective from the way Ger’alin was sticking by Ta’sia’s side. The warlock forced herself to ignore the jealous bile curdling in her stomach and smiled, winking at the other woman in a conspiratorial manner. Ta’sia grinned and then blinked, hearing what Jez’ral was saying. Alayne wiped her own face; this was no time to be thinking about such inconsequential things, she told herself firmly.

“So, what will happen to the two of you?” Ger’alin asked, his mien serious after Jez’ral explained what they were going to try.

“At worst? You’ll have to rig up a couple of litters and drag us back to Thrallmar or Falcon Watch.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Sama’ar said, siding with Ger’alin. “Demons that big are nothing to play around with.”

“Why thank you, young mage. I wouldn’t have known, being a warlock and all,” Jez’ral sneered. “We can do it. Just remember to try to wake us before you kill it. Come on, Alayne. Let’s sit down and get started.” The three stood around them protectively, spells and sword at the ready in case this backfired. Alayne and Jez’ral closed their eyes, joined their hands, and sent their minds out, trying to force their wills on the giant red demon. Alayne grunted as it resisted their first attempt and began looking around for the warlocks. Jez’ral pressed on, succeeding in enslaving it, grateful that Alayne was with him to give the orders. It took all of his focus just to keep the demon under control. The woman whimpered whenever

the demon was struck by one of his fellows. The other Nether beings had turned and begun attacking their master as soon as they felt his will over them vanish. Alayne forced herself to ignore the resonating pangs and ordered the demon to fight on, its power quickly decimating the others. Once it stood alone on the platform, Ger'alın, Ta'sia, and Sama'ar moved closer, casting their spells and hacking at the creature while it was still docile.

"Augh!" Jez'ral cried out at a particularly deep bite of the blade, his control slipping. Alayne tried to force her will on the demon and was repelled. Opening her eyes and letting go of Jez'ral's hands, she staggered to her feet and began running up the platform, casting her own spells to help bring the creature down before it could kill anyone. Jez'ral staggered behind her, nearly pulling her down when he tried to steady himself by grabbing at her arm. She heard Ger'alın cry out in pain as the demon smashed its fist into his shield. The shield fell from his numb, nerveless grasp as his arm hung limply at his side. He stared at it in disbelief for a split second, giving the demon enough time to sweep him off his feet, sending him rolling off the platform and into the Pools. Alayne roared in anger and redoubled her efforts to bring the brute down, letting the heated violence she'd once torn herself in half to repress flow through her, desperate to be done with the fight so she could help Ger'alın. Edging closer to the side, she glanced down, grateful to see the paladin pulling himself out of the brackish water, his broken arm folded against him. Turning her full attention back to the fight, she cast again and again, her shadowy bolts exploding on the creature's chest while ice held it fast and pure, crystalline arcane bolts flew like arrows at it. Before long, the demon swayed, falling in a heap that shook the platform and made waves in the Pools below.

"Ger'alın!" Ta'sia screamed, running down the platform to help him. Alayne beat her there, diving off into the water and swimming to him. The mage smiled inwardly at the look of concern and worry on the warlock's face. Skirting the edge of the greenish-grey waters, Ta'sia hurried to Ger'alın's side, taking his good hand in both of hers and holding it against her chest. "Oh, Ger'alın, are you all right?" she asked.

"I'll be fine," he grimaced. "Just need to get to Zerith."

"You can't ride to Thrallmar with your arm like that," Alayne pointed out. "Here, try to sit up. We'll make a litter like Jez'ral suggested."

"I'm not riding in a litter. Set the arm," he said, gritting his teeth. "It doesn't have to be perfect; just stable."

"But..."

"Just do it, woman!" he shouted. Alayne glanced at Ta'sia and nodded. Motioning for the mage to hold Ger'alın's shoulder steady, Alayne took hold of his elbow and, using the skills she'd learned for mending skeletons while with the Scourge, realigned the bone as quickly and painlessly as she could.

"Ger'alın?" she whispered softly, sighing when she saw that he had blacked out. "We'll have to drag him back, regardless," she sighed. "Maybe Jez'ral and Sama'ar can carry him. Here, help me get his armor off."

