

Mordenai tapped lightly on the door, wondering if the Blood Knight were inside. Only a few orcs remained in the fortress; the rest were all still at the Black Temple, catching their breath on the field of victory. He wondered why the man had been in such a hurry to get out of there, had been so rushed that he had left all of his friends, his wife, behind. The dragon, still in his disguise as a fellow blood elf, furrowed his brow while he mulled that over. Ger'alín had thrown himself on Illidan's corpse, gibbering like one distraught beyond words. He'd dug through the demon's pockets frantically, discarding the powerful Skull of Gul'dan and, finding something else, had lit up brighter than the noon-day sun on midsummer's day. Then he'd run off. "What did he find and why does thinking about it make my skin crawl?" Mordenai wondered quietly. He tapped again at the door, shifting the woman he carried into a more manageable position. He was almost ready to give up and kick the door down when it sprang open, a wild-eyed sin'dorei fighter staring at him.

"What do you want?" Ger'alín snarled angrily.

"To get her off my shoulder," Mordenai said reasonably, reminding himself that the man had no doubt been through torments that he would never be able to imagine.

"What's the matter with her?" Ger'alín asked, only a light coating of concern in his abstracted voice. He sounded as if he knew he should be concerned but had something far more pressing on his mind. Mordenai shrugged and, lifting his eyebrows in askance, stepped into the room. Settling the unconscious woman on the bed, he turned and left, closing the door behind him and hoping that, once she awoke, Alayne was able to do something to help Ger'alín cope with whatever horrors he had faced.

Once the door pulled closed, Ger'alín cast a glance at his wife. She lay still, her face pale. Not a whisper so much as passed her lips; a sign that something was very wrong with her. He watched her for several minutes before turning back to the room's small table. Opening the drawer, he pulled out the Vial he'd taken from Illidan's corpse. The warding was still firmly in place around it, preventing him from tapping into the energies within. He'd been hammering at it frantically, trying to find a weakness, something that would let him get past it to the pure joy within. Sweat rolled down his face, splattering droplets on the desk as he continued to try, continued to fail, and continued to despair of ever knowing what it was he had known for such a brief time.

A soft rustling sound perked his ears and he quickly returned the Vial to its drawer. As much as he wanted to beg Alayne to help him tap into its secrets, he feared she would turn it over to the Scryers or the naaru as she said she had the other one. He turned around to face her, torn between gladness and anger that she had finally woken. Her legs hung off the edge of the bed, her feet pressed to the floor. Her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands, she sat, her back to him, shivering and rubbing her temples. "You're awake," he said, his voice falling flat. Alayne nodded, not lifting her head. "I'm glad," he grinned, trying to recall how he used to feel and act. The Vial and the ecstasy it promised clouded his thoughts, making it difficult to think of anything else. Something about the way she sat, refusing to look up at him, tugged at him. He huffed in irritation, wishing she would either leave or do something to help him take his mind off the bliss he wasn't feeling. Sitting down next to her, he looked at her. "What?" he said flatly.

Alayne hunched further in on herself, cringing and shaking. For a moment, Ger'alín was so moved by her obvious fear that he forgot about the Vial. "Alayne?" he whispered softly. Her shuddering increased and gut-wrenching sobs were ripped from her throat. Reaching over, he cupped her chin in his hands and forced her to look up at him. He sucked in a horrified breath at what he saw in her eyes. Not just fear for him; but, for some reason, fear *of* him. The longer he held her gaze on his face, the more the fear grew. He kept his touch gentle and light. "I'm fine," he murmured, hoping to reassure her. "He didn't hurt me so much; I just..."

He hit the ground with a thud, the wind knocked out of him. For a moment, he just lay there, stunned, letting her rain a frantic frenzy of kisses on his face, lips, and neck. Her hands tangled painfully in his hair and, whenever she opened her eyes and met his, he wondered anew at the fear he saw hidden in their emerald depths. The greater her fear, the more frenzied she grew, as if to deny the one with the other. He closed his eyes and groaned when he heard the sound of fabric ripping, not certain if it had been him or her who had lost patience with the buttons. Then came a warmth, a glowing bliss that momentarily lessened his hunger for the power trapped behind Illidan's ward. *Only a lessening*, he thought, the truth a pain-filled realization. *Only a lessening*, he shivered as his eyes gazed back towards the drawer.

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“Will you go out today?” Alayne asked, bracing herself. Sometimes when she asked him this, his ire swept over her, a tidal tirade of proportions she'd never dreamed he was capable of. This morning, he merely grunted and turned back on his side, pulling the covers over his head. “Ger'alín, it's been almost a week...”

“I rather like it in here,” he said sardonically, his voice muffled by the blankets. “Good memories here.”

“Garrosh wants to see you. He's worried. Same with Callie and Zerith and Dar'ja and Tau're... everyone's worried. *I'm* worried,” she sighed.

“You're afraid of me,” he accused.

“I'm afraid *for* you,” she corrected. “I'm afraid of something I saw...but I know that it won't happen now. I just...wish you'd come outside for a bit. The fresh air would do you good.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” he muttered. “Go on, take a walk or something.”

“Maybe I should stay...,” she offered, cringing when she saw him stiffen beneath the covers. When asking him if he'd go out didn't set off an argument, her offer to remain with him almost always did. Still, she made the offer daily nonetheless. She had to. She had to convince herself that the visions were false; that he would never hurt her, no matter how irritable he became.

“Get out!” he shouted. Alayne quickly ducked out into the hallway. She hated herself for doubting him at all, yet at the same time...

“He's been in there for the past six days. Is he coming out any time soon?” Zerith asked flatly. Alayne gave a start. The hallway was lined with people, their eyes all on her. Zerith folded his arms over his chest and kept his face carefully expressionless. “This is more than just mere trauma over torment, isn't it?”

“He's fine, he says,” she replied uneasily. “He says we're all worrying over nothing. He just wants to be left alone, he says.”

“And what do you think? Light, Alayne, you're the only one of us who would have any clue what he's been through or what he's going through now.”

“I...I think we should leave him alone. He'll come out when he's ready to come out.”

“Two days,” Zerith said after a long pause. “If he doesn't come out on his own in two days, I'm dragging him out myself. Now, what does he look like?”

“He looks fine,” Alayne lied quickly. “Healthy as a horse. A little pale from being cooped up but nothing a few hours in the sun won't fix.” Zerith narrowed his eyes to slits, examining her. “Okay, he's a little thin, too,” she admitted. “A little? He's lost more weight than I have on my frame! In the space of days, he's wasted away and he told me if I said another word about it, he...he'd...but he didn't mean it!” the words tumbled out of her. Zerith's expression went from guarded and suspicious to concerned. “And his eyes,” she sobbed. “His eyes...”

“Dar’ja, take her outside. See if Mordenai will keep her company,” he whispered.

“I’ll stay,” Alayne said firmly. “He listens to me...sometimes,” she sighed.

“You’re going outside.”

“I’m his *wife*, Zerith!”

“You’re going outside,” her brother repeated. “Dar’ja, haul her out of here and tell Mordenai to sit on her to keep her away if he has to. Garrosh, Tau’re, I want you two to be ready to help me. Callie, stay out here and, if I tell you to go fetch something, you go get it right then and there.” The others nodded and Dar’ja began dragging a struggling, protesting Alayne down the corridor.

“Let me stay, please!” Alayne pleaded, her voice growing fainter as her sister-by-marriage carried her off. “He’s my husband! My husband!”

“Which is exactly why you shouldn’t see or hear any of this,” Zerith muttered beneath his breath. “If any of you tell her a word of it...,” he threatened his assistants. Satisfied that they would guard their tongues, he stood in front of the door, hitched his robes up over his knees, and kicked as hard as he could. His foot landed flush against the lock and the door flew open, splinters of wood scattering everywhere. Zerith winced when he took a step into the room, then froze in horror.

Ger’alin stood hunched over the desk. Alayne had not exaggerated; the woolen robe he wore hung on his wasted frame where once it would have burst at the seams had the Blood Knight tried to wear it. His long brown hair was lank and tangled as if he had not brushed it in days. The soul smell of sweat and desperation permeated the chamber, assaulting everyone like a slap to the face. Everything the priest had planned to say and do vanished from his tongue as he took in the sight. He heard Garrosh and Tau’re gasp in shock when they followed.

“What do you want?” Ger’alin demanded angrily, his back to the door. “Leave me in peace! Haven’t I been through enough lately?” The whining tone sounded completely out of character for the normally stoic fighter. “Did Alayne send you in here after me?”

“No, she didn’t,” Zerith said flatly. “What is wrong with you?”

“I’m fine!”

“And I’m the king of Stormwind! What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing! Leave me be in peace!”

“Ger’alin, let me look at you,” Zerith demanded, striding over and wrestling the man around. A week ago, Ger’alin would have been able to throw the priest across the room had he tried that. Now, Zerith forced him to turn and face the door easily. Letting the Light flow through his hands, he wove healing energies into his friend, stunned when nothing happened.

“I told you, I’m fine,” Ger’alin snarled. “I just want to be left alone.”

“There may be no illness or injury,” Zerith said doubtfully, frowning as he tried to puzzle out the problem, “but you are not fine.”

“There is nothing wrong with me.”

“Ger’alin, have you looked in a mirror lately?” Tau’re asked quietly. “You’re almost as thin as that rail of a wife of yours!”

“If I wanted your opinions, cow, I’d ask for them.”

“Ger’alin, what is wrong with you?” Zerith gasped. “You are not yourself! You shout at Alayne, you snap at Tau’re, you won’t go outside...all you do is sleep, eat, and scare the living daylights out of everyone around you!”

“You forgot ‘occasionally make love to my wife’ in that list. I may be thin but I still have it where it counts!”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about; you are not acting like yourself, Ger’alin. What is bothering you? Are you having trouble sleeping restfully? Bad dreams? I know that I have

no idea what you went through; none of us do because you won't talk about it and Alayne's so terrified of asking you that she gets ill at the mere thought... What is that in your hand?"

"Oh this?" the Blood Knight said nonchalantly, setting the Vial down on the desk as if he didn't have a care in the world. "It's just a little something I've mixed up that helps me sleep a little better," he lied easily. "I'm sorry," he added, sounding contrite. "I have been having trouble sleeping. It's made me short-tempered. I apologize for everything I've said this morning. Every time I close my eyes, I see..." he shivered.

"What's in it?" Zerith asked gently. "Perhaps I could mix something better."

"Oh, just a weak mix of dreamfoil and sungrass."

"Hmph. I've heard that the oil from the olemba roots in Terokkar could be... we'll leave you to rest," the priest sighed, seeing irritation sparkle in Ger'alain's eyes again. "But, please stop shouting at and scaring your wife so much." Ger'alain made a rueful gesture and ducked his head. Zerith turned and led the others out of the room, glad that he had not needed them to help him hold the other man down for an examination. "What do you think of that?" he asked once they had walked a short distance down the hallway.

"I think that if he were any other man, I would have his head," Tau're muttered, shaking his shaggy shoulders. "He's lying, that's clear enough."

"But why would he lie?" Garrosh wondered.

"He's not himself," Zerith answered simply. "He's not going insane, the way Alayne did... now what is that look for?" he demanded, his patience worn thin. Every time he mentioned his sister around Garrosh or Callie, they grimaced in distaste. Worse, they no longer seemed to notice it. Alayne had taken to sneaking around the fortress like a thief; whenever one of the orcs or Forsaken saw her, they glared daggers at her. "Callie, you promised me after the battle that you would tell me what was going on. Now, I want to know why everyone keeps looking at her like she fed a newborn to a demon."

Callie opened her mouth to answer, not really wanting to. Garrosh saved her by stepping in. "Your sister did something that only one among our people has ever done and that one... he is held to be the most vile, evil, twisted of our kind. Your sister abused our dead, she twisted them, compelled them to obey her commands and fight her fight. The dead should not be treated so."

"Garrosh, she can't control herself when she gets enraged," Zerith explained patiently. "I hate what she did, too. It makes me sick to even think she knows how to do that but... she would never do it voluntarily. She only uses that power, she only..."

"...abuses the dead, enslaving them to her will..."

"Her husband had been tortured! She wanted to avenge his pain on his tormentor! Had you been in her shoes, would you have done differently?" the priest demanded angrily. "What she did was wrong; I will never say otherwise. She knows it and she is stricken with guilt that she did it and that, if she were in that situation again, she'd do it again. Until you know that you wouldn't do the same, don't you dare judge her!"

"Thing is, Zerith, he has a point," Callie said softly. "When she did... what she did, we felt it. All of the Forsaken. For a moment, we felt the compulsion to return to slavery. Alayne knows that the goal of the Lich King's power is to enslave all life and unlife to his will; why would she use that power around us? I know she was enraged, Zerith, but it *hurt*. It hurt me deeply and I'm not certain I'll ever be able to look at her and not see the chains of necromancy. I'm sorry, but all of the Forsaken feel the same. We know in our heads... but in our dead hearts, we can't know."

"I know that your sister did what she did out of love," Garrosh grunted, unaccustomed to such displays of emotion. "But, no command I issue, no explanation I give will make my people see her as anything other than a perversion of nature. She stays in this fortress by sufferance only. Mor'ghor and the rest of the Dragonmaw want her out of here. I have

prevailed upon them to allow her to remain until her husband is well. Still, what she did angered the spirits and, if I do not keep my distance, if my people do not keep their distance, the spirits may flee us again and who knows when we'd convince them to return?"

"So, you're saying that, essentially, all of the good she's done, all of the struggles she's put herself through to help you and your people has been erased by a moment of insanity?" Zerith fumed. "Scarcely more than five years ago, Callie, your kind would have been hunted to the ends of the world, would have been eradicated by the Horde *and* the Alliance. But then, the tauren took pity on you, saw that you were not evil, only conflicted. They argued for you and because of that, the Forsaken have enjoyed the protection of the Horde. But back when you were slaves, back when you had no control over yourselves, you sacked my homeland, you destroyed my people's source of magic, you murdered and raised to a mockery of life those of my kind that you slaughtered. Yet, I hold nothing against *you*," he explained. "I know that you weren't in control of yourselves and, that had you been, *you* would not have done as you did. I can find it in my heart to forgive you even though, Callie, even though the Scourge and Arthas were responsible for the destruction of just about everything I held dear! And you, Garrosh," he said, rounding on the chieftain, "your kind killed many of my people in various wars. You invaded our world. You destroyed your own through reckless sorcery. But, you were not in control, then. Your leaders had been duped and then turned around and duped you into following the Legion. Yet, I can rise above that. I can forgive you for that insanity. Are you honestly going to stand here and tell me that neither of you nor your people can return the favor? For a woman who will give her life to help you?" Garrosh turned the thought over in his mind. Callie stared at the floor glumly; she'd never considered it from this angle before. "I'd better leave," Zerith muttered, "before I really lose my temper." Storming out of the keep, he blinked against the bright sunlight.

"Is he coming out?" Alayne asked, rushing up to her brother. He winced when he glanced over to see his wife holding the remnants of Alayne's sleeve in her hand. Bleeding furrows marred his sister's arm where his wife had been restraining her. "He's not, is he?" Alayne sighed, her lips quivering. "I...hoped that you would be able to...he hasn't...I don't know what's wrong with him!"

"What is that vial of liquid he's been drinking from?" Zerith asked. Alayne's head jerked up and she stared at him. "When we burst in there, he was holding some kind of vial. I couldn't make heads or tails of the etchings on it. He says he's been using whatever is in it to help him sleep. I think he was lying. No, belay that," Zerith growled, "I *know* he was lying."

"A vial?" Alayne muttered uncertainly. Fear began worming its way through her stomach, a constricting snake that threatened to squeeze her heart until it burst. "I...I don't know. If he says it helps him sleep..."

"It doesn't. He was lying plain as day about that. How has he been sleeping?"

"Poorly," she admitted. "He only sleeps when exhausted and, even then, he tosses and turns most of the night. I've taken to sleeping on the floor just to get any rest at all. He...he doesn't like that. He says I'm afraid of him."

"You are," Zerith gasped. Alayne was shivering. "You're scared spitless of him."

"I am not!" she protested. "I'm afraid *for* him."

"I believe that," he replied, "but, he's right. You are scared of him. I can see it written all over your face. You're terrified of what's happening to him, of the person he's turning into."

"I am not!"

"Deny what's plain as the nose on your face again and, warlock or no, I will pull you over my knee and do to you what my father used to do to me when I lied."

“I am not afraid of Ger’alin,” she said, a slight emphasis on her husband’s name. “Ger’alin would never hurt me unless it was to save me from a greater danger. Ger’alin loves me. I love him. But...”

“But the person in your room right now is not the man you married,” Zerith finished for her. “Has he told you at all what he went through?”

“No,” she sighed, shaking her head. “He says he doesn’t want to talk about it. He wants to be left alone. The first two days, I refused to do that. I stayed in there with him until...”

“Until what, Alayne?”

“Until he...,” she shuddered, making a wrenching gesture. Zerith nodded; he remembered well the signal they used to use to discuss what they did to stave off the worst effects of their arcane addiction. “I had to leave him, then. Light, Zerith, it hurt! Jez’ral did that once by accident but he...he didn’t care. He said...I...I wanted to slap him for it! I did, almost. Then he started crying, Zerith. Weeping. He said he was sorry; he hadn’t meant it. He begged me not to leave him then and I wanted to stay, more than anything. But, before I could tell him I forgave him, he turned on me, snarling, yelling at me to get out, to leave him alone.”

“I want to you go back in there and see if you can get him to talk. Carry up some food; has he been eating?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “He eats enough to put a tauren to shame but I don’t know where it goes. He’s so thin and pale...”

“That’s not the important thing. See if you can get him to talk. About anything. Work in a way to ask him what’s really in that vial. Maybe whatever he’s been drinking has been contributing to the problem. You know he almost turned into a drunk when you were...well, maybe that’s all that’s happening here. Severe trauma, some kind of strong alcohol; that could be all there is to it. If so, well,” Zerith sighed, shaking his head in frustration. “There are ways to help him cope with it.” Alayne nodded again and walked back into the fortress. She brushed past Callie and Garrosh, careful not to look at or touch either of them. Callie winced when Alayne walked by, guilt panging her for how she’d been acting, especially with Alayne needing all the help she could get to deal with Ger’alin. The Forsaken opened her mouth to call out after the woman but Alayne quickly vanished down the corridor. Garrosh shrugged and stumped the opposite direction, putting the thoughts the priest had given him out of his mind for the moment and praying that the ancestors would help his brother Ger’alin.

Ger’alin glanced over when he heard the door creak open. “I thought I told you to take a walk,” he growled at his wife. “I’m fine. Tell that brother of yours to lay off me from now on. And would you look at me occasionally, woman? Or am I so scary now you can’t stand the sight of me?” Alayne threw herself down on the bed, facing him, staring out of blank eyes. She held herself rigid, stiff, simply staring off in his direction like one who could no longer see. “Have it your way,” he muttered, turning his back to her. If he ignored her long enough, she’d probably leave again and he could return to what he’d been working on.

“What’s in the vial?” she asked suddenly.

“What vial?”

“The one you told Zerith you’ve been using to help you sleep.”

“Oh, just an herbal concoction.”

“Ger’a...don’t lie to me,” she said flatly, her voice as dull as her eyes. “It’s a vial you found on Illidan’s body or in his belongings, isn’t it? Another Vial of water from the Well of Eternity.”

“So what if it is?” he spat, whirling around and flinging the vial at her. “What do you want to do? Take it and give it to the naaru?” he snorted elaborately, making his thoughts on that issue clear.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you gave up the other one! If I had known what it could do, I’d have never let you turn it over!”

“What can it do?” she asked slowly, the fear threatening to close her throat. As he began to describe the torment and the ecstasy, slow tears trickled down her face, dampening the pillow. She watched as he was transformed, his face glowing, his eyes brightening that damnably blue she had come to loathe. He was lost in the rapture of memory, his every thought centered on the magic the Vial contained. After a while, Alayne closed her ears to his words, listening only to the rise and fall of his voice, trying to remember when he spoke gently, tenderly, the passion in his voice warming instead of frightening. As he continued to ramble on and on, she fought to keep from weeping wildly. Visions of the Wretched filled her eyes. She knew now what it was she had seen before Ger’alin had ever set foot in the Black Temple. Her heart writhed as he continued. Finally, she sat up, wiped her cheeks, and, feeling oddly calm, looked at him without seeing him. “And you can’t tap into it because of the warding?” she said flatly, surprised at how cool and distant her voice sounded. She felt as if part of her had just died.

“I’ll figure it out soon enough,” he grinned, sounding painfully like his old self. Her heart spasmed in her chest, each beat gushing anguish anew. “And then, Alayne, then we’ll...”

“Illidan must have left information about his enchantments,” she interrupted, not wanting to hear about the joy they’d share when he attained the power he hungered for. “I will go back to the Temple and research anything and everything he wrote.”

“You’re afraid of me,” he said accusingly.

“No, I’m not,” she said firmly. She was not afraid of him; she was *terrified* of him. She prayed he could return to himself one day. “Don’t tell the others. They’ll try to take it from you.” A plan began to form in her mind; a plan to save him. There had to be a way to reverse the transformation she feared he was undergoing. “I’ll be back tomorrow or the day after.”

“Maybe I should come with you...” he offered, a nagging suspicion lurking in his mind. Vaguely, he recalled that Alayne could be tricky. He felt the anger and irritation rising within him, burning through him. By the Light, she was his *wife*; he should be able to recall more about her without the Vial twisting his every thought! But then...she was going to help him. Once he could draw from it, he’d be able to think clearly again. He’d be able to be the man she loved again. “Or maybe I’ll stay here,” he sighed.

Alayne stood up from the bed and walked over to him. The closer she drew to him, the further away she felt herself going. Embracing him warmly, even giving him a fond smile and a light kiss on the forehead, she murmured useless words of encouragement and turned, leaving the room. Once outside, she froze the mask on her face, shoving away every emotion. If this were going to work, she couldn’t afford distractions. Recalling the techniques her father had taught her to distance her mind and spirit from reality, to keep the pain of battle from reaching the core of who she was, Alayne strode out of the fortress, ignoring the icy stares that she left in her wake. Cold as they were, nothing could be more chill than the desperate fear she ignored as it clawed at her thundering heart.

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Mordenai saw the woman leave the fortress and, excusing himself to his companions, crept after her. The set of her shoulders and the way she refused to acknowledge anyone spoke of trouble coming soon. He’d listened carefully to her comrades talking about her. She was a force to be reckoned with, even at barely twenty years of age. Something about the way she walked told him that she was struggling against a mortal blow. He sniffed the wind; his

kind were sensitive to more than just the subtle flows of magic. Dragons had ever been able to detect strong emotions; indeed, he had often wondered if emotions themselves were their own form of magic. Following after her, careful not to be seen by the others, he caught up to her just as she cleared the corner leading towards the Black Temple. “So, was your brother able to determine what ails your husband?” he asked casually.

“No, but I think I know,” she muttered. “There’s an affliction that has wracked my people. They...succumb to the arcane addiction, sometimes. Those so afflicted devolve.”

“And what makes you think that is what ails him? You may be advanced beyond your youth, Alayne, but you are hardly a healer.”

“He found a Vial,” she said, the capital plain in her tone. “Illidan used it on him; used its power to torment him and then to...bathe him in the glow of pure arcane energy. Ger’alin was never much of a mage. He drew only enough to keep from weakening but felt no real pangs when he had to do without,” she explained. “Some meditation techniques he’d picked up among the humans helped him become...less addicted, I suppose, than some of the rest of us. However, now that’s reversed. He’s had a taste of raw power and he is starving for it. It’s killing him,” she said simply, trying not to hear the words. “It’s killed many of our kind.”

“And so you’re just going to leave him?” Mordenai asked, glancing back towards the fortress.

“No. I’m going to return to Illidan’s chambers and dig through anything he may have written about the Vial, the Well, or wardings. The demon laid an enchantment on the Vial Ger’alin has; none can sense it, none can tap into it, until the ward is lowered.”

“So, you’ll break the enchantment and then...?”

“That’s none of your concern.”

“It is,” he sighed, more in exasperation than irritation. “Ever have my kind guarded such powerful magics. Mad Malygos himself would have my scaly hide if I didn’t do my duty here. If you manage to break the ward, what will you do?”

“It’s too powerful,” she said absently. “Breaking the warding, especially if I left it in Ger’alin’s hands afterwards, would touch off a war. There were riots in Shattrath when it became known that we had found a single Vial after defeating Lady Vashj. The night elves demanded we hand it over to them for ‘disposal.’ The sin’dorei wanted to keep it. The same thing will happen again here once word gets out. The night elves and their allies will want the Vial turned over to them or to the naaru. Ger’alin would kill anyone who tried to take it from him. The sin’dorei will want it – we have a right to it! – because it contains the very seeds of hope for our people.”

“You speak fine words but you have not answered my question.”

“I’m getting to it. As I said, it contains the seeds of hope for our people and a way to end the threat of the Legion once and for all. Therefore, I will...” she outlined the rough plan she had in mind, wincing and praying that Mordenai would not turn her over. He stood impassively as she explained what she planned, described what she hoped would happen and what she would do if a particular part of her plan backfired. “All I ask is that you hold your peace until after I’ve gone.”

“You realize you could die, don’t you?”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take. You’re not going to give me away, are you? Zerith will tie me up and chain me to the floor.”

“It’s too dangerous for you to attempt this alone.”

“I’m not going to take anyone else with me. I’ll take the risks; I will not ask another to take them for me.”

“Well, too bad,” he grinned. “Because the one way to make certain that the first part of your plan works is to impress the Magisters with your power. The child who enslaved a dragon,” he laughed. “I’m coming along with you. Now, let’s go see what we can find in the

Black Temple. If there's nothing, I can always try shattering the warding. After all," he said ruefully, "I *am* a nether dragon."

Alayne shook her head in refusal. "I will do this alone," she said firmly. "You need not risk yourself in my mad plans. I'm not even certain I'll be able to sneak away with either of them."

"I'm coming with you whether you want me to or not," he said reasonably. "Pray tell me how you'd actually reach his inner sanctum? Sprout wings and fly? Shout and wave your arms and hope one of his followers takes you in? No. I'm coming with you. Besides, from what little I saw of that husband of yours, I rather like him. I just hope that your plan will work and will help him," he said, cutting off suddenly. No need to frighten the woman more than she already was. "Come along, Alayne. Let's see what we can find."

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"Nothing," Mordenai sighed as he rubbed his eyes. He wished he had actually seen the Vial and held it. Perhaps then he would have a better idea of what he should be looking for. "Nothing but the ramblings of a megalomaniac. Any luck on your end, Alayne?" he asked. The two of them had not left the Temple in days. Between them both, he thought they may have read every book related to magic and history housed within the massive structure. "Alayne?" he asked again, more loudly, when the woman did not respond.

"Purple horses dancing," he heard her mutter softly. "Ger'alín, look at the snowmen." Mordenai shook his head. Walking over to where the warlock had fallen asleep, her legs tucked up beneath her, her head resting against one of the wings of the massive chair, he tucked her cloak around her and slipped the book out of her hands.

"Sleep well," he whispered, squatting down in front of the chair and studying the tome she'd been holding. "Hmph. A primer on kaldorei sorcery. I wonder if there is anything in here I wouldn't already know. Flipping through the book, he noticed that some of the pages seemed to have come loose. Holding the tome so that its spine faced the ceiling, he shook it, letting them fall into his lap. "These aren't pages of the book at all," he muttered. "Some kind of notes, instead." Glancing over them, his eyes widened. It wasn't the exact information on the warding Illidan had laid over the Vial, but it gave Mordenai enough insight into how the man constructed his magical shields to begin to puzzle out what he might have done. Flipping back through the book, he scanned the pages that Illidan's notes referred to, wishing he could wake the sleeping warlock and ask her thoughts on the matter. Without the Vial in front of him, he could not be certain what he surmised was correct. Alayne had actually seen it; touched it. She would know better than he whether his suppositions were accurate. Glancing up again at her sleeping face, her lips moving soundlessly, he decided to let her sleep on. He had already woken her several times when she nodded off. It had been at her insistence, true, but he knew that mortals required more sleep than the sin'dorei had been allowing herself. "I could do with some sleep myself," he grinned, stretching out on the carpets. This frame did have some similar weaknesses to those shared by the sleeping woman. He leaned his cheek against the rough, grainy carpet and closed his eyes, intending to catch a few hours' rest before he woke Alayne and sent her back to Dragonmaw Hold in search of something to fill her belly and, perhaps, to try to convince Ger'alín to "loan" the Vial to her so he could test his theories. The door creaking open made him open his eyes and glare up, albeit his gaze a bit watery as he yawned, at Akama.

"Forgive me, Mordenai," Akama said. "I was just showing some of the Aldorites...what is *she* doing here?"

"Resting," the dragon yawned. "Why? Is she not supposed to be here?"

“She profaned the holy ground of the Temple with her necromancy!” Akama hissed. The Aldorite priests behind him gasped.

“A sin I intend to make up for,” Alayne muttered sleepily. Akama muttered angrily. “I know what I did was wrong. I could say I was out of my mind with rage. I could point out that my husband had been tortured. I could offer any number of excuses or explanations but I won’t. I was wrong to abuse the dead so. I was wrong to profane a holy place with a blasphemous and un-natural power. However, I will redeem my evil. Or do you believe I am beyond repentance? You, a one-time priest of the Light?”

“What do you intend to do to ‘redeem your evil?’” Akama asked.

“Send the others away and I will take you as my confessor,” she said bluntly. “Perhaps it is not your custom...”

“Indeed it is not,” he muttered dryly. “I will do as you ask this once,” he said, gesturing for the others to continue on. The Aldorites were as familiar with the Temple as he was; many had lived within its walls before the wars that wracked their world and tore it apart. Stepping into the room Illidan had made his own, glancing around and wishing he could have continued to explain his plans to refurbish this room and dedicate it to the souls of those killed in battle, Akama folded his hands and waited for the woman to begin. Once Alayne was satisfied that, save for Mordenai, they were alone, she told Akama exactly what she had worked out with the nether dragon days ago. The fact that they had not yet found the key was all that kept her from acting. As she explained her plan, Akama’s jaw dropped and his brows nearly lifted off his face. He’d heard of such undertakings in the past to attempt to right a grave wrong, but he’d never dreamed of setting such a task to anyone; not even a death knight who had abused the helpless dead. “I...am at a loss,” he sighed when she finished. “It is a bold plan. However, you may never...”

“If you hear that I have fallen,” she said quietly, “whether to the grave or corruption, shed no tear. Instead, watch after my husband. He has sacrificed everything that made him the man I loved in order to help your people and the orcs.”

“When first war came to Draenor,” Akama began, his voice a soft whisper, “we would pray that the Light would follow those who walked into darkness. Such do I pray again for you, young sin’dorei. I will say nothing of this to anyone. You are right; best to let them steel themselves with anger at what they’ll perceive than to risk giving you away. Please, consider the Temple your home until you find the key you seek.” Bowing deeply, he left them to their study.

“Alayne,” Mordenai said when the woman began casting about for the book she’d fallen asleep reading.

“No,” she muttered. “I could have sworn...there was something in his notes stuffed in this primer I had. I wanted to show it to you. Maybe you could...”

“I read it already,” he grinned tiredly. “I was hoping you’d wake up and be able to tell me more about the enchantment on the Vial. From what I could glean of Illidan’s notes, he would have...” the nether dragon droned on, explaining his theories to Alayne. Several times, the woman’s leaden eyelids threatened to cut short the conversation but she was able to fight off sleep and offer suggestions or comments that cemented his belief. “I could do it easily, then, if that’s how he set the warding.”

“The problem is that Ger’alin might not let you near it,” she muttered. “I read Illidan’s journal...where did I put the thing?”

“Oh, I took it from the pile. This one?” he asked, holding up the book he’d termed “ramblings of a megalomaniac.” Alayne nodded. The journal was large and heavy. Illidan had kept it only sporadically over the course of his imprisonment. She wished she had access to his earlier journals; he made references to several entries not in that particular book.

“If you read back, the earlier entries,” she yawned, stuffing a fist in her mouth. “The ones right after he was imprisoned, he rants about the kaldorei’s short-sightedness concerning his second Well. He seems fairly lucid there, recounting that they’d exiled the others who refused to give up arcane magic out of fear of bringing the Legion back down on everyone’s heads. But then, skip forward to the middle...he grows more and more obsessed with the Vials. He wanted them back very badly. He went from being convinced that the kaldorei held them apart out of fear of the Legion to being convinced that they were doing it to spite and torment him personally.”

“I see. Paranoia? Some of my own have been afflicted with it as well,” he muttered quietly.

“You know as well as I do how addictive arcane power is. It’s also corrupting. Normally, the corruption is slow to take place because magi do not weave massive spells every day. You start out with small magics, small feedings, small bits of pure energetic joy,” she recalled, thinking back to the first days she’d begun to learn how to weave arcane spells from her mother. “Over time, your endurance and ability increase. However, you always have to be cautious. It’s addicting, I know. If you begin to draw too much, too frequently, it can have adverse affects on your mind. That’s why our teachers are so methodical, so rigid, so *slow* in their teaching. They don’t want us to become so completely addicted that we lose control of the spellcraft. With fel magic,” she sighed, “it’s even worse. But, I’m rambling. Ger’alin seems to have been exposed to more arcane energy in one hour than I ever had access to in my entire life. He may have been fed more – *force fed* more – than some of the Magisters have handled. He’s grown so paranoid, so...terrifying and different from what he was just a week ago! I’m no longer certain he’ll even let *me* handle the Vial.”

“Giving up on your plan already?” Mordenai asked softly, sadly.

“No. I may just have to steal the blasted thing from him. Come on,” she sighed, standing up and swaying unsteadily on her feet. “Let’s see if they’ll still let me back in the fortress. I’ll need one day’s rest before we begin. Let’s meet this evening for a late supper. I’ll let you know what adaptations we need to make to the plan then.”

“As you command, Mistress,” he teased, bowing formally and falling in behind her.

“Don’t start that yet,” she grimaced. “Not until I give the order. Let’s go.”

As the pair walked slowly, tiredly out of the Temple, Akama watched them go. He had mistrusted the sin’dorei woman, had forgotten what he had learned of her, after seeing her enslave the spirits of his friends and family. Now, as he watched her shuffle down the road, her tired steps taking her into almost certain death to atone for her insanity and to bring a peace he’d never dared dream possible to his shattered world, he prayed that she – and he – would be forgiven before it was all done. “Now,” he said, turning back to the Aldorites, “we will need to request shipments of Khorium and Adamantite from the Mag’har orc clan. We can salvage some by melting down these great statues but we’ll need more to restore...” he continued, his feet firmly on the path to atone for his own misjudgments as the warlock’s were upon hers.

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“Ger’alin, be reasonable,” Callie groaned. “She doesn’t hate you. I don’t know why she’s been gone four days but it’s not because she hates you. She loves you and you know it!”

“She said she would help me but she’s run off with that Mordenai! I just know it!”

“She has not. I spoke with Tau’re yesterday. She’s locked up in Illidan’s chambers in the Black Temple reading like a madwoman. I guess she’s trying to figure out what he did to you that has made you so ill so she can help cure you. That proves she loves you,” the Forsaken muttered irritably. “If you don’t want to listen to reason, I’m going to stop breaking

in here to talk to you. Also, Gerry, you stink pretty badly. Maybe she's staying away because she can smell that you've not bathed in almost two weeks!" she teased, hoping to pull him out of his wallowing.

"Bring me something to drink, would you? Something with a good kick so I can forget that faithless whore!"

"Ger'alın Sunrage," Callie said, jumping up onto the bed and standing over him, "if you call her that again..."

"Oh please," he spat, "you damned Forsaken have called her worse!"

"And we were wrong!"

"No, you weren't!"

"Yes, we were!"

"No, you weren't!"

"Yes, we...good morning, milady Sunrage," Callie grinned, seeing Alayne step through the door. "We were just talking about you." Alayne quirked an eyebrow at them; she'd heard them shouting, calling her a whore, calling her faithless, among other things, since she'd turned down the corridor. Then the stench of the room hit her, making her nose wrinkle in disgust and her stomach turn.

"Bring soap and water," she muttered to Callie, keeping her eyes down. "He does need a bath. Ger'alın," she said, forcing herself to call the strange man by her husband's name, "let me take a look at you." The rogue loped off quickly, springing lightly from the bed, glad to leave the couple alone. Ger'alın had been inconsolable the past two days since he'd convinced himself that Alayne had run off again.

Ger'alın pushed the covers down and glared at his wife, overjoyed and outraged that she'd returned. Alayne blinked and had to fight to stay calm as she stared at him. In four days, he'd lost almost as much weight as he had in the first week. His cheeks were hollow, his eyes sunken back in his head and a milky, translucent blue. She could see where he'd torn plugs of his hair out of his scalp. Her heart turned over in her chest; he was suffering so much already. How dare she consider making him suffer more? "*But it will help him,*" she reminded herself firmly. "*It will cure him and all of the others like him. The pain will be only temporary and then he will bless your name forever. So will everyone who had turned cold to you; it is the only option you have left, Alayne.*"

"I look like hell, I know," he said flatly. "I wouldn't be surprised if you did decide to run off with that hunter."

"Mordenai?" she choked. "Light of heaven, Ger'alın, he's not my type. He's far too old for me, for one thing," she muttered, tugging the sheets back to the foot of the bed, trying not to notice his wasted and emaciated frame. She fought back tears, remembering how strong he'd been, how safe and secure she'd felt in his arms. "For another, I've got you."

"Were you able to figure out how to break the seal?" he asked, desperation in his voice. "I'm no fool, Alayne. I know what's happening to me! If I don't get that power soon, I'll..."

"I'm not certain," she sighed. "There are a few things I can try but first," she muttered, "let's get you cleaned up and then I need some rest. I've scarcely slept since I left you. I've lost track of the days."

"Four days," he groaned. "I can remember when the mere *thought* of being away from you for four days would have been agony enough to fell me. Now, though, now all I can think about is whether or not you've figured out a way to let me tap that Vial in these four days! Light of heaven, what has happened to me?" he asked, his tone despairingly rhetorical.

Alayne said nothing but continued tugging the sheets into a semblance of neatness. "Alayne?"

"Ger'alın, if I tried it now, I'd fumble it for certain," she muttered.

“Please,” he pleaded, “please try it. I’ll do anything! Just try it so I can be the man I used to be!” Alayne sighed and nodded. “In the desk drawer. It’s shoved to the back. Thank you, dearest, thank you!” he sobbed gratefully as she took out the Vial. She glanced back at the door, wondering how long Callie would be getting the water, soap, and towels, and, deciding on caution, slipped the Vial into her belt pouch. Sitting down on the foot of the bed, she began concentrating, letting her mind slip around the seemingly solid warding surrounding the Vial. She could sense the miniscule threads of magic, woven together so tightly they seemed one continuous strand extending infinitely in all directions yet finite in their boundaries. For long moments she sat, going through various methods to try to force the strands of magic apart just a hairsbreadth, just wide enough for her to slip around them and crack the warding from the inside, using the Vial’s own power to aid her. Sweat began gushing down her face. She let herself fall more than lay back, collapsing with the effort of trying to penetrate the demon’s magic and the long, sleepless nights and days catching up to her. Just when she thought she felt a shiver in the warding, a sign that her efforts were paying off, the door banged open. She leapt to her feet, startled to see Callie, Zerith, and Dar’ja all carrying buckets of water, soap for washing and for cleaning the room, and fresh linen.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” Zerith said evenly. “The next time you decide to slip off for four days, leave a note. If someone hadn’t mentioned seeing Mordenai go off with you, I would have been tearing Outland apart hunting you.”

“I didn’t intend to be gone so long. I just happened across some interesting books and…” she shrugged, grinning ruefully. Zerith stared at her flatly, wiping the grin off her face.

“Now that you’re back, you and I need to talk,” he said in the same even tone. “I will be waiting for you in my room once you’ve finished cleaning up in here.” Setting the bucket down, he motioned for the others to follow him out, leaving her alone with her husband.

“Ger’alin, do you want to tell me what Zerith is going to yell at me about before I go and get my head taken off?” she asked quietly. Putting her hands on her hips, she began planning how to go about making the room habitable again without requiring too much effort from the gaunt figure of her husband. Nodding, she walked over to the side of the bed, reached down and helped him to his feet, and half-carried, half-dragged him to a chair. Letting him drop in it, she began tugging the sheets off the bed, wondering if the stench could ever be washed out of them.

“Me, probably,” Ger’alin gasped, out of breath from just that short exertion. “He’s been in here every day, whether I wanted him here or not. He knows what’s wrong with me and I think he’s hoping to be the one to break the news to you if you haven’t already figured it out. Alayne, you’ve got to find a way to break that warding!” he moaned. “I don’t want to leave you a widow or the next thing to it!”

“I’ll try again in a bit,” she muttered, wrestling the clean sheets onto the padding. Letting the task of cleaning fill her mind, she felt calmed and soothed by doing something so mundane, so ordinary. Pausing before she picked up the broom lying propped in the corner, she prayed that one day – a day she hoped would come soon – her greatest worry would be whether or not she felt like mopping. Attacking the floor with a vengeance, she quickly swept the dirt and dust under the window and, using a slip of paper, tossed it out of the room. By the time she finished mopping the floor, glad that the smell of strong lye soap had replaced the stink of sweat and sickness, her arms shook with weariness and she could barely lift Ger’alin out of the chair to help him back to the bed. Knuckling her back, she picked up the basin of cooling water and began washing him off, careful not to get the sheets wet. “You will not be leaving me,” she whispered as she gently lifted his shoulders and let his hair fall into the water. “I can promise you that. You will not turn into one of the Wretched. I will do whatever it takes to prevent that.” He smiled at her, a smile so filled with hope and gratitude that her

heart skipped a beat and she wanted to throw herself out of the window. Did he have no idea what she was thinking? What she planned and how much it would hurt him? Staring down at his impossibly hopeful face, she saw that he had become so focused on the Vial and its arcane energies, he had forgotten – or lost – the connection they shared. She could still feel his thoughts, could still track the path his mind wandered down. But, no longer could he do the same to her. Part of her was grateful. The other part of her wanted to wail in frustration like a lost child that he would never guess or try to stop her from doing what must be done.

“You should go speak with Zerith,” Ger’alin said as she towed his hair dry and began brushing it. “I haven’t told him about the Vial. Maybe you should, now that you seem to be close to finding a way to help me. But...maybe...no, he’d try to take it, wouldn’t he? It’s so powerful, so...he’d want to take it. You’re the only one I can trust with it, sweetheart, because I know that you understand.” Alayne nodded dumbly and, feeling the blissful numbness of exhaustion, staggered down the hallway to speak with her brother. Ger’alin watched her go, something about the way she’d been acting tugging at his mind, telling him that something was extremely wrong. “I’ll be able to recall it later,” he thought, licking his lips in anticipation. “Once she breaks that warding...I’ll be able to recall what it is that has me worried now.”

Alayne knocked softly on the door to Zerith and Dar’ja’s room, hoping it was too soft for them to hear so she could honestly say she’d come down to see what they wanted, assumed they were out, and had decided to take a nap. Her eyelids felt as if the weight of the world hung on them and her whole body craved sleep the way Ger’alin craved the Vial. She tried to put the thought of just how nice it would be to curl up against him and nap out of her mind. Sighing fretfully when she heard her brother’s imperative “Come in!” in response to her knocking, she pushed open the door. She grunted, the wind knocked out of her, when Zerith flung his arms around her and squeezed her tightly. Her knees buckled and only his embrace kept her from falling. It took all of her willpower not to bury her face in his long reddish hair and sob. Taking firm hold of his arms, she forced her legs to support her and stepped back from his embrace, eyeing him coldly, distantly. “I am so, so sorry,” he whispered, tears trickling down his cheeks.

“I cannot speak about this,” she said, wishing she could confess to Zerith as she had to Akama. “Is that what you wanted to speak to me about? Ger’alin’s...illness?” Zerith nodded. “I can’t talk about it,” she repeated, her voice catching. “Not now.”

“I can’t say I understand,” he said softly, the love and concern in his voice nearly melting her resolve. “I can barely begin to imagine what you must...all I can say, little sister, is that I am here. If you need me for anything, at any time, please know that I’m here for you.”

“I’ll remember that,” she said faintly, her heart racing as she fought against breaking down and telling him everything. She knew he would stop her; he would talk her out of it. She couldn’t let him. It was the only way, the only hope left for Ger’alin and for all of their people. Turning on her heel, she walked slowly, wearily, back to her own room. Zerith’s eyes followed her, wondering why his old instincts were shouting at him that Alayne was about to do something foolish. Shaking his head, he opened the window and, sitting in the streaming sunlight, began to pray, hoping that some miracle would heal the Blood Knight or, at the very least, give Alayne the strength and peace she would need once Ger’alin’s transformation was complete.

Back in her room, Alayne sat down on the bed, wishing she had the energy to change clothes. Pulling her feet up, she sighed when she felt more than heard Ger’alin shift and stare at her expectantly. She nodded wearily and, forcing her exhausted mind to slip around the warding, began hammering away at the weak point she’d created earlier. Just as she felt it beginning to give, darkness closed in on her, dragging her eyelids shut with leaden fatigue.

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Alayne woke hours later, feeling exhausted and lethargic. She wanted to close her eyes again and return to sleep but forced herself to sit up, wincing when the room spun before her eyes and her head began throbbing. Ger'alín sighed, huffing with relief, when she looked at him. "You're awake," he grinned, his teeth seeming too large for his mouth. "I've been waiting forever for you to wake up."

Alayne nodded and immediately regretted it. Her vision swam and a wave of nausea gripped her in its sickly fist. She'd been hoping he would have fallen asleep, making it easier for her to simply slip out without having to face him. Without having to figure out a way to trick him. The moment she'd seen the Vial in his hand, she'd known what she'd have to do. The final details of her plan had unfolded before her like a well-crafted map. The days spent in the Black Temple had confirmed her decision. Still, her heart hurt at the thought of having to deceive him. Firmly, she reminded herself that he was no longer truly Ger'alín. "Give me a few minutes," she said breathlessly. "A few minutes and I'll try it again." Ger'alín smacked his lips in anticipation, crowding close to her and letting his bony chin dig into her shoulder. Alayne wished he would move back a little; she did not know if she would be able to lie to him with him hovering over her so closely. She was glad she'd fallen asleep before she'd broken the ward completely earlier. There was no telling what kind of reaction Ger'alín was going to have if she lowered the warding while he was nearby. She did need to test to see if she could do it or all would be for naught. Closing her eyes, she focused her concentration once more and felt the warding begin to shiver. Ger'alín's breathing grew shallow and fast as he felt the thrill of anticipation; he could sense the shield growing thinner. He whispered incoherent praise into his wife's ear, kissing her neck and shoulder and shivering with a hunger that would soon be satiated. Just as he sensed the thinness growing to insubstantiality, Alayne withdrew her efforts and sighed.

"Come on, dearest," he said, his lips brushing against her ear. "You almost had it. Just a little more and..."

"It's not going to work," she sighed leadenly. "I...there's a second enchantment hidden beneath the warding. I'd need to study it more thoroughly but I think, unless the warding is lowered in just the right manner, the second spell will cause the Vial to teleport away."

"You're not serious?" he whispered incredulously. "Well, you'll just have to figure out a way to stop that from happening," he muttered flatly. "I need that power!"

"Ger'alín, it could take me months to..."

"You don't have months! *I* don't have months! I don't care what you have to do; find a way to break that enchantment *now!*" he howled.

"Ger'alín, I can't," she sighed, feeling the acid churn in her stomach as she lied to him. There was no second enchantment. She could break through the warding easily now that she knew what it was. She just did not trust him to let the Vial out of his sight once he was able to tap into it. "I'm sorry," she said, tears falling from her lashes. Truly, she was.

"You're sorry?" he snarled. "You're sorry? I don't believe you! You just want it for yourself!" he yelled, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her violently. His fingers closed around her throat, choking the breath out of her. She gasped, black flecks floating in her vision as her lungs screamed out for the air he was holding from her. "You're a warlock, after all. No doubt you want it all to yourself! I would have shared it with you, you stupid woman!" he screamed, pulling a hand away from his stranglehold to backhand her. She crashed to the floor, his blow wrenching her from his iron grip. She drank in breaths gratefully, shivering, feeling her first true fear *of* him. As he raged at her, she wept,

considering giving in, letting him have the energies of the Vial even though it would, at best, a temporary solution. “Why did I ever give up someone like Ta’sia to chase after you, you faithless whore! She could have broken the enchantment, I’m sure. She would have shared it with me instead of trying to keep it all for herself!” he shouted. Alayne shuddered, trying to remind herself that this person was not really Ger’alin; this was some hideous, dark reflection of the man she loved. Staring at his face helplessly, she looked past the anger, past the gauntness, seeking and finding the remnants of the man she’d married. Her fingers closed around the Vial and she prayed to the Light that he would be so enraged he would forget she had it. “I could be back in Silvermoon now, enjoying life as it came to me instead of out here in this Light-forsaken hell with a worthless warlock who can’t even break a simple warding! Damn you, woman! Damn you!” he roared, his anger giving him strength. Standing, he walked over and pulled back his foot, preparing to kick her in the ribs, to make her feel just a smidgen of the torment he was going through.

Ger’alin crashed backwards, a sudden force of fury pinning him to the ground. Zerith glared at him, anger contorting the priest’s normally calm features and sheer discipline keeping him from throttling the other man. “I am trying to remember that you are very ill,” Zerith growled between gritted teeth, “but if you ever say anything like that to my sister, if you ever so much as even think about raising a hand to her, illness or no, *husband* or no, I. Will. Kill. You. Now, what is going on here?” he demanded, shoving himself off of Ger’alin and glancing back to see Dar’ja gathering Alayne into her arms. “What are you screaming about? Someone answer me!” he hissed in frustration. Alayne had buried her bruised face on Dar’ja’s shoulder and was weeping with remorse and sorrow. She held the Vial clutched in her fingers, hidden by the sleeve of her robe. Zerith turned back to glare at the Blood Knight, grabbing the man’s chin fingers that pinched like a vice and tugging him upright. “What were you screaming at her about?” he snarled, his jaws clamped together. “What is it you were going to share with her?”

“Nothing,” Ger’alin said flatly, trying to ignore the way the priest’s fingers dug into his jaw. “I’m not sharing a damned thing with her!”

“Dar’ja, take her back to our room. See if you can take care of those...,” he shuddered, waves of pure anger washing over him, the desire to throttle the paladin whose jaw he held painting his vision red as he saw the finger marks marring the skin of his sister’s neck. Had he been another minute slower... Dar’ja quickly pulled Alayne out of the room, working her healing magic on the woman. “Now, you’d better not ever even think about doing anything like that again, Ger’alin. When I married you two, you swore that you would die before you let any harm come to her. You swore to shield her with your own body, to lay down your *life* to save hers if need be. The only reason, Ger’alin, that I have not killed you already is because I know you are *not* yourself. I know that a fate far worse than death awaits you and, at this moment, I’m *glad*! Do you hear me?” he shouted, shaking the other man as Ger’alin had shaken Alayne, “I’m *glad*!” Zerith forced his hands away, shaking with rage. He blinked, his vision growing dark, nearly blinding him. “I have heard everything you’ve said since she went off with Mordenai to do Light-alone-knows-what to try to help you! If you think Callie hasn’t been reporting to me, you’re dumber than I ever thought you were. I closed my ears to it, telling myself that you were only upset because Alayne had been gone so long. I told myself that your anger was a mask for your fear of losing her again. I was wrong,” Zerith said, tears of hatred stinging his eyes. “I was wrong and I will never, never let you close to her again! I am going to tell Garrosh and Mor’ghor to haul you out of here so I never have to look at you again! Go and wander with the rest of the Wretched, Ger’alin! You will hurt my sister no more!”

Ger’alin gaped at Zerith, his face turning white. Zerith whirled around, his robes flying out behind him as he stormed down the hallway. Pausing to clutch the wall, his knees

buckling and his muscles turning to water from the release of rage, Zerith buried his face against an arm and wept, hammering the wall with his other fist. “Light, why?” he demanded. “Why let him fall ill? Why let him suffer? Why let him hurt Alayne and why do you let her suffer? Have we not been hurt enough? Why?!” he sobbed, hating the entire situation and hating that there seemed to be nothing he could do to heal it.

Back in his room, Ger’alin stared down at his hands in horror, realizing what he had just done. For a moment, the Vial was the most distant thing from his thoughts as the priest’s words sunk in. The Blood Knight lifted his shaking hands to his face, his fingers becoming talons that tried to claw the sight, the memory, of what had just happened away. Sobs tore his throat, pulling him to the ground as he wept. “Did I hurt her?” he repeated again and again to the empty air where Zerith had stood. “Oh, Light, what has happened to me? How could I?! I deserve this! Light forgive me,” he begged, praying for what he did not believe he could receive. “Alayne, I...,” he gasped breathlessly, recalling the first time he’d realized he was falling for her, the first time he’d sworn to protect her, the memory flaying his soul when he realized that now *he* was the one she needed protection from...

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“How are you feeling today?” Ger’alin asked cautiously, standing in the doorway leading to Alayne’s room. The woman was lying on her bed, rolled on her side, staring sightlessly at him. “Better, I hope,” he continued awkwardly, uncertain of whether or not he should enter the room. Zerith and Dar’ja had left the day before, the priest muttering something about gleaning before fall truly set in – whatever that meant. “You’re not going to talk today, are you?” he sighed. “You’re not going to tell me anything. I guess...I’ll have to see for myself,” he whispered, striding across her small room. He stood in front of her bed, completely ignorant of how to proceed. Zerith might push her over and sit down next to her as naturally as he would his true sisters but Ger’alin had never had any experience on how to deal with a woman lying abed. Alayne could be very understanding; she could also be very prudish. He still felt uncertain as to which she would be should she rouse while he checked her. Gritting his teeth and glancing over his shoulder, feeling the ghost of his mother glaring at him for being alone, un-chaperoned, in a woman’s bedroom, he reminded himself that he was only there to see if he could help her. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Ger’alin,” he growled to himself. “She’d flay you if you even thought about it.” He gingerly gripped her shoulder, his touch feather-light, and gently shoved her back so he could sit at the edge of the bed. Taking her head in his hands, he let the healing energies of the Light, the blissful power he drew from the strange creature held captive beneath the city flowing through him, bringing tranquility and hope to his bleak heart. “No change,” he whispered softly, sensing the cracks that had been widening for weeks now. “You’re not...going to get better again, are you?”

He sat there, staring down at her blank face, wishing she would blink, move, or sigh. He stared for so long that his eyes began to water. “You know what?” he asked suddenly, not expecting an answer. “Those fools can wait on me to teach them how to hold a sword another day. You shouldn’t be left here alone. We are going to sit here and talk, joke, and make fun of each other just like we used to back in Desolace. You remember those times, don’t you? Running your brother and me up a tree. Chasing me while waving a spear I’m still surprised you were able to heft at all. Reminding me a million times to pick something up off the ground because you were my friend, *not* my wife,” he grinned, settling down on his side to face her, his eyes even with hers. “We had some great times, didn’t we? Even before that, we had good times. Remember when we attacked Arugal? You didn’t even wait for Zerith to wake up for that one. I remember thinking you were the bravest woman alive as I followed you through that labyrinth of a keep. You never once flinched at those worgen-things. And

they certainly couldn't stand your fire and shadow. Hey, Alayne," he whispered, reaching over to stroke her cheek. "Do you remember when you and Zerith first started getting people together to go attack Deatholme? I remember it. I was sitting around in Silvermoon, wondering when someone would put me to work doing something other than polishing armor. I was wandering through the Bazaar, trying to find a better sword, and I heard you crying out 'We're looking for brave souls to lead a strike against Deatholme! It is time we reclaimed the Ghostlands for the glory of Quel'Thalas!' I thought you were an angel made flesh when I turned to see you and heard what you were planning. Do you remember any of this?" his fingers gently brushed through her hair. He moved in closer, so close to her that their noses almost touched. "Why won't you speak to me now? What are you staring at? Are you going to...forget everything? I've never known anyone who went mad," he sighed, "but, I want you to know that I will do whatever I can to protect you from that. I know you have Zerith to help you but I want you to know that I'll always be here to protect you from anything. No matter what it is. So...you don't have to be afraid, you know," he babbled, closing his eyes to block out the sight of her staring, "I'll always look after you and keep you safe. So...you can tell me about whatever it is that is wrong with you...just...don't go away. I've lost my parents, I lost everyone I knew growing up. I don't want to lose you..."

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"What have I done?" Ger'alın wailed, the rest of the memory searing him. How far had he fallen that he would cause even the slightest harm to her? "Light, what has happened to me? Zerith's right. I deserve this fate. Do you hear me, Light? I *deserve* this!" Pounding his fists on the floor, he cried himself to sleep. As he drifted off, he thought he heard faint chimes singing across his mind.

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Ger'alın woke hours later, feeling drained. He opened his eyes, wondering if he were still where he had been or if Zerith had made good on his promise to have the man hauled off. The carpet beneath his eyes was the same; lifting his head, he saw his wife hunched over the desk, her quill scratching across parchment. "Alayne?" he whispered softly. She stiffened and continued writing. "I can't ask you to forgive me; all I can say is that I am so horrified at... you should leave now. Find a man who will never hurt you." The warlock continued to ignore him but, from the way her shoulders shook, he knew she'd heard him. "I'll leave as soon as I regain enough strength to make it back to Quel'Thalas. Though, from what I know of this malady..."

"Drink this," she said coldly, shoving a flask at him, her back still to him.

"What is it?"

"Drink it. Zerith said to. He said it would be wise for you to drink it."

Ger'alın tipped it back and drained the flask. After a few moments, he could feel an overpowering drowsiness threatening to drag him back to sleep. "A sleeping potion?" he yawned. "I just slept the day away. Zerith will no doubt be expecting me to be *gone* by now. I'm surprised Garrosh hasn't dragged me out of here." Alayne continued to ignore him, her quill moving fluidly across the parchment. When he began snoring, she wiped the stub, dusted the letter, and folded it. Dipping the quill once more, she scribbled Ger'alın and Zerith's names on the outside and set it, standing so the names were prominent, on the desk. Lifting shaking hands to her eyes, she wiped away the tears she had dared not let Ger'alın see. She thanked the Light that the man had simply drunk down the dram; she'd been afraid she would have to find some way to trick him into it as she had the others. Ger'alın had been fast asleep,

lost in dreams, when she finally convinced her brother to let her return to her room. It was only because Ger'alín had been out cold that Zerith had let her leave his and Dar'ja's room at all.

"Shall we be on our way?" Mordenai asked quietly. "I think even the Forsaken are asleep. What did you slip in the soup?"

"A strong mix of dreamfoil and lotus," she muttered. "Zerith says that the healers use that mix when they have to cut someone open to remove an arrowhead or the like. It makes the person fall into a profoundly deep sleep for the better part of a day. That gives us time to do what we have to do."

"You can always turn back, Alayne. Enjoy what little time you have left with your husband. I...I've never seen anyone return from a case this advanced. There's simply no cure once the withering goes so far."

"I will not give him up as lost. He never gave up on me until he thought I was dead."

"Then let us be on our way. We can be in Shattrath before the moon rises. Such dark deeds are best done in darkness."

"You can always turn back, Mordenai," she muttered as they walked out of the fortress, the sonorous snores of the sleepers growing quiet as they crept through the shadows and into the night. "I can do this on my own. Why risk yourself for something that you say is a long shot anyway?"

"My kind feel a kindred for your people. We share much – including an all-consuming passion for magic. It comes to us as naturally as breathing. To hear of your suffering, to see the way it is destroying some of your strongest... I like to think that, were the roles reversed, you'd do the same for me. Besides," he sighed, "you seem to have a gift for inspiring people, for calling them to you, even when it seems hopeless. Perhaps you'll pull this off. If not, it is a worthy cause to die for; to give one's life for love."

Alayne sighed and nodded. The dragon had said as much before when she asked him why he wanted to get involved. "Do you think...if I survive...they'll ever forgive me?"

"They will. They love you just as much as you love them. I don't think anything you do will ever change that. Now, would you mind turning around?" he asked sheepishly. "I prefer to do this without an audience." Alayne turned her back on the man and stared at the rocks of the hill in front of her. She forced herself to keep her back turned even when she felt the rush of magic accompanying the incantation that shifted Mordenai to his true form. "Another five minutes," his voice whispered across her mind, "I've been in elven shape far too long."

While she waited, she let herself think about the absolute disaster the day had been. After Ger'alín had... her hand crept to her throat, remembering the iron grasp of his fingers. After that, she had been dragged down the hallway by Dar'ja, the woman desperate to keep her from further harm. Alayne had flinched as if struck when she heard what Zerith was yelling at Ger'alín. The whole thing had been her fault anyway; if she'd been able to think up a better lie, he might not have grown so angry. If she had been able to convince them to stay away from Illidan, he would never have been exposed to such power and begun this terrible transformation. When Zerith had finally stormed back into his own room, shaking and sobbing with a mix of fear, anger, and relief, she had considered just lifting the warding entirely; maybe if Ger'alín could tap into such pure energy, he would learn to control it better, learn to live without having to gorge himself on it to the extent that it damaged his mind, possessing and obsessing him as it had. Once Zerith calmed down, she opened her mouth to pour out the truth, the words freezing on her tongue when her brother signaled for silence and told her that he was going to send Ger'alín back to Quel'Thalas that night. "I couldn't let that happen. If you send him back...there's no telling what will happen to him," she whispered to

the darkness, praying her brother would understand. She'd explained as much as she dared in the note she'd left.

"That feels so much better," Mordenai growled, his voice as low as he could make it in his current form. "I'd forgotten how cramped that shape could be." Giving himself a shake, he grinned toothily when Alayne turned around and blanched. "Don't worry," he joked, "I'm not going to eat you."

"It's not that," she whispered breathlessly, staring at his wings in horror. "Don't let me fall off," she said, her voice strained. He nodded and, lowering himself to his belly, did his best to help her clamber onto his back. Once she was settled, her hands holding onto the loose skin and scales at the base of his neck, Mordenai gave himself a mighty push with his hind legs and leapt into the night.

Alayne glanced behind her once, tears stinging her eyes as the fortress grew distant. "I do what I must," she whispered to those she was leaving behind, "remember that, always."

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Sar'la watched the night sky, looking for the first star to appear so she could make her nightly wish. The matrons of the orphanage had told everyone to get in bed and go to sleep but Sar'la could never fall asleep unless she got to make her wish. "What will I wish for tonight?" she wondered. "I think I'll wish that I'll get to see Miss Alayne again soon and she and I will go off and have adventures. I haven't wished for that in a whole week, after all." Spying the first star, Sar'la closed her eyes tightly and made her wish. Giggling, she started to return to her bed, the stone floor cool against her bare feet, when she saw a shadow cross the sky. It seemed very far away and very strange; not like any bird or bat the little girl had seen in her life. Watching it, she saw it circle the city a few times before flying back off towards the east. "Whoa, I wonder what that was?" she whispered. Glancing around the room, she satisfied herself that all of the other children were asleep before pulling herself up on the table in front of the window and dropping out. Her mind wove all kinds of possible stories and adventures to explain the strange shape and keep her from seeing the seedy characters who gave Lower City its true name and nature. Keeping to the shadows, she snuck past most of them without notice. The few who did notice her paid a child no mind; a little girl would not carry much gold on her person, after all. Sar'la held her breath as she climbed the ramp leading to the forest. She hoped that the Vindicators wouldn't find her and take her back to the orphanage. She'd been in a lot of trouble the last time she'd sneaked out after dark. Still, it was fun to sneak out into the night and see what the grown-ups did while kids slept. As she reached the end of the ramp, she stopped, seeing a familiar shape emerge from the shadows of the forest.

Alayne took firm hold of her stomach, reminding herself that she was back on the ground and there was no need to be sick. She reviewed her plan silently to calm herself. Sneak in through Lower City, take the elevator to the Aldorite's tier. If questioned, she would say she was seeking a cure for her husband's sudden illness. "That's not a complete lie," she reminded herself. If she could make it to the elevator that lowered to the Scryer's tier from the Aldor's, she thought she could probably sneak in the Library through the back. Voren'thal would have put the Vial in the room where all of the other objects of extreme arcane power were stored. Normally – unless her memory failed her or times had changed – it would be guarded only by a pair of Magisters at this hour. They would be relying on the warding to keep intruders out. "Mordenai should fly over and scare the wits out of everyone about the time I make it into the Library. That will pull everyone out onto the tier, giving me a chance to blast through the wall. Why they never think to ward the entire room instead of just the windows and doors is something they'll reconsider after this," she grinned. The sewage

passage into the Black Temple had given her the idea. "This will work. I can do it," she said to herself. "Come on, Alayne. Time's ticking away while you stand here like a rock." Straightening, she strode down the ramp, her heart nearly stopping when she heard footsteps running after her.

"Miss Alayne! Miss Alayne!" Sar'la shouted, overjoyed. "I wished you would come and my lucky star brought you!"

"Sar'la, what are you doing out at this hour?" Alayne said, nearly swallowing her tongue. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"I snuck out because I saw a big monster in the sky," the little girl gibbered excitedly. Adrenaline surged in Alayne, sweat beading on her forehead and heating her underarms. Her palms grew clammy. "Then, I saw you," the girl continued. "Have you come back to take me with you?"

"Take you with me?" Alayne gasped, her mind racing. "Actually, no," she said, not wanting the little girl or any of her friends to be hurt. "I've come to warn you that an evil dragon is going to attack the city. I have to go up and warn everyone else now. Get back to the orphanage. I will come for you when it's all over. Oh, do me a big favor?" she asked, forcing her voice to sound light and her eyes to grow wide and bright. "In a few days, maybe even tomorrow, some people might come back from a place called Shadowmoon Valley." Sar'la nodded impatiently, eager to be off and warn her friends so they could find some place safe to hide and watch Alayne battle the evil dragon. "There are two of them I want you to make friends with. They're both boys. Their names are Zerith and Ger'alain. Ger'alain has been very sick lately so he'll need lots of attention and lots of you guys to make him laugh. Can you do that for me, Sar'la?"

"Yeah, sure!" the girl nodded as she ran off to warn her friends. Once Sar'la had vanished, Alayne hiked her skirts and ran up towards the Terrace of Light, praying that she would be able to work her way to the Library before Sar'la roused the whole of Lower City.

"Adapting the plan?" she felt Mordenai's mental link with her.

"If you had listened to me and landed by the ruined thicket instead of insisting on overflying the city 'looking for a better landing spot,' this wouldn't be happening," she growled through the link. "And, stop eavesdropping on me."

"As long as you have that scale, I'm going to hear everything you hear. I'll try to be as menacing as I can," he sighed. "Let me know when you're on the Aldorite's tier."

Alayne nodded before she could stop herself and sent her thoughts along the link. She could have sworn she felt Mordenai grin ruefully. She kept close to the wall, doing her best to ignore the Vindicators who stood guard on the elevator. The draenei eyed her suspiciously; few sin'dorei allied themselves with the Aldor, but let her pass without incident. "I'm on the tier. Give me two minutes to get to where I need to... I said to give me two *minutes*, Mordenai! Not two *seconds*!" she thought angrily as she heard the first screams and saw the other Vindicators begin rushing out of their temple. Hoping she looked like any other terrified civilian, Alayne ran for the rear elevator, heaving a sigh of relief at finding it unguarded. The Scryer guards at the bottom were gone as well. "No doubt they're looking for a way to have your hide," she said smarmily. "Good going there, Mordenai."

"Quit complaining like a she-dragon in season and get about your business," the dragon snapped, his irritation hitting her mind like a slap. "Women, I swear..." she heard him finish. "Incoming!" he warned just before she heard a fierce roar that nearly deafened her.

"Do all dragons have such a poor sense of timing?" she grumped. "Does this come with living as long as you do, or are you just careless?"

"I'm considered young and hot-headed. Oh no. Try to stay out of that big structure with the golems in front."

"Why?" she asked. "That's where I need to..."

A blast of magic hit the top of the Library, blowing the crystalline pylons on the roof off and flinging them away into Nagrand. Another deafening roar followed, this one strangely muted compared to the last. Alayne could sense the currents of magic being woven by the Scryers as they tried to fend off the maddened dragon attacking them. "Don't get yourself hurt, you big blue lummoX," she sent fondly. "I'm going in. Looks like everyone is out trying to keep you away."

"All according to plan," Mordenai gloated. "I'll circle around a few times, keep their attention. Get in, get it, get out and let me know when you're back down to Lower City. I'll meet you at the cave leading to Blade's Edge Mountains." Alayne sent her agreement and hurried on through the Library. Books, shelves, and tools of magic lay scattered on the floor where they had fallen when Magisters dropped them or when Mordenai's attack had toppled them from their places. Alayne heaved a sigh of relief at finding the Library empty. Working her way to the room where the most powerful arcane artifacts were stored, she nodded to herself in delight when she sensed that the warding ended at the door's edge. Glancing up and down the corridors, ascertaining that no one would see her until it was too late, she lifted her hands and hurled a bolt of shadow at the wall next to the door. Feeling the wall shake, she hurled a second, and a third. The fourth one punched a hole in the wall large enough for her to scramble through. Now if she could just find the Vial she could be on her way.

"What are you doing here?" Jez'ral demanded, a flame springing into existence over his upheld palm. "Alayne?"

"What are you *doing* here?" she hissed, glancing around the room.

"I'm on guard duty tonight," he muttered. "Why did you blast in here? What is going on?"

"A dragon is attacking the city," she said quickly. "I was just looking for a safe place to hide."

"Safe place to hide? Safe place to hide," he murmured, finding the words strange coming from her. The more he recalled about her, the less he thought she knew what 'safe' meant or would put herself in a 'safe place' if she could throw herself in the thick of battle. "You're lying."

"Jez'ral, is the Vial still here?" she asked, her frustration boiling over. She did not have time for this!

"Why do you need to know that?"

"Because Ger'alín has fallen deathly ill and we need the Vial to cure him," she said quickly and truthfully.

"Then he can return to Shattrath. A'dal has given orders that the Vial is not to leave the tier."

"He can't come," she lied, desperation making her sweat. "It must be brought to him."

"Then you'll have to go plead your case to the naaru," Jez'ral said firmly. His eyes were gentle, though, in stark contrast to his tone. "I'm sure that they'll agree to help you. They seem to like your husband. Now, come here," he said, turning his back on her and glancing around for the book he'd been reading. "I found this fascinating text on... what are you doing?" he demanded, feeling her arms slip around his neck. Alayne threw her weight back, pulling the man down and locking her arms in the sleeper hold her husband had taught her.

"Forgive me, Jesthal," she slurred as her former teacher lost consciousness. "I have no choice." Reaching in her pocket, she pulled out one of the parchments she'd prepared earlier and stuffed it in the man's hand, positioning it where it would not be overlooked. Then, she tore through the room, blasting apart wardings, breaking open drawers, blowing apart lockboxes until she came across the Vial. Stuffing it in her belt pouch with its twin, she quickly wove the shadow magic that kept their presences hidden and climbed out of the hole

in the wall. She ran out of the rear of the Library just as the Magisters began returning to it to investigate. They would have felt her frantic search and known that the dragon's attack was a feint. Creeping quickly through the shadows, she prayed that, one day, they would all understand just why this had to happen. "I don't like it any more than any of you will," she muttered to the distant shades of her friends, "but it must be. This is the only way I can see; the only way! Forgive me," she whispered to the darkness. Firming her resolve, she hurried on to the place where she was to meet with Mordenai to begin the next phase of her desperate, reckless plan.

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Mordenai shook his head, glad that he had finally lost the Vindicators trailing him. He could feel Alayne's impatience as she sat, shivering, in the damp swampy marshes waiting for him to get there. "This may take a while. I'm going to have to run instead of fly," he warned her.

"Why did you go south instead of just coming up here to begin with?" she asked, her irritation grating on the dragon. She was right; he could have easily eluded his pursuers and taken her to their final destination. He didn't want to admit that now that it was upon him, he was no longer certain this was such a good idea. "Well, why did you?" she demanded insistently.

"To throw them completely off. Had I just headed north, they'd have figured out where we were going quickly enough. By going south until they lost sight of me, I was able to loop back around through Nagrand. I'll keep to the forests in case any Vindicators or Magisters from Shattrath are out patrolling, looking for a young nether dragon. You mortals can be so persistent." He snorted at the thought that hit him from the link and began loping through the forests, pausing every so often to get his bearings from the night sky before dashing back off again. Once or twice he froze, hearing the pounding hooves of elekks and the high-pitched caws of hawkstriders. The entire city of Shattrath must have turned out for the dragon hunt.

"I just hope someone finds Jez'ral and my note by morning," Alayne thought quietly. "Anything to keep them from guessing where we might really be heading."

"I have to admit, it's a good plan. You're going to have everyone's head twisted around backwards trying to figure out who did what and why. That will be sufficient to keep them off our trails long enough. Not to mention that the way you're going to 'prove' yourself is, frankly, either insanely courageous or just plain insane."

"Zerith and Ger'alain would say 'insane.'"

"They're more than likely right. They're quite wise for fellows as young as they are."

Alayne nodded absently, standing up carefully to glance up and down the road. The few draenei and troll patrols she had seen pass by had not been agitated. "I guess word hasn't gotten here from...oh no. Mordenai, where are you?"

"Hiding beneath a rickety bridge. A patrol just passed over. There's a village housing some Broken just south of me."

"Head north and see if you can swim across the lake. I can meet you in the shadow of the mountains. No way we're getting through that cavern," she sighed fretfully. "I can see the mouth from here and there's a sizeable number of guards grouping up. My guess is that they figured we're either in Nagrand, Terokkar, Shadowