

“Night elves,” Alayne breathed as they descended into Zangarmarsh. Her smile grew wider every time she saw one of the fabled beings. She could barely contain a squeal of delight when she laid eyes on the moonwell.

“Be welcome to the Cenarion Refuge,” a night elven druid said, hiding his distaste for the sin’dorei behind a welcoming smile. “Who among you leads this band?”

“I do,” Zerith answered quickly, vaulting off his hawkstrider. “We are just travelers, passing through. We mean you no harm.”

“You are most welcome!” a tauren druid boomed, startling everyone. “We have been praying for just such a deliverance!”

“What do you mean?” Zerith asked, glancing around. “All seems peaceful enough here. Is there something we can help you with?”

“Yes, please let there be something we can help them with,” Alayne whispered beneath her breath, hoping that whatever it was would give her a chance to speak with the night elves frequently.

“The naga have taken over the lakes of Zangarmarsh and are draining them with some kind of foul machinery. The Circle would be most grateful if you could lead your band to disperse the naga to the north and south and destroy their infernal devices. They are threatening to cut off our water supply,” the night elven druid explained. “Will you aid us, sin’dorei priest?” he asked, sounding as if he had just bitten into a bitter fruit.

“Yes,” Zerith answered. “We will be glad to be of assistance to the Cenarion Circle. Ger’alin, Jez’ral, Tau’re, Davril, could the four of you come along with me? Sir, would you be so kind as to show us what you can of your enemies’ positions? The more information we can have now, the sooner we can drive them out. The rest of you,” he said, turning back to the small army following after, “should find places to sleep tonight and try not to annoy the Circle too much,” he said, glaring at his sister. Alayne adopted her most innocent “who, me?” expression, forcing him to hold back a laugh. Motioning for Dar’ja to come over to him, he quickly whispered something in her ear, smiled, and then walked off with the druids to begin learning more about the situation.

“What did he tell you?” Alayne asked Dar’ja as the two of them began moving through the crowd towards the inn.

“To keep an eye on you,” Dar’ja winked. “Come on, we’ll probably have to double up at the inn. Is it okay with you if we put Callie in with you?”

“Sure. Not like she sleeps anyway,” Alayne muttered. “Mind if I go look at the moonwell for a while? Maybe if I look pathetic enough, one of the night elves will take pity on me and tell me everything I want to know.”

“Just try not to annoy them too much,” Dar’ja laughed. Alayne shot her a wolfish grin and wandered over to the settlement’s moonwell, letting herself sense the energies emanating from it. “It feels... very similar to the Sunwell,” she whispered. “But the frequencies are completely different.”

“That is because the water of the moonwell has been blessed by Elune,” a night elven druid said softly, “and by her son, Cenarius.”

“Really?” Alayne asked, awed. “Is that true or is it a legend among your people?”

“It is true,” the night elf replied seriously. “The waters from the first moonwell...”

“What is she doing?” Callie asked Dar’ja as the pair of them moved to where they couldn’t be seen.

“Indulging herself in her one, true passion. She’s probably getting him to tell her the entire history of Azeroth according to the kaldorei. It’s not enough that I think she’s read every single history book in Silvermoon, oh no, she’s got to hear it from the lips of those who lived it, if she can.”

“I’ll go get the rooms, then. Is it on for tonight?”

“Zerith says so.”

“Okay. I’ll get spare keys then, as well,” the Forsaken giggled. “This is going to be the most amusing thing to happen in the history of amusing things.”

“If it works as we hope it will,” Dar’ja said. “Let’s not count our dragonlings before they’re hatched.”

“Have any of my pranks ever gone awry?”

“According to Ger’alin, yes.”

“Those don’t count, then.”

“Hey, where are you two going?” Dar’ja asked, seeing Alayne and the druid walking off together.

“I want to write this all down,” Alayne said. “Have you taken the rooms yet? Callie, you’re in with me tonight.”

“I was just going to get them now,” the Forsaken replied, jogging to the inn, sprinting to keep well ahead of Alayne.

“What are you two talking about anyway?” Dar’ja asked, stalling them.

“The battle of Mount Hyjal,” Alayne answered. “Var’thanos was there. He’s over *twelve thousand years old!*” she said in an awed whisper. “And, he knew Dath’Remar! He promised he would tell me about it since, according to him, we have most of it wrong. I’m glad I brought all those extra books,” she said. “I may run out of pages to write on. Twelve thousand years...” she said, sounding stunned beyond belief.

“You’re kind to put up with her,” Dar’ja said, watching out of the corner of her eye for Callie to come back out of the inn.

“It is not kindness to correct those who have erred,” Var’thanos said evenly. “And, though there is much mistrust and dislike between our peoples, Tyrande and Mai’ev did help young Kael and he, in turn, aided them. While we may be on different sides from time to time, we were once the same race and, perhaps, if more of your young ones are like this one here,” he said, putting a hand on Alayne’s shoulder, “you will listen to our wisdom.”

Dar’ja bit her tongue to hold back a retort that would have probably started a fight. Alayne winced but said nothing. She was more than willing to put up with the arrogance of the night elves if she could learn more about their history. Callie jogged back, handing a key to Alayne. “Up the stairs, second floor, fifth door to the right. There’s only one bed, though, but it’s *huge*. I’ve moved it so that it’s in the darkest corner in case I get sick of sitting or standing around tonight. Moonlight gives me a headache if I stare at it too much.”

“That’s all right,” Alayne laughed. “We’ll have a slumber party.”

“I haven’t had one of those in ages,” Callie giggled. “You can braid my hair and we’ll tell each other scary ghost stories and have a big pillow fight.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” the warlock grinned. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a lot of notes to take. So, Var’thanos, you said that the...” she asked, her voice trailing off as she and the druid strode towards the inn. Alayne was already reaching into her bag for a pen, ink, and something to write on.

“In the darkest corner, eh?” Dar’ja laughed.

“If he doesn’t see her until it’s too late, we’ve got them right where we want them,” Callie explained. “Zerith better be able to play his part tonight or else we’re all going to be busted.”

“He’s been practicing his outraged expression and lecture since you hatched this scheme,” Dar’ja chuckled, rubbing her hands together. “I don’t know why he keeps saying it’s not going to work. Come on, let’s go see what there is around here to keep ourselves occupied until the Pranking Hour.”

“Who’s that over there with Alayne?” Ger’alin asked, hoping he didn’t sound too jealous. The warlock was sitting at a table, her head together with one of the night elves.

“Var’thanos,” Callie answered. “I don’t see how she can put up with his haughty attitude. Apparently, he’s telling her his life story. It spans twelve centuries so they’ve been talking for a while.”

“Alayne and her obsession with history,” Jez’ral muttered. “Sometimes I wonder if I’ll catch her summoning something just to ask it questions like in the stories of old. Who would have thought someone so young would be interested in things so far in the past?”

“I see,” Ger’alin said slowly. “Well, I’m just about worn out. I think I’ll go get my room and just go to sleep. Never mind about supper.”

“You’re in with Jez’ral,” Callie said quickly. “I’ve got all of the keys. But, I’m not giving you yours until after you’ve eaten something. Your stomach rumbling will probably keep poor Jez’ral up all night.”

“Fine, fine,” Ger’alin grumbled, glancing over at Alayne. The woman smiled at him and waved, motioning for him and the others to join her. The night elf stood up and, bowing courteously, left. Alayne bent back over her book, scribbling in a few last notes before the others sat down. “What was so interesting about him?” Ger’alin asked, poking the woman in the shoulder.

“He knows so much,” she said, her voice bordering on worshipful. Ger’alin grimaced. “He was there when the first of our people were exiled. We had to agree to disagree about that subject,” she muttered. “I still can’t believe they...well, it’s been several millennia now, so arguing about it won’t make much difference. I wish there were a way to navigate the Maelstrom,” she whispered, staring off into space.

“Why would you want to do that?” Ger’alin asked.

“Apparently, that’s where the Well of Eternity is. Or where he thinks it wound up. I wish I could find a naga who wouldn’t try to stab me so I could see if they knew. Maybe if we could...no, it probably wouldn’t work,” she sighed. “Though, that one test before the voidwalker spawned on top of us gives me great encouragement that it can be done.”

“I see,” Ger’alin said, not understanding a word but content to listen to her speak. “Do you know what’s good here? I’m starving,” he announced. “First we spent hours poring over maps and arguing tactics. Then we had to go scout out the positions. Zerith’s got a great plan worked out. And, yes, Alayne, you get to get in on the action. He’s not putting you off in reserve.”

“That’s good,” she answered. “I’ve already eaten so I think I’ll just go see if Zerith will tell me what the plan is and then I’m going to sleep. If we’re going to be fighting, I want to be well-rested for it. Good night, Ger’alin, Callie, Jez’ral,” she said, smiling sweetly. Ger’alin watched her leave, his heart pounding so loudly he feared that everyone could hear it. He tore his gaze away, terrified she would be able to read his face if she turned back, and stared at the table. Callie rubbed his back in commiseration, keeping her own eagerness and anticipation tamped down firmly. It would never do to give the game away before the trick had been played. Jez’ral, knowing he would not be able to stifle his laughter much longer, simply stood up and walked over to find something to eat. He waved at Alayne again when he saw her leaving Zerith and Dar’ja, skipping up the stairs lightly, happy after a day of hearing legends explained and looking forward to a rousing battle. Callie startled him when she walked up beside him and slipped him a key.

“Second floor, second door to the left. I’ll take the floor. I just gave Ger’alin the key to his room. Get soup so he can eat fast. We have to get him up there before she falls asleep deeply enough to start babbling and give herself away.”

“Good, good. Come with me. You can help me carry the bowls back,” the warlock whispered, pocketing the key. “He won’t see her, will he?”

“Ger’alin is blind as a bat at night unless he spends several minutes letting his eyes adjust. Luckily, he’s so tired right now that all he really wants to do is fall asleep. Come on, we can’t miss the window,” she giggled, grabbing two bowls of soup from the cook and hurrying back across the room. Zerith and Dar’ja were sitting around the Blood Knight, going over the plans for tomorrow afternoon’s battle. Jez’ral kept quiet while they ate, feeling a thrill of nervous anticipation. He’d not participated in a good prank since he was their age and had forgotten the excitement that heated the blood.

Ger’alin ate with maddening slowness, it seemed. Time seemed to crawl by. Callie and Dar’ja shot each other worried glances behind the man’s back, hoping that Alayne would take her time falling asleep. Zerith chaffed his hands, wishing Ger’alin would hurry in the event that this long shot mad scheme did work. He’d figured that Ger’alin would be more than ready to go to sleep after the way he’d made the man run all over Zangarmarsh this afternoon and evening. He nearly sighed with relief when Ger’alin pushed his bowl away, and yawning said, “I think I’m going to head on to bed. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good night, Ger’alin,” Callie said smoothly. Zerith didn’t trust himself to speak without bursting into laughter. “Pleasant dreams,” she said, smiling to herself.

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Ger’alin hummed to himself quietly as he walked up the stairs to the second floor of the inn. Counting off the doors, he opened the fifth one to the right and walked in. Stopping for a moment to pull his shirt over his head, he wished idly he knew which room Alayne was in. “I’d put up with listening to her ramble on about history since creation just to hear her voice,” he thought to himself as he set his things by the door. Walking over to the wash basin, he poured some water out and washed his face, wishing that he felt up to waiting for a tub to be filled. Squinting in the bright moonlight, he quickly finished washing off the sweat and dust from running all over the area and turned, taking a second to orient himself. Moving slowly, groping almost blindly, he grunted when his foot hit the side of the bed. Feeling for the covers, he pulled them back and climbed in, rolling on his side and nearly biting his tongue when he saw a woman’s sleeping face on the pillow across from him.