Ta'sia nodded and helped the other woman unbuckle the straps holding the plate together. Whenever she saw Alayne's worried look, she smiled to herself. This was so perfect it almost seemed planned.

~\*~\*~\*~

"He'll probably sleep the rest of the day," Zerith predicted after he left Ger'alın's room. "That was a bad break. Good job on setting it, though," he said, turning to Ta'sia. "He might have gone into shock if he'd tried to ride with it unset."

"I didn't set it," she said. "Alayne did. I want to talk with her," the mage said, glaring at Zerith, "about other things she's done for him."

“She’s in her room, lying down,” Zerith said, pointing down the hallway. “She didn’t sleep last night and she should know better than to wear herself out like this with no sleep.”

“Well, I’ll be leaving soon anyway,” Ta’sia said, “but I need to clear things up with her, woman to woman, before I go.”

“Leaving? Oh, when Ger’alin wakes up, you mean?”

“No. He can stay out here for all I care. I’ve had enough of his ignoring me, of his adventuring around, of his rudeness, his temper, and his roving gaze. If he wants to bed that warlock, then that is fine with me!”

“Wait, him and *Alayne*? That’s just not possible,” Zerith protested.

“You haven’t seen the way she looks at him,” Ta’sia sneered. “And, to think, she was so nice to me while stealing my man right from under my nose! Well, good luck to both of them.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Would I joke about something like this?” Ta’sia asked, raising an eyebrow. “Your sweet little sister is a home wrecker. I want to make certain she knows I know before I go. I deserve better than this!” she huffed, turning on her heel and striding down the hallway, leaving Zerith staring after her in shock. Ta’sia bit her lip to keep from laughing out loud. This was easier than she’d thought it would be. Now just to twist the knife in the warlock a little and she could wash her hands of the whole lot of them, secure in the knowledge that Alayne would never let herself look at Ger’alin again. Raising her fist, she pounded on the door, adopting an angry, jealous expression.

“Yes?” Alayne said tiredly, pulling open the door. Ta’sia pushed it the rest of the way open, not caring that she’d shoved Alayne onto the floor by doing so. Storming into the room, Ta’sia slammed the door shut and rounded on the warlock.

“Do you think I’m a complete fool?” the mage demanded, taking the initiative.

“Why...what would I think that for?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, little harlot. I saw how you were looking at him today. I’ve seen how you stare at him, your heart in your eyes. How long has he been running around on me with you?”

“We’re just friends...,” Alayne protested.

“Oh, just friends. I see. Just friends who drop everything to run off to Outland together without so much as a word to me. Just friends who sneak off together all the time. Just friends who stare at each other like guilty lovers. I see. Just friends.”

“I would never...”

“Yes you would,” Ta’sia cut her off. “Don’t you dare deny what is as plain as the nose on your ugly little face! Well, you can have him, if you want him. If you can keep him. Just think; if he’ll cheat on me, a woman he swore he loved, what won’t he do to you?”

“But we never...I would never...Ta’sia, I swear, I wouldn’t!”

“I don’t believe you, you little liar. You may have everyone else fooled with that simpering sweet girl act of yours but not me. You tell that lout that I’ve left when he wakes up. Tell him I give you both my blessing, may you choke on it!”

Turning, she jerked open the door, making Zerith and Dar’ja fall into the room. Stepping over them, her head held high, Ta’sia strode out of the inn, mounted her hawkstrider, and, smiling at Sama’ar, turned back west to the Dark Portal.

“So, you got rid of that oaf?” Sama’ar laughed.

“I did more than that. I’m so glad you came along,” she cooed. “He never knew how to treat a lady...”

Zerith sighed as he stroked the top of Alayne's head. Dar'ja held a cold, damp cloth to the back of his sister's neck, praying it would calm the woman down. Alayne was rocking back and forth, sobbing wildly. "Just tell me the truth, Alayne. I won't be angry. Did the two of you ever..."

"No!" Alayne sobbed. "He thinks of me like a little sister, Zerith! He would never look at me that way! Even if I sometimes...but I won't anymore! I'm sorry! I couldn't help it! It was just spring!"

"Wait, *he's* the one you have a crush on?" Dar'ja asked, looking surprised and happy.

"I won't anymore! I promise! I'll stop right now! I just have to figure out how to stop caring for him! Go tell her that I'm sorry and I'll leave!"

