

Alayne chewed her lower lip nervously as she rode near the head of the column. In front of her, Zerith, Ger'alain, and Garrosh rode with their heads together. The leader of the Dragonmaw clan, an orc named Mor'ghor, had been waiting for them on the road south of Firewing Point. He and Garrosh had exchanged brief words before he galloped off to return to his embattled keep. From what little Ger'alain had told her, Alayne knew that Illidan was enraged at the Dragonmaw's mass defection. Their redemption from the blood lust had cost the Illidari enormous resources and manpower. Only demons and sin'dorei operating under orders from Kael'Thas were left of Illidan's forces. "There has to be a way around him," she whispered beneath her breath.

"Not talking to yourself again, are you?" Callie asked, poking the warlock in the knee. "You need to stop worrying so much."

"I'm not worried," Alayne lied. "I'm just thinking."

"Well, quit thinking. Zerith and Ger'alain have worked out a pretty good plan. Actually sneaking into the Black Temple is brilliant. Still, it's going to be hard to kill the attackers without damaging their clothes," the rogue mused. "But, hey, the Disorder of Azeroth is always up for a challenge. Quit looking so glum," she sighed.

"I'm not glum," Alayne said irritably. Craning her neck, she tried to read the others' lips, desperate to figure out what they were talking about now. From what she could make out, they were just discussing possible avenues of attack to help break the siege at Dragonmaw Hold. She felt the now-familiar tingle that told her that something – she had no idea what – momentous was upon them.

"Yes, you are," Callie interjected, trying to divert the woman's attention. "Something's bothering you."

"Nothing's bothering me," Alayne growled. The men had finished their conversation and Ger'alain was reining in Lucky, letting the horse fall back until he was abreast of his wife and the Forsaken. "So?" she asked.

"Have I ever told you how much I hate sieges?" he sighed. "They're nasty things. Luckily, this one has only been in place a short while. It shouldn't be too hard to rout them out."

"I seem to recall you mentioning something about sieges being nasty things," Alayne muttered. "What is the plan?"

Ger'alain sighed and scrubbed a hand through his long brown hair. Alayne reached over and tucked the stray lock that always fell in his face back behind his ear. Patting the side of his head fondly, she repeated her question.

"We're going to crush them," Ger'alain answered simply. "Zerith is up there now doing the sums in his mind. He sent us back so we'd quit bothering him. The Disorder of Azeroth will split in half. One half will circle around from the Sanctum of the Stars and hit the Dragonmaw from the side flanking the mountains. The other half will continue towards the Black Temple and flank them from the other side. Garrosh's forces will wait in reserve and strike in the center once we've pushed them back a good bit. Together, we should be able to crush them against the Dragonmaw's wall."

"That doesn't sound so hard," Callie muttered.

"Oh, you want hard?" Ger'alain replied in mock exasperation. "Well, I suppose the fact that we don't dare get close to the rear of the lines because the Dragonmaw are going to be letting loose with their catapults would be 'hard.' Oh, and all of the sin'dorei with us are going to have to watch out for the orcish archers on the wall. According to Mor'ghor, we all look alike. There, is that 'hard' enough for you, Callie?"

"I like a challenge," she grinned.

"What kind of demons are with the Illidari?" Alayne cut in.

“I think Mor’ghor said that there are mostly fel guards. Nothing terribly strong; Illidan apparently doesn’t trust demons any more than the rest of us. He only used Magtheridon because he needed a way to force the orcs to remain loyal to him. The more I think about the fact that Stormrage enslaved an entire people and foisted an addiction on them, the more I…”

“Calm down,” Alayne said, patting his knee absently while she sorted through various methods of defeating fel guard class demons. “Are there any other kinds of demons there? Besides the fel guards?”

“No. At least, he didn’t say when we asked.”

“Tell Zerith to put all of the warlocks together,” she sighed. “We’ll work better with bringing them to heel if we can meld our magics. No, Ger’alin, we’re not going to try to enslave them,” she answered the irritated question she saw flash in his eyes. “Though, if none are very powerful, enslaving them would be fairly low-risk. But, I’m not,” she sighed. “I’m not going to put myself in the position Jez’ral is in now.” Ger’alin stared at her flatly, his green eyes bland and demanding at the same time. “What?” she asked.

“What is bothering you?” he asked, his tone matching his expression.

“Nothing!” Alayne snapped.

“That’s exactly what she told me, too,” Callie added, rolling her eyes.

“Spill it, Alayne,” he said, staring at her relentlessly. “You can’t hide anything from me and you know it.”

Alayne glared at her husband and flapped the loose ends of her reins in irritation. Opening her mouth several times, she closed it, uncertain of how to begin. “What are you doing?” she demanded angrily when Ger’alin pulled her off her felsteed and in front of him. He ignored her, shaking his head at Zerith when the priest glanced back and raised his eyebrows in askance. Letting healing energies flow through his hands, Ger’alin looked for the cracks that had marred Alayne’s spirit during her illness. Finding no trace of them, he let her straighten her skirts and look daggers at him over her shoulder. “What was that for?”

“What is bothering you?” he asked, his tone growing milder. “You were crying in your sleep last night. You’ve been distant all morning. I know you, Alayne. I know every expression you have and you’ve been wearing your ‘something is bothering me but I’m not going to tell anyone because either a) it’s something silly or b) I’ll handle it myself or c) both’ expression since breakfast.” Alayne squirmed, trying to find a way to sit comfortably in front of his saddle while giving her husband her frostiest glare. “I can drag it out of you,” he threatened, his eyes lighting up. He lifted his hands slightly and she froze, staring at him in dread.

“I’ve just got the feeling that something horrible is about to happen,” she said quickly. “I… I keep seeing things… and I don’t know if they are true things are not. I… nothing good will come of confronting Illidan,” she explained. “The orcs are going to turn against us. I don’t know if they’ll become our enemies or if they’ll just refuse to help us, but… something is going to happen if we go up against Illidan and it’s going to turn them against us.”

“Why would the orcs turn against us?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged helplessly. “I just…”

“What are you two doing?” Zerith asked, reining E’la in near them. He had signaled a halt to the advance just before the hill leading up towards Dragonmaw Hold.

“Alayne thinks that something is going to happen to cause the orcs to turn against us if we continue against Illidan,” Ger’alin said, not giving Zerith’s sister a chance to open her mouth. “She’s having those visions and that sense of déjà vu again.”

Zerith squinted at Alayne. “If we don’t help break the siege,” he pointed out reasonably, “they will turn against us. No, Alayne, I know that you’re afraid of something and

it's got you very worried. We'll talk about it after this fight. For now, let's just take this one step at a time. We'll cross the bridge to the Black Temple when we come to it."

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"I hate sieges," Ger'alın muttered as he and Garrosh crawled up the hill on their bellies.

"All warriors hate them," Garrosh replied, pulling himself up over the crest of the hill carefully. "They are nasty things," the two said at the same time. Glancing at each other, both grinned and shook their heads ruefully before turning their attention back to the scene further down the valley.

"This may be tricky," Ger'alın whispered. Arrayed in heavy lines from nearly the middle of the valley all the way to the walls of the fortress, demons and elves bearing the Illidari crest threw spells and missiles at the fortress's palisade, concentrating fire on the gates in hopes of forcing them open. From atop the high walls, orcish archers and magi returned fire. Every few moments, the ground would shake and the canyon echo with a resounding "thud" as the Dragonmaw let loose with one of their catapults. Blood and gore staining the dusty floor of the canyon attested to the fact that the Illidari forces had learned, through trial and error, to stay pressed close to the walls and out of the catapults' range. The two watched for several moments more before conferring amongst themselves and crawling back down the hill. Once they were far enough down, they stood, dusted themselves off, and jogged up to Zerith.

"Well?" the priest asked. He'd seen the pair of them put their heads together.

"The plan will work fine," Ger'alın replied. "I just wish we had drilled more with the casters mixed in with the front lines. It's going to be really chaotic out there."

"We'll do fine," Zerith said, faking a confidence he did not feel. "After all, once we push them back, the Mag'har will pin them and we'll have them caught like a snake in a cleft stick." Ger'alın and Garrosh nodded and, at a signal from Zerith, hurried back to gather their groups. The priest watched anxiously as his forces divided themselves in half. One half began to funnel itself down the far side of the canyon wall, keeping a careful eye for the wandering creatures who fed off the crystals dotting the canyon floor. The other half galloped down the road, keeping pace with their counterparts. A few Illidari moved to try to intercept them but were cut off when, seeing rescue at hand, the Dragonmaw directed their catapults towards the road, forcing the Illidari to remain near the gates.

A flash of light off a sword blade caught Zerith's eye. He watched as Ger'alın led his group into the midst of the Illidari demons and elves. The priest muttered a brief prayer, hoping his healers and sister would be well with Ger'alın. Letting Alayne fight so close in made the man nervous. Her temper had ever been uncertain unless she had someone standing over her. Letting her stay with Ger'alın during a battle might not have been the best idea. "It's not as if I could have stopped her," he muttered to himself. Seeing both sides engaged, Zerith directed his attention back to Garrosh. He would ride with the Mag'har, healing their forces as they tried to avoid the missiles from the Dragonmaw and pin the Illidari to the wall. The sin'dorei priest kept his focus on the orc chieftain, refusing to let himself watch the progress of the battle. He would not trample Garrosh's newly-found leadership by questioning the man's decisions in front of his own troops. Time seemed to move with infinite slowness as the priest watched the chieftain watch the battle. Zerith heaved a sigh of relief with he saw Garrosh's arm fall forward, signaling the advance. Glancing up at the sun, the priest was shocked to see that it had risen to nearly its noon-day peak. Letting the orcs ride in front of him, Zerith hung back with the shaman, looking with mild interest at the primitive idols and

totems they carried to help in healing their brethren. He uttered a brief prayer to the Light as he heeled E'la to a trot, one eye on the sky and one on the battle before him.

The Disorder of Azeroth had done well, forcing the Illidari lines back upon themselves, putting significant numbers out of the fight by giving them no room to maneuver. Relief trilled through him when he saw Ger'alín and Dar'ja in the fore on either side, their blades dripping with blood. Telling himself it was demon blood, refusing to let himself consider that they had had to kill any of their own, he looked around for Alayne and Callie. The Forsaken was near Dar'ja, her daggers making quick work of any demon or elf who tried to get through the lines. Alayne stood back, hunched over and catching her breath. Around her, the other casters stood in similar states of exhaustion. He grimaced when he saw her reach out and, with a deft grasp, pull part of the life-force from one of the remaining demons. "I hate it when she does that," he thought to himself. With renewed vigor, his sister began hurling her spells. Bolts of shadow exploded against Illidari chests, sending the targets reeling and giving them no chance to try to deflect the hexes and curses she wrought on them. One by one, the other casters regained their strength, adding their power to hers. Bolts of ice and fire joined her shadow bolts. Lightning sprang from the hands of the shaman and, overhead, thundering clouds appeared, forks of electricity shooting from them and decimating the Illidari ranks in the rear. Rain slicked the ground, turning the dirt into bloody mud. Zerith could imagine Ger'alín's thoughts when he saw the Blood Knight grimace as the sucking mire tried to hold him fast.

On the battle raged, steel ringing against steel, screams of agony mixing with shouts of triumph. By the time the sun had begun to descend from its zenith, the last of the Illidari demons was slain and only a handful of elves, throwing their weapons down and lifting their arms to beg for quarter, remained. Zerith held himself back, letting Garrosh take command of the prisoners. He told himself that they would be treated more honorably by the orcs than they would treat any prisoners Illidan held. Looking around, he began to tread through the crowd, offering healing to the wounded and comfort to the distraught. Out of the corner of one eye, he could see his friends, his family, gathering together near the gate. Alayne was wiping sweat from her forehead and waving away Ger'alín's offer of support when she staggered. Dar'ja had slumped to the ground, her sides heaving, trying to catch her breath. Only Callie seemed her normal, energetic self and Zerith would not pay the price she had for such endurance. He grinned to himself as he began to walk towards them, trying to frame the best way to tease Dar'ja about her fatigue while not giving Ger'alín ammunition to use against him. The gates of the fortress creaked open and Alayne turned to look. Her face went dead white and her eyes bulged. Her mouth opened to emit a wordless, high-pitched shriek. Zerith began running, glad that Ger'alín was there to catch her before she could hit the ground. Garrosh looked away from the prisoners to stare daggers at the fainting elven woman. Jogging over to the gate, he grinned when he saw Mor'ghor and an orcish magician of great power walk through. "The Dragonmaw owes the Mag'har a debt of blood," Mor'ghor said gruffly.

"There is no debt between brothers," Garrosh replied. "Let the past go, Mor'ghor. Your clan did dark things, that is true. All the clans did in those days. Let us focus now on the future."

"That is what he says," Mor'ghor grinned, pointing to the sin'dorei Blood Knight trying to revive his wife.

"He says many things worth considering," the magician muttered, staring at the strange tableau. "I have heard his words from Mor'ghor. Because of them, we sent Zuluhed's head to Illidan as a sign that we will no longer allow him to destroy us. The dragons have decided to ally with us as well, now that we no longer enslave them."

"That is good news," Garrosh said. "Good news indeed. Come; let us discuss the next stage of our battle."

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Ger'alín rubbed Alayne's temples, praying that the next time the woman opened her eyes, she would not faint again. After the third time, it had ceased to be funny. Neither he nor Zerith could hide their worry that something was terribly wrong with the woman. Both recalled her explanations as to why she had been unable to confide in them in the run up to her insanity. Both fervently prayed that such would not become the case again. "She seems fine," Ger'alín said for the tenth time. "I don't know why she keeps fainting."

"If she does it again, I'm going to throw a bucket of ice water on her," Callie muttered. "This really isn't funny anymore."

"Shush," Dar'ja said, waving the others to silence. "I think she's coming around again." Ger'alín continued to massage her scalp, watching her face worriedly as his wife made quiet moans and twitched, regaining consciousness for the sixth time. "Alayne?" Dar'ja asked softly.

"Light my head hurts," Alayne whispered, reaching up and putting her hands over Ger'alín's. "Thanks, sweetheart, but it's not working."

"Are you feeling well?" Zerith asked. Alayne still had not opened her eyes. "Look at us."

"I...I don't know," she answered, sounding confused. "When the gate opened and I saw Mor'ghor and the other orc with him...for a moment, I thought..."

"You thought what?" Zerith pressed, squatting down beside her.

"I just...we can't attack the Black Temple. If we do, something terrible is going to happen."

"If we don't attack, we'll lose the Mag'har and the Dragonmaw as allies," Zerith pointed out reasonably. "Why shouldn't we attack? What do you fear will happen?"

"I don't know," she muttered fretfully. "We should be going after Kael."

"He's next on the list," Ger'alín said gently. "But, if we pull Illidan down, we may be able to convince him to stop this madness."

"You don't understand," Alayne said, sitting up. Her face paled again but she took a firm hold of herself. "Ever since I heard we were going to fight Lady Vashj, I've been having...not visions, but memories. I can see that something bad is going to happen if we continue down this path."