“I am going to *kill* Callie!” Ger’alin groaned softly, rolling on his back and covering his eyes with his hand.

“Ger’alin, is that you?” Alayne asked, her voice thick with sleep.

“Go back to sleep, Alayne. Apparently, there’s been a bit of a mix up.”

“Hm-mmhm,” she sighed, drifting back off. Ger’alin lay absolutely still, terrified to wake her up further. When she started mumbling in her sleep, speaking words and phrases that were disjointed and chaotic, he heaved a sigh of relief and began to sit up slowly. He froze, the muscles in his neck and back quivering with the strain of holding him up, when the door began to creak open. Blinking against the sudden light streaming in from the hallway, he let his head fall back down when he recognized the Forsaken’s outline. “If you wake her up, Callie,” he muttered threateningly.

“She’s asleep?” Callie said, sounding disappointed.

“Yes, and she’ll stay asleep and I’ll stay alive if you’ll just close that door and let me get over on the floor. What was the big idea anyway?”

Callie waved frantically behind her back, motioning for Zerith to get out of the hallway and stay out of sight. “Just trying to help you tell her how you feel,” Callie said, thinking quickly on her feet.

“How does me climbing into her bed do that?” he asked in a careful undertone, forcing himself not to shout at the undead.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time?” Callie said, half-stating, half-asking. Zerith had been right. This wasn’t going to work. Ger’alin, like Alayne, was too hung up on proprieties to take advantage of the situation in the way the Forsaken had half-hoped they would. The rogue shot the priest standing down the hallway a confused, pleading look. Zerith smiled at her, shook his head knowingly, and walked back into his room. Callie turned her eyes back to the room in front of her.

“Well, it wasn’t. Imagine if she’d woken up...she’d kill me! Now, close that door. I’ll make up a pallet on the floor over there and we’ll just tell her we got our keys switched around.”

“You really want to stay in there with her?”

“I want nothing more than that. But, she’d freak out if she could see what was going on right now and I don’t want that so close the door, keep your trap shut, and I’ll explain what I was doing on the floor to her in the morning. And, Callie, no more pranks like this. She thinks of me as a brother, Light help me.”

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“What went wrong?” Dar’ja asked the next morning. Alayne and Ger’alin were still asleep, the Blood Knight curled up on the floor across the room and Alayne still wrapped up in her blankets, murmuring incoherently. Zerith had listened to the pair for several minutes, laughing when he noticed that they did seem to talk to each other in their sleep, one starting a string of nonsense that the other quickly picked up and elaborated upon.

“He saw her. I figured he would have been asleep before his head hit the pillow or that she would have woken up and they...never mind! When I opened the door to check to see if they were both asleep together, he caught me. I had to think quickly to keep him from killing me, waking her up, and making a worse scene than we got. She slept through it all, though, thank the Light. He was right about that; she would have panicked and thrown a fit if she’d really woken up.”

“He’s right. I tried to tell you that it wouldn’t work. Oh well, we’ll have to come up with another way to get those two married off, then,” Zerith sighed. “I don’t think that the outraged-brother-forcing-the-marriage trick is going to work here. Come on, let’s go get breakfast and try to come up with another idea.”

The three closed the door gently, careful not to wake either of the pair, and walked down to the main room. Sitting at a table, they discussed and discarded several elaborate plans, ranging from finding a centaur tribe to trying to figure out if there was a way to get around the “signed and duly witnessed contract in advance” part of the Proxy Marriage law. In frustration, Callie finally suggested finding a really strong aphrodisiac and spiking Alayne and Ger’alin’s food with it. Zerith dismissed the idea, saying, “Those only work if you believe they do, for the most part. If you don’t, or at least aren’t so inclined, then you might as well have spiked it with water for all the good it would do.” The bitterness in his tone and the sudden heat in Dar’ja’s cheeks said he spoke from experience.

“Well, I’m fresh out of ideas.”

“Maybe we should just tell them.”

“That may be the only way.”

“Just tell who what?” Alayne asked, sitting down on Zerith’s other side and nearly startling the wits out of both priest and Forsaken. “Callie, Ger’alin told me what you did. I think that you really should stop teasing him about what he said to get the centaurs to come after me in Desolace.”

“What did he tell you?”

“That you decided to stick him in with me since he and I shared a tent the whole time we were in Desolace. He said you wanted to sneak in and listen to us talk at each other in our sleep. Well, fine. I don’t mind sharing a room with my friend, even if he is a man. Just be up front about it next time so I don’t wake up and nearly faint when I see him on the floor.”

Callie chewed her lip worriedly but said nothing. Alayne poured a cup of tea and sipped at it while Zerith stared at his hands, wanting to blurt out everything. Priest and Forsaken nearly leapt out of their skins when Ger’alin sat down on Callie’s other side and set down a bowl of oatmeal. “So, looking forward to the battle?” Ger’alin asked.

“Yes,” Zerith said, sighing in relief. “Unless you’re planning to kill Callie for that nasty prank she pulled. That I would have to say I’m not looking forward to.”

“We’re not going to kill you,” Ger’alin said lightly to the Forsaken. “Oh, you’ll get what’s coming to you, scaring me half to death like that just so you could get a few laughs.”

“Maiming, however, is not out of the question,” Alayne said lightly. “Come on,” she muttered, “let’s go see if everyone’s ready to fight.”

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“We need a new plan,” Callie said. “One that is more foolproof than the last one.”

“We almost had them. I still can’t figure out what went wrong,” Dar’ja muttered.

“I’m out of ideas,” Zerith sighed, hoping to divert the two women long enough for him to finish fleshing out the details of his own scheme. “They’re both pretty upset about all of it. I don’t think they’ll be trusting any of us, especially Callie, for a little while. Maybe we should just sit them down and tell them we know everything.”

“That may be the best idea,” Jez’ral agreed. “Light knows they’re not going to figure it out on their own. I swear, sometimes Alayne can be so slow she goes *backwards*.”

“Ger’alin can be about as bad,” Callie giggled. “Okay, how about this? We get them drunk. Not that there’s anything to drink around here other than all this water,” she muttered, gesturing to the lake. Zerith bit his tongue, terrified she had figured out his plan. He sighed in relief when her face said she had no clue what he was thinking.

“How about we leave them alone, instead?” Zerith suggested suddenly, seeing the pieces fall into place. It would only work if everyone was convinced it wasn’t a prank. Healers had ways of getting people to do things they would *never* consider otherwise. “Either they’ll figure it out themselves or they’ll get over it. Either case, no harm, no foul. Dar’ja, could you go tell Alayne that I want her to head up the groups searching the corpses after the battle? We will need to see if we can find out who is really in control of the naga,” Dar’ja nodded and clucked her horse to a faster walk, catching up to the other two and passing along the request.

“Do you think we could just leave them alone?” Callie grinned. “You’re talking about us, Zerith. Leaving them alone just isn’t going to happen. I wonder what they’re talking about up there, their heads together like that.”

“No idea. Probably figuring out how to get back at us,” Zerith huffed, his mind working away as he considered the possibilities. He’d have to pay close attention and make certain neither of them got too cold... Ignoring the others as they plotted and planned, he continued on, figuring, weighing options, and arriving at a plan. Nodding to himself, he put his mind back on the battle to come.

Near the head of the column, Alayne and Ger’alin rode so close together that their knees nearly touched. “I saw some itchweed,” Alayne whispered. “Just a little of it in their clothes and they won’t be able to think straight for a day.”

“That’s pretty good. I saw a blackcap or three. Just a little of that sprinkled over a meal or into a drink and they’ll be running to the privy faster than you would believe.”

“I like the way you think.”

“Probably because it’s the same way you think.”

“I still can’t believe...”

“Don’t think about it,” he advised. “Best not to go into a battle upset or angry at anyone other than those you’re about to kill.”

“Still, the very idea...”

“Alayne, could we rehash this later, please? Battle,” he pleaded.

“Sure,” she said, staring at him uncomfortably. “Later. I’ll just go...join my squad now.”

“Try to remember the location of that itchweed,” he grinned. “We’ll get them back tomorrow. She couldn’t have been alone in that one. Zerith would have killed her otherwise.”

Alayne smiled and Ger’alin smiled back, forcing himself to look away after a few seconds, steeling himself for the fight to come. As they drew close to the naga-infested lake, he took several deep, calming breaths to quiet his mind and spirit. He hoped that he would be so tired from fighting today, on top of not having slept much at all last night, that he would drop off before he realized who else was in the room tonight. He shook his head, forcing the thoughts away. “Battle,” he told himself firmly, trying to forget how much he wanted to just tell her everything and beg her not to leave and plead with Zerith not to kill him then and there. “Battle,” he growled.

“They’re moving into position now,” Zerith observed, pulling up alongside Ger’alin. Callie stopped on the Blood Knight’s other side, carefully not looking at him. “Dismount,” the priest ordered, watching his command trickle through the crowd. “I’m really, really sorry,” he said, putting a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I don’t know what Callie was thinking.”

“Well, I want to talk to you about that as well,” Ger’alin snorted. “But not right now. Somewhere quieter, with less naga and no weapons laying about. Light, what did they do? Gallop all the way down the lake?” he said, seeing the runner from the caster group approach and wave that they were ready to begin.

“Alayne probably did. She loves to swim.”

“I don’t want to think about that,” Ger’alin grimaced. “Let’s get into position ourselves and see if we can make this work like we planned.” Moving down the eastern side of the island, Ger’alin waited until the line was formed before charging in, his blade flashing as he let loose a tension-relieving primal shout, startling the naga, making them freeze as the Horde fighters dove in, pushing them back relentlessly towards the water’s edge. The Disorder of Azeroth completely outnumbered the naga, making the fight a short and sure one. The serpent-men, seeing that they were routed, tried to make an escape by diving into the deep waters of the lake. Ger’alin laughed when he saw the waters begin to bubble as the casters hidden in the depths began their attack. Wild-eyed snake-men surged back out of the lake, throwing themselves on the blades of the fighters. Almost before the battle had been joined, it was over, the casters bobbing to the surface and swimming back for the opposite shore to dry off and redress. Ger’alin forced himself to smile a friendly smile when he saw Alayne’s head break the surface of the water. She scanned the crowds, looking relieved to see everyone well, waved, and began swimming back. Ger’alin watched her go, keeping himself from swimming after her by effort of sheer will.

“One down, one to go,” Zerith muttered as he walked about, looking for injuries to heal. “What’s the matter with you?” the priest asked, seeing a stricken look on Ger’alin’s face.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” the man sighed. “For now, battle,” he said, kicking at the naga corpse at his feet. He’d forgotten about the after-effects of a good, rousing fight.

Ger'alın grit his teeth in frustration when he realized he probably wouldn't be able to sleep tonight. "Let's round everyone up again and head to the northern pool. The druids must be finishing off the ones to the west even as we speak." Zerith smiled at the fighter's back. All was going according to his plan.

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Alayne shivered as she finished drying off for the second time that day. Her eyes stung from keeping them open underwater and the chilly late evening air made her skin pebble. She tried to ignore the others around her, most pairing off to celebrate still being alive after such a close battle. She'd never noticed how they acted after a battle before now and tried valiantly not to notice again. "Oh, to be blissfully unaware of everything again! Besides, Zerith would skin me if I even thought about that. All I need is a good book to take my mind off...the fact that this is really, really getting on my nerves," she muttered to herself as she finished pulling on her robe and redoing the buttons. "I should just tell him. Then, he'll understand why I have to ask him to stay away from me for a while. Light, I thought it would be easier with Ta'sia gone. Now, he distracts me even *more*."

"Who distracts you?" Jez'ral asked. He didn't understand why Zerith had ordered Alayne to search the corpses for clues this morning. There had not been time to ask for a reason, though, with Zerith having his hands full trying to heal the many wounded. The man must have been crazy; not that his sister was much better. She'd been quite stubborn about completing the task, despite Jez'ral's demands and pleas that she give over and get out of the water.