"Alayne, she's gone."

"He's going to hate me. It's all my fault. If I had never...she wouldn't have thought that...and she wouldn't be leaving him!"

"What is going on?" Callie asked, concerned and frightened.

"I'm a horrible person!" Alayne cried. "Just go away all of you and leave me alone!" she shouted, shoving them away and diving into her bed.

"What is going on here?" Jez'ral muttered, peering into the room. "What has her so upset this time?"

"Go away!" she shouted from beneath the covers. Jez'ral rolled his eyes and stormed down to his own room.

"Maybe we'd better," Zerith sighed. "Alayne, I want to talk to you when you've calmed down. Promise me that you won't run off or do anything until we've talked, okay?"

"Will you go?"

"If you promise."

"I promise. Now go!"

Out in the hallway, Zerith sighed and ran a hand over his face. "This has been a day I certainly won't forget for the rest of my life."

"What's going on?" Callie repeated.

"Short version: Ta'sia accused Alayne of trying to steal Ger'alın from her. Alayne swears she'd never do anything like that and, to be honest, I *know* she wouldn't. But Ta'sia wouldn't listen to me. She went in there, chewed out Alayne, and then left. Ger'alın will have a conniption when he wakes up."

"She's gone? Oh. Thank. The. Light!" Callie sighed, letting her head thump against the wall in relief.

"Why do you sound so grateful?" Zerith asked, his brow furrowing in confusion and anger. "Ger'alın will be heart-broken."

"No, he won't. He'll be overjoyed," Callie muttered. "It's been driving him crazy, having her following him around so much."

"But she's his..."

"No, she's not and she never was," Callie snapped. "Frankly, now that she's gone, I can tell you the truth about her without having to worry too much. Come on, let's go into your room. This could..."

"What is she crying about now?" Jez'ral demanded, sticking his head out in the hallway. "And why are the three of you standing outside my room? Does it say 'Conference Room, By All Means Talk Just Loudly Enough To Keep Me Awake' on the door or something?"

"You can come along, too," Callie growled irritably, grabbing the man by the arm and dragging him after her. "I think this will explain a lot of things that have been going on lately."

~\*~\*~\*~

“I’m going to kill him,” Zerith announced, balling his hands into fists and pounding on the desk. “If I don’t kill him, at the very least I’m going to re-break his arm for him! How long has he been hiding this from all of us?”

“Since Desolace, I think,” Callie answered, careful to move and block the door in case Zerith decided to make good on his threats.

“He should have told me!”

“He was afraid of exactly this reaction.”

“I wouldn’t be so upset if he’d told me the truth,” Zerith growled. Dar’ja put a calming hand on his back and Jez’ral stared at him.

“I’ve heard about brothers being protective of their sisters, but this is a bit much, don’t you think?” Jez’ral said dryly.

“I’m not upset about that at all!” Zerith raged. “I’m upset that he lied to us! If he’d told us the truth, none of this would be happening. Alayne wouldn’t be in there convinced she’s the next thing to an eredar; I wouldn’t feel like such a fool for having made the effort to like that blasted woman; my wife wouldn’t have had to keep me up four nights running complaining that this wasn’t what she had hoped for... To think, all this time, he just let us sit here and think he was being cruel and callous when it was her who was... ugh! I’m mad at him for making me ever get mad at him!”

“He didn’t say anything because, at first, Alayne was so ill she hardly knew what was going on around her and he did not want you having to worry about *him*. Then, we thought she was dead and he didn’t want to tell you because he didn’t want to add to your grief or make you feel like you needed to offer him any kind of comfort. That’s a big part of why he left that day. He didn’t even tell me how he’d been feeling until the morning after Ta’sia... well, by then, I think half of Stranglethorn knew before I did! And do you see me getting upset about it?”

“To go through all that, alone...,” Zerith sighed. “Well, they’ll make a matched pair for certain. Alayne can be as stubborn as he is about trying to protect everyone, sometimes. That’s ultimately what broke her, made her easy prey to that illness... but we’ll talk about that another time. It’s her story to tell, really. Okay, I’ll accept that reasoning as to why he didn’t say anything before, but why keep it secret now?” he asked, staring relentlessly at Callie.

“Because he never got the chance to,” the Forsaken sighed. “He wanted to wait a bit, give Alayne time to recover from her injuries and get back to normal before he sprung it on her. Then Ta’sia showed up and, the next thing either of us knew, you guys were singing her praises and treating her like one of the family. She held it over his head like a club, that you liked her and that if he told you what was really going on, you’d hate him for it.”

“What an insufferable little...,” Zerith grated. “Yes, we thought she was sweet and we were trying to be happy for him because that’s what we thought he’d want. She told us the reason he’d never told us about her was because he was afraid we wouldn’t like her and then he wouldn’t have us for friends or some such nonsense that seemed plausible at the time but doesn’t, now.”

“So... do you hate him?” Callie asked.

“No!” Zerith said in shock. “I’m a little put out with him, yes. Hate him? No. As a matter of fact, I had been hoping that he and Alayne would wind up together. He is the only other man I know of who can knock sense into her when she needs it.”

“Too bad she’s feeling like she’s just killed someone,” Dar’ja muttered, “and that he’s out cold, still. We could make both of them feel better by locking them in a room together and telling them what we know.”

“How would that make her feel better? Wouldn’t she feel worse knowing that the whole time, Ger’alin was in love with her?” Jez’ral asked. “Isn’t that why she’s in there sobbing like it’s the end of the world? Because she’s feeling guilty as sin for having a crush on him, thus giving Ta’sia the ammunition to use against them both?”

“Wait, she...,” Callie asked, sounding stunned. “Oh, this is great. This is greater than the greatest great thing ever.” The others turned and stared at the Forsaken. “I have just had the most wonderful idea. Dar’ja, remember how you once told me you still wanted to get back at them for that centaur wedding in Desolace? Well, here’s what we’re going to do. They’ll thank us for it later, I promise.”

The three sin’dorei listened attentively to the Forsaken as she outlined what would possibly go down in the scrolls of Silvermoon as the Greatest Practical Joke In History.

“That...is evil,” Zerith laughed, rubbing his hands with glee. “Too bad it has absolutely no chance of working.”

“Have I ever told you how much I love your devious mind, Callie?” Dar’ja giggled.

“Were you born this twisted, or is it a result of the Plague?” Jez’ral asked, hiding a smile. “I’ll go along with it for my part as long as it doesn’t interfere too much with our work out here.”

“You’ll have all day tomorrow to get caught up,” Callie chortled. “Then the fun begins. And, it will, work, Zerith. For now, I’d better get to Orgrimmar.”

“No, it won’t. Why are you going there?” Zerith asked.

“Because you are looking at the Official Ambassador Extraordinaire to the Mag’har orcs. Long story. I’ll tell you about it another time,” the Forsaken said over her shoulder as she skipped out of the inn.

~\*~\*~\*~

“Are you asleep?” Zerith whispered when he ducked his head in to Alayne’s room after Callie had left.

“No,” she sighed, shifting and rolling on her back, turning away from the wall. “I don’t think I’ll ever sleep again.”

“I can mix you something if you want,” he offered, walking over and sitting on the edge of her bed. She pushed herself up and leaned against the headboard, reaching up and wiping tears from her cheeks. “I have to tell you something,” he grinned, looking around conspiratorially.

“What?”

“I *hated* that woman.”

“Zerith!” she said, shocked. “That was his first love!”

“Ger’alin’s first love is either drinking or hitting things with his sword,” Zerith laughed. “I think she was way down the list.”

“He’s going to be furious with me.”

“I don’t think he will be,” her brother said comfortingly. “Trust me; he seemed eager enough to get away from her. I think that they just weren’t right for each other and you should be grateful that she’s gone. He probably will be. Tomorrow morning, you should go down and give him a hug and tell him that you are there for him if he is upset.”

“I’m never going to be alone with him again!” she said hotly. “I don’t know where she got the idea that I would ever stoop to anything like that, but I’m not making the same mistake again! He’d be disgusted if he knew...”

“Alayne,” Zerith said, smiling someone condescendingly. His sister shot him an annoyed glance but kept silent. “I don’t think he’d be disgusted at all.” Alayne rolled her eyes elaborately and snorted, making her thoughts on the subject clear. “Have you looked in a

mirror lately, my sweet little sister? What man, other than me, of course, wouldn't want to hear that you had a crush on him?"