"Alayne, those 'visions' are from Arthas," Ger'alín whispered. "We've discussed this. You can't put any faith in them. After all, you told me that you feared going up against Vashj because you thought she would kill Dar'ja. Dar'ja is alive and well and glaring at us like we've lost our minds," he teased softly. Alayne glared at him. "Going up against Magtheridon would have made anyone nervous; that's why you were afraid that something was going to happen. It doesn't mean you knew, beforehand, that Jez'ral was going to have his mind destroyed. Whatever you fear now is probably akin to that. You can't let it control you."

"But..."

"But nothing," Zerith cut in. "He's right. If you're having visions from Arthas or remembering things you saw in Northrend, you can't trust them. The Lich King would love nothing more than to see all of us dead and in his service."

"He's a cold, heartless bastard without even the barest recollection of human feeling," Callie added. "I'd say, if he's telling you not to do something, then it's probably the very thing you should be doing."

"I agree with her," Ger'alín nodded.

"Just hear me out," Alayne pleaded. "If you do this...something terrible is going to happen! I don't know what but I know that I can't stop it if you do this!"

“Alayne,” Ger’alin said firmly but softly, “if anything terrible happens, we will deal with it when it happens. Now, I want you to rest. Zerith and I are going to speak with Mor’ghor and Garrosh to finalize our plans for infiltrating the Black Temple. No,” he said, putting a finger across her lips, “we are not going to back out of this now. We have given our word that we would help see the orcs of Outland free of Illidan’s control forever. If we break our word, they’ll never help us with our own problems. Thrall would probably rescind his offer of protection to the sin’dorei and then we’d be left to face the Scourge, the Horde, and the Alliance alone. No doubt that is what Arthas hopes for; that’s why he’s trying so hard to scare you into scaring us...” he sighed in frustration, tears springing to his eyes when Alayne’s rolled back in her head. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“One day, I’m going to plan an expedition to Northrend just to kill that son of a bitch,” Zerith swore.

“I’ll be more than happy to supply whatever information I can to see that happen,” Callie promised. “But, for now, maybe you two better go confer with Garrosh and Mor’ghor. Dar’ja and I will keep an eye on Alayne and try to get her to understand. Who knows, maybe we’ll be able to convince her to stop worrying so much,” the Forsaken continued, sounding doubtful. Zerith sighed and nodded, conceding the point. Ger’alin stood up, glancing at the door and back at his wife indecisively. Giving himself a shake, he stormed from the room, muttering imprecations and threats beneath his breath. Zerith followed after him, hoping that the four of them would be able to come up with a plan that would calm his sister’s fears.

Meanwhile, Alayne began to moan brokenly and thrash in her sleep.

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Ger’alin slumped against the wall just outside of the room where Mor’ghor and Garrosh were waiting for him and Zerith. He lifted a shaking hand to his eyes to wipe them and try to collect himself before he entered the room. “Hey, man,” Zerith said softly, gripping the Blood Knight’s shoulder. “She’ll be all right. Likely, she’s just worried about us going up against Illidan. How many times did she say it was hopeless?”

“I know, I know,” Ger’alin said, waving the other man off. “I just can’t help but remember how she used to clam up because her personality was splitting in half. She kept trying to protect us... And he used that against her! Is he doing it again?”

“That’s a question I dearly wish I knew the answer to,” Zerith sighed. “At least now, she doesn’t hide everything from us like she used to. I think, if she’s fainting, it’s from sheer terror, not because her mind is fighting against her will.”

“I wish I’d spent more time listening to Ma’iv,” Ger’alin muttered sullenly. “Maybe then I wouldn’t feel like I’m treading on thin ice.”

“Oh, believe me,” Zerith said, shaking his head, “having spoken with Ma’iv quite a bit, it does no good. I still feel worse than useless when it comes to maladies of the mind. Let’s try not to think about this right now,” he continued, “difficult as that is, I know.” The other man nodded his head and, taking a deep breath, gathered himself. Gesturing, he motioned for Zerith to go ahead of him into the room.

Garrosh and Mor’ghor looked up at the new comers before bending their heads back over the maps. Zerith and Ger’alin strode over and took their places on the opposite sides of the table. Looking down, both sin’dorei examined the maps laying out the inside of the Black Temple. “When I visited the Temple a week ago,” Mor’ghor said, pointing to one of the outer hallways, “Illidan had demons and Akama’s Broken patrolling these corridors. The only entrance to the Temple, unless you sprout wings and can turn completely invisible, is here,” he continued, indicating a pair of enormous doors. “This hallway leads – or perhaps led – to the Illidari Council chamber. If you’re still planning to go along with the scheme you cooked

up, your best bet is to collect what armor, tabards, weapons, and insignias you can from the dead and the prisoners. I can supply you with a few names that might ease your passage into the Temple. However, be wary of approaching the Illidari Council members or Illidan himself. Those blood elves are clever and Illidan has a way of seeing right through to the truth.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Ger’alin said calmly. “I wouldn’t mind testing my bluffing skills against Stormrage. I earned more than enough gold to buy a patent of nobility cutting cards,” he grinned. The orcs stared at him, their eyes flat, in no mood for jokes or attempts to lighten the atmosphere. “I’ll be careful.”

“*You’ll* be careful?” Zerith asked under his breath. Ger’alin raised a hand, silencing the priest for the moment. Zerith gave him a glare that demanded an answer later before letting himself be diverted.

“Brother,” Garrosh said, under no such compunction to hold his tongue, “your bravery is unquestioned but you would better serve us by staying here to design a battle plan. By the ancestors, you have one of the finest minds I’ve seen.”

“All the more reason for me to go,” Ger’alin replied, grateful that he was able to hold back the blushes that the chieftain’s compliments brought. “If I can see the disposition of Illidan’s forces first-hand; if I can see what defenses he’s mounted, then I can plan an even better attack. Besides, I’m not in the habit of asking others to do something I’m unwilling to do myself. I will lead the group infiltrating the Temple myself.”

“Very well,” Mor’ghor said, effectively ending discussion of the issue. “Have you given any thought to the story you’ll tell?”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” Ger’alin said confidently. “If we can find a set of sergeant’s armor – nothing too high-ranking, I plan to pass myself off as a low-level field commander. I’ll bring news of ‘our’ armies’ defeat by the Dragonmaw and a request for reinforcements. I’m afraid I’ll have to provide enough information about the gates and the troops you have on them,” he continued, explanatory but not apologetic. “Otherwise, when they double-check my report, we’ll be found out. We’ll decide exactly what I’m going to tell them, though, and how we’re going to make it look as if you’re trickier than one of my friends can be when she gets up to no-good. I was thinking that...”

Zerith stood quietly, letting the others make their plans. Only a few times did the priest volunteer a suggestion or argue against a course of action. He was still upset that Ger’alin wanted to lead the spies into the Temple but knew that he had few arguments to raise against it. Once Mor’ghor and Ger’alin had settled on a tale, they drilled at it until Ger’alin could have recited it in his sleep. Zerith was forced to admit that his friend was cool liar. Had he not known better himself, he might have thought the Blood Knight really had been a member of Illidan’s vast army of sin’dorei. By the time the sun had sunk below the mountains, painting the sky an ominous shade of bright red, Ger’alin had thoroughly impressed the leader of the Dragonmaw with his ability to play-act. He’d impressed his brother-by-marriage as well. With wishes for a peaceful night’s rest, the four left the room, each pair heading in separate directions. “I’m starving,” Ger’alin sighed, his stomach rumbling in agreement.

“I don’t think Alayne’s going to like the idea of you...,” Zerith began.

“We’re not going to tell her until after I’m back,” Ger’alin interrupted. “I know how she’ll worry; I would probably do the same if she told me she wanted to infiltrate the Black Temple. Still, once I’m back, she’ll be more at ease with the fact that *I’ll* have gone. She won’t be so worried that whoever went may have overlooked something. Just do me a favor, Zerith,” he said, stopping and glancing up and down the empty hallway. “Once I leave, keep an eye on her. Don’t let her out of your sight; not even for a moment. Tie her to your arm if you have to. Promise me.”

“I’ll keep my eye on her, of course.”

“No, I literally mean *do not let her out of your sight*,” Ger’alin growled in a hushed whisper. “Light, if I come back and she’s vanished...”

“You still worry that she might disappear again?” Zerith asked, sounding surprised. “Ger’alin, she’s free of Arthas. Granted, she’s having some kind of visions or something that may or may not be of his doing. He may be making a last ditch effort to stymie our plans, but she’s not going to follow him again or be swayed by him. Light, she hates the power she learned from him even more than she hates controlling demons.”

“You don’t understand,” Ger’alin said, shaking his head. “Zerith, sometimes I’ll wake up in the middle of the night and I won’t see her. Maybe she’s buried herself under the covers and out of my immediate line of sight. Maybe I’ve rolled over on my other side. Regardless, I’ll wake up and she’s not there. For a moment, my heart will stop and I’ll start to sweat, thinking that everything up to now has just been a pleasant dream – like the ones I used to have when she really was gone. I’ll think that I’m back in that hell where she’s dead and... Oh Light, it was torment, those long, lonely nights. Not even the strongest dwarven ale could quench the pain I felt!” he gasped, shuddering.

“I’ll tie her to my belt,” Zerith promised quickly. “Literally.” Ger’alin watched his face for a long moment before calming himself and striding back down the corridor. “So, do you want to go out and see what’s making those wonderful smells?” the priest asked, trying to change the topic.

“Oddly enough, I’m not hungry anymore,” Ger’alin muttered, turning up another corridor. “I’m going to go see if she’s still lying down. We might be down later,” he added, smiling as he stared off into the distance.

“Actually, I want to check on her myself,” Zerith replied. “If her head is still hurting...”

“Please,” Ger’alin huffed, rolling his eyes. “If you think I haven’t started carrying that tea you make for her, you’re crazy. As I said, we might be down later,” he repeated, putting a slight emphasis on the words ‘might’ and ‘later.’ “Go on without us.”

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“I still think this is a bad idea. Something terrible is going to happen,” Alayne insisted. Ger’alin held his tongue, realizing by now that she just wanted to get the words out, not engage in a discussion of the issue. He listened with half a mind, enjoying having her curled up against him, her head resting in the crook of his shoulder. He contented himself with listening to the sound of her voice and running a thumb along her ear. She pushed herself up and glared at him. “You’re not even listening to me, are you?” she accused.

“Not really, no,” he admitted, grinning. “I stopped listening after the twentieth ‘this is a bad idea.’ I get the point, Alayne. You are convinced that something terrible is going to happen if we attack the Black Temple. I want you to stop and think about what will happen if we *don’t* attack it, though. The orcs will never trust us again; the Dragonmaw may very well decide to try to throw themselves on the demon’s mercy. Thrall would be most displeased to hear that; he might very well take back his offer to protect the sin’dorei who disavow allegiance to Kael’Thas. On top of that, we’d be leaving a very powerful, very unpredictable power to take us in the back when we finally do go against our prince. Going against the master of Outland is not something we’re doing lightly, Alayne, but it is something we cannot back out of at this point.”

“It’s still a...”

“Hush,” he sighed, putting a finger over her lips. “I don’t want to hear it again.” She glared at him in irritation. He moved his finger before she could nip at it.

“You have to promise me that...”

“*Enough*,” he said firmly, taking her by the shoulders and pulling her up so that her face hovered over his. “We are not going to back out and that’s final. We will proceed with all reasonable caution. If you can’t accept that, I will escort you back to Shattrath until this is over. Oh no,” he growled, trying to interject heat into his voice when tears welled in her eyes. “Don’t you dare start the waterworks, Alayne Sunrage!”

“I can’t help it,” she sniffled, trying to swallow them and failing. “You won’t listen to me,” she bawled. “Something terrible is going to happen and you won’t listen to me!”

Ger’alin sighed and let her settle down against him, burying her face against his neck and weeping with frustration. He felt close to tears of irritation himself. He understood her fear of some unknown, perhaps unknowable, catastrophe. He wished with every fiber of his being that she could understand the consequences of what she was proposing. “We’re caught between a rock and a hard place,” he muttered, his voice cracking. “Alayne, we can’t back out now!” he said, pounding a fist against the mattress on his other side. “We can’t!”

“I know,” she hiccupped. “I’m sorry that I keep insisting we do just that but…”

“Let’s not think about it?” he suggested. “Let’s have a complete moratorium on discussing any kind of battle plans for the next month.” She murmured her assent and, after a few moments, managed to halt her tears. “You okay?” he asked shakily once her breathing returned to normal. He felt her nod. “You know what?” he said suddenly. “I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving,” she laughed, her voice shaky as well.

“If you weren’t such a good cook, I wouldn’t always want to eat.”

“You can stop hinting,” she said, sounding amused. Her voice still trembled but she managed to keep it under control. “I’ll go get dressed and see if there’s anything left on the cook fires.”

“And I will lay right here under the covers and keep the bed warm,” he grinned. “Don’t be gone long. I might die of starvation,” he laughed as his stomach rumbled loudly. Alayne shook her head, letting the last of the somber mood dispel. Pulling her discarded robe back over her head, she slipped her feet into her slippers and twisted her hands behind her back to do up the buttons. “Come over here and I’ll do that,” Ger’alin said. “Though, it’s more fun undoing them if you ask me.”

“Oh hush up or you’ll die of starvation,” she teased.

“Right, right,” he muttered, finishing the last of them. Pulling her cloak off the door hook, she tossed it over her shoulders and padded out of the room. The late evening sun made long, thick shadows through the keep’s few windows and arrow slits. She nodded and shared a knowing grin with Dar’ja when she passed the other woman in the hallway. Her sister-by-marriage balanced two plates on her hands, nearly dropping them when Alayne winked at her conspiratorially.

“As different as they are, some things are always the same,” Dar’ja giggled. “Are you feeling better? You couldn’t have slept well; you were thrashing and moaning until Ger’alin came in and woke you up.”

“Need help with that?” Alayne asked, pointing to one of the plates. Dar’ja shook her head. “I’m feeling a little better. I’d rather not think about it, though.”

“Fair enough. What were you dreaming about, though?”

“It was one of those dreams where I’ll probably remember it five seconds after whatever it was happened,” she said cryptically. “Go, take Zerith some food. You two will need it if you’re going to try to keep up with us. We have youth and vigor on our side.”

“Oh, bah. Zerith’s only twenty-nine and I’m barely twenty-four. We’re hardly fossils.”

“I’m nineteen and he’s twenty-five; my point stands.”

“Well, I’d better get in there before he crumbles into dust, then?” Dar’ja muttered with rhetorical sarcasm. Alayne grinned at her back and continued on her way out of the

fortress. Once outside, she waved to Callie and Tau're, wondering what devilry those two would get up to left unattended. Gesturing back towards the keep to explain why she wouldn't come over to chat with them, she hurried over to the cook fires. Only a few of the felboars were left roasting on spits over the fires. The smell of stewed vegetables wafted over from the kettles nearby. Grabbing a pair of bowls, Alayne scooped out a generous helping of the vegetables and then cut some meat off of one of the roasting spits. Letting it fall into the stew, she stirred the bowls and glanced around, looking for where the orcs had set out the seasonings. Spying the table, she hurried over to it and set the now-warm bowls down quickly, blowing on her fingertips. "What goes well with felboar?" she wondered aloud.