"No one," she yipped, her voice going up several octaves. "Make noise from now on. You startled me."

"I'm sorry about that," he said, "My word, Alayne. Your face...you could pass for a night elf right now."

"I'm freezing," Alayne whispered, her teeth clicking together.

"I can see," he said sincerely. "Let's get you back to the inn. A hot bath, some warm food and you'll be back to normal in no time. I'd have thought a young thing like you would weather the chill of the water and the night air better than an aged ruin like me," he teased, chaffing her arms and hiding his concern. The woman felt like a block of ice.

"Light, Jez'ral, you moan like you're four hundred. You're not even one hundred and twenty," she shivered.

"I do not need a woman who's not even seen the change of two decades to tell me how decrepit I'm allowed to be," he said mockingly.

"That must have hit a nerve," she teased back. "Where is everyone?" she asked as they walked back through the crowd seated on the road near the southern side of the lake. "I don't see Zerith, Dar'ja, or Ger'alın."

"Zerith and Dar'ja went back to the Refuge after they finished helping with the last bit of healing. They both looked pretty worn out. Ger'alın went back with them. I think he just wanted to take a hot bath and get some sleep. Zerith had to ride with him; the man couldn't walk or grip the saddle with his leg... Light, woman, can *you* walk?" he asked, seeing her nearly topple over with cold and fatigue. Scooping her up, he rubbed his hands over her back, trying to warm her a bit and quickening his steps. She needed to be in bed. She would be lucky if she didn't take ill from her long immersion in the cold water. "It was close there, for a while," he said, desperate to keep her talking so she wouldn't bite through her tongue the way her jaws were chattering.

"It was," she shivered, remembering how desperately the casters had had to swim to keep the fleeing naga from breaking through and overwhelming them. The melee ranks had

caught the worst of it, though, being forced to wade hip-deep into the water and fight the serpents once it became apparent that they had gotten wise to the trick used to herd the others earlier in the afternoon and had forced the battle onto ground, or rather, water, where they were more agile. It had been sheer luck that no one had been killed, though several, including Ger'alín, had been seriously injured and almost drowned. Alayne remembered pulling the sputtering Blood Knight back onto the shore as the battle neared its end. He'd taken a naga spear through the leg and had fallen, unable to find his footing in the slick mud.

"What was it you did to those naga around Ger'alín?" Jez'ral asked, recalling the same scene. The Blood Knight had been splashing, trying to pull himself up onto his good leg but too panicked to find purchase. Jez'ral had been swimming towards him when, suddenly, Alayne was there, grabbing the man by his back plate and hauling him out of the water. Then...she'd cast a spell he'd not recognized, one that made rotting sores break out all over the serpent men, turning their turquoise scales an ugly, mottled purple and creating a foul stench. As the sores grew worse, the snakes grew more docile and then, without any explanation he could reach, the naga impaled themselves on their own spears.

"Something I learned in Northrend combined with knowing how to dominate lesser minds," Alayne muttered. "And no, I won't teach it to you. Light knows I wish I didn't know how to do those things myself."

"I don't want to know," he said quickly.

"I only did it because they were too close. I tried to terrify them into fleeing but couldn't focus enough to make it stick," she explained. "I didn't have time to do anything else and I didn't want to risk any of my spells landing on Ger'alín."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me. I've always wondered why you came back to being a warlock instead of honing the skills you learned...elsewhere. Most of the others who came back didn't return to their old positions."

"Because I don't want to be one of them," she replied. "I don't like tapping into that power. I don't like even knowing that it's there to tap into. But I can't get rid of it and I won't teach it to anyone. Oh, Jez'ral, I'm not hungry," she said when he started to sit her at a table in the inn. "I just want to go to sleep," she muttered, her eyelids drooping.

"You should eat something or let me carry you down to the bathing rooms," he said, concerned. "You're still blue from being in that cold water so long."

"I'll be fine," she mumbled. "I'll wrap up in the blankets and won't even notice I'm cold once I'm asleep. Just help me up to my room."

"Have it your way, then," he laughed, picking her up and carrying her again. "After I'm done tucking you in like a good little girl, I'm going down to soak the chill out of my ancient bones."

"Don't forget your cane, gramps," she sighed tiredly. Reaching in her pocket when they were in front of the door, she tried to put the key in the lock, nearly dropping it with her shivering and shuddering as her body tried desperately to recover warmth.

"Let me take care of that," Jez'ral said, setting her down and steadying her hand with his own. The door opened suddenly, Zerith standing there. His eyes widened when he saw just how blue Alayne was and he ducked his head out into the hallway, shouting for Dar'ja. Pulling the two warlocks into the room, he methodically began rubbing Alayne's hands, shoulders, and arms, cursing beneath his breath.

"We'll get you in bed soon enough," the priest muttered. Dar'ja came running into the room, carrying a thick woolen nightgown. Zerith turned his head while his wife quickly stripped and redressed Alayne, tossing the dampened robes into a pile of other clothes.

"Has she eaten anything?" Dar'ja asked, sounding concerned.

"She wouldn't. She said she just wanted to go to sleep."

“Well, she can do that in a bit. We’ll need her to stay awake long enough to warm up,” Zerith mumbled, picking Alayne up. The woman looked dazed and confused from the sudden activity.

“What are you doing?” Jez’ral heard Ger’alin mumble. “Let me get on the floor,” the fighter started to say.

“No,” Zerith said curtly. “Alayne’s half-frozen. I’m putting her in with you for a few hours until she warms up to something above ‘glacial.’”

“Zerith!” Ger’alin said, sounding scandalized.

“Get your mind out of the gutter, man,” the priest growled, pulling back the covers with one hand and setting his sister in the bed with the other. “How long was she in the water, Jez’ral?”

“Four or five hours, probably, but only because...”

“I know. I’d *completely* forgotten about what I’d asked her to do this morning. You should probably go take a bath. I’ve had the attendants keeping the tubs filled with hot water. If I thought Alayne wouldn’t go into shock over the change, I’d have her down there right now. Dar’ja, go bring some extra blankets to pile on her.”

“Zerith,” Alayne shuddered, “I can sleep on the floor.”

“No, you can’t,” he said firmly. “You do that and you won’t wake up. You’re not going to sleep now, either. You are going to lay here next to your good friend Ger’alin and the two of you are going to *talk*. At the very least, you, sis, are going to stay awake until I come back in here and say it’s safe for you to go to sleep. Ger’alin, you stay where you are! I didn’t poultice that leg so you could make it worse by sleeping on the wooden floor. You stay right where you are and keep that leg propped up!” Pushing the protesting warlock down and pulling the covers over her, he stood over the bed, looking down worriedly. This was no act; not anymore. He hadn’t realized just how cold that water was or how much her temperature would drop. Berating himself for almost killing her with his forgetfulness, he continued to chafe her hands, arms, shoulders, and face, breathing easier when her skin began to lighten. “Alayne!” he said loudly whenever she started to drift off to sleep.

“Zerith, she’s freezing!” Ger’alin said in shock. Alayne stared at the ceiling, not really seeing it, no longer really aware of anything other than her desire to just fall fast asleep. Ger’alin yelped and reached over, slapping her lightly to keep her from drifting off.

“No, she’s this lovely shade of light blue because someone painted her skin,” the priest snapped, hiding his relief. Now, he could leave her in Ger’alin’s care. “Look, I’m going to go and mix something for her to help keep her from getting ill. I need you to keep her warm and awake while I do that.”

“I think I can manage that,” Ger’alin said, looking concerned. He tried to sit up, groaning and falling back whenever the muscles in his leg moved. Cursing under his breath, he rolled on one side, using his free arm to rub Alayne’s arms and hands, watching as her skin began to lighten back to normal as her temperature rose.

“You get her arms, I’ll take her legs. The potion can wait,” Zerith muttered, reaching under the sheets and pinching her on the calf. “Can you feel that, Alayne?” he asked.

“Ouch!”

“That’s a ‘yes’ if I’ve ever heard one,” Zerith chuckled. “If you get tired, Ger’alin, just lay close to her. What she needs most is warmth and, frankly, that’s what I need you to give her. Keep her awake, though. I’m not too particular on *how*, mind you. If you need some privacy, just say the word,” he continued, his voice elaborately nonchalant.

“What are you...,” Ger’alin asked, looking confused and mortified.

“Look you,” Zerith sighed, “if you’re going to insist on taking this in the gutter, fine. Take it in the gutter with my blessing on both of you! I’ll be back in a little bit with something to try to keep her from getting sick.” Zerith ducked out into the hallway before he could burst

out laughing at the expression on his friend's face. "Confusion, embarrassment, and hope," he grinned to himself, "not a bad mix at all. Too bad she's half-frozen, though," he sighed, hurrying down to his own room to mix a potion to ward off infections.

Ger'alın glared at the door after the priest left. "If this is someone's horrible idea of a prank, I'm going to ground them into powder! No, Alayne," he sighed, seeing her start to drift off again. Chaffing her arms and face with one hand, he prodded her hard in the side with the other whenever she began to nod off. "I may ground them into powder regardless," he muttered. "This is torture!"

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"Where did you say the itchweed was?" Ger'alın asked the next morning. He and Alayne had snuck out of the inn at first light, determined to get back at the others for the recent round of not-very-amusing pranks. First Callie and now Zerith. Alayne wondered what Jez'ral had up his sleeve or if it would be Dar'ja's turn next.

"Just south of the Refuge," she muttered tiredly. Ger'alın had not let her fall asleep until an hour before daybreak, once her temperature had risen enough to pull her out of the danger zone. "I'm really sorry for keeping you up all night. After we find the itchweed and powder their clothes with it, you can take a nap."

"Don't worry about me so much," he said gently. "I'm not the one who was blue with cold. I wonder what he was thinking."

"Who? Zerith? I've given up trying to figure that one out. It seems to amuse all of them to keep throwing us together. This has to be Dar'ja's idea of payback for Desolace."

"We'll be on our guard from now on. I hope we can leave this swamp soon. I'll start sleeping in my tent again and that should put an end to this nonsense."

"Indeed," Alayne agreed, not looking at him at all. "I'm sure you'll be happy to be able to sleep without having to worry about someone shoving you in with me or me in with you."

"You must be looking forward to being secure in your own bed," he replied, also not looking at her. Neither said anything; the silence stretched out into awkwardness. Finally, Alayne sighed and turned to look at Ger'alın, a confession ready on her lips. As she moved, she saw something familiar out of the corner of her eye. Smiling, she nodded.

"There it is," she said, pointing. "I'll hold the sack while you pluck off the leaves. Don't let any touch you. It will give you a rash that will last for hours. It would probably keep you awake which would defeat the purpose of taking a nap."

"I'll be careful, then," he grinned. "How did you learn about this, anyway? Isn't your brother the tree-hugger?"

"Mir'el and Jez'ral," she answered, blushing furiously. "It's a very long, very disturbing, very explicit tale that you should never, under any circumstances, allow them to tell you. I know I was much happier before I heard it."

"Then why did you...?"

"Callie and her big mouth."

"We'll put an extra dose in for her, then," he said, smiling. Alayne smiled back and, for a moment, Ger'alın almost forgot to breathe. Alayne's expression changed from one of delight to one of slight confusion as he continued to stare at her.

"Ger'alın, what's...?" she asked.

"Ssh," he said, his ears twitching as he heard voices from nearby. Alayne listened intently as well, recognizing Zerith, Callie, Dar'ja, and Jez'ral's voices. "I'll bet they're up to something," he mouthed. "Let's sneak up on them and see what they're plotting." Alayne

nodded and set the sack down, following him closely and quietly. The other four were sitting by the lake, skipping stones.

“I can’t believe they snuck out so early,” Jez’ral was saying as Alayne and Ger’alin hid themselves behind one of the looming mushrooms. “He could barely stand last night and she was like a block of ice. Are they both crazy?”

“If the innkeeper has the right of it, they’re both *angry*,” Zerith sighed. “He said he overheard them vowing to make us regret the constant throwing them together.”

“And we will,” Alayne mouthed, grinning at Ger’alin.

“I wonder why they keep doing it?” he said back silently. Alayne shrugged, somewhat guiltily. She suspected Zerith was trying to “help out” in his own way. The warlock resolved to speak with the priest and explain that he needed to leave poor Ger’alin alone.

“Okay, so trying to trick him into climbing into bed with her didn’t work,” Callie said, lifting a finger. “Zerith’s idiotic plan didn’t work either.”

“Zerith’s idiotic plan?” Ger’alin mouthed, looking confused.

“What was the big idea with that anyway, Zerith?” Jez’ral demanded. “She was *blue*!”

“I’d completely forgotten about it!” Zerith said defensively. “If you think I haven’t been kicking myself for almost killing my sister, you’re wrong. Why else would I be out here looking for her? She shouldn’t be out of bed and neither should he.”

“What were you thinking, though?” Callie asked.

“My plan was to have her get just chilly enough that he would need to hold her for a few minutes and I was hoping that the normal reaction to surviving a battle would take care of the rest. I had completely forgotten about it, though, in the heat of that second battle. Light, that was a close one.”

“Zerith!” Callie said, sounding shocked. “You’re a priest!”

“Do I look like I’m vowed to celibacy?” he asked. “I’m a priest, not a monk! I’m also a married man who knows very well the ways that men and women react when put in a situation that would let them get away with it. I seem to recall that being how my wife and I got married! Besides, neither one of them is a priest!” he shouted, angry at himself.

“We should just tell them,” Dar’ja sighed, reaching over to place a calming hand on her husband’s leg. “This constant ‘putting them in the same room and/or trying to trick them into it’ is just going to get us in trouble and make things worse.”

“What are they trying to trick us into?” Alayne wondered.

“It is becoming painfully obvious that they aren’t going to actually tell each other, no matter how much we want them to,” Callie sighed.

“I told you, Alayne can be so dense sometimes that she’s going to develop her own gravitational pull,” Jez’ral joked.

“If only Ger’alin would get caught in her orbit,” Callie grinned. “So, we’re agreed, we just sit them down when we find them and tell them.”

“Their reactions will be priceless,” Dar’ja agreed.

“Ger’alin, how I love you, my dashing sword-slinger! Now, let me take you up to my room and do all of the things Uncle Mir’el told me about!” Jez’ral said, mimicking his assistant’s alto voice.

“Alayne, is that true?” Ger’alin asked, his lips moving silently. Alayne was trembling, blushing from the tips of her toes to her hairline, tears of embarrassment and dread hanging from her lashes. “Alayne?” he mouthed again, putting a hand on her arm. Without a word, the woman turned and ran, choking back sobs. Ger’alin waited a few seconds, listening to the others wonder what that sudden noise had been before dashing after her, his heart pounding with joyous relief.

He caught up to Alayne nearly on the other side of Zangarmarsh. She was leaning against a giant mushroom, one hand clutching her side while she gasped for breath and wiped tears away from her cheeks. He walked up behind her, hoping she wouldn't bolt again, dragging his leg and wishing he'd thought to swing back by the Refuge to get his horse.

"Alayne?" he said softly, kindly, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Alayne, what's the matter? What, do you think I'll be angry or upset with you? Talk to me," he whispered, hating the way that she was shuddering and sobbing, refusing to even look at him. "I'm not upset at all," he continued, hoping to calm her. "Actually, I... Alayne, please calm down!" he pleaded, feeling a lump forming in his own throat. "Were they just teasing or were they being serious? Just tell me the truth; I won't be upset either way."

"Light, forgive me," she said, her voice quavering and breaking. "No, they weren't teasing. I'm so sorry! I didn't mean for this to happen."

"How long have you..."

"I don't know... it all started when I couldn't find a place to read and I saw you down by the lake and you were working your sword forms and looking really, really good and then I started thinking about how nice and sweet and kind you were and how you always used to make me laugh and how I could sometimes tell you things I couldn't even tell Zerith and then the next thing I knew I felt practically compelled to follow you around just so I could look at you and I really just wanted to be sitting next to you the whole time but whenever I let myself get close to you, all I could think about was how much I just wanted to tell you everything but then I know that you think of me as a sister and I didn't want to disgust you and I figured I would get over it soon enough..."

"Breathe, woman," he whispered, feeling protective of her and wishing she would turn around to see the look on his face. He thought his heart might fly out of his chest with joy.

"And then I saw you with Ta'sia and I wanted to kill the both of you but I couldn't because you would probably be upset with me if I killed your girlfriend because I thought she was even though she wasn't and I really, really, really wanted to beat the ever-living snot out of her, you know. So, I came out here to get away from you because I couldn't stop thinking about you and I hated that because you were with her and she seemed nice, I know, it was an act, but she seemed nice and I liked her but I really didn't want to be around the pair of you so I came out here with Jez'ral..."

"Oxygen break, Alayne," he said, his grin growing broader as his heart continued to pound in eagerness and relief.

"Came out here with him and Mir'el was telling me that since I'm practically twenty or will be next winter I should start looking and there were lots of men in Outland but I didn't want to look because I wanted you but you were with *her*. And I really wanted to kill her sometimes because I was so jealous but then you came out here following me and she came and the two of you seemed happy sometimes but I kept hoping you would break up and then you did and she blamed it on me and I felt horrible and Zerith and Dar'ja found out and I thought they thought we, you and me, had, but we hadn't and I was really upset because I had wanted to but I know you'd never think of me like that and I'm really sorry about this whole thing and can we stay friends because I really am sorry and I'll get over it one day and I'll try not to be jealous ever again but I can't stay here another second because this is driving me crazy having you so close! I feel like you're carrying around a little piece of my *soul* and you don't even notice it and..."

"Catch your breath, Alayne. Is that everything?" he grinned, feeling as if his head would float right off of his shoulders.

“Yes. Mostly. I may have forgotten one or two points but I can’t remember them right now but that is the main bit. I’m really sorry,” she said, shivering with a combination of nerves and weariness.

“Is that why you were moping around back home?” he whispered in her ear, keeping his hands on her shoulders.

“Yes.”

“You think I’m handsome?”

“Yes. And charming and sweet and caring and wise in the ways of common sense which is something I envy and respect you for on top of the fact that you are brave and courageous and fun to be around with a wonderful sense of humor...”

“Do you realize that you babble and ramble when you’re nervous?” he chuckled.

“I’ll shut up now.”

“Let me know when you’ve got your breath back.”

“I’m fine. I’m sorry about all this,” she sighed, squeezing her eyes shut and turning to face him. “It’s just that...”

“Alayne,” he whispered. She opened one eye cautiously, afraid to look at him. Her expression changed from one of dread and despair to one of absolute bewilderment when she saw the man smiling at her, his face lit up like the sun. She had less than a second to wonder about it before she found her feet dangling off the ground as she was being quite thoroughly kissed. “Light, woman, you have no idea *how long* I’ve been wanting to do that!” he said minutes later while she leaned her cheek on his shoulder and tried to catch her breath. She chuckled; he sounded a touch breathless himself. Whispering softly in her ear, he said, “You know, I have just a little confession to make myself...”

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“Do you want to go back and try to find that itchweed?” Alayne asked as they began walking back towards the Cenarion Refuge.

“Yes. They deserve it for the constant shoving us in bed together,” he laughed.

“Speaking of that, what do you want to do about telling them?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she grinned. “Half of me wants to keep this between us and let them find out at some point in the future.”

“And the other half?”

“Would really like to take a nap right now,” she sighed. “I’ll take the floor. You’re limping,” she noticed. “I’m sorry for running so far. Light, we’re clear on the other side of Zangarmarsh!”

“Don’t be. It was worth the chase,” he said, wrapping an arm around her waist.

“Though, do you think your fel steed could carry both of us? I didn’t get Lucky.” His face turned crimson when Alayne doubled over laughing so hard that tears streamed from her eyes.

“Okay, that was not what I meant,” he sighed, grinning. “That’s right, laugh it up, woman.”

“I’m sorry,” she wheezed. “Yes, he’d probably carry both of us. We’ll take it slow,” she said slyly.

“I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“I won’t laugh at you anymore, I promise.”

“Don’t promise that,” he chuckled. “I like seeing you laugh. I like seeing you smile, or sleep, or read...okay, I like seeing you, end of statement.” Alayne gave him a smile that lit up her entire face, rivaling the sun for brightness, as she summoned her fel steed. Pulling herself up, she helped Ger’alin climb up behind her, sighing contentedly when he put his arms around her as she clucked the demonic horse to a walk. “So, where do we go from here?”

“We’ll just follow the road back east. It should lead us straight into the Refuge.”

“No,” he laughed, “that’s not what I meant.”

“Oh. You meant about us,” she smiled. “Well, I’m content to take each day as it comes. And I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“No, you won’t.”

“You need to keep your leg propped up.”

“I will put my sword between us but I do not want to be apart from you anymore than I have to be,” he said. “I like watching you sleep. I like listening to you babble in your sleep.”

“I have to admit, I did miss hearing you snore and ramble when first Jez’ral and I came out to Outland,” she grinned. “What does ‘putting your sword between us’ mean?”

“A legend you don’t know about?” he asked in mock horror.

“It’s not an elven one, I know that much.”

“Old human tale; some man was tasked with escorting his tribal leader’s son’s future wife to their tribal grounds. The man set out on his journey and, when he first laid eyes on the bride-to-be, he was smitten with her, and she with him. He had given his oath, though, to his tribal leader. That night, when they stopped to make camp, they camped in a small cave for safety. To show that he would not touch her, he laid his sword between them and made her swear to stab him with it if he gave into temptation to break his oath.”

“And then what happened?”

“I’ve forgotten,” he said, smiling ruefully. “The simple fact is that if one of us is going to sleep on the floor, it will be me. Actually, Alayne...Light, help me, I know that we’ve been together all of maybe a half hour at this point. I know that you have the same notions of propriety that I have and I know that my father would come back from the dead and kill me if he could for rushing this...but...”

“But?” Alayne asked, feeling her stomach hover up around her shoulders.

“As I was saying, I don’t want us to be apart. The whole year you were gone, I felt as if part of me, the best part, had vanished. All I could do to ease the pain was drink until I could barely stand! I know this is sudden. I’m willing to wait until roses bloom on Icecrown Glacier and Arthas remembers his heart if that’s what you want. Just promise me you won’t ever...or rather...I guess what I’m getting at is...”

“Looks like I’m not the only one who babbles when nervous,” Alayne smiled, looking back over her shoulder. Ger’alin flushed and began stammering. Oddly, that calmed Alayne down further. “I like it,” she laughed, giggling at the look of chagrin on his face.

“How can you put up with an oaf like me?” he sighed.

“Easy,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I put up with you because I love you.”

“You...I love you, too,” he grinned. “Well, what I’m beating around the bush about is: would you mind marrying me?” he held his breath, feeling fire and ice course through his veins while she pondered the question. His face burned; he felt like an oaf, saying it out like that, scarcely even an hour after kissing her for the first time.

“Would I mind marrying you?” she said slowly, wondering if she’d just heard that correctly.

“Yes,” he said nervously. “I know it’s sudden but...”

“It’s not,” she grinned. “I think we should go ahead and get married, especially considering that we’ve been engaged for,” she stopped to calculate, “almost two years now.” Ger’alin worked that out, laughing when he realized what she was referring to.

“I was being serious this time as well as that time,” he laughed. “Would you?”

“Yes, of course, I’ll marry you. Just as soon as Jez’ral and I finish up our work out here and I’m free of any obligations. Ger’alin! Stop that!” she laughed as squeezed her in a bear hug. “It will be difficult to marry you if you crush my ribs!” Turning as much as she could while riding astride, she kissed him on the jaw. “Now, let’s get back to the Refuge and take a nap. You don’t have to put your sword between us, though. I think the innkeeper, not to

mention Zerith and the others, would be upset if we accidentally stabbed ourselves in our sleep.” Ger’alin buried his face in her shoulder and laughed until tears streamed from his eyes.

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Zerith and the others slunk back to the inn with the noon sun. They’d seen no sign of Alayne or Ger’alin. “We’ll round up the entire Disorder of Azeroth and go out looking for them,” he sighed. The other three nodded wearily. “Tau’re,” he said, seeing the tauren sitting in the hallway outside of Alayne’s room. “I need you to gather up everyone who can sit a saddle. Ger’alin and Alayne are missing.”

“No, they aren’t,” the tauren said, his deep voice sounding amused. “They’re asleep. They came back around mid-morning.”

“They did?”

“Yes. Alayne was dragging a sack filled with plant samples and helping Ger’alin limp around. I don’t think either of them got much sleep so, after they’d washed up, they said they would be napping and asked me to let you know.”

“I see. They’re both in there, asleep,” he said flatly.

“I suppose they’re asleep. They just ducked in there about five minutes ago.”

“Thank you, Tau’re,” he said, moving around the tauren to knock on the door.

Without waiting for an invitation, he shoved it open, surprised to find it unlocked. He felt his throat constricting in shock and heard the other three start giggling as they peeked in. “What are you doing?” he asked, sounding strangled.

“I’m not speaking to any of you,” Alayne muttered. In one of her hands, she held some of Ger’alin’s hair. The other wielded a brush. Her brow was furrowed in concentration as she gently worked through the tangles, brushing his hair until it shone.

“Why aren’t you speaking to any of us?” Jez’ral asked. “You two going to paint each other’s toenails next?”

“Hand me that hair-tie,” she said to Ger’alin, ignoring Jez’ral completely.

“What are you two doing?” Zerith asked, still sounding strangled, when Ger’alin stood up and let Alayne sit on the stool and began brushing her hair.

“Getting ready to take a nap,” the Blood Knight muttered. Alayne winced. “Sorry. I don’t see how hair so short gets so tangled.”

“Think I should let it grow out?” she asked him.

“No. I like the way it looks on you. However, you could pull it out of your face more. You’ve got such a lovely face. I don’t know why you hide it. Men will never notice you if you don’t stop being so coy,” he teased, tapping her lightly on the top of the head with the brush.

“It won’t stay back,” she explained. “I tuck it behind my ear and three seconds later, wham, it’s blocking my vision again. I’m so used to it, though, that when I see the world with both eyes, it throws me off.”

“Will one of you tell me what’s going on?” Zerith demanded, despairing of getting an answer. Dar’ja and Callie tittered from their vantage point in the doorway. Alayne and Ger’alin continued to ignore the others, the warlock helping the Blood Knight limp across the room and into the bed. Once he was settled in, his leg propped up, she lay down next to him and the pair both closed their eyes. “One of you tell me what’s going on. Why were you both out of here before the break of day this morning? Where were you? What were you doing? What’s with those plant samples Tau’re said you dragged back?”

“Not talking to any of you,” Alayne yawned. “Sleep time. Good night.”

“Alayne, I will stand right here and I will keep asking you until I get an answer.”

“We will tell you all about it later,” Ger’alin said sleepily. “Right now, she’s right. Sleep time. Good night.”

“I want an answer!”

“Fine,” Ger’alin sighed, covering his mouth as he yawned. “We snuck out this morning because neither one of us could *sleep*. Yes, we’re best friends,” he spat accusingly, “but for the love of the Light, Zerith: after a battle that *close*? What were you *thinking*? Don’t worry, though. I didn’t touch her. I know you’d have my head and other parts of my anatomy if I even thought of your sister that way. At any rate, we snuck out this morning because we were both still rather upset about the constant throwing us together thing but, we discussed it and if you’re going to keep doing it, fine. We can share a bed if that is what you four are after. Is this some kind of bet to see how long you can throw two friends: a man and a woman, together before they break?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow at the others. They flushed in embarrassment at his frankness but said nothing.

“Sharing one right now,” Alayne said groggily, half-asleep.

“Well, after we both calmed down, we decided that, since we were awake, we might as well gather some of those plant samples you wanted to study, Zerith. So, we ranged all over Zangarmarsh, gathering samples for you. They’re in a bag in your room. By the time we were finished with that, both of us were practically asleep on our feet. We came back here, had some breakfast, went down to the baths, and then came up here to catch a few hours of sleep.”

“Gold rain from east warding,” Alayne babbled. Zerith quirked an eyebrow and Ger’alin bit his lip to keep from giggling. “Strawberry sand...”

“Now, if that satisfies you, would you four please get out of here? I’d like to be making as much sense as she is. And, if this is some kind of sick bet, she and I are both calling ‘after the next battle where one or both of us nearly gets killed’ as the breaking point. We’ll put fifty gold down as our wager.”

“Actually, we really wanted to talk to the two of you.”

“You can talk to us later,” Ger’alin sighed, his jaws creaking in another yawn. “We’re not going anywhere. Just let us get some sleep. Light’s truth, Zerith; that’s all either of us wants right now,” he pleaded tiredly. Zerith raised his hands in surrender and escorted the others out, closing the door behind them.

Alayne’s and Ger’alin’s eyes popped back open as soon as they heard the door shut. Waiting several minutes, Alayne tiptoed over to the door, bolted the lock, and shoved the room’s heavy dresser against it. “Think that will hold?” Ger’alin grinned.

“If it doesn’t, I’ll summon my fel guard. Your sword still wedged over on the other side where you can get to it?”

“By the time they break through there and get through your blue brute, I’ll be ready for them.”

“Good. Now, to wait,” she grinned, laying back down next to him. “The art to pulling off the perfect prank is to keep up a constant stream of misdirection.”

“Callie will be so proud to know you’ve learned so much from her,” Ger’alin laughed. “Too bad she’s going to find out the hard way. That stuff the druids said would relieve the itching...?”

“...is under their bed. I imagine they’ll be trying to barge in here any minute now to...”

The door shook with a bang, making Ger’alin and Alayne jump. “We’re going to kill you!” Jez’ral swore from the hallway. “What made you think of hiding itchweed in that sack? Open this door!” Alayne stifled a laugh when she heard what sounded like Jez’ral or Zerith throwing themselves against the door and then rubbing against it, seeking relief from the spreading rash that came from handling itchweed.

“This isn’t funny!” Zerith moaned as he beat on the door while scratching with the other hand. “What did we do to you two to deserve this?”

“Four words,” Ger’alin shouted loudly enough to be heard on the other side. “Her own gravitational pull!”

Shocked silence met that declaration. “Wait, you heard that?” Zerith shouted.

“I had to chase her clear to Nagrand after that!”

“So...the two of you...you are not staying in there together!”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with it last night,” Alayne retorted, trying not to giggle. “Neither of us is a priest, after all.”

“Open this door! I’m going to kill you two brats!” Zerith shouted, laughing.

“We’re not opening that door for a few more hours,” Ger’alin replied airily. “We are trying to get some much needed shut-eye.”

“Yeah right! I’m not buying that!”

“You can listen if you want,” Alayne said graciously. “Here, a gesture of our good will and honorable intentions. Go look under your bed. There’s a lotion there that will relieve the itching.”

“That sounds like a ploy to get me away from here,” Zerith said, sounding suspicious.

“Then send Jez’ral after it!” she laughed. She listened, hearing her employer stumble down the hallway.

“Alayne, you are so dead!” Dar’ja shouted. She shuffled down the hallway, dragging her itchy feet and bending over to scratch at her ankles.

“Jez’ral’s getting the antidote,” Zerith muttered to his wife. “How did you...?”

“The leaves are all over our room!” she groaned. “Callie’s writhing on the rug in there!”

“I’ve got to see that!” Ger’alin shouted, pulling himself out of the bed. Alayne stood up and helped him limp to the door.

“It could be a trap,” she whispered.

“Send the demon out first?”

“Agreed,” Alayne grinned, summoning her fel guard. Together, she and Ger’alin moved the dresser out of the way and pulled open the door, jumping back to let the fel guard go out first. The demon flew back into the room, landing heavily on its back, when Zerith tried to tackle it, thinking it was one of them. Ger’alin limped quickly across the room, flopping on the bed to grab his sword. Alayne squealed when Zerith grabbed the hem of her nightgown and made her trip. “Zerith!” she screamed, laughing as he stuffed handfuls of itchweed down the back of her neck.

“Hey!” Ger’alin laughed, dropping his sword. “Don’t manhandle my woman like that!”

“Your woman!” Zerith laughed, rolling on his back and wriggling on the floor, seeking relief. “She’s my *evil* little sister!”

“Light that stings!” she said, laughing while she scrambled to her feet and shook the leaves out of her nightgown. Ger’alin limped over to her and began scratching her back, laughing as she scratched her sides. “Where’s Jez’ral?” she demanded.

“I’m here,” he replied from out in the hallway. “Where did you find the antidote?”

“We asked the druids about it,” she explained. “Does it work?”

“Yes, it works,” he laughed. “Now, I’m holding it hostage until you two go clean up the mess in Zerith’s room.”

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“Okay, you’re forgiven,” Zerith said after Alayne and Ger’alin finished sweeping the leaves into the bag and sealed it.

“Good, because we’d both like to go wash off and then get some of that ointment Jez’ral’s holding hostage,” Ger’alin laughed, scratching his arms and chest. Callie had pulled him down onto the floor, right into a pile of the itchweed. The Forsaken grinned at them both as she scratched Alayne’s back. Her own arms were coated with the soothing substance and her shirt clung to her where Dar’ja had rubbed it on her back.

“I’ll make him give it to you,” Zerith laughed. His hands and face were dotted with the ointment. “It does make the itching go away almost immediately. Still, before I let you go,” he grinned, “We want to hear exactly how it happened.”

“How what happened?” Alayne asked, scratching her sides and arms.

“How you two little brats found out about each other,” Dar’ja grinned, wriggling her toes. “We were on the verge of just spilling to beans to both of you since you hadn’t figured it out on your own yet. Jez’ral’s right, Alayne. Sometimes both of you can be so dense, we worry than objects might start orbiting around you.”

“I told you,” Ger’alin sighed. “We overheard you talking. We snuck out to get the itchweed and, as we finished gathering it, we overheard you four looking for us. So, we snuck up on you to listen in. We heard the ‘gravitational pull’ remark and then the bit about her being in love with me. She bolted after that; I caught up to her near the border to Nagrand.”

“Alayne!” Dar’ja laughed. “Why did you make him walk so far with his leg in that condition?”

“Panic,” the warlock admitted. “Complete and utter panic. I thought he thought of me as a sister, like Zerith does...”

“...and I’ve spent weeks thinking she thought of me like a brother on top of worrying that her adopted brother would kill me,” Ger’alin added. “I should have suspected Callie knew the truth first time I got tricked into going to her room. Why didn’t you let me in on that piece of information, my un-indicted co-conspirator?”

“Because I was trying to plan the Prank To End All Pranks,” Callie laughed. “I figured we would trick you into getting into her bed; that’s why the room I put her in has one that is so large you can go two weeks without sleeping in the same spot.”

“It’s not *that* large,” Ger’alin muttered. “I guess you’ve forgotten just how much bed I take up.”

“Whatever,” Callie quipped. “The first plan was to get you in there, let you get half-way to sleep, then have Zerith barge in acting outraged and force the two of you to get married before either one of you could figure out how to get out of it.”

“That was the first plan?” Alayne laughed. “How many did you have?”

“Zerith tried his own plan next,” Dar’ja answered. “Apparently, the idea was for you, Alayne, to swim around long enough to get chilly. He was counting on Ger’alin being keyed up from the battle. It didn’t work out like he wanted, though, considering how close that last fight was and that Ger’alin took a spear through the leg.”

“I had completely forgotten that I’d told you to search all of the naga corpses,” Zerith apologized. “I got caught up in healing the wounded and helping them get back here and it slipped my mind that I’d given you that assignment. When Jez’ral carried you back here, blue as the evening sky, I spent the whole night kicking myself for forgetting about that. I did try to turn it around a little, though, once it looked like you would be fine but Mister Honor And Chivalry over here didn’t take advantage of the offer.”

“Zerith, she was half-frozen! What kind of man do you think I am?” Ger’alin said defensively.

“I’m just teasing you,” Zerith laughed. “Though, it would have raised her temperature more quickly than just chaffing her arms and legs.”

“So, were there any other plans?” Alayne asked, blushing.

“No,” Callie admitted. “We’d run out of ideas. I was thinking about arranging for both of you to wind up in the same bathing room but didn’t have time to get it worked out.”

“Well, thank the Light for minor miracles,” Ger’alin muttered. “That one would have been too much. Now, could we please get that ointment?”

“I’ll go get it from Jez’ral,” Callie offered.

“I should go change,” Alayne muttered, excusing herself and leaving with the Forsaken, still contorting her arms to try to scratch her back. “I’ll tell her to tell you when it’s safe,” she whispered to Ger’alin. The others watched her go, grinning at the spectacle of the warlock twisting as she tried to relieve the itching.

“So, do we need to plan a trip to Desolace?” Dar’ja asked. Ger’alin started laughing but shook his head.

“No. As soon as Jez’ral releases her from their work, Zerith can marry us,” he replied.

“But it was such a lovely ceremony. I especially liked the bit where I got to hold that humongous spear to his throat...”

“I remember praying the whole time that you wouldn’t drop it. Still, I cut myself worse shaving than you did when I had to vow that I would...what was it I had to promise? Oh, that I would sire sons strong and proud to trample their enemies under hoof. So, you don’t want that to be one of your wedding vows?” he teased.

“I think I hear Callie coming to tell me I can go to sleep now,” Ger’alin said sheepishly, standing and limping quickly from the room. Zerith and Dar’ja laughed until they were gasping for breath. Callie ducked in and joined them once they told her the whole thing.

“He came in just as she was pulling the gown over her head, so no real harm done,” Callie giggled. “Though, his face was *red*. She gave him the ointment and then the two of them went on to sleep. They dropped off pretty quickly, which is good considering that Jez’ral says he wants to head over to Nagrand early tomorrow morning. So, they’re finally together. I need to go tell Davril and Tau’re. The entire Disorder of Azeroth had a betting pool going on that one.”

“I know,” Zerith snorted. “Here’s my five gold. I had changed my bet from ‘last night’ to ‘next week.’”

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Zerith groaned and pushed himself up, his ears twitching back and forth wildly. “That had better not be what it sounds like,” he muttered irritably, hearing shouts. Listening for another few seconds, he reached over and shook Dar’ja awake. “Wake up,” he hissed as he leapt out of the bed. “I think we’re under attack.” Her eyes popped open and she sat bolt upright as an inhuman shriek rang through the inn. Following her husband’s example, she quickly dressed and grabbed her sword, running out in the hallway only seconds behind Zerith.

Fighters and magi from the Disorder of Azeroth fought in the hallways, trying to push the naga invaders out of the building. Zerith was pressed against the wall, Ger’alin standing in front of him hacking away at one of the snake-men who had made it up the stairs. “Where’s Alayne?” Dar’ja asked, pitching her voice so she could be heard over the din of battle. Ger’alin shook his head irritably, nodding towards the stairs. Dar’ja flanked the serpent he fought, helping him to bring it down. Glancing the direction he’d nodded, she ran to keep her sister-by-marriage from being overwhelmed. She could hear Ger’alin limping after her, cursing under his breath as Alayne cast her spells while her fel guard blocked the stairway, preventing naga from coming any further. Jez’ral stood next to her, his own fel guard fighting alongside Alayne’s, all of his concentration centered on keeping the thing enslaved. Ger’alin grabbed the handrail and swung himself over and in front of the fel guards, his leg nearly

giving out when he landed. Dar'ja pushed in front of the two warlocks, reaching out and channeling Light-energies into Ger'alın to keep the man on his feet while he and the two demons pressed the naga back down to the main floor of the inn.

"What is going on here?" Zerith wondered aloud as he hurried down the stairs after Ger'alın and Dar'ja had cleared them. Alayne shook her head and shrugged. Jez'ral dismissed his fel guard, freeing himself to cast spells without having to worry about the thing running amuck. Dark circles under the man's eyes attested to the effort staying in the battle was taking from him.

"Get out of there!" Ger'alın screamed from near the front of the inn. "They've set it aflame! No, Alayne, where are you going, get out of there!" he called after the woman. Alayne was running back to their room, gathering her books and the samples she and Jez'ral had collected in Hellfire Peninsula. Out in the hallway, she could hear everyone else running to get out of the inn. Slinging her sack over her shoulder and praying that the samples wouldn't break open, she hurried after them, coughing as the smoke began to billow in from outside. Ger'alın met her in the hallway, waving his hand in front of his face, his eyes blazing in anger and fear. "Books aren't worth dying for!" he shouted at her as he grabbed her arm and hauled her down the stairs. She staggered after him, coughing and waving her free hand in front of her eyes, trying to brush away the stinging smoke. Once out in the street, Ger'alın let go of her and collapsed, his leg finally giving way. "Woman, what was going through your mind?"

"That it would be a shame to have to trek all the way back through Hellfire Peninsula and redo all the work we've already done," she snapped, glaring down at him. "I didn't realize the fire was spreading so quickly. I'm sorry."

"Just don't ever do anything like that again. If I tell you to get out, you get out and leave the books behind! Better they burn than you." Alayne gave a guilty start as some of the samples clinked together in the bag behind her. "That fire didn't spread that quickly. I think the naga must have set it alight before any of us were even awake," he grumbled, rubbing his leg. The druids were working quickly, the two ancients throwing water from the lake onto the burning buildings. The fires were flickering out and, for a wonder, most of the buildings remained standing. Ger'alın blinked when it looked as if the buildings were *growing*, the wood and vines moving to cover holes, burns, and damage from the fighting.

"At any rate, we'd better get out of here," Zerith said as he jogged past. "Callie and Davril managed to turn the mounts loose from the stables. Most of them have bolted, though. We'll make for Swamprat Post," he announced in a carrying tone. "Everyone regroup there. Try to stay together and keep your weapons ready. Just because the naga have retreated doesn't mean the battle's over. Ger'alın," he said in a softer tone, "if I can spare the energy before we leave, I'll heal that leg completely. Don't look so grateful," he said, cocking his eyebrows at the Blood Knight and the warlock, "we might need you to fight."

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Zerith's jaw dropped as he and the last stragglers from the Cenarion Refuge rode up to Swamprat Post. Only ashes remained of the Horde's base. Ger'alın strode through the debris, lifting still-smoking pieces of wood up and tossing them aside, digging through the rubble for survivors. Jez'ral snorted when he saw a fel guard walk over and help the Blood Knight lift a heavy beam from the remnants of the settlement's inn. "I'll bet Mir'el never envisioned a demon doing that," he thought to himself.

"What happened here?" Zerith asked, jogging up to Tau're.

"The naga attacked here as well. They weren't as lucky as we were. Most were caught asleep. The guards were quickly overrun. Ger'alın sent riders out to Zabra'jin, to see how they

fared. He thinks the Alliance was attacked as well; we can see smoke from where Telredor should be.”

“We must have really made them angry,” Zerith sighed softly. “Tell any Forsaken who are able to stand watch to do so. I’ll make it up to them later. Tell all of the others who aren’t currently involved in digging through the debris to get some sleep. Tell Callie to have the watchers wake us at mid-morning,” he ordered the tauren. Tau’re nodded and stomped off to do as directed. The priest hurried over to the smoldering remains of the inn, glancing around to see if any needed healing. Seeing none whom he could help, he stepped gingerly through the rubble to help Ger’alin lift another heavy wooden plank. The Blood Knight glared at him when Zerith nearly dropped the heavy board, nodding when Alayne’s fel guard took up from the priest and helped him heave it out of the way. “This is our fault,” Zerith whispered to Ger’alin when the man stopped to catch his breath.

“No, it’s not,” Ger’alin growled breathlessly.

“But we stirred them up. We’ll have to figure out some way to make amends. Though, how we can make up for getting dozens of innocent people killed is beyond me,” he sighed.

“Zerith, shut up and use your brain for a second,” Ger’alin muttered as he bent to shove more flooring out of the way. “No one here,” he sighed, seeing mud. Climbing over to another section, he and the fel guard began clearing through it, stopping only to give directions to some of the tauren and trolls who were nearby. Zerith stared at him. “Think it over, man. How long would it have taken you to plan and coordinate an attack against three well-guarded positions, possibly five?”

“But I’m not a military...”

“Yes, you are. You’ve got a gift for it. And, you’ve got me and several others who did train in this. I can tell you that it would take me a few weeks to do enough reconnaissance to plan an attack on this scale. Our ‘surrounding an open area and forcing them out of the water’ trick has nothing on this.”

“So, you’re saying our attacks had nothing to do with this?”

“No, I’m saying that our attacks didn’t cause them to do this. They had to have been planning it before we even stepped through the Dark Portal.”

“And you call yourself an oaf,” Zerith mumbled. “Alright, if our attacking them didn’t bring this retaliation, what would have?”

“Control of the water and domination of Zangarmarsh,” came the reply in trollish accents. Zerith turned around to see a troll climbing up the rubble to join the others. His armor and insignia marked him as a person of rank. “These damned naga have been dogging our heels ever since we came out here,” the troll continued, bending down beside Ger’alin to help the man lift what appeared to be the wall of a room. “No one here,” he muttered sourly. “I think you can stop now. If there be anyone under all this, they aren’t going to be alive. Gotta take care of the living, brothers.”

“May I ask your name?” Zerith asked formally, bowing slightly.

“I’m Denjai, the troll appointed by Thrall and Vol’jin to oversee Horde activities in Zangarmarsh. Normally, I stay over in Zabra’jin. However, Zabra’jin is just a big pile of smokin’ rubble. I’d been hoping that Swamprat woulda fared better. Guess not. So, you’re the leader of them that attacked the naga. Pleased to meet you. Good job.”

“Thank you,” Zerith said, looking around uncomfortably. “Though, this whole thing might be our fault.”

“Did you make Zangarmarsh the only place in Outland, other than Nagrand, where you can find reliable sources of pure water?” Denjai asked. Zerith shook his head. “Then, it’s not your fault. I told you; we been fighting the damned naga for months now. It was only a matter of time before that witch Vashj got reinforcements to help her take us all out. And me,

I been too focused on the ogres to keep an eye on her like I should have. No, brother, this ain't your fault. If it's anyone's, it's mine."

"Did you just say Vashj? As in Lady Vashj?" Zerith asked. Denjai nodded tiredly. "Why would she attack the Horde?"

"Why would a blasted snake do anything?" Denjai sighed rhetorically. "We thought the same thing when we first got out here. We figured we'd have a leg up on the Alliance, what with your prince being all buddy-buddy with Vashj. We sent emissaries to meet with her. When they didn't come back, we sent others. One of those managed to make it back and tell us what the snakes were doing. We decided not to send any more diplomats to serpents who think it's acceptable to skin them alive."