"Oh Light," she muttered, turning away and burying her face under the covers. "First Mir'el and Jez'ral and now you! He. Thinks. Of. Me. Like. You. Do. Zerith. I am not going to flirt with him, attempt to seduce him, get him drunk, start wearing low cut robes slit up clear to my armpits, or do anything else to make a complete fool of myself! It's. Just. Spring. It. Will. Pass."

"And if it doesn't?" he asked softly. "If Ger'alın's the one you're supposed to be with? If he felt the same way you do?"

"It will, he's not, and he doesn't!"

"He followed you out here. He didn't even wait for the rest of us to get finished packing before he hopped over to Undercity, took the zeppelin, and was galloping for Outland."

"He likes adventuring! That's what she said!"

"He certainly seemed ticked off when you kept slipping out of his grasp."

"He thinks I'm a simple-minded fool who can't cross the street without help! And he's right!"

"He was absolutely miserable when you vanished last year."

"So were you!"

"You have an answer for everything," he laughed, slightly exasperated. "Fine, at least tell me when you realized you had this crush."

"I don't want to talk about this," she moaned.

"Well, I will sit here all night until you do," he returned. Alayne called his bluff, pulling the covers down to her shoulder, closing her eyes, and trying to go to sleep. Zerith, for his part, scooted to the foot of the bed, pulled his legs up, and began counting silently. Before he'd reached 'fifty,' his sister sighed, sat back up, and glared at him. Zerith just raised his eyebrows, folded his arms over his chest, and waited for her to begin.

"Honestly, I want to say it started a few weeks ago when I was wandering around, looking for a quiet place to get some reading done."

"Reading? A romance novel?" he teased.

"A treatise on advanced demonic summoning and higher demonic entities!" she replied caustically. "I was trying to figure out how they tap into the arcane currents in the Twisting..."

"You lost me after 'summoning,'" he grinned. "Why would that make you realize you had a crush on Ger'alın?"

"Because I was looking for a place to read and went down to the lake where he was practicing his sword forms...without his shirt on," she mumbled, blushing.

"Oh? What does he look like? Without his shirt?"

"That's not important! I just...saw him and...started thinking about how nice he was...how he would put up with me being...me. How he was never afraid of me and I never worried about scaring him the way I worried about scaring you. About how he knows so many things I don't! How he's so intelligent and quick-thinking; how fun he is to be around and how much I enjoyed being around him, playing pranks on or with him. How much I just wished he would drop that blasted sword and sweep me off...never mind about that!" she muttered, clearing her throat. "After that day...I wanted more than anything to just be around him. But, whenever I was...I felt like a fool and I was terrified he would find out just how much I liked being around him. Then I saw him with Ta'sia and I realized that he would never think of me as anything other than an annoying little twit who he had to keep pulling out of trouble! Please don't tell him, Zerith," she begged, tears coming to her eyes. "If he knew...he'd leave!"

“Wouldn’t that be better, then? If he left, you’d get over him.”

“I don’t want him to leave! I... I’d rather go on the rest of my life feeling miserable just to have the chance to spend a few moments with him as his friend than have him leave and me stop feeling the way I do now.”

“You know,” Zerith said gently, standing up and moving to tuck her in. Leaning over to kiss her on the forehead the way he had his sisters when they were little, he grinned, “for someone who just has a little crush, you sound an awful lot like you’re in love,” he teased lightly, hurrying out of the room before she could find something to throw at him.

~\*~\*~\*~

“You’re taking this remarkably well,” Zerith said the next morning when Ger’alin just shrugged and muttered something about not deserving her in response to being told that Ta’sia had left.

“It’s not like we were in love or anything,” Ger’alin muttered, trying to hide his relief. “We were just together for a little while. Light, man, we’re not all like you and Dar’ja, destined to be with the first person we come across in our travels.”

“So, you’re not upset at all?”

“No.”

“Not even a little bit.”

“No.”

“Not a tiny smidgen of upset anywhere?”

“I’ll be upset in a minute if you don’t let me finish eating in peace,” the Blood Knight grinned. “I’m relieved more than anything else that she’s gone. Zerith, I need to tell you the truth, actually. See, she and I were...,”

“I know. Callie told me.”

“When did she tell you? And how much?”

“Just the basics. You met, she chased you. Callie didn’t have much time to explain it last night.”

“Is that why Ta’sia left? Callie telling you the truth?”

“No. Actually, Ta’sia left after tearing Alayne a new one, accusing her of all kinds of things involving you. Alayne denied it, of course...”

“I have never touched your sister, Zerith, and I never would,” Ger’alin said quickly.

“I know,” the priest smiled, stifling a laugh that would give it all away. “That’s why I trust you around her. Well, Alayne feels just horrible. She thinks she broke you and the love of your life up.”

“I’ll go set her straight right now.”

“Finish eating, at least. Besides, she’s with Jez’ral right now and they’ve hung the ‘Do Not Disturb Unless Kil’jaeden Shows Up’ sign on the door. He said they’d be testing the samples today and are not to be disturbed. Callie should be back shortly and, if you two want, we can either spend the day waiting for two exhausted warlocks to stagger down for a late supper or we can go wander around.”

“Where’d Callie go?”

“Orgrimmar. Apparently, she’s become some kind of orcish envoy. She promised to tell us about it when she got back.”

“I should get my arm broken more often,” Ger’alin laughed. “I wake up to find out that the most annoying woman in existence has left me in peace and that my friends know the truth about her and don’t hate me over it. On top of that, Callie gets some kind of diplomatic promotion. Maybe if I break the other arm, someone will decide to tell me what was in that book you all have been passing around between yourselves.”

“Do you really want to know? I’ve got it up in my room and, frankly, Dar’ja and I are pretty much finished with it. It’s got some good bits but then, it’s filled with a lot of garbage as well.”

“Sure,” Ger’alin said uncertainly. Zerith nodded and hurried back up to his room, returning with the book. Ger’alin took it gingerly, feeling a little let-down. What he’d imagined would probably be much better than whatever actually was in the book itself. Staring at the outside cover, he smiled, wondering if he really did want to read it.

“Go on, read it if you want,” Zerith urged. “It’s certainly educational.”

“Oh, alright,” Ger’alin laughed, rolling his eyes and opening the book. Zerith’s head hit the table as he started laughing uproariously at the way Ger’alin’s eyes bulged out of his head. “Of all the things I imagined, I didn’t imagine this,” the Blood Knight muttered breathlessly. “Who...how...what...is that *possible*?” he asked, pointing to a passage.

“It requires a lot of dexterity,” Zerith replied. “So, staying in to read or going out?”

“Yes,” Ger’alin muttered absently, turning a page.

~\*~\*~\*~

Jez’ral sighed and plucked the sample out of Alayne’s hand. Pulling a handkerchief out of one of his pockets, he wiped the sweat off her face and moved the samples away from her before she could pick out another one. “If there’s no resonance,” he said, “then channeling at them until you’re exhausted won’t create one.”

“Nothing,” she muttered irritably. “None of them have any resonance with the orcs. We’ll have to go elsewhere and see what we can find. Possibly the demons in Nagrand or Shadowmoon Valley are the cause of this. Though...how it traveled this far is beyond me.”

“What do you know of orcs and their culture? It could have been transmitted during...”

“That they aren’t nomadic like the tauren tend to be,” she replied. “So that’s not going to explain it,” knowing where he was going. “Light, I hope we didn’t capture and torture those poor beasts for nothing. Well, I’d better get started on these notes,” she sighed, gathering the books and empty sheets of paper she would need.

“Alayne, you should take a break and go eat something,” Jez’ral said. “You’ve been cooped up here all day.”

“No, I need to get finished with this. If you’re that worried about it, you can bring me something back. I’ll eat while I work.”

“You know, I heard you last night. You and Ta’sia, at least. I heard what she said to you and I’m going to tell you now that avoiding everyone isn’t going to solve anything. It’s not your fault if that woman was suffering from paranoid delusions and accused you of having designs on her lover. Punishing yourself as if it were true isn’t going to make things better for anyone.”

“I guess you’re right,” she sighed. “Besides, I’m starving half to death. Come on.” She led the way towards the stairs, stopping, her breath catching in her throat when she was halfway down. Without another word, she raced back up the stairs and had locked the door to Jez’ral’s room before he so much as caught a glimpse of the Blood Knight sitting across from Zerith, his back to the stairway.