"Some of those lotus leaves, I think," a deep voice replied in oddly accented Thalassian. Alayne turned around to see who had spoken to her. Her eyes widened when she saw a man, elven to all appearances, met her gaze evenly. His eyes were deep blue and his hair silver-blond, pulled up in a top-knot on top of his head. It flowed down his back and shoulders, over his blue-scale armor, ending just above the quiver belted at his waist. His eyes crinkled as she continued to stare at him. "What?" he asked, sounding concerned.

"You're a...you...a...a..." she stammered, a rush of visions slamming her mind.

"There's no cure," she heard him saying to her as they stood in front of a desolate landscape filled with broken rocks and purple haze. A vision of Ger'alain, withered and twisted appeared in her eyes. Ger'alain, snarling at her, screaming and raving as he struck her. "No cure once it's reached this stage," she heard the stranger's voice ring in her ears.

"I am called Mordenai," the man introduced himself. "You are?"

"...a dragon," she sighed, fainting dead away.

"I hate it when they do that," Mordenai sighed.

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Alayne opened her eyes and wished she were still asleep. Heat stained her cheeks crimson as the man who had named himself Mordenai stood over her. "Are you well?" he asked, sounding concerned.

"I'll be fine," she muttered, pushing herself up. "I'm sorry for how I reacted."

"It's quite alright," he laughed softly. "Still, it is strange to see someone who has ventured into Northrend here. Or, did you come across it by another path? I can smell the scent of necromancy about you. Very faint and weak, but still there."

"That's a long story," she replied, holding out her hands so he could help pull her to her feet. "I was one of those who..."

"Ah, yes," Mordenai said, brightening. "We heard about your plight. Our watch over the Lich King has increased since then. He will not spread his madness among the living races while we keep our guard. That explains much, then. But not why you fainted."

"I...I've been under a lot of stress lately," she said lamely. "Seeing you shocked me. What is a member-by-proxy of the blue dragonflight doing wandering about Outland?"

"I was born out here," he replied, "Not very long ago as you consider things. I had come here to try to free one of our own from the orcs. However, since the orcs were freed of their demonic taint, they have freed all of my kind they held prisoner. Now, we work with them and with the newlings to help thwart Illidan. Here, let me help you," he offered. Quickly, he prepared two more bowls for her. He insisted on escorting her back to her room, saying he would feel guilty if she fainted again and came to harm. At the door to her room, she managed to convince him not to follow her in, hinting that her husband was waiting for her. Mordenai grinned knowingly and trotted off after promising to speak with her the next day concerning ancient night elven magic. Ducking into the room, carrying both bowls carefully, she smiled to herself.

“What happened to you?” Ger’alin asked when he looked over to see Alayne entering the room. He stared at the front of her robes, soiled and stained with stew from where she had dropped the bowls when she passed out. Dirt and dust still clung to her back. “Did you fall or something?”

“Or something,” she said lightly, handing him a bowl. She bit her lip and lowered her face, not looking at him, not wanting him to see the tears welling back up in her eyes.

“Ger’alin, please, hear me out,” she begged. He snorted angrily and looked away, his jaw clenched to keep from reminding her that they had an agreement. “If you go against Illidan... you’re going to die because of it.”

“He’s going to kill me?” he asked.

“No. But... you’re going to fall ill with something and it will kill you.”

“Then I’ll have to be careful not to take any poison,” Ger’alin sighed. “I cannot back out, Alayne. I’m one of the strongest fighters we have. If I hide from some fate you fear, what will the others think?”

“When I was down getting our dinner, I saw...”

“All the more reason for me to go,” he muttered. “If the Lich King wants me to stay out of the fight, then the fore of the battle is where I belong. No, Alayne, end of discussion. I couldn’t convince you to stay out of the fight against Magtheridon. You were right; you were needed, there. I’ll be needed in the battle to take the Black Temple. I will not hide away because you’re afraid something will happen to me. I’ll take every reasonable precaution I can but I will – not – hide – from fate!”

“Very well,” she sighed, dashing a few stray tears from her cheeks. “I will go with you. No, don’t you start arguing now,” she said, glaring at him. “I can still swing a sword. Surely one of those Illidari we captured today had some armor that would fit me.”

“I have no objections to you joining in battle,” he growled. “However, it has been months since you’ve so much as held a sword, let alone sparred or participated in a melee. Besides, you’re the only real expert we have on night elven magic. You will be needed with the casters, Alayne.” He sighed and ran a hand over his face before gulping down the last of his stew. “Finish eating, at any rate. And stop getting dirt all over the bed,” he grinned slyly. “You’re really convinced that I’m going to die,” he said tonelessly. “You really and truly believe it.” She nodded and tried to swallow the tears. “I had not intended to tell you this,” he sighed, “but I’m planning to lead the spies into the Temple tomorrow evening. I will still do that and, if there is any way I can see, I will plan an attack that involves me staying out of the fight. Will that satisfy you?” She nodded, her tears vanishing in relief. “Now, finish eating,” he smiled, heat sparkling in his eyes. “I’ve got a hankering for dessert,” he said, grinning wolfishly.

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Ger’alin sighed and watched Alayne sleep. Once he had convinced her that, if at all possible, he would stand aside from the battle, she had begun to set her fears aside. He hated feeling as if, by comforting his wife, he were aiding the Lich King. Once again, he vowed to hunt the leader of the Scourge down and make him pay in blood for all the pain he had caused. “You know he can’t be trusted,” he whispered to his wife’s sleeping face. “You know how he used your own love for your father against you, twisting it, twisting you into something you never wanted to be. He’s doing it again, Alayne. Why can’t you see that? He’s using your love for me, your fear of losing me, to his own ends. Why can’t you see it? Why do you let him do it? Because you can’t help it,” he sighed, answering his own question. “Because, to you, it’s more real than any argument Zerith or I could present. I just hope that nothing bad comes of letting you convince me to do this.” He clammed up and jerked his head

up when he heard the door begin to creak open. Callie poked her head through the crack and gestured for him to come out in the hallway. "What now?" he mouthed silently. She gestured again, with more emphasis, and he sighed. Waiting until she closed the door, he crawled out of the bed, careful not to wake Alayne, and dressed quickly. Leaning down until his face hovered inches over hers, Ger'alin made certain that his wife still slept soundly before padding out into the hallway, his boots in his hands.

"Took long enough," Callie muttered. "There's been a change in plans. Some Broken came in not an hour ago. He says that he's been watching us. If we want to sneak in to the Temple, we're going to have to do it tonight. Don't ask me; ask him," she snapped, leading Ger'alin down the corridor towards the room where the others waited. "Zerith isn't happy about the sudden change either. He wasn't happy about my forgetting to knock as well," she cackled softly. "Poor Dar'ja."

Ger'alin ignored her wisecracks and continued down the corridor, pausing outside of the large meeting room to stamp his feet in his boots. Running his fingers through his hair, he wished he'd taken a moment to untangle it. Clearing his throat and his mind, he pushed open the door and walked in. Zerith glanced up and frowned at the Blood Knight, wishing that he'd been sound asleep when Callie had peeked in on him. "Ger'alin, this is Akama," the priest said, making quick introductions. "He leads a group that calls themselves the 'Ashtongue Deathsworn.' Illidan thinks they're loyal to him but Akama has assured me that they are not."

"Forgive me for speaking so," Ger'alin said, not taking the time to consider the wisdom of his words, "but sudden allies appearing out of thin air seems a little too...convenient. What proof do you..."

"I will overlook your suspicions, blood elf," Akama rasped, his voice sounding like gravel scratching over broken pavement. "You've done me a good turn, whether you know it or not. When you killed the naga following Vashj and freed my people, you also freed a friend of mine who was being tortured because that serpentine bitch was on to us. Olum asked me to ask after your wife, the warlock. How is she?" Ger'alin glared daggers at the Broken but Akama met his gaze evenly. "If that's not enough to convince you, perhaps she will," he said, pointing to a cloaked and hooded figure standing in the shadows of the room. The woman strode into the light from the fire and, lifting a pair of slender but well-muscled hands, pulled back the hood of her cloak to reveal cold, pitiless night elven features. "Maiev Shadowsong has waited long years for her chance to re-capture Illidan."

"Maiev, the warden?" Zerith asked, sounding stunned. His legs gave out and he plopped into the chair behind him, his muscles gone to water. "Why would you...how...what...?" he asked, glancing back and forth between the Broken and the night elf.

"It is a long tale," Maiev said, her deep voice filled with intensity. "For years, I have sat in the aptly-named 'Warden's Cage.' For years, I have waited for Akama's schemes to play themselves out, for the chance to undo what Tyrande did. Now, it is upon us."

"Why tonight? Why right this moment?" Ger'alin asked, sounding unconvinced.

"Your prince has sent an envoy to the Black Temple," Akama answered. "We have...diverted them. However, Illidan knows they are coming. He expects them this night. If you wish to enter the Black Temple, to see for yourselves what awaits you, you must take their place. With luck, Illidan will be so pre-occupied with the Dragonmaw and his plans for them that he will not look too closely at Kael's envoy."

"Why would Kael'Thas send an envoy to Illidan? I thought he was going his own way with the Legion," Ger'alin mused.

"Your prince is a tricky one. Yes, we know he's gone over to the Legion, swearing allegiance to Kil'jaeden. However, we've managed to keep that bit of information from reaching Illidan. The Lord of Outland thinks that Kael is merely...over-ambitious. He does

not realize that the Lord of the Sin'dorei has his own plan in motion,” Akama replied, grinning in amusement. “So many stones cast into destiny’s river... so many ripples reaching out, moving us forward.”

“How do you know so much about us?” Ger’alin demanded.

“My spies are every where,” Akama muttered. “The wind, the rocks... they speak with my followers. When we heard from Olum that a group calling itself the ‘Disorder of Azeroth’ had cast Vashj and her damnable naga down, we began to pay closer attention to you. We know of your disarming the mana bomb at Firewing Point. We know that you’ve allied with the Scryers. We know that you brought down Magtheridon and convinced the Dragonmaw to redeem their honor. Your actions have rippled through Outland, setting my own plans in motion before I even realized the time was nigh. Now, you will need my help in order to fulfill those plans. I offer it to you.”

“Why?”

“I was once a priest, like him,” Akama said, pointing to Zerith. “The Temple was my home, my life. When the orcs came, twisted and tainted by the Legion, I was forced to flee my home, to leave my life behind. Then, Illidan came and I saw the chance to regain what I had lost... I will bear the price of that misjudgment until the day I die, sin’dorei. Now, I have the chance to make it right; to free the sacred Temple of evil. Have you ever loved something so much, Blood Knight, that you would kill or die to defend it?” Ger’alin nodded, thinking of the warlock who had captivated him from almost the moment he’d first laid eyes on her. “Then you know how I feel. The Temple is all I have left of the time before the Light departed from me. For the chance to restore it to its former glory and tranquility, I would ally with just about anyone.”

“We will go with you,” Ger’alin said after a long pause. Zerith did a double-take and stared, goggle-eyed, at his friend. Ger’alin waved him to silence, never looking away from Akama. “How many spies can you sneak in?”

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“Alayne is going to freak out and I don’t think that anything I or anyone else says will calm her down,” Zerith muttered direly as he helped Ger’alin fasten the straps holding the Sunfury captain’s armor together.

“She’ll sleep until mid-morning, hopefully,” Ger’alin grunted. “I hate ceremonial armor. It’s useless.”

“How does this hook on there?” Zerith asked, holding up a pair of ornate shoulder guards.

“That belt slides under this fastener and hooks around here,” Ger’alin answered, demonstrating. He sat down in a chair to give the other man a chance to finish strapping on the shoulder plates while he fastened the gauntlets and arm plates. “Just do me a favor and keep an eye on her while I’m gone.”

“I will.”

“I mean it, Zerith. Don’t let her out of your sight unless she’s with someone you trust absolutely.”

“I promise.”

“Zerith, if she vanishes again so help me Light, I will... If I come back and she’s run off on some mad scheme to try to ‘save’ us all...”

“I’ll take care of her,” Zerith promised. “Now, you’d better get going. I’d hate for your cover to be blown because you arrived too late.” Ger’alin nodded and stood up. Slipping the Sunfury tabard over his head, he belted the captain’s sword around his waist and tucked the helm under his arm. Presenting himself for inspection, he tried not to laugh when Zerith

scrutinized him, tugging the tabard straight and stepping back to inspect him with a careful eye. “You’ll do. Get going.”

Ger’alin gave a mocking salute and ducked out the door. Out in the courtyard before the gates, the others were waiting. He waved to Callie before joining them. “You’re late,” Akama said accusingly. “We should have been gone five minutes ago. You’ll have to jog to make up the time.”

“I love a good run,” Ger’alin grinned, settling the helm on his head. “Everyone knows who they are supposed to be, right?”

“Indeed we do, Captain Pa’lar,” Bara’la giggled. “I am Kael’s envoy to Illidan. My mission is to offer the Sunfury’s forces to retake our mutual holdings in Zangarmarsh. My prince has...impressed upon me the law handed down by Lord Stormrage: ‘who controls the waters, controls Outland.’ You,” she laughed, pointing to Ger’alin and the other men decked out in Sunfury armor, “are my guard, hand-picked for the task by Lord Sanguinar himself.”

“If you play your part well,” Akama sighed, “and if the others will hold their tongues, you may slip past Illidan. At the very worst, Bara’la, you would be imprisoned. If you can bluff your way with the Illidari elves, more likely than not they’ll help you to escape. Kael’s elves have little love for the ‘half-demon mongrel.’”

“And if the worst happens,” Ger’alin said quietly, “she’s got enough dreamfoil to ease her into the next life. Let’s look sharp,” he continued, firming his voice. “We’ve got a job to do.” Taking off at a trot, he led his spies towards the Black Temple, glancing over his shoulder only once to gaze back at the window to the room where his wife slept.

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The Black Temple loomed in front of the six sin’dorei as they made their way down the broken pathway leading to the imposing doors. Nestled among the mountains, the Temple had once looked like a true sanctuary. Beneath the blood and dust still staining the once-golden walls, Ger’alin could see the hidden beauty that had made the Temple of Karabor a refuge from the small troubles of ancient Draenor. Now it dominated where once it had melded, rivaling only the twisted Hand of Gul’dan for the tingling terror it caused in an onlooker. Striding up to the doors, he lifted a gauntleted fist and pounded against them.

“Who comes?” came the customary challenge.

“Envoy Anar’la,” Bara’la said in lofty tones. “King Sunstrider wishes to offer his assistance to the Lord of Outland and Master of the Black Temple.”

“Lord Stormrage has been expecting you,” the reply came as the enormous doors swung silently open. The sin’dorei who gestured them in ignored the guards completely, to Ger’alin’s relief. “Did the rebels give you any trouble?”

“None at all,” Bara’la laughed. “They rarely venture out of their little hiding places. No doubt the naaru fear a repeat of Tempest Keep if they send their mewling worshippers after us.”

“Do not speak so of Voren’tal,” a deep voice said. The Illidari elves froze, their fear evident in their eyes. The speaker strode forward. Ger’alin gasped and was relieved to see that he was not the only one so affected. Walking out of the shadows of the entrance was Illidan Stormrage. His face could have been carved from the rocky mountains surrounding his domain so hard and expressionless it was. Green flames, akin to the fel green glow in sin’dorei eyes, danced from behind the dark cloth band bound around his head. Twin horns curved from his forehead, turning back until the points almost buried themselves in his long jet-black hair. Illidan gazed down upon the Sunfury, his face impassive and his muscular arms crossed over his bare chest, partially obscuring the green tattoos that Alayne had said were a gift from Sargeras. The half night elf’s ears twitched as he lifted a hand and tapped a thick

finger against his cheek. “Kael was a fool not to kill Voren’tal when he had the chance. Now that traitor’s movement has grown from pebble in the shoe to a full-fledged problem. When your prince...”

“King,” one of the Illidari elves near Ger’alin muttered beneath his breath.

“...does something as foolish as what he has done with the so-called Scryers, it makes me wonder if he is truly loyal to me. Now, what of control of Zangarmarsh? Your prince permitted another group of rebels to murder Lady Vashj! What is he doing to retake what he lost for me?”

“King Sunstrider is organizing a force at this moment to regain control of the waters of Zangarmarsh,” Bara’la ad-libbed quickly. “Why, we have orders to rendezvous with them on our return.”

“Do you?” Illidan asked, sounding amused. “Then we shall see how your ‘king’s’ plans fare. “Come with me,” he said, turning quickly. “Naj’entus will be most eager to hear your ‘king’s’ plan. What are you waiting for?” he asked, glancing back over his shoulder at Ger’alin. “Certainly you, Captain, are the one who will know the most of military matters. This lady,” he grinned mockingly, “is merely a messenger. Come along. I want to hear what your ‘king’ has up his sleeve.”

Ger’alin sighed and hurried after the pair, exchanging wide-eyed glances with Bara’la. He hoped that his skill at bluffing would be equal to the challenge. The other guards dispersed quickly, shaking hands with the Illidari sin’dorei and praying that their spy-work would not be noticed. Ger’alin caught some of the Broken watching them, desperation painted plainly on their twisted faces. “Light, be with us,” he prayed, feeling acid rising in the pit of his stomach.

Illidan led them deeper into the Temple. Massive doors flew open when the demon raised his hand. Ger’alin gaped at Stormrage’s raw power. No wonder Alayne feared the very thought of confronting him. The man wielded arcane energies with a flourish and a strength that most sin’dorei could only dream of attaining. Had he been this powerful before his dreadful transformation – or had becoming the very demon he despised granted him more power? Through the Temple he led them, elves giving the trio wide berth and demons, wrenched to this plane and enslaved by a half-demon, glared at them. Ger’alin could feel the un-natural creatures’ hatred pummeling him. If ever they broke loose... He shuddered. Likely killing Illidan – or even hurting the man, were such a thing possible – would set them free. He would need to keep that in mind when making his report. Hopefully, some of the Dragonmaw warlocks would be able to join in and help the warlocks under Alayne’s command keep the fel creatures from wreaking havoc.

Once or twice as Ger’alin took his mental notes, Illidan glanced back over his shoulder at the man, his face carefully neutral. It was obvious to anyone who remained in the Temple long that the former night elf did not trust Kael’s followers any further than he could have thrown the very Temple itself. Still, something about the strange captain demanded his attention. This sin’dorei was unlike any other ‘blood knights’ Illidan had encountered. Something oddly familiar, oddly comforting, lurked in the air around him. Unbidden thoughts of a woman, her long silver hair framing delicate features, flooded the demon’s mind. Anger burned through him at the thoughts – that had been long ago; he had been a different being altogether. Shaking his head in irritation, Illidan stumped down the corridors of his dominion, the two sin’dorei in tow. Finally, they stopped before a pair of doors carved with ancient emblems that proclaimed the rooms behind belonged to one of the Highborne. Illidan grinned mirthlessly as he threw them open. A serpentine hiss greeted them. “Lord Illidan,” Naj’entus said, his words less sounds than growls. Ger’alin strained to understand him. “Why am I being kept here when my place is in Zangarmarsh?”

“Enough, Naj’entus. You served the Lady well. You will serve her by serving me. Kael’Thas has sent word that he intends to make good on his failure to keep his rebellious

subjects out of our hair. These two,” he said, turning and pointing at Bara’la and Ger’alin, “will tell us everything we wish to know about the rebels, their forces, and their dispositions. If they don’t,” Illidan grinned, “they’ll have the distinct pleasure of watching their friends die. Now,” the demon said firmly, gesturing. The doors slammed shut and several pair of naga guards surrounded Ger’alin and Bara’la. “Let’s start with who you *really* are.”

Ger’alin reached for his sword, praying that he would at least give a good account of himself. He regretted not listening to Alayne; whether from Arthas or not, her visions had been right. He was going to die here. “No need for that,” Illidan laughed, reaching into one of his pouches. Ger’alin’s arm went limp, his hand falling away from the hilt of his sword. “You’ll answer my questions beginning with what young Kael is really planning in that naaru vessel he fancies his palace. You will answer me truthfully or...” Ger’alin felt every muscle in his body clench. The floor rushed up to meet him as he collapsed, liquid agony coursing through his veins. The air seemed to turn to fire in his throat as he screamed, howling in pain unlike any he had ever known before. His skin felt as if every inch of his body were being beaten with white-hot whips. For long moments, all he could do was twist and writhe in torment, inhuman screams being ripped from his throat. Distantly, he could hear Bara’la howling in similar torment. He hoped she would be able to find ease; they’d given her the only means of certain escape when they thought she’d have been the only one to face Stormrage. Finally, the pain began to subside. Shuddering sobs shivered through Ger’alin’s raw throat as he gasped for air. Once he was able to think of anything other than the tearing pain, he noticed that the naga were hovering over Bara’la, hissing in their strange, snakish language. Had they killed her? Had she chewed the leaves already? How had she been able to do that if she’d been in anywhere near as much pain as he? “Take her to the cells. Tell her that if this nut doesn’t crack,” he said, jerking a thumb at Ger’alin, “she’ll think what she just experienced was a lover’s fond caress. Now you, Blood Knight,” he growled, coming to stand over Ger’alin, “you will tell me everything.”

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Akama growled, his snarl sounding like that of an enraged feral beast. “How did they get captured?” he demanded of the Broken who still gasped, trying to capture his breath. “Fal’na!”

“I am not sure, Akama,” Fal’na said, gulping in air. “Illidan must have seen through their story. Either that, or he trusts Kael even less than we had imagined.”

“Where are they being held?” Akama snarled, sweat beading on his forehead. It could not go wrong now; he was so close to attaining his revenge on that demon!

“Most of the guards have been taken in by their sin’dorei brethren. Not that the elves are treating them gently. The Illidari are enraged; they fear that their cover might soon be blown. I believe that the elven council is planning to take control of questioning them. If that happens, they may very well learn that we’ve allied with the Horde and Dragonmaw. Still, if the spies can hold through, if they are strong enough, they may be able to convince the Illidari they do serve Kael. That would ease their torment a little; give us a chance to break them free. I’ve set Gal’in and Dav’ri to keep an eye on the prisoners there. Under the guise of bringing them food, they’ll instruct them on how to hold out and what to say.”

“Most of the guards? What of the others?”

“Bara’la, the woman pretending to be the envoy, is under our care. She nearly chewed her tongue in half when Illidan first confronted her. Olum was able to convince the naga and the demon to let us look after her. After all, Illidan knows that our healing is a rough kind; less likely to bring comfort than merely ease pain. We should be able to stage a break out that would be convincing.”

“Is that all?” Akama sighed, feeling relieved.

“No,” Fal’na sighed, his face falling. “The one called Ger’alin is being held by Illidan himself. The only guards he’ll allow to watch the ‘captain’ are the naga loyal to him. We’ve not yet been able to learn how much Ger’alin may have told them.”

Akama nodded and waved the other man away. Fal’na stumped off, feeling wrung out like a wet cloth. The leader of the Ashtongue Deathsworn settled himself on one of the many stones scattered about his broken lair, resting an elbow on one knee and his chin on his fist. Thinking furiously, he tried to devise a scheme that would allow the spies to go free without giving him – or that bastard Kael – completely away. The Broken had seen how effective Illidan’s torture was; many of the Illidari demons served out of fear of facing that again. With the defection of the Dragonmaw warlocks, that fear was probably the only thing keeping the demons from running amuck. Letting his mind sort through the possibilities, Akama moaned when he realized that, short of committing suicide and giving everything away, there was no way to free Ger’alin. The Broken pushed himself off of his seat and cast about for his walking stick. The Blood Knight and the priest leading the Disorder of Azeroth had mentioned – in hushed mutters where they thought no one else could hear – that a friend of theirs had somehow foreseen a catastrophe. The black-robed leader of the Ashtongue Deathsworn wanted to speak with this prophet of theirs, praying that whoever it was would be able to foresee a way out of this mess.

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“So, night elven sorcery relies mostly on channeling energies from a fixed point?” Alayne asked Mordenai. She knew the answer already but needed an excuse to discuss the issue. Anything to keep her mind off the fact that she’d awakened to find Ger’alin gone. “In that regard, they are not so dissimilar to our magi,” she mused, pushing away the fear she felt trying to close her throat and darken her consciousness. “We, too, relied on the Sunwell to infuse us with its energy.”

“And that is why, unlike humans, gnomes, and trolls, you elves have a tendency to become highly addicted to the arcane,” Mordenai pointed out. “My kind have watched your people long; while you learned the lessons from the Sundering and did well in hiding your use of the arcane from the Legion, your people are still dependent on such energies.”

“The Sunwell...,” she said, sighing, “I was only a child when it was destroyed but I can still recall how its existence made mine brighter. When we lost it...,”

“I know,” Mordenai said softly. “You went into withdrawal. Those too old, too young, or too weak to find a way to stave off the addiction died or succumbed to it. I’ve seen...are you well?” he asked, sounding concerned. Alayne had glanced over towards the gate, her face turning an ugly white and her jaw falling open. Mordenai looked over, surprised to see the Broken leader, Akama, stumbling through.

“Light no,” Alayne whispered, her lips taking on a bluish-green tint. “No, no, no. They promised me he’d never...not even in the same room, they said!” Zerith saw Akama and, leaving Maiev to continue her demonstration to the fighters of how to counter Illidan’s attacks, hurried over. He shot a look filled with fear and concern at his sister, seeing that she was rooted to the spot. Mordenai, still having no idea what was going on, shook the woman gently. Alayne watched, the fear she’d fought to keep at bay gnawing its way through her guts, up her throat, and searing her mind. The two men put their heads together. Akama gestured forcefully. The snatches of conversation she caught told her that the Broken was angry and upset. Zerith put a hand over his heart as if he’d been struck in the chest by a heavy weight. His other hand shot out to keep him from falling face-first into the wall of the building next to them. Akama made soothing gestures, forcing his face to calmness, trying to

reassure the priest. Alayne watched as her brother shook his head slowly and, regaining control of himself, straightened. Sheer panic seized her as the pair began walking towards her and Mordenai. She wanted to scream; she knew what they would tell her. She'd suspected since waking but she knew, the moment Akama had walked through the gates...

"Illidan has captured my husband," she whispered when Zerith and Akama drew near. She thought she heard someone gasp in horror before the world went dark.

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"How did she know?" Akama asked, sounding as if he did not quite believe it himself. Zerith and Mordenai had carried the unconscious woman back to her room and were still trying to revive her. "How?"

"That's a good question," Zerith growled as he lifted his sister's eyelids and peered at her pupils. "Ger'alín and I think that it's a leftover from her time as a death knight in the service of the Lich King. We think it may be the Lich King trying to throw us off the path we should take. But now...now I'm not so certain. The last few times she's seen something, according to Ger'alín, either she didn't know what it was exactly or whatever it was did not come to pass. That's why we doubted it. Next time, we're listening to her."

"She was a death knight? Like Teron Gorefiend?" Akama asked, backing away and staring at the woman in horror. Zerith gaped at the man, his mind working quickly to try to recall what little he knew of Gorefiend. Mordenai stepped in, saving the priest the trouble.

"No," he replied. "Not like Gorefiend. More like Arthas Menethil, if you have heard of him?"

"I have heard of Arthas," Akama nodded slowly. "A living man who gave his soul to death. A dark paladin. I have served Illidan for long years since his defeat at Arthas's hands. I know well that story. But, if she is a death knight..."

"She *was* a death knight. She isn't anymore," Zerith snapped. "She was tricked and seduced into serving the Scourge. She broke free of them and returned to us. Do not speak of her so again. Alayne?" he said softly, seeing her rouse.

"Please tell me this is a dream!" she pleaded. "Tell me that Akama is not here."

"I wish I could," Zerith sighed. "Ger'alín has been captured. So have the others. Apparently, your foresight saw clearly that going up against Illidan would be a bad idea," he said euphemistically, not wanting to refer to the fact that she believed Ger'alín would die because of this. "We need to know if you've seen any more. Is there any way we could break him out?"

"I don't know," she said, tears trickling down the corners of her closed eyes. "All I know is that...he's going to die," she finished, her voice a faint whisper.

"Illidan is going to kill him? If so, maybe if we attack now..."

"Illidan would not kill him," Akama said flatly. "Not until he's drained Ger'alín of everything the man knows. And, from what little I've seen of your friend, Stormrage would be a long, long time breaking him down."

"I don't know," Zerith muttered, looking back and forth from his sister to Akama. "We discounted her visions before. If we listen to you, are we making the same mistake again? Alayne," he asked, raising his voice slightly, "did you see that Illidan would kill Ger'alín?"

"No," she moaned. "Just that, because of his capture, something is going to happen and he's going to die. Light, we've killed him," she sobbed, stuffing a fist in her mouth. "I couldn't convince him...and now he's going to die!"

"Mordenai, would you stay with her? Make certain she...doesn't do anything rash," Zerith whispered to the strange elf who seemed to have taken Alayne under his wing. "I need

to speak with Garrosh and Mor'ghor. We should hasten our plans. The less time Ger'alín and the others are prisoners, the less time Illidan has to do whatever it is she thinks he's going to do." The silver-haired man nodded and took a chair at the foot of the bed. His gaze strayed to the door and back to the weeping woman, discomfort clear on his face. Zerith told himself firmly that the best way to help his sister was to get her husband out of Illidan's clutches as soon as he could. Striding out of the room, he motioned for Akama to follow him. Giving orders to a pair of orc guards, he all but ran to the room where they made their plans, the Broken hurrying along in his wake. After a few minutes, the orc chieftains hurried in.

"We were told that there is dire news," Garrosh said, glancing at Akama uncertainly. He held himself stiffly as if bracing for a blow.

"Our spies were found out," Zerith said baldly. "We must step up preparations for our attack."

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A faint light trickled in through Ger'alín's eyelids. He squeezed them shut more tightly, bearing down so hard that his ears rang with the effort. While he slept, he did not feel the pain that had become his constant companion in the last day and a half. Not that he had much chance to sleep. Illidan and his demons kept the sin'dorei up long hours with their torture. He tried to lift his head, groaning when it fell back against the floor. He felt as if a goblin had set off some explosive device inside his skull while a battalion of dwarves pounded at his temples with massive hammers. His neck felt like a mass of jelly from the mere effort of trying to lift his head. He kept his eyes shut; the faint light burned his retinas as if he were staring directly into the sun.

"Ah, awake, are we?" Illidan asked mockingly. "Are you ready to answer my questions yet? Or do you need more convincing?" Lifting a hand idly, Illidan grinned as the sin'dorei arched his back, his jaws clenched to try to hold back screams. Ger'alín heaved great gasping breaths between his teeth as he felt every muscle in his body tighten. He continued to arch upwards, only his head and feet remaining on the floor. He could feel his spine starting to give way. The pain was excruciating. Time and time again during the long hours of his confinement, Illidan had twisted the sin'dorei up, manipulating the man's body against his will, weakening him. Ger'alín wondered, through a haze of agony, if he would ever be able to move on his own again – provided Illidan didn't kill him, of course.

As Ger'alín arched further, his head nearly touching his feet, he let the cries come. Tears trickled down his forehead, dripping on the floor. Agonized shouts were ripped from a throat already hoarse from screaming most of the night. And still, he continued to twist back upon himself, feeling the muscles and the bones of his back, hips, and legs start to crack under the strain.

He groaned with relief when Illidan let him drop, collapsing back onto the floor in a heap of pain. Ger'alín wiggled his toes, not caring that the effort burned fires through his legs. He could still feel his body, pain-filled as it was. That counted for something. He gasped, gulping for air through a raw and torn throat, sucking it into his lungs gratefully, knowing that each breath could be his last. In the long hours of the previous day, Ger'alín had given up any real hope of surviving his imprisonment. The others had managed to escape; perhaps Akama had devised a means to smuggle them out. He didn't know and, at this point, he no longer cared. With every pulse that shot white-hot acid through his veins, he prayed that darkness would close over him. A momentary pang at the thought of leaving Alayne tugged at his heart, threatening to break it – to break him. He quashed it relentlessly. He'd held out so long...he couldn't give in to the demon now.

“You’re a tough one,” Illidan mused, grudging respect in his voice. “Still, you will break, eventually. You will tell me what it is your prince wishes to hide from me. I know his ruse, you see. He is over-ambitious to the point of insanity! No doubt those ‘rebels’ who killed Vashj are his secret forces. You will tell me what I want to know, sin’dorei! The others may be gone – you are the only elf left in the Black Temple – but you will tell me!”

Ger’alin said nothing. He merely continued to gasp for air and prayed that the Light would shine its mercy on him soon and grant him release. He tensed, preparing for the pain, preparing to fight it, to struggle against it, to keep up the fight until Illidan was forced to go too far. When, after long moments, he felt nothing but the ease of tired muscles and soreness, he ventured to open one eye. Slamming it shut almost immediately, he groaned. Seared into his mind was the after-image of Illidan hoisting something in one of his hands, staring at it as if weighing options he had never believed he’d face. “There are ways; all of you fools suffer, as I did, from arcane addiction. That was what led your prince to follow me. He was desperate to find a way to feed that hunger. I gave him the methods to save your people.” Ger’alin’s brows lifted slightly in surprise. He’d always thought that Kael himself had discovered the method to feed off of the magic energy of other beings. That was certainly what the leaders among the sin’dorei had told all the recruits. “Your prince has ever been ambitious. He lusts for more and more power. He has not learned, as I have,” the demon muttered softly, so softly Ger’alin had to strain to hear, “that power comes with a price.” Illidan flapped his wings irritably, closing his fingers around the vial of water. He could remember still the day he’d been caught with the vials. He’d saved the night elves from certain death and destruction by creating a second Well of Eternity. His brother had repaid him with ten millennia of imprisonment beneath the earth. He’d given up part of his mortality, part of his very self, in order to acquire the power needed to help his people again. He’d consumed the Skull of Gul’dan only because it was necessary – necessary! – to fight the Legion’s fire with fire! For that, he’d earned exile from his homeland. “Why has Kael turned against me? What does he seek now? Tell me these things and I will protect you from his wrath. Tell me and I will teach you the one thing I never taught him: how to actually tap into the water from the Well. Your kind craves power above all else,” he mused, as if speaking to himself instead of Ger’alin. “I will show you *true* power!” he hissed softly. Ger’alin braced himself, waiting for the pain to begin.

A golden glow surrounded him, permeating his very being. Ger’alin gasped, shivering in shocked delight as the pain he’d begun to accept as part of himself vanished. He could feel his bones and muscles mending themselves; stretched and torn ligaments easing, returning to their normal size and place. He opened an eye experimentally, surprised to see that the light surrounding him caused him no pain. He felt a tingling thrill of exhilaration. The pain was gone!

Illidan watched the elf push himself up and test his returning strength, husbanding it as if afraid that it would vanish as quickly as it had come back. The demon grinned and continued to channel. Exhilaration became ecstasy. Ger’alin shook, sweat pouring out of every pore of his body as he felt a rising bliss more intense than any he had experienced before in his life. A memory from childhood, from the days before the Sunwell’s destruction, niggled at the back of his mind. The sensation was akin to that but more...more pure, more real. Not even his most tender, passionate moments with Alayne came close to matching the pure joy he felt surging through him. He tried to stand and collapsed to his hands and knees, shaking, overcome with the rush flooding through him. Illidan watched, gauging the sin’dorei’s reaction, beginning to taper off the flow of power when the man seemed on the verge of passing out from pure bliss. An hour passed before Ger’alin was able to regain control of himself, of his thoughts. True clarity eluded him even after the effects of Illidan’s magic departed. All he knew was that he wanted to experience that warmth, that *wholeness*,

again. “Answer my questions,” Illidan repeated, “and not only will you experience it again,” he said, answering the unasked question. “I will gift you with the ability to feed that desire yourself. Now, who are you *really*? What is your prince doing?”

Ger’alin tried to gather his thoughts; part of him wanted to confess to everything. All that held his tongue was fear that Illidan would be angered to learn that he was involved in Vashj’s downfall. Casting about through the haze the ecstasy had left in his mind, he searched for enough information to please the demon but not enough to damn him to the bland reality he existed in now. “I...I’m a spy, sent by Kael’Thas. My mission was to alert the other sin’dorei that the time to strike is drawing near. Kael plans to move against you in order to prove his worth to the Legion; he’s sworn fealty to Kil’jaeden. Kael’Thas hired a band of assassins to attack and kill Lady Vashj. They are currently mixing with the Scryers and are behind the death of Magtheridon as well. Forgive me, my Lord!” he begged, pleased at coming up with such a neat story so quickly and galled at the same time for lying to the demon who could wield such delight.

“Tell me about these assassins,” Illidan ordered, the flames in his eye sockets boring into Ger’alin’s head relentlessly, demanding utter truth. “Tell me the truth and life will become very, very pleasant for you. Lie to me...,” he left the threat hanging in the air.

Part of Ger’alin’s mind watched in rising horror as he gibbered out everything he knew about the Disorder of Azeroth. Tears of remorse flowed down his cheeks and the flow of information was broken as he bawled like a baby. Still, he could not stop himself. The thought of Illidan leaving him bereft of that wonder, of the demon letting him suffer the rest of his life from the gnawing hunger he could feel eating at his soul...where pain had not broken him, pleasure had. Tears of bitterness mixed with those of remorse as he continued to pour information out. When he was finally finished, he stared at the ground, blinking tears and sweat out of his eyes. He knelt, hands splayed to keep him from pitching over on his face. He felt as if he’d been rung out – like an old towel left too long in the water. His heart writhed in his chest, breaking as he realized he had just handed his friends, his companions, *his wife* over to the mongrel Lord of the Black Temple.

“It is well that you told me the truth,” Illidan said. The Blood Knight felt a strong hand reach for his chin and force his face up. Closing his eyes, he prayed that the demon would strangle him, would tear his throat out. He deserved no less for his betrayal. “You will serve me better than you have served Kael,” he said simply, as if stating a fact. “Now for your reward...,” he grinned maniacally. Ger’alin groaned through clenched teeth as a golden wave of pure energy shot through him. All thought, all fear, all anguish vanished. His last coherent thought was that he wished one day to share this with Alayne.

Illidan watched impassively as the sin’dorei writhed, moaning and shivering with pure delight. The demon could remember his first taste of such power and the way it had filled him, warming him, thrilling him in a manner nothing else had since. He let the other man enjoy this little gift, grinning inwardly. Before long, this Ger’alin would be a willing slave. If fed to him in drips and drabs, soon this Blood Knight would do anything Illidan asked of him, including stand against his own people.

“M-m-master?” one of the Broken stuttered. Illidan. The demon let one of his ears twitch back, signaling that he was listening without turning his attention away from the sin’dorei. “Y-your orders?” Illidan nodded, lost in thought, making plans for this sin’dorei. He would break the man completely, send him back to Kael as a shattered vessel renewed, filled with Stormrage’s own plans. What a pity it would be to lose both of them. Still, Kael and his followers had to be taught a lesson and the man himself had said he was expendable. Illidan let the power flow a few moments longer, ceasing when Ger’alin blacked out.

“You,” Illidan said, pointing at the Broken. “Come with me. Naj’entus will prepare an escort for you. I want you to report to the Dragonmaw. Those noble savages should honor the request for a parlay. You will arrange one, set for three days from now.”

“A p-p-arley. T-t-three days from now,” the Broken stammered, nodding. Illidan returned his nod. “W-w-what terms will you offer them?”

“That is for me to know,” Illidan snapped. “Now go.” As the Broken hurried off, Illidan glanced back over at the unconscious man. His blind eyes could see the shimmer of arcane energies that outlined the sin’dorei. He grinned mirthlessly. Kael had come to him for a cure for that addiction. How surprised the so-called ‘sun king’ would be when he learned just how easily that weakness could undo him, and all his damnable race. In three days, that Blood Knight would be willing to do anything Illidan asked of him for just a taste of power. Still, something about the man tugged at a corner of his mind, bringing memories he’d buried long ago. Something was different about this sin’dorei, if only Illidan could put his finger on what...

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“What did you see?” Zerith demanded when the Broken made his report to Akama and the others. “Did you see him?”

“He...he was not injured,” the Broken sighed. “I’m not certain what Stormrage was doing to him but I don’t trust it.”

“Do you think he’s revealed anything of our plans?” Akama broke in. While he understood the priest’s concern for his friend, they needed to know how to adapt their plans. The scout shrugged and glanced around uncertainly.

“We’d best operate on the assumption that Ger’alin has told them everything,” Zerith sighed. “Hope for the best but prepare for the worst; then surprises are always pleasant,” the priest quoted his friend beneath his breath. “You may leave,” he said, dismissing the Broken. Akama glared at the sin’dorei. Zerith met his eyes evenly. The scout backed out of the room, bowing to the battle leaders. “We will revise our plan,” Zerith said finally. “Are there any other entrances? Besides the ones that you mentioned when Ger’alin was here, I mean.”

“There is the old sewer entrance,” Akama sighed. “Illidan sealed it up, though. It would take a day, maybe two, to break through the seal. I didn’t mention it before because it’s very narrow and the way there is treacherous. You’ll have to go through single file, making you an easy target should Illidan catch wind of it. Beyond that, the naga often go there. It’s wet, you see?” Zerith nodded and pulled up a rolled parchment. Flattening it, he jabbed a finger into the center of the diagram.

“Show me where the sewer entrance opens out to,” he said. Akama moved to show him but was brushed out of the way by Mor’ghor. The Broken glared at the orc chieftain; though they were allies now, there was little love lost between the former enemies.

“They are here,” Mor’ghor said, pointing to a point on the Temple’s southern side. They empty out into the void behind the Temple now. Getting into the pipes will be tricky; the rocks are slick with refuse. One false step would mean falling off the world, forever.”

“Who speaks of false steps?” Akama harrumphed loudly. “Will the dragons not help us? The entry is large enough for the young ones to fit in. Two or three people could ride in on one dragon, have him land inside the pipe, climb off, and then let him return to ferry more in.”

“Perhaps they could be used as such. However, we would need to ask them. Already, they plan to assault the Temple from the air; force Illidan to expend his energy defending against their bombardment. But, perhaps, Broken one, they could help. Perhaps,” Mor’ghor mused grumpily. Zerith tried not to glare at the pair; he wanted to hit both of them. Ger’alin

was no doubt being tortured while they argued and tried to settle scores years in the making. The sin'dorei priest didn't know who annoyed him more: Mor'ghor and Garrosh with his constant insistence on the Dragonmaw leading the foray, or Akama, who maintained his arguments about doing things just so, determined to play out a scheme he'd spent years dreaming up. And, meanwhile, Ger'alín suffered some unknowable torment... Alayne went so long without sleeping that she would fall face-first into her food when someone managed to drag her away from her books for a meal... Callie had sharpened her daggers until the edge began inches from the visible blade... Zerith lifted his hands and rubbed them across his eyes, forcing his worries to the back of his mind. For now, he had to concentrate on devising a battle plan that not even Ger'alín would be able to predict. He threw himself in one of the chairs and, covering his eyes with a hand, focused his thoughts. The orcs and Akama fell silent, staring at the sin'dorei. For long moments, he sat, unmoving, drafting plans and discarding them. Ger'alín knew him too well; knew the tactics he favored. Whatever he did, it had to be something Ger'alín would never dream he would do. A soft rap on the door pulled him from his thoughts.

"Come in," he growled irritably. For a moment, he'd been close to something that might have worked. His irritation deepened when his sister stepped into the room. The last thing he needed right now was to have to worry about her. His irritation melted as he looked her over. The sleepless nights – only two, so far – were graven on her ashen face. She'd been thin – too thin – since her return from Northrend. Now, her face appeared gaunt and haunted. "What is it, Alayne?" he asked, trying to sound gentle.

"I spoke with the Broken scout," she mumbled. "I think... I'd like to offer my services in battle."

"Alayne, I am already planning to have you head up your caster squad."

"Let me rephrase the statement," she sighed. "I would like to offer you my services as..."

"As...?" he asked.

"As a death knight," she said in a hushed rush. "I've been thinking it over," she continued quickly, seeing her brother's brow darken. "Illidan has only ever been beaten by one power: the Lich King's. The only way I can see to overcome him is to use that power. The others who returned have been able to wield it without succumbing to his control," she explained to the priest while he shook his head. "I can do likewise. Let me take up the blade again and I can..."

"Ger'alín would have my hide tanned, salted, and stretched for a rug if I let you do that, Alayne," Zerith said flatly. "And, frankly, I'd help him skin me if I were fool enough to consider it. I know you want him rescued; I know you're terrified of what he may be going through. But, I cannot let you use that un-natural corruption to help us." Akama, Garrosh, and Mor'ghor all nodded their agreement. "Besides, you're a very talented caster. Your spells have more power than your physical attacks, no matter what source you draw strength from." Alayne wilted under their gazes, nodding glumly, wiping a tear from her cheek. "You will be in the fore of the fight, my sister. You'll get your chance to unleash hell on that demon who's holding your husband. Now, leave us. We still have plans to make." Alayne nodded, her face still to the floor, and left the room.

"I've decided," Zerith said suddenly, a few seconds after the door closed behind her. Her offer, mad as it had been, had given him the final piece of the plan. "Here is what we are going to do and how we are going to do it." Returning to the table, he began describing an elaborate, desperate, and daring plan. One that Ger'alín would never dream that Zerith would use. The priest silenced the nagging voice in his mind that said the reason Ger'alín wouldn't consider it was because the man was sane. "It's risky, I know," Zerith concluded. "But, as far as I can see, it's our only option."

The others stared at him, dumbfounded. He braced himself, preparing mentally to combat their arguments. One by one, each broke into a broad grin and began laughing. “They will never see this coming!” Mor’ghor roared, wiping tears from his eyes. “A good plan, priest. A good plan.”

“Good?” Garrosh grinned. “This will go down in song as either the greatest battle of all time or as a warning of what never to attempt!”

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Alayne paced restlessly around the inside of the fortress. Four times since she’d made her offer to Zerith had she paced the entire circumference of the keep. Mordenai walked beside her, looking concerned. The woman had said nothing to him since stalking out of the room. He prayed her brother had put her off her mad scheme to use the dead. “What did he say?” the nether dragon disguised as a sin’dorei asked at last.

“Exactly what you said he’d say,” she muttered.

“Oh,” he replied. Alayne began her fifth circuit of the fortress, staring at the gate, grinding her teeth. Zerith was right; Ger’alin would rather die than have her use that unholy power to free him. Still, Arthas was the only person who had ever defeated Illidan. Perhaps there was something to the power of death that gave one an edge against the arcane. Alayne turned that thought over in her mind, wishing she knew more. Ger’alin and Zerith thought she knew so much when it came to magic of the major schools. They would be shocked to realize just how little she knew beyond the theory. “Did he tell you what he was planning?”

“No. He usually waits until he’s ready to tell everyone before revealing it to me. I wish I could have sat in on that meeting, though,” she sighed. “I don’t have Ger’alin’s mind when it comes to such matters but at least then...”

“You wouldn’t be feeling so useless and helpless,” Mordenai finished for her. “Well, there’s really nothing left to do but wait. I’ve explained to you possible ways to counter Stormrage’s magical attacks. Maiev has told all of you his preferred tactics. Akama and the Dragonmaw explained about the types of demons in the Temple. I’m sure that whatever your brother comes up with, it will be good. Everyone here seems to respect him immensely... What’s the matter?” he asked, seeing that Alayne had begun to weep.

“That’s part of the problem,” she shuddered. “Any plan Zerith devises would be something Ger’alin could guess easily enough. We’re walking into a trap because, if Stormrage has broken him... The only way I can see to beat him is to use that power. Ger’alin would never suspect I’d do it unless he thought I might try to rescue him on my own. He knows Zerith would never let me do that so...”

“Zerith would never let you do what?” her brother asked, jogging up to her. He nodded at Mordenai, glad that the man had kept an eye on her. He feared that, if someone wasn’t watching her, she would slip off and try to rescue Ger’alin on her own. He grinned and wagged his head when Mordenai told him. “Alayne, I have devised a plan that will let us get in, rescue your husband, and put an end to Illidan. The demon’s mad request for a parlay along with your bringing Arthas to mind gave me the final pieces I needed to come up with this idea. Hear me out; I think this will work and would be something Ger’alin would never suspect I’d try.” He quickly outlined the plan he’d developed. Alayne seemed stunned by it. He emphasized the role he needed her to play in the battle. Her brow knit together as she considered it.

“He’ll never see it coming, that’s for sure,” she muttered after a long pause. “Of course, that’s because it’s *completely insane!*”

“Sometimes insanity is the only option,” Zerith grinned. Alayne sputtered angrily, bristling like a wet cat. “And, it’s not insane. Just not something that seems logical or

predictable. Will you be able to do your part without assistance? Or should I put two warlocks together for what I want?"

"I can do it," she sighed. "If I have to do it for more than an hour, though, you'll be carrying me back here. Only the Forsaken have that kind of stamina. How this is any better than my idea of overwhelming the demon with the dead, I'm not certain I'll ever understand, but..."

"But you're not going to do that. If you feel the need to unleash some anger during the battle, stick to flinging fire about. Frankly, I almost wish there were a way to trigger one of your blind rages," he said flatly. "The power you can let loose when you get really angry is a thing to behold." Mordenai lifted his brows in interest, giving the young woman a weighing look. Alayne flushed. She'd worked very hard to keep her temper in tight rein; to remind herself that death was a part of life. Her long talks with Zerith in the early days of her convalescence had done much to help her keep the over-protective, fiery, fiercely loving part of her personality from interfering with her life and relationships. She had come to learn that she could love and protect without clinging so tightly. She could worry without it controlling her life to the extent it had earlier. Still, that part of her worked hard, especially now, to try to regain control. She found herself becoming more and more convinced that her plan was the only way to achieve victory. "Alayne, no," Zerith said firmly, glaring at her. He had gotten better at reading her expressions though, often, Ger'alin seemed practically psychic in his ability to know what Alayne was thinking. "I want an oath from you that you will not..."

"By the Light and by my hope of a restored Sunwell, I vow that I will not use the powers I learned in Northrend inasmuch as it is within my conscious control," she said quickly. "I cannot promise, Zerith, that if I flew into one of my 'blind rages' that I won't do something monumentally stupid."

"I suppose that will have to do," he sighed. "Come on. I'd better see that you eat something. I'll mix you a potion to help you sleep. I don't think you've done much of either since Ger'alin was captured." He waved Mordenai away, desiring some time alone with his adopted sister. He rather liked the strange man; he knew that Alayne had been picking the hunter's brain about history. Idly, as he escorted her to the mess hall, he wondered how old the other sin'dorei was.

"I'm not hungry," Alayne announced quietly when the smells of cooking food hit her nose. She could feel her stomach clenching and twisting in her middle. How could she even think of eating, of sitting down and enjoying a pleasant meal, when Ger'alin was...

"You'll eat if I have to sit on you, pry your jaws open, and force it down your throat," Zerith said reasonably. "Really, Alayne, going without food or sleep will not help Ger'alin at all. He'd be angry if he knew you were doing it. You wouldn't want to make him angry, would you?"

"If only I had been able to convince him, this wouldn't have happened!" she whispered, her tone scathing and self-accusatory.

"Don't start on that, sis," Zerith muttered. "If you're going to blame yourself, you need to remember to save some blame for me and for Ger'alin. Neither of us would listen to you because we thought we'd be playing into the Lich King's hands. From now on, I will hear you out and consider what you say when you have one of those premonitions."

"But..."

Zerith put a finger over her lips, forcing her to silence. "We all make mistakes. Remember when you were captured? Ger'alin wanted to rush right off and grab you back. You want to do the same thing now that he's in danger. Alayne, I'd love nothing more than for you, or me, to be able to just waltz right in and rescue him. However, in both cases, we were going up against an entrenched enemy in his home base. That requires planning and coordination. Yes, I should have listened to you," he repeated. "But hindsight is always

perfect. All we can do now is focus on what we will do. And eat,” he grinned, hearing her stomach rumble loudly. “You’ve got to keep your strength up,” he continued gently. “He would want you to.”

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Ger’alin grinned and laughed in delight at the flow of power surging through him. Though he’d been allowed access to this ecstasy several times, he never tired of it, nor lost the thrill of wonder that came at feeling the power of the ancient Well that was every elf’s birthright. A hunger he had learned to tame, that he had forced into submission, was being fed at long last. He wondered at the suffering he’d endured – wondered that he’d never realized he’d suffered until now.

The flow cut off and Ger’alin struggled not to weep for the loss. The world seemed so drab now, compared to when the demon allowed him to tap into the Vial. “That’s enough for now,” Illidan muttered. “I have other matters to attend to.” Pocketing the Vial, the demon stomped out of the room.

Ger’alin slumped to the floor, his legs pulled up, his chin on his knees and his arms wrapped around them. It was always so, when Illidan replaced the wards on the Vial. Though the Blood Knight knew he should be able to draw from its energies no matter where it was – his own studies under Lady Liadrin had taught him that – he could not tap into the blessed waters unless he could see them. As if that were not enough, Stormrage had placed some kind of enchantment around the Vial, preventing anyone from tapping it unless he lifted the warding. The demon guarded the source of his own powers and ecstasy with a zealotry that made the most dedicated Vindicator seem a shirker. Trembling violently, he tried to think of anything other than the emptiness growing inside of him or the exhilaration that he was cut off from.

“How are you, Ger’alin?” he heard a Broken whisper to him.

“Ger’alin?” he asked, desperate to maintain his ruse. Guilt tore at him as he realized, not for the first time, that he wanted to maintain the ruse so Stormrage would not cut him completely off more than to protect his wife and friends.

“Akama asked me to check on you if Illidan left you alone. Today is the first day he’s done that. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” Ger’alin lied, his shaking giving him away.

“Are you ill? Akama says that help will come soon. I cannot tell you more than that, though. Has Illidan poisoned you? Is that why you are shivering?”

“No, I’m just cold,” Ger’alin scowled, feeling sweat begin to trickle down his forehead and neck. He did feel cold and clammy. He felt only half-alive. “How long have I been here? I’ve lost track of the time in this room.”

“Three days. Don’t worry. Help will...”

“...come soon. Yes, I heard that. What kind of help?”

“I cannot tell you more. I need to be going, Blood Knight. Hold to your courage no matter what the demon does. I’m surprised you’ve lasted three days under his merciless ministrations. I will see if we can slip something into the food the naga bring to you that will help you feel better,” the Broken offered, waiting only a second for Ger’alin to wave him off before loping back out of the room. Ger’alin managed to hold himself together long enough for the Broken to close the doors before he toppled over on his side, his muscles stiff and locked, heaving and sobbing as he thought about how he wanted nothing less than to be rescued. He wanted Alayne and Zerith to leave him here to experience the bliss that Stormrage allowed him access to! How had he come to this in only three short days? He’d thought it’d been longer – months, certainly; not a mere three days!

“What’s happening to me?” he wondered aloud. “Why can’t I think of anything other than that power? Why can’t I even think of Alayne – just her? Every thought turns to that power; even when I wish I could think of something else!”

Waiting for Stormrage to return, torn between what he knew he should want and what he actually wanted, Ger’alin lay on the floor, weeping like a lost child.

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The naga slithered about the courtyard leading into the Temple, their irritation evident in the way they spat and hissed at every being that came near them. Naj’entus himself stood stationed just behind his master, a pair of elite serpentine guards flanking the Lord of the Black Temple. Illidan lifted a hand and fingered the blindfold he wore absently. He shifted his weight, feeling reassured when his pouch thudded against his hip. The skull of Gul’dan and the Vial of water he’d gathered an eon ago made a tinkling sound that brought comfort. Something still bothered him about the Blood Knight he’d captured, something beyond mere unease at having one of Kael’s agents in his domain. The mongrel night-elf told himself firmly that the knight was under his complete control; a few more days of feeding the man’s latent addiction and he would do whatever Illidan asked. The sin’dorei were fools – they never stopped to think about the way the fel energies they feasted upon left them wide open to manipulation by one who had access to a purer arcane source.

“I don’t trust these spies,” Naj’entus hissed softly, pitching his voice for Illidan’s ears alone. “They say they’ll parlay; that the Dragonmaw will reconsider their defection and will bring the Mag’har with them. Could this be one of Kael’s plots to draw us out?” The naga lord, Vashj’s devoted follower from the fins of his forehead to the scales of his tail, lusted for a chance to wreak vengeance on those who had slain his Lady.

“Be at ease, Naj’entus,” Illidan said calmly, soothingly. “You will get your chance for revenge. Do you think I would let Vashj’s death go unpunished?” he grinned.

“Then why the parlay?” Naj’entus hissed.

“Is that what I said it was?” Illidan asked, his brows lifting and his face twisting into an expression of mock innocence. “I must have misspoken. How dreadful.”

“If you’re planning something, my Lord, I need to know about it. How else will I and my people defend you if we do not know what you are planning?”

“What I am planning,” Illidan spat, “is to send the heads of these spies back to their friends as a warning of what happens when you dare cross the Lord of Outland. Now, take your place,” he ordered. “They are coming.”

Zerith, Mor’ghor, and Garrosh strode up the broken stairs and pathways leading to the Temple’s entrance. Zerith stared around in fascinated horror. He could see clearly the latent beauty hidden beneath the twisted rubble. That such a holy place had been perverted so deeply offended him. Seeing it himself, he understood why Akama felt so strongly about restoring the Temple. With a firm shake, Zerith forced his mind back to the matter at hand. Up ahead, he could see the demon leering down at them. “Do you think he’s going to attack us?” he asked quietly.

“Without a doubt,” Mor’ghor replied in the same tone. He rolled his eyes to the sky, feeling reassured at the shadows passing over the high clouds. “All will go well.”

“All will go well,” Garrosh echoed numbly. He’d fought demons before; every Mag’har warrior had gone toe-to-toe with the Legion’s foul creatures. Still, seeing Stormrage with his own eyes, sensing the once mortal’s vast power himself, Garrosh began to wonder if the sin’dorei’s plan was actually crazy enough to work. “Ancestors be with us,” he muttered quietly as the trio continued their slow, stately tread up to the demon’s waiting place.

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Alayne kept her eyes firmly on the dragon's back. She tried to ignore the looming, impossibly vast, open pit they flew over. Callie sat behind her, the Forsaken uncharacteristically silent, not teasing her at all as they flew the short distance to the sewage pipe that was their entry into the Temple. "How long before Zerith and the others start out for this 'parlay'?" the rogue asked when the dragon landed inside of the pipe.

"They said they would give us an hour," Alayne replied. "We'll have to move quickly."

"That could be difficult," Callie muttered, eyeing the slick ooze and moss coating the pipe. "One false step, one person falling and knocking another down in this mess and we could lose half our forces before we even get in."

"Don't remind me," Alayne said, her face ashen and her lips green. "Come on, we're the first. We need to move on ahead." The pair walked quickly up the pipe, following the sounds of pickaxes ringing against stone until they drew near the entrance. "How much longer?" Alayne asked the men working through the seal.