"But... Vashj... and Prince Kael'Thas..."

"Hey man, snakes are crazy bad. Maybe she decided to do her own thing. Maybe Kael don't want nothing do with her. Maybe there's something going on we don't know about. It's six up, half a dozen down. You come with me," he grinned, motioning for the priest and the Blood Knight to follow him. "We'll try to figure out a way to make that bitch pay."

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Alayne yawned and stretched out, apologizing when her hand brushed against someone. She grinned when she saw Ger'alain laying across from her, snoring softly. Glancing on her other side, she saw Zerith curled up in a ball. She stifled a laugh when she sat up and saw that Dar'ja was trying to figure out how to disentangle her hair from Zerith's fist without tearing a bald spot in her scalp. "He does this whenever he gets stressed out," Dar'ja hissed in a whisper as she tried to pry his fingers open. "Last time, I had to slip out of my nightgown just so I could get breakfast started. Don't laugh, Alayne. I'll bet Ger'alain has some odd habits that you'll get to learn about," she grinned.

"Rise and shine, sleepers!" Callie shouted at the top of her lungs, making Dar'ja jump and wince when she felt the tug at the base of her neck. Alayne giggled and stood up, prodding Ger'alain gently with her foot and nearly tripping when he grabbed her ankle. He let go and sat up quickly, apologizing and pushing himself to his feet. "Come on, everybody up!" the Forsaken continued loudly. "It's mid-morning and it's time to wake up!" Walking among the sleepers, the Forsaken who had stood guard gently prodded those not already up awake. Dar'ja began chewing her lip and shaking Zerith gently, hoping to wake him so he wouldn't roll over and rip a plug out of her scalp.

"Oh, sorry," he mumbled when he finally woke up, releasing her hair. "I'm under a little stress right now."

"I know," she muttered to him in an undertone, "you must really be worried because you were kicking last night, too."

"I am," he sighed, sitting up. "It looks like we might wind up fighting Lady Vashj." Dar'ja gasped and stared at him. "Denjai, the leader of the Horde forces in Zangarmarsh, told me last night that Vashj has been attacking the Horde bases and has killed almost every envoy they've sent to try to negotiate with her. She's been sending forces against the Alliance as well. It seems that she doesn't want *anyone* out here but the naga loyal to her."

"What are we going to do? We can't fight Lady Vashj! She's one of our allies."

"We may have to. I fear that she's gone mad. At any rate, if we don't help the Horde out; if we stand aside, it's going to be a black mark against every sin'dorei. Thrall has accepted us, but he doesn't really trust us. I could kill the Lady for putting us in this damnable position but we're trapped between a rock and a hard spot. If we stand aside, we may lose our allies in the Horde. Prince Kael'Thas would *not* be happy about that. Ger'alain and I decided last night that we're going to fight. Any sin'dorei who feels that he or she can't is welcome to

stay out of the battle. Vashj has made her choice already; she's going to fight us whether we want to fight her or not. We may as well take the battle to her and be done with it," he said firmly. "Will you be coming, or will you stand aside? I promise not to be upset with you either way, my dearest."

"I've followed you this far," Dar'ja sighed. "I'll fight."

"Good," he smiled. "It would be odd not to have you at my side. Oh no," he groaned, hearing his sister's high-pitched squeal and looking over to see her collapsing, nearly falling to the ground before Ger'alain could catch her. "Looks like Alayne's not taking the news well at all."

"She'll be fine," Dar'ja laughed, grabbing hold of the hem of Zerith's robe when he stood up. "Let Ger'alain handle it. She is *his* woman, after all," the sin'dorei grinned wolfishly as she watched the other Blood Knight try to figure out what to do with the unconscious woman in his arms.

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"And what about after this is all over?" Alayne asked as they regrouped on the shore of the lake. "Do you honestly think we will be able to explain to Lord Lor'themar why we attacked and killed our naga allies?"

"Well, it's not as if the Lady is giving us much of a choice," Zerith said slowly. "Did Ger'alain not explain this to you?"

"He did but it's still insane!"

"Then you can stay here while we fight," Zerith muttered. "I'm not forcing anyone into this who doesn't want to go."

"I'll go. I just... I don't want to see us exiled or executed. I definitely don't want to see us leading any kind of rebellion," she said quickly.

"Rebellion? Alayne, are you feeling well?" he asked in concern, putting a hand on her forehead and looking to see if the madness was returning.

"It's just something I saw happening while I was in Northrend... or maybe it was after that. I don't remember when, but I had a dream that there was a civil war in Quel'Thalas and that we had turned against our Prince."

"Arthas is a liar, Alayne. You know that. He had you thinking that we were draining your soul from you. He lied to you, tricked you, trapped you, and then brainwashed you into following him. Don't ever think anything he said or showed to you is real. If you do that, you could fall back under his control."

"I know," she sighed. "It's just that... I keep getting this odd sense of déjà vu. As if I've lived through this before."

"Ignore it," he suggested. "Everyone gets those weird feelings once in a while. They don't mean anything. Now, come on. If you're going to join the battle, you need to get in the boat with Dar'ja and Callie. There we go," he said, helping her in. "Look after my wife, please," he whispered in his sister's ear. "She hates boats."

"It's not the boat, it's the rocking," Dar'ja moaned, leaning over the side and emptying her stomach. "Really, I could have swum out there. It's not so far."

"Sea-sick?" Alayne said, her voice sounding sympathetic but her face looking amused. "Well, whatever you do, don't think about food. Especially not green food like pea soup. Or the way it sloshes around in the bowl. Oh, and definitely do not think about rocking. Rocking back and forth, back and forth," she grinned, making the boat sway slightly.

"I'm going to kill you," Dar'ja groaned. "What did I ever do to you?"

"The zeppelin ride after your wedding. Payback is tough, isn't it? I think I'll make nice, slimy boiled spinach for the celebration feast..." her voice trailed off as the boat moved away from the shore. Zerith shook his head and tried not to laugh. He didn't like seeing his

wife so sick but Alayne did deserve to get some payback for recent events. Walking over, he climbed into the boat waiting for him. Ger'alain and Tau're picked up their oars and shoved off.

"So, Dar'ja doesn't like boats," Ger'alain muttered. "That's useful information for the next time she makes me mad."

"Leave my wife alone," Zerith said wryly. "Alayne is allowed to get a little bit of revenge but you aren't."

"So, I'll just wait until Alayne and I are married and then, if Dar'ja makes me mad, I'll tell Alayne to get her back for me. We'll be married; she'll have to do it, then. Why are you laughing, Zerith? I'm not entirely joking. Dar'ja can be nice but she can be a real pain, too."

"No, it's not that," Zerith gasped. "It's you thinking you're going to *tell* Alayne to do anything. It doesn't work that way. Trust me. No man *tells* his wife to do anything. It's never done anything other than get the man sleeping on the couch since the beginning of *time*. I doubt even the Titans can *tell* their wives to do *anything*."

"I see," Ger'alain said slowly. "Can I arrange to have a long discussion with you about this at a later date?"

"Certainly," Zerith nodded, seeing the chance to really wreak a little havoc. Grinning inwardly, he began planning out the plausible – and very humorous when acted upon – advice he would give the other man on how to deal with a wife.

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"Be careful," the Broken said, his voice rasping like sandpaper rubbed across rough wood. "She's tricky, Vashj is."

"We'll keep that in mind," Ger'alain muttered absently, trying to catch his breath from the last fight. "How are we doing, Zerith?"

"If we can avoid another fight like that one, we'll be doing fine," the priest muttered as he passed through the ranks, reaching out to lay hands on the worst wounded. "I still don't know how they got behind us."

"They swam," the Broken replied.

"In that water?" Ger'alain asked, pointing to the rivers below. "There are piranhas down there." Next to him, Callie nodded emphatically, recalling how her ankles had been gnawed nearly to shreds when she'd ventured into the shallows to try to scout a way around the bridges and platforms.

"Those piranhas?" the Broken said, stumbling over the unfamiliar word, "are probably under their control, just as we were until you killed our jailers."

"That figures," the Forsaken sighed. "Fish and fish."

"You and the others should go to the surface," Zerith suggested to the Broken. "This is our fight. We would not see you hurt," he continued diplomatically, hoping that the twisted creature would take the hint. None of the strange slaves they'd freed looked as if they could press on in a fight. Several still limped and dragged around as if pained, even after they'd been healed.

"We said we would go with you to see her brought down," the Broken replied fiercely, his eyes gleaming. "None of us cares anymore if we live or die. We have nothing left but revenge. I intend to make that slimy witch pay for taking my home, my wife, and my brothers from me!" The other Broken nodded; all wanted to see Vashj dead for what she had done.

"Zerith," Alayne said calmly, firmly, "let them come. If you won't let them, I'll go with them and we'll bring her down." The priest nodded in acceptance. Ever since they'd come across the slaves, Alayne's entire attitude towards fighting Vashj had changed. "I've

seen slavery,” was all she would say, referring to her time in Northrend. “Those who would enslave another being deserve to die, or taste slavery themselves. Only the vilest of all creatures – demons – merit slavery and, even then, it is better to destroy them if you can.”

“This is it,” he sighed. “She’s in there. No doubt the minute we go through that door, there will be a million nasty things waiting for us.”

“Well, she’s not going to come out here, no matter how long we wait for her,” Callie muttered. “If only we could have gotten behind her before she got away.”

“We were a little too busy being pressed on all sides,” Ger’alin grimaced. “You’re right, though. Waiting for her to come out could mean waiting until it snows in Molten Core. Yes, there’s probably a few surprises waiting for us in that room but better to face them head-on and get through to her than wait out here until our grandchildren have grandchildren.” Zerith started to suggest letting some of the rogues scout ahead but Ger’alin ignored him and stood up straight. Signaling his group, the paladin ran forward, straight into the room.

“Ger’alin, wait!” Jez’ral shouted, sensing a current in the air just as the man charged through the doorway. “Oh no,” the warlock sighed, ducking in to the room and keeping his back pressed to the wall. Alayne followed on his heels, nearly screaming when she saw the fighters held to the floor, their feet encased in blocks of ice up to their knees.

“Disobedient children,” Vashj hissed, the last six of her guards surrounding the trapped fighters. “Your prince will be most displeased to learn that you’ve meddled in our affairs. Kill them,” she said to the naga guards. “I said kill them!” she repeated angrily. “Why are you just standing there? Kill them!”

“Alayne?” Jez’ral whispered, seeing sweat begin to roll down her face. “What are you doing?”

“Just kill them before one of them breaks free,” she said, forcing the words between clenched teeth. “I don’t know how long I can keep them like this. Just go!” she grunted.

“As you command,” he muttered, raising his hands and casting his spells. The other casters followed his example, entering the room and keeping well back, throwing spells at the docile serpents. Alayne jerked every time a spell landed. Dark circles appeared suddenly under her eyes and her face paled as if all of the blood were being drained out of her. The naga rolled their eyes, shivering, trying to break free of the woman’s control so they could defend themselves. Vashj stared at the fight in confusion, her jaw dropping lower each time one of the guards fell to the magical onslaught.

While the casters fought, Ger’alin and the others hacked away at the ice encasing their legs. Several managed to free themselves and, after stomping their feet hard on the ground, they rushed out to slash at the serpents. When the first sword-strike fell, Alayne’s eyes rolled back in her head and she hit the ground, releasing the other five from her control. The fighters still trapped in ice held their ground valiantly, twisting as best they could to deflect spear points or land blows of their own. Moments after Alayne had fainted, the only serpent left standing was Vashj.