“You know what I would just kill for?” Ger’alin was saying, gesturing with a fork. “That roast she used to make every week. I would commit cold-blooded *murder* for that.”

“It was really good,” Dar’ja agreed.

“The bread wasn’t half bad either,” Zerith said. “I never could figure out her secret.”

“Honey,” Dar’ja said.

“Yes?” Zerith replied.

“No, that was the secret,” Dar’ja laughed. “Jez’ral,” she said, seeing the man juggling two bowls of soup, “are you two going to stay up there until the Legion comes?”

“Hopefully not,” the warlock answered, not pausing as he climbed the stairs. “Someone has way too much of a work ethic. Little workaholic.”

“I’ll help you with that,” Ger’alin offered, standing up and walking up the stairs. “I’d like to explain things to her.”

“Here, then,” Jez’ral said, handing him a bowl and digging in his pocket for the extra key. “And tell her she’s allowed to go to sleep when she gets tired. We’ll be leaving for Zangarmarsh tomorrow and she won’t want to be half-asleep when she gets to see night elves.” Ger’alin took the bowl and key and, careful not to spill any, raised his hand to knock on the door. Changing his mind, he put the key in the lock, turned and opened the door, tiptoeing in as quietly as he could, trying to mimic the warlock’s light tread. He smiled, feeling dazzled when he saw that Alayne was hunched over her desk, scribbling furiously. Walking up to her, he set the bowl down on the desk.

“Thanks,” she muttered hoarsely. “I just couldn’t go down there and face...,”

“Face who?” he asked, looking confused when she jumped out of the chair and was halfway across the room, staring at him, wide-eyed, her face pale and her mouth hanging open. “Face who? Me?”

“I am so, so sorry,” she said, her lips quivering. She bit them and lifted her hands to wipe the tears streaming down her face away. “I don’t know where she got the idea that I would ever, ever do anything like that!”

“Alayne, Ta’sia hated both of us, you and me. If she could do something to hurt either of us, she would and she did.”

“She didn’t hate you!”

“Yes, she did. She lied to you and to everyone else. She and I were never together. I embarrassed her in Stranglethorn months ago and she’s had it out for me ever since. Look, it’s a long story,” he sighed. “I met her in Stranglethorn about two months before Callie and I ran across Ber’lon. For a split second, when I saw her, I thought it was you, back from the dead. I walked up and smiled at her, spoke with her, and realized it wasn’t you. She, evidentially, was interested in pursuing me after that. I don’t know what I did to give her the impression I was interested in her at all, though,” he lied, remembering that night and feeling the heat of shame and guilt burn his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Alayne said, drawing a shuddering breath of relief.

“I wanted to, but it wouldn’t have done any good with her around. She’s very convincing when she wants to be. I had to wait until she’d gotten bored with me and left before I could say anything. Besides, no use hurting her any more than I had to. She wanted to make me feel bad for making her feel bad and better to just let her get what she wanted and leave,” he said, feeling guilty at only telling half the truth.

“So, you’re not angry with me?”

“No. There’s nothing you could do to make me angry with you. I’m just sorry that she took you on that guilt trip. I know you’d never think of me like that,” he laughed carelessly but keeping an eye on her face for any hopeful sign. “You wouldn’t settle for an oaf like me,” he continued, feeling empty and hollowed out when she just stared at him. “What, exactly, did she accuse you of?”

“Oh, you know, the usual stuff. Sneaking around with you, things like that,” Alayne said awkwardly, blushing. “I felt horrible about it; I didn’t know what I could have done to make her think that. Why does she hate us? I never did anything to her; what did you do, exactly, that embarrassed her so?”

“I said ‘no,’” Ger’alin chuckled. “That threw her for a loop. Her friends wouldn’t leave her alone about getting rejected. Light, she wouldn’t even leave me alone when she

found out I was in Silvermoon. I wanted to kill her when she walked up to me and dropped in my lap in Farstrider Square a few days ago. As for you...she probably hates you because you attracted just about every sin'dorei man in the area without even trying. She's jealous of you, I think."

"Jealous? Of me? The woman who is every man's little sister," Alayne snorted. "She's crazy."