"Another three minutes. We could probably force our way through it now. The magic is the only thing holding the stone in place."

"Wait for the others to get here and then remove the holding," she said firmly. "We have to be in position in a little over an hour." Slipping more than stepping back, she kept an eye on the groups moving up the pipe.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" Callie asked suddenly, after a long pause.

"He'll be fine," Alayne said firmly. "Light, he has to be."

"I'll help you with him, if you need," the rogue offered. "I had to learn how to handle him when he gets wild." Alayne nodded absently. "I'm sure he'll be fine," Callie finished lamely. "He's a tough nut to crack."

Alayne clenched her jaw, knowing that her friend meant well. She blinked tears out of her eyes, praying that she could find the numbness she would need to keep her mind focused on her task. Zerith had set her and the other warlocks from the Disorder of Azeroth and the Dragonmaw to enslave the demons and turn them against each other and against the naga. He had also given her "permission" to compel the naga if she felt she could do so without tiring herself too much. This would be a wearing battle; they would probably have to fight their way through the Temple's sub-basements up to the main floor. However, according to the Broken spies under Akama, they would not need to worry about facing other sin'dorei; all of the elves had fled the Temple, returning to Kael's base in the far north of the broken land. Only naga, demons, and whatever else Illidan had managed to force into serving him. She stared at the gathering crowd behind her, willing them to hurry, and trying not to think about what Ger'alín might have suffered at Stormrage's hands. She had woken in a cold sweat, remembering her time under the Burning Blade's imprisonment. In the days that had followed, she'd fallen further into madness and despair. Her heart pounded and her skin felt clammy from the mere thought that Ger'alín might be affected in the same manner.

"He'll be fine," Callie whispered when she passed Alayne a few moments later. The elf woman looked as if she was going to be ill. "Now, it's time to get him out of there. Let's go." Alayne nodded and motioned, gesturing for the other warlocks to fall in around her. The orcs and Forsaken eyed her warily, knowing what they had to do and not looking forward to it.

"We go first," she said calmly, forcing the gibbering voice that flogged her for haste, the voice that screamed at her for leaving her husband to suffer to a muted buzz. "Remember, this time, we're in the front. It will be up to us to look after ourselves. We can't rely on the fighters this time around; they have their own battle to fight."

“We’re ready,” the lone Forsaken warlock hissed. “We know what to do.” The orcs nodded in agreement. Alayne had gone over the plan with them dozens of times. She took hold of herself, consciously stopping herself from chewing her lower lip in worry or from apologizing; she’d bored the plan into their skulls because, when she was doing that, she wasn’t weeping or making herself sick with dread over thoughts of her husband.

“Then let’s go,” she said firmly, projecting an aura of calm collectedness that she did not feel at all. Striding forward purposefully, she nodded to the magi holding the magics of the barrier in place. The ward collapsed and, with a rush of fel energy, Alayne blasted the thin, rock barrier away. A rush of chill air blew in, thinning the stench of waste for a second as Alayne and the warlocks leapt through the hole, ready for battle.

The handful of demons glanced at the explosion and the forces rushing through the wall in surprise. Their gaping did not last long as they rushed to meet the attackers. Alayne and the rest of the warlocks quickly reached out and began the battle for control of the demons’ minds. The sin’dorei grunted with the effort but, after a few seconds, was able to relax, the demon as firmly under her control as those she could pull from the Twisting Nether. Looking around her, she saw that the other warlocks were also ready. Issuing commands mentally, Alayne hurried to the ramp leading up to the next sub-basement. She heard the other warlocks, their demons in tow, padding after her. The magi and rogues followed behind, some grinning and joking softly about bringing up the rear. Whirling around, she pressed a finger over her lips, demanding absolute silence. If the plan was to work, they needed to get as far into the Temple as they could as quickly as possible without being detected. The Ashtongue Deathsworn said that Illidan tended to favor frontal assaults and, from that, tended to expect his enemies to do the same. Alayne nodded, seeing that the information seemed to be correct. Illidan had pulled almost all of the demons and the naga under his command out to man the walkways and battlements, obviously expecting that the main strike force would come from the Dragonmaw against the Temple’s doors. Ger’alin would have expected as much as well; hence why Alayne herself was leading the strike force through the basements, taking the Temple from the bottom and rear, as it were.

Running up the ramp, she threw herself to the side and compelled her demon to attack the naga guards standing in front of the doorway leading to the stairs. The serpentine guards were powerful and she felt the recoil of their killing strokes as her demon collapsed. Hissing in frustration, she began hurling her spells while the other warlocks set their own demons against the creatures. She reached out, trying to compel the snakes’ minds...

The blow from the serpent mage who slithered into the room struck Alayne across the very core of her being. Her head began pounding, her temples throbbing wildly from the backlash of her spell striking her. For a moment, she gaped in complete confusion, wondering where she was, who she was, and what was going on. The confusion cleared quickly, though, as she regained a sense of self and pressed on, forgoing her attempts at control in favor of her spells. Her anger, her fear at what had almost happened, and her desperation to have her forces in place in time for what Zerith planned lent strength to her magic. Focusing her attacks on the magi, ignoring the guards pummeling the demons for the moment, she gestured and screamed, “Take down the magic user!” Bolts of ice and fire flew past her and she saw the rogues jog quickly across the room, some peeling off to aid the enslaved demons while others tried to cut the caster to ribbons. Alayne winced when the naga guards let loose a loud roar, wondering if they had just alerted others to the invaders. She cringed again when the massive corpses fell to the ground, throwing dust into the air.

“Well, so much for a quiet entrance,” Callie said, her tone loud enough to carry across the room but soft enough not to be heard outside. She pressed herself against the wall and moved slowly up the stairs, going only high enough to see that the basement above was empty, save for a few scattered bands of small demons. Loping back down, she gently closed

the doors behind her and strode over to Alayne. Giving a report of what she'd seen in as few words as possible, she wondered aloud why the demons had not come to the nagas' aid. Alayne shrugged and, not giving the others time to even catch their breath, hurried out of the doors and up the stairs. She grinned when she saw that the demons there were engineers. "What are you smiling at?" Callie asked.

"Something Zerith never dreamed of," Alayne replied cryptically as she reached out and wrestled for control of a pack of the minor fel beings. She could hear the other warlocks dragging their demons behind them, grunting as they had to command the creatures to mount the stairs. Once gained, control over a demon came easily. Still, it was tiring. Alayne herself could feel the energy seeping out of her as she maintained control over four minor entities, forced them to continue in their current tasks so as to not alert the others that anything was amiss. Gesturing, she told the other warlocks to set their demons loose in the room, scattering the packs of tinkering Nether-spawned engineers, herding them closer to the pack she had enslaved. "Pull yours back," she said between gritted teeth. Once the other demons were out of range, Alayne commanded all four of the ones she'd enslaved to use the explosives they carried, crippling her own demons as well as the rest of the ones crammed against the side of the room. "Now," she ordered, giving the magi permission to unleash their spells. Once the last of the demons had fallen, Alayne knuckled her back, took a moment to wipe sweat from her forehead, and strode over to pull the doorway leading to the next sub-basement open. She was greeted by a grinning serpentine warrior, his spear point hovering mere inches from her heart.

"Did you really think Lord Illidan wouldn't foresee this?" the snake hissed. Alayne leapt back, rolling across the floor to come to a crouch several feet away. As the rogues rushed to engage the snakes pouring into the room, Alayne prayed that Zerith's fall back plan would work in case she couldn't get to where she needed to be.

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"That was what I like to call way too close for comfort," Callie muttered as she pulled an arrow out of her shoulder. "At least we got rid of them," she growled, glancing at the piled corpses of naga.

"At a high price," Alayne muttered. The last fight had cost them half of their forces. Their few remaining healers concentrated only on the most grievously injured; the rest were making do with crude bandages or splints made from the clothing or weapons of the dead. "Light, I knew this was a..."

"...bad idea," Callie said. "I know. You were right."

"Still, nothing to do about it now but press on. Light, I hope that the rest of the naga are either patrolling far from us, or are lazy, or are out on the Temple's facings trying to look impressive. We will not survive another battle like that one." Giving her flagging forces another moment to catch their breaths and tend their wounds, Alayne signaled for them to stand and prepare to follow her. Reaching up, she readjusted the bandage wrapped around her head, checked the one stuck, held on with her own blood, to her shoulder, and tried to ignore the way her ear folded in on itself. Her face was a mass of bruises and claw marks marred the skin of her neck. She hefted the long dagger she'd taken from one of the naga warriors; to her, it was a sword. She might not be able to use it as well as she had been trained, but at least she had a last line of defense for when she was too weary to cast. At least now she could make a quicker end to her enemies instead of letting them decimate her ranks. Her cheeks flamed beneath her bruises as she thought about how ashamed Ger'alín and Zerith were going to be when they found out that her blundering had cost them many of their best casters.

“Don’t blame yourself, Alayne. You can’t mute serpents. You did the best you could,” Callie said, lifting a hand to place it, gently and gingerly, on the woman’s arm. “Come on, we’ve only got a few minutes before we’re supposed to be in place in the rearmost sanctum. Let’s get moving.” Suiting words to action, Callie began loping forward, her strides taking her up the ramp and onto the Temple’s main floor. She started to grin in triumph as the rest of the survivors followed her up. The hallways were empty. Straining her ears, the rogue could hear no tell-tale slithering or stomping that would indicate naga or demonic patrols. Still, the others were silent, cautious, glancing around themselves in a mixture of surprise and relief. They found it hard to credit that the sounds of their clash with the naga had not brought hundreds of guards down searching for the invaders. “Back this way,” Callie whispered, barely loud enough to be heard. Dashing off, she hurried to make it to the room Akama had indicated as the position they were to hold.

Alayne hastened after her friend, the relieved delight of finding the corridors empty giving her – along with everyone else – a second wind. Soft footfalls and the susurrant of robes filled the sin’dorei’s ears, sounding like thunder. Each time she looked over her shoulder or strained to hear sounds that meant battle and death, she heaved a sigh of relief when she heard nothing more than their passage. As they drew near their target, Alayne stopped, hearing muffled weeping. Her halt brought the others to a standstill as they looked to her for direction. Cocking her head, she tried to determine where the sound was coming from. Her eyes widened in anger, her face and neck reddening with rage as she recognized the agonized weeping. Without stopping to consider the wisdom of her action, she ran to the doors that Akama had indicated marked the way to Illidan’s chambers and flung them open. A pair of serpentine guards looked at the lone elf woman in surprise but she ignored them, her attention focused on the curled up ball of misery that she knew as her husband.

“Oh no,” Callie said, jogging up behind Alayne. The serpents were rushing towards the warlock, their spears pointed straight for her heart. Callie turned to shout for the others to join them, hoping to make quick work of the guards. Before she had a chance to voice her shout, her jaw went slack as she watched the naga’s skeletons erupt through their scaly hides, gore fountaining everywhere. “Why didn’t you do that earlier?” she muttered irritably to the sin’dorei. “It would have saved us a lot of trouble and several lives.” Alayne didn’t hear the Forsaken and, glancing at the warlock’s face, Callie took a few steps backwards. Alayne was about to let loose with one of her legendary fits of temper and the rogue wanted to warn the others to stay out of the woman’s path.

For her part, the warlock seemed unaware of the blood and scales splattered on her robes, in her hair, and staining her face. She had eyes only for the weeping form prostrate on the ground. Walking over to him, she knelt down and placed a gentle hand on his head, stroking his hair. “Ger’alin?” she whispered, her voice sounding impossibly distant to her own ears. “Ger’alin, what...someone heal him!” she barked, fearing the worst when she saw him shivering and convulsing. One of the few healers ran into the room, keeping a watchful eye on the elven woman as he set down the totem that would allow him to focus his power and heal the Blood Knight. “I said heal him!” Alayne screamed moments later when Ger’alin continued to shake.

“I have,” the tauren shaman muttered. “There is nothing to heal; he is as healthy as a bull.”

“Then why is he... Illidan must have... something... Some poison or torture...”

“Get back here!” Callie hissed to the shaman. The bull-man obeyed with alacrity, well aware of Alayne’s inability to distinguish friend and foe when enraged.

“You rest, my love,” Alayne whispered tenderly to Ger’alin, her tone at complete odds with the implacable hatred etched on her face. “I will take care of...the rest,” she finished, striding from the room. Ignoring the survivors, ignoring everything, Alayne began

stalking towards the doors of the Temple, her mind set on one thing and one thing only: to destroy the demon who had hurt her husband.

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Zerith glanced around uneasily. From Mor'ghor's cryptic comment, he knew that the aerial assault was in place and merely awaited his signal. Still, he felt a tingle of nervousness as he and the two orc chieftains drew close to the self-proclaimed Lord of Outland. "Everything should be in place. With luck, Alayne will have found Ger'alain and he'll be healed, maybe even ready to take part in the next phase of battle. If not, she's to order him to stand aside. In the worst case scenario, one of the shamans will be carrying him back to Dragonmaw Hold," he thought to himself, rehearsing the various plans he had made. "We knew, before we set out, that this was a trap; that Illidan will probably attack us or order us held captive. When he moves to do that, that is when I give the signal the dragon-riders are waiting for. Hopefully, this will not be long and everyone will be in place." Settling himself beneath the tent, glad of the shade that obscured the crazed sky but wary of the hulking demon staring down at him, Zerith let the orc chieftains move in front of him, flanking him, and waited for the 'negotiations' to begin.

"I see you have come crawling back, Mor'ghor," Illidan sneered. "Your pathetic little 'defection' has cost me a week's worth of resources! And you, little elf, what business did you play in this farce? Did your prince order you to disrupt my plans? He'll be very disappointed to lose one of his best 'renegades,'" the demon spat.

"You wanted a parlay, demon," Garrosh answered gruffly. "If you arranged this just to boast and waste wind, then let us be done with it now."

"Name your terms, my Lord. Surely you know by now that we have defeated the force sent against us," Mor'ghor said, trying to steer the conversation back to the supposed topic. "However, you are right. If we remain divided, we will be easy prey for the Legion. All we ask is that we no longer be subjected to fel blood or demonic corruption. Let us serve you of our own volition, without compulsion, and using our own strength."

"My terms?" Illidan murmured softly, absently. Lifting a hand elaborately, he stroked his chin as if deep in thought. "Yes, my terms. My terms are that your heads will decorate the gates of the Black Temple, soon to be joined by the heads of the rest of your fellows and your misbegotten prince! Naj'entus!"

Zerith danced back nimbly, lifting his hand and calling upon the Light. A cascade of holy energy erupted from him, flying high into the sky and signaling the launch of the attack. He barely had time to throw himself out of the way of the demon's attack before the first wave of dragon's breath and boulders began to rain down upon the Temple. Illidan stared up at the sky, his jaw going slack in surprise when he saw the dragons coming to the aid of the very orcs who had once enslaved them. Garrosh and Mor'ghor both ran, their short, stocky legs carrying them quickly to the place where one of their fellows and dropped their war axes. Zerith kept an eye on the shocked demon, wondering how much longer it would be before...

The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth and the Mag'har forces from Nagrand and Hellfire Peninsula came surging up the Temple's walkway, their charge a roar that deafened the ears. Illidan's shock at the aerial assault vanished in his consternation at the sudden attack from the ground. Overhead, the dragon riders kept their aim confined to the Temple itself, careful not to accidentally fire upon their own. Illidan's naga began trying to rush down from the walls to meet the attackers head on. Now, if everything had gone as he hoped...

The sin'dorei priest groaned, his teeth grinding together and his face blazing with anger when he saw the night elven huntress pick her way through the fight, her eyes filled with the sight of her elusive prey. Maiev was supposed to have waited, supposed to have held

herself back until they had forced Illidan back into the Temple, inside, where he couldn't use his wings. Had the lust for vengeance held too long in abeyance caused the warden to forget everything Zerith and the others had told her?

Illidan roared when his gaze fell on his former jailer. Shouting coarse oaths, the demon leapt up into the air, his wings beating to give him altitude. Green fire sprung from his hands, the blazes transforming into the Twin Blades of Azzinoth. Twirling them in his hands as if to get the feel for them again, the demon Lord of Outland completed his ascent and rolled, plunging downward, his blades speeding, seeking the Warden's blood. Zerith cringed, certain he was about to see the legendary huntress's death. At the last minute, Maiev swept aside, Illidan crashing to the ground. The demon quickly regained his feet, his blades an impossible green whirlwind of ferocity as he bored in, slashing at his enemy. Maiev wielded her spear deftly, deflecting the demon's blows. Still, with each attack, she gave ground, yielding to her stronger, desperate prey. Zerith was riveted, watching avidly as the millennia-old duel played itself out before his eyes. Not even the battle waged by his friends, his comrades, could draw his attention away from the display of deadly skill before him.

Illidan's head jerked up and he sniffed as if testing the wind, his purple face paling. A horror-stricken expression of absolute dread flitted across his face, as if he had seen something he feared more than death itself – something he had hoped to never see again. Zerith glanced in the direction the demonic lord of the Black Temple stared. Even Maiev glanced back uneasily. A chill breeze blew through, freezing the priest's blood. Dar'ja pressed against him as if feeling the same sense of foreboding unease. The massive twin doors of the Black Temple blew open, some force flinging them open with such strength that they blasted off their hinges, splintering and crashing to the ground with a deafening rush. Zerith began praying desperately, wondering what minion of the Temple had come to its master's aid.

"What is she *doing*?" Dar'ja gasped, aghast. Zerith turned his gaze the direction his wife pointed and felt his jaw dropping open when he saw Alayne, her face a mask, her eyes twin fires to dwarf the blaze from Illidan's blades, walking calmly out of the Temple. "Isn't she supposed to wait for us to push the naga and Illidan back..."

"I guess she, like Maiev, forgot the plan," Zerith grumbled in irritation, trying to mask his concern. He'd heard tell of Alayne's legendary battle rages from Ger'alín and Callie but he'd, blessedly, never witnessed one himself. It seemed that was about to end. Alayne continued her strangely detached and dignified pace down the stairs, coming to a stop a few yards from the master of the Black Temple.

"Is this one of your puppies, huntress?" he asked, his tone a mocking mask to hide his discomfort. "Am I going to have to kick her out of my way?"

"You hurt him," Alayne said, her voice distant to her own ears. "You did something and hurt him."

"One of your little litter mates?" he sneered. "Did your master send you because he fears to face me, little girl?" the Betrayer prodded, betraying his unease. Alayne's eyes flashed, an expression of absolute hatred blaring through so swiftly Zerith wondered if he'd really seen it. Maiev Shadowsong, the Warden, a woman who had faced demons and dead and countless other horrors in her centuries' long life, took a step backwards, staring at the sin'dorei as if the woman carried the deadliest of contagions. "Does the so-called Lich King want a rematch, little girl? I think I will send you back to him in pieces, one part at a time, as a warning of what I'll do to him when I come to tear him off his throne."

Alayne said nothing. Lifting a hand idly, as if bored, she pointed at the monstrous demon. The chill wind returned, whipping Zerith's robes, slapping them against his legs and plastering them to his back. His long hair flew in his face. He reached up, clawing it out of his eyes. Next to him, Dar'ja did the same. At the top of the Temple's stairs, Callie stared down in stupefied shock as the wind continued to pick up, swirling around the sin'dorei and her

target. The Forsaken felt a flutter in her stomach; a sensation she vaguely remembered from the first days of her freedom. The wind continued to howl, its shrieking horrible to hear. Dust and smoke whirled on it, riding it, nearly obscuring the warlock. Zerith wondered why he didn't feel the grit of sand rasping against his skin as he watched the wind coalesce. After a moment, he felt the same terror that turned Callie's bowels to water. The wind had not brought smoke or sand.

It had brought the dead.

Moments stretched into hours; time crawling as the restless spirits of murdered draenei swarmed over the demon. Illidan threw his head back, roaring in rage, feeling his power being drained from him, sapped by the vampiric touch of the living dead. He beat his wings, hoping against hope to dislodge them. Incorporeal, they ignored the mighty gusts of wind, compelled only by the necromantic magic wielded by the former death knight. Tapping into both the Vial and the Skull of Gul'dan, Illidan tried to blast them off of him, tried to destroy the dead. Alayne grunted, feeling the recoil of her death magic failing. Opening her mouth, she uttered words that made Callie and every other Forsaken want to claw their ears off their heads. Though the sin'dorei barely whispered them, the undead heard her compelling command as if she shrieked inside their heads. Naga corpses stirred, regaining their standing position, chill hands gripping the weapons they had borne in service of the Betrayer as they turned on him, their dead eyes shining with un-natural and unholy life.

"Alayne, stop it! Stop this at once! Let the dead rest, sister! Let them rest!"

Illidan let his blades whirl through his hands and licked his lips nervously as the dead drew near. "Is this the best you can do, little girl? A few shambling corpses and ghosts?" he smirked. Maiev glanced between her prey and the now undead naga, uncertain of which enemy she should be facing.

"Alayne, for the love of the Light!" Dar'ja screamed. Zerith added his hoarse yells to hers, praying that Alayne would snap out of it, would realize what perversion she was performing. To enslave demons was one thing...to manipulate the helpless dead?

"*She can't hear you,*" Zerith heard Ger'alín's warning. The two had been discussing how best to use Alayne in the battle for control of Zangarmarsh. "*You let her get enraged and she goes deaf. She goes blind. She knows nothing but the need to kill – to eradicate from existence – whatever it was that enraged her. She can't tell friend from foe. The only way to get her to stop is to **force** her out of the fight. Light's truth, Zerith, I hope you never face that choice. Hurting her is...I still have nightmares about it.*"

"She can't hear you," he repeated to his wife. "She can't hear either of us. Light, Illidan must have done something dreadful to Ger'alín. Go. Go now, while he's distracted with her. See if you can help him. I'll stay here and...do what I must." Dar'ja opened her mouth to protest but he cut her off with a stern, "Go!" Jogging across the courtyard, glancing over her shoulder to see that the demon was still engrossed with the sin'dorei warlock, she hurried up the stairs, wondering what had the Forsaken clutching their heads as if in pain.

Illidan had managed to overcome his fear of the death knight in the meantime. He danced near her, his blades a blur. Zerith lifted his own hands and, with a hurling gesture, blasted the demon with pure Light energy. Illidan shrieked in outrage as the holy power seared through him. His glare of pure hatred made Zerith jump back. The demon's shift in attention seemed to snap Alayne back to reality, though. The naga fell back to the ground and, behind the mammoth mongrel, her fel guard appeared, its axe cutting across the back of his knees. Once again, the Lord of Outland screamed, crashing to the ground, his legs useless. Alayne walked up to him, standing over him, staring down, her whole body trembling and tears streaming down her face as she repeated "you hurt him" again and again, her voice so filled with despair that it tore her brother's heart.

“Come on, Alayne,” he said, putting a gentle arm around her shoulders. “Let’s leave the huntress to her prey,” he whispered, still not quite certain he could believe that Illidan was as helpless as he seemed. Glancing down to the road in front of the Temple, Zerith could see his forces and those of the orcs standing, cleaning their weapons, the naga threat finished. Of the defenders of the Black Temple, only its master remained alive and, to judge from the implacable look on Maiev’s face, she was going to take that matter into her hands momentarily. “Come on, let’s go see to that husband of yours.”

“He hurt him,” she shuddered, leaning against Zerith as he led her away from the field of battle. “He hurt him,” she sobbed.

As the two sin’dorei siblings mounted the stairs of the Temple, Mor’ghor and Garrosh exchanged significant glances before making gestures to ward off evil and ask forgiveness of the ancestors. “She must have had a good reason,” Garrosh muttered. “She must have.”

“We have done enough evil, brother-in-battle,” Mor’ghor grunted. “Let us be done with it. Let us be done with them and their abuse of our dead.”

Maiev stared down at her prey, hefting her spear. Illidan cringed, his useless legs scrambling against the ground in a futile effort to lift him. His wings, trapped beneath the weight of his body, twitched painfully. “It is over,” she said, disbelieving. “You are beaten.”

“You have won... Maiev. But the huntress...,” he gasped, “is nothing without the hunt. You... are *nothing*... without me.” For a moment, Maiev wavered. For long millennia, she had guarded the man he had been. For years, she had hunted him, chasing him across lands, across worlds. What would she do now, that it was ending? Visions of Illidan betraying her people long ago, allying with Sargerath, of him standing next to the new Well of Eternity he’d created, defiant, of the deep, dark prison she’d been forced to call home for long years...visions of Naisha’s face filled her eyes and her doubts evaporated in the blaze of her rage. With a quick thrust, she buried the point of her spear in the demon’s chest. Illidan gasped, groaned, then went limp. Great gusts of air snorted out of Maiev’s nostrils and sweat dripped down her ashen face. Pulling her spear free, she wiped the point against the demon’s own trousers and turned on her heel.

“He’s right. I feel nothing. I am nothing,” she whispered, glancing back over her shoulder to see the two sin’dorei vanish into the Temple. “Farewell, champions. Our paths will not cross again.” Striding past the gathered orcs, tauren, trolls, Forsaken, and elves, the Warden was blind to their outstretched hands, deaf to their questions and demands. Blinded by the sudden tears springing to her eyes, she ran, soon lost to their sight, lost, wandering only where legends still lurk.

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Dar’ja glanced up, relieved to see Zerith entering the room escorting his sister. The Forsaken still glared at the sin’dorei warlock, their eyes flashing with pure outrage. Only Callie seemed to have any sympathy for her friend but even the rogue watched the woman warily, her hands twitching involuntarily towards her daggers. Dar’ja spread her hands helplessly when Zerith raised his eyebrows at her, asking silently what ailed the normally hale and hearty Blood Knight. “Let’s see what we have here,” the priest muttered, kneeling down beside Ger’alin. The strong man was still curled up, his arms wrapped around his legs, his knees tucked up and his face buried in his legs. He shook violently, as if with some foul poison or fear beyond reasoning.

“You’re among friends, Ger’alin. We’ve come to rescue you. Illidan has fallen; he will harm you no longer.”

“NO!” Ger’alin screamed, his voice muffled by his legs. “NO!”

“There’s no need to be afraid,” Zerith continued, wondering why the man was screaming and why his tremors seemed to have increased. “Light, Ger’alin, what did he do to you?” Zerith jerked back, feeling himself choking when Ger’alin...exploded outward, his limbs flying out and the man springing to a crouch. One hand snaked out to grip the priest’s collar in a vice-like hold. For a moment, Zerith did not recognize the face snarling at him; it was far too thin for one thing. The eyes, no longer pure emerald green, blazed a milky aquamarine. Still, his friend’s strength seemed to have remained with him. “You are free, Ger’alin.”

Zerith threw his hands in front of himself to keep from pitching forward on his face when Ger’alin flung him away and began sprinting from the room. Glancing up, he saw that several of the group who had been assigned to Alayne were picking themselves off the floor where the sin’dorei Blood Knight had bowled them over in his hasty exit. Alayne just stared at the path he’d taken, her jaw hanging open and her throat emitting a wordless, keening wail. Dar’ja walked over to her, wondering what was going on. “Alayne?” she whispered. The warlock’s eyes rolled back in her head and her legs folded. Her head hit the floor with an echoing ‘bang!’ The Forsaken in her group spat on the ground and began stalking in the direction her husband had run. Dar’ja stared at them; Callie shrugged at her, giving a look that promised an explanation later before she loped after them. Zerith managed to regain his feet and, walking over, picked Alayne up in his arms and sighed. “Sometimes I wonder; do I really want to know what’s going on?” he asked as he carried her out of the Temple, his wife walking alongside him. On their way out, they passed Mor’ghor and Garrosh. Zerith smiled at them, relieved to see them well and eager to discuss the next phase of the battle for Outland. Anything to take his mind off of the complete catastrophe that his battle plan for the Black Temple had turned out to be. The orcs nodded to him respectfully but glared at the unconscious woman in his arms, their eyes cold as the depths of winter. Deciding, once again, that he really didn’t want to know at the moment, the priest continued his tread out of the Temple. Passing Akama, he and Alayne received the same treatment as from the orc chieftains. Grinding his teeth, he told himself he was just being paranoid. Heightened senses from battle and whatnot, he told himself over and over again. He only *thought* they were angry about something.

Zerith and Dar’ja heaved twin sighs of relief when they stepped into the fading sunlight outside of the Temple. Callie and the Forsaken were mixing with the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth again, the rogue laughing and pointing at the road, clearly amused by something. The strange elven man, Mordenai, glanced over at them, his smile wiped clean from his face when he saw Alayne. He ran up and, exchanging quick whispers with her brother, soon had her tossed over his shoulder and was loping back towards Dragonmaw Hold as quickly as his long legs would carry him. “What’s so funny?” Zerith asked Callie, wondering if he wanted to know anything.

“Ger’alin. When we got out here, he was whooping for joy like a kid who had finally found his lost treasure and jumping around like an idiot. I guess seeing that Stormrage really is dead was what he needed to put him in a better mood. Then, he started running towards Dragonmaw Hold faster than I thought possible. We’re guessing that he’s going to get things ready for Alayne’s arrival. Care to make a wager on how long it will be before either of them gets a wink of sleep?”

“No. I don’t like losing my money,” Zerith said dryly. “Speaking of my sister...”

“Not here,” Callie said, raising a hand. “Not now. It’s too soon. I promise, I will explain why every one of us is put out with her. Give me time to calm down, though. I keep having to remind myself that she didn’t know. She was...not in control of herself. Even then, even though I know that...I want to kill her for what she did!”

“Callie, when she gets enraged, she can’t tell friend from foe. She didn’t...hurt anyone, did she?”

“Not physically, no. It’s too soon, Zerith. I’ll tell you tomorrow or the day after. Let’s just...well, let’s burn this carcass,” she said, prodding Stormrage’s body with her toe. “It’s hard to believe...a legend is dead.”