Ger’alin managed to free himself from the ice and turned to see Zerith trying to slap Alayne awake. “She’s alive,” the priest mouthed to the fighter. “Out cold, though. I don’t know why.” Turning back to Vashj, the Blood Knight grinned, a cold grin that made the ice that had trapped him seem warm. Behind him, the former Broken slaves poured into the room, adding their numbers to the Disorder of Azeroth as the group advanced on the lone snake-woman.

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Jez’ral knuckled his back and sighed with relief after the brief fight was over. It had seemed to go on for an eternity. Bending down, he pulled Vashj’s disbelieving eyes closed.

Ger'alın was right; the snake must have been mad to think that she could take on an entire army by herself. "You may have been a legend," he whispered, sounding amused, "but now, you're just a memory. Hm? What's this?" he wondered, digging through the pouches the woman wore belted around her many-armed torso. "It's just water," he sighed, finding a vial filled with pure, clear liquid. "It feels...one of the Magisters back in Silvermoon will have to look into this," he muttered, pocketing the vial. "What else do you have in these pockets of yours, I wonder?"

"Zerith says that Alayne will be fine," Callie reported. Jez'ral nodded absently, pulling parchments from the dead woman's pouches and glancing over them quickly. Nothing in the documents made sense to him. There was something about some spy among the Broken, a bit about water shipments to the Netherstorm, and an odd mention to Kael'Thas about Illidan not being pleased with certain rumors he had heard. "He wants to know what she did." Callie repeated for the fourth time, pulling the man from his thoughts.

"I have no clue what she did. Something she learned in Northrend, I think," Jez'ral replied with half a mind. "Ask her."

"He said she'd be fine," Callie said dryly. "He didn't say she was awake yet. Frankly, I don't think he's going to get her away from Ger'alın any time soon. What's that?" she asked, pointing to the vial of water Jez'ral was holding.

"Just some water."

"Then why are you staring at it like that?"

"It feels...there's something about this...I can't quite place my finger on it," he mumbled. "It's as if I should know but I don't."

"Well, put it away for now and let's get out of here," the Forsaken muttered. Jez'ral pocketed the vial again, wondering why it seemed familiar and yet, completely foreign to him, at the same time. He blinked in surprise when he saw Alayne's head lolling against Ger'alın's chest.

"I thought you said she was fine," he said in an irritated undertone to the Forsaken.

"Were you listening to only every other word?" Callie replied in like tone.

"What did she do?"

"Question answered," the rogue snarled, striding ahead to join the others who were making their way out of the cavern. Jez'ral shook his head and walked over to Ger'alın. The Blood Knight clutched Alayne protectively to his chest, glaring at the warlock who approached them.

"What did she do?" the two men said at the same time, Ger'alın demanding where Jez'ral wondered.

"I was hoping you would know," Zerith said wryly, making both men start in fright.

"I'm not doing that ever again," Alayne answered thickly, her tongue sounding as if it were swollen. "He doesn't know," she continued, waving an arm towards Jez'ral. "Northrend."

"Was it what you did to those naga when they surround Ger'alın a few days ago?" Alayne nodded. "Why did you faint?" Zerith asked.

"Because it's really tiring to do that, especially when they were practically on fire with battle-blood," she sighed. "I'm also not very good at it. One good slash and my control slips away completely. Once I lost the first one, the other five were even harder to hold on to until I just couldn't anymore."

"I see," Zerith sighed. "Well, at least you'll sleep well tonight. And you had better just sleep," he growled, glaring at Ger'alın. "Come on. The druids say that the repairs to the Refuge are almost complete. Yes, Ger'alın, they re-grew them; you weren't seeing things," Zerith said, sounding just as amazed as the other man had been.

“I’ve got to see that,” Alayne said, turning her head. “Let’s go.” She chewed her bottom lip worriedly as Ger’alin carried her back towards the entrance of the cavern. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was going to happen...something she should be able to foresee.

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Ger’alin woke up, feeling Alayne trembling next to him. “Alayne, are you alright?” he asked, realizing that he was trembling too. The whole room seemed to be. Alayne turned around and flung her arms around him, burying her face in his chest as the room continued to be rocked by a small, but long-lasting, earthquake. Ger’alin winced and felt tears spring to his eyes as she continued to cling to him. “Nails,” he whispered, whimpering as she held on in terror, “you’ve got to trim your fingernails. Oh, Light, what was *that*?” he groaned, feeling a wave of raw, searing energy pass over him. The scent and feel of it, crackling and electrifying, made his head spin while turning his stomach at the same time.

Through it all, Alayne held on to him as if her life depended on it. For long moments after the wave passed, the earth continued to shake before finally settling back down into stillness. “There, there,” he said, running a hand through Alayne’s hair. “It’s over now, whatever it was. There’s no need to be frightened, now. I’m here; I’m not about to let anything happen to you,” he whispered comfortingly, soothingly. He could feel his ribs creaking as she tightened her grip. He could feel a warm wetness on his chest. Reaching down, he gently, but firmly, pulled her up so that he could peer into her face. “What’s the matter?” he asked, wiping the tears from her face.

“War,” she shuddered. “There’s going to be a war!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I...he...Arthas said this would happen!” she sobbed. “When I was in Northrend, whenever I would start to come back to myself, he would be there, showing me things that would happen if I deserted him. One of those things was a night, just like this. An earthquake that wouldn’t stop; a wave of raw energy that threatened to sweep me away...and then a war and all of you were dead and it was my fault! All of you, dead, blood dripping down the streets of Silvermoon, its spires broken and crumbling! All because I...”

Ger’alin silenced her by the simple expedient of kissing her. Whenever she seemed to try to launch into her bout of self-blame and fear again, he would cut her off. After a while, her trembling stilled and her sobs subsided. Once he was certain she was calm, he set her gently back down on her side of the bed and turned to look at her. “Arthas is a liar,” he whispered. “You’ve told me what he said to convince you that none of us cared for you; that we had been using you. Surely you’ve learned I would never do anything like that.”

“I know but...”

“But nothing,” he sighed. “Now, explain to me how your leaving him, turning your back on the road you had taken, would somehow lead to Silvermoon being destroyed and all of us being killed.”

“I don’t...”

“It wouldn’t,” he continued, reaching over to stroke her cheek. “While you are the most important person in my life, Alayne, you are hardly the linchpin upon which sin’dorei civilization hangs. None of us could single-handedly cause that kind of destruction. Especially not you. You only wreak that kind of havoc when it’s truly called for. Of course, you do have a tendency to overdo it but that’s why I’ll always be there; to pin you to the ground and kiss you within an inch of your life if need be,” he teased. She smiled and reached over to pat him on his cheek.

“Have I told you lately that you’re very intelligent and wise?” she sighed. “You’re right. One person couldn’t cause all that devastation. Not even me when I get *really* angry.”

“What concerns me is that you would even let him make you begin to think that,” Ger’alin sighed. Alayne turned on her back and placed a hand on her forehead, pulling her hair out of her eyes and taking a deep breath.

“He’s...insidious,” she said after a long pause. “He can worm his way into your thoughts, your hopes, your greatest fears and turn them against you. There’s nothing human left in him other than the fact that he can recall caring enough about those things to see them as weapons to be used. Effective weapons, too. Light, he used my own father against me. I...oh, Light, my father!” she sighed bitterly, tears streaming down her face again. Ger’alin reached over and lifted her again, letting her cry herself out on his shoulder while he fought to breathe around the lump in his throat.

“Using someone’s own heart against them. If it wouldn’t be complete folly, I’d go give him the death he claims mastery over right now,” he thought to himself. “Not even demons are as vile as that rotten bastard.” Rocking her until she fell asleep in his arms, and then holding her still, he felt the giddy light-headed rush of emotion when she started whispering incoherently. Settling her back down, he smiled and tried to puzzle out what she might be dreaming about. He froze, his eyes shooting towards the door, when he heard it begin to creak open. Zerith and Callie ducked their heads in, grinning at him when he rolled his eyes and mouthed ‘wake her and I’ll chop you into little pieces.’

“Are you alright?” Zerith whispered, tiptoeing into the room. “That earthquake has just about everyone spooked, especially after those late-night attacks.”

“Oh, I’m fine. She was terrified but she’s calmed down and fallen back to sleep,” Ger’alin replied, keeping a careful eye on Alayne to make certain she was still asleep.

“What had her so upset?” Zerith asked, seeing his sister’s face red, her eyes swollen as if she’d been weeping.

“Long story summed up in four words,” Ger’alin growled softly. “Arthas is a bastard. Apparently, he sent her visions of an earthquake followed by the collapse of all of elvendom, convincing her it would be her fault for leaving him.”

“He’s good at that,” Callie muttered, glancing down at Alayne. “He gets inside your mind, makes you believe things you never would otherwise. He can play a person the way a bard plays a lute.”

“You don’t think he’s trying to get her back?” Zerith asked. “She’s been complaining about having a sense of *déjà vu* since this morning.”

“No,” Ger’alin whispered firmly. “It was something he used to hold her in Northrend. Using her own love for us as a knife against her throat. How could anyone, even him, be so heartless as to do that to such a beautiful, kind, warm, and loving woman?”

“We’ll just let you get back to sleep,” Zerith said quickly, wrapping an arm around Callie and clapping his hand over her mouth before she could say anything. Ger’alin nodded absently, staring at Alayne’s face with a look Zerith recognized. It was the same way he looked at Dar’ja when he knew she wouldn’t see and ask him what he was staring at.

“Beautiful? Her face was all red, blotchy, and swollen,” Callie laughed when Zerith dragged her out into the hallway and let her go. The priest shook his head at the Forsaken as he walked back to his own room. “He’s got it baaaaaaaaaad,” she cackled.

“No,” Zerith smiled as he opened the door and saw his own wife sleeping peacefully. “He’s got it *good*.”

“You two are up earlier than I expected,” Jez’ral said, sounding surprised when he saw Alayne and Ger’alin sitting down, eating breakfast together the next morning. Most of the others still slept, worn out from battle or the celebration the druids had held in honor of Vashj’s demise.

“Callie said we’d be leaving this morning and so, we’re ready,” Alayne answered. “Besides, I’ll be glad to get this over with. I have plans for when we get finished,” she said, winking at Ger’alin. “And the sooner we can get on to those, the better.”

“What do you two need to do in Nagrand, anyway?” Ger’alin asked, grinning back at her.

“Demon research. It’s driving me up the wall not knowing who tainted the Outland orcs,” Jez’ral sighed. “On top of that, Nagrand is the only area that has flourished, despite the destruction of Draenor. I want to know why. I also want to test the waters there. Something I found on Vashj,” he said, holding up the vial of clear water-that-wasn’t-water.

“So do I,” Alayne muttered, staring at the vial and shrugging. Something about it seemed familiar. “Hellfire Peninsula was a barren, rocky wasteland. Zangarmarsh is...just plain odd. Nagrand is bound to be better. Still...maybe we should head south into Terokkar. That earthquake last night...”

“Yes,” Jez’ral whispered, pocketing the vial again. “I would like to learn more about whatever caused that. Wild torrents of arcane energy are always worth exploring.”

“So, a little detour before we head on?” Alayne asked. Jez’ral nodded.

“What detour?” Dar’ja asked, sitting down across from Ger’alin and Alayne. “Congratulations on your amazing self-control, you two. You cost me ten gold,” she said warmly. Zerith settled in next to her, laughing, and Callie plunked down next to Jez’ral. “If you two need any...*practical advice*, you know Zerith and I...”

“Thank you,” they both said at the same time, blushing in unison.

“So, what detour?”

“We’ll be heading south into Terokkar Forest today instead of southwest into Nagrand. Alayne and I are both curious about that burst of energy that washed over us last night.”

“The earthquake, you mean? I wondered what that was about myself. As did everyone else,” Zerith said.

“Then let’s eat and round up the others,” Jez’ral said dryly. “Send the rest of your private army on to the ruins of Shattrath. Tell them we’ll send word if we need them.”