"Yes, she probably is," Ger'alın agreed, glad to be moving away from the more dangerous topic but feeling dejected that Alayne didn't seem to notice him at all. Gesturing towards the bowl, he said, "You might want to eat that before it gets cold. Otherwise, I will pour it down your throat myself," he grinned. "Or I'll just toss you over my shoulder and carry you to the nearest body of water like I did last time."

"Yes, thank you," Alayne replied, sitting back down in the chair and alternating between eating and writing. "I'm eating, see?" she joked. "No need to stand over me."

"I just want to see what this research is about. What in the name of the Titans is a 'resonant matrices emanating from an extra-planar dimension?'"

"A really fancy way of saying 'a pretty bolt of lightning that came out of the Twisting Nether.' If you want to read over my shoulder while I write, you can. Just don't interrupt me too often. I'd like to get done before midnight. We get to meet night elves tomorrow."

Ger'alın nodded and stood quietly, his hand on the back of her chair, leaning over slightly so that it would look as if he were reading over her shoulder instead of staring at her, wishing he could tell her the whole truth without destroying the little bit he had with her.

~\*~\*~\*~

"You look awfully cheerful this morning," Jez'ral muttered as he and Alayne finished loading the samples onto the fel steeds.

"It's hard not to be cheerful when you are about to have a dream come true," she giggled, knowing it was more than that but not wanting to say anything, fearing that if Ger'alın were to find out, he'd be disgusted. "Night elves," she laughed. "I'm actually going to get to talk to some of them and learn more about our people's history. Do you know that I have dreamed of hearing it from those distant legends, Malfurion and Tyrande, since I was old enough to remember?"

"I doubt you'll find either of them out here," Jez'ral said. "Tyrande is busy trying to hold together their society back in Teldrassil, I think it's called now. I've not heard anything about the legendary Malfurion Stormrage though, rumor has it his twin, Illidan, is out here, somewhere."

"That would be wonderful, wouldn't it? To actually meet Illidan Stormrage. I wonder if he would be able to help us with our research."

"I don't know, Alayne," Jez'ral said honestly. "The legends say he can be dangerous; that he's even more hopelessly addicted to the arcane than we are. I know that Prince Kael'Thas allied with him to try to take down Arthas during the last war, but the legends say..."

"Legends aren't always true," Alayne argued. "Time distorts them, twisting them into monsters and giants. The key to understanding history is to strip away the layers until you uncover the truth lurking beneath. Often, it's not nearly as interesting as you want to believe but sometimes the truth is stranger than anything you've ever dreamed," she finished, sounding for all the world as if she were giving a lecture.

"Will that be on the test, Head-Mistress?" Callie asked, making Alayne jump.

"Yes," the sin'dorei said quickly, laughing. "When did you get back?"

“Last night. You were asleep already. I heard about what happened,” Callie said, placing a hand on her friend’s arm. “Ta’sia is not worth losing any sleep over. Why, I saw her in Grom’gol already wrapped around that mage who came up to the Pools of Aggonar with her.”

“Doing exactly what she was accusing me of,” Alayne sighed. “I’m the world’s worst judge of character.”

“Let’s get a move on,” Jez’ral said. “I’d like to get on to Zangarmarsh and get a chance to gather a few plant samples before it gets too late in the day.” The others hurried to finish saddling their mounts and climbed up, Callie fighting to hide a grin at what she knew was waiting just outside the gates of Thrallmar.

“Light of heaven,” Zerith grunted, fighting to hide a knowing grin. Callie was determined to try her idea even if the priest knew it was doomed to failure. Still...it did give him an opening to try something else that might work...if he could pull it off...

“Who...what...?”

“Looks like the Disorder of Azeroth,” Ger’alin laughed. “Callie, did you round them up while you were in Orgrimmar?”

“I ran into Tau’re,” she explained, “and happened to mention, in passing, that I was coming back out here to be with you guys. Well...he sort of told someone else who told another who spread the word and, before I knew it, the zeppelin was chocked full of people convinced that you’re planning something and wanting to be part of it.”

“Well, we can make use of the extra muscle,” Jez’ral said dryly. “Come on, I just hope there’s enough room for everyone in Zangarmarsh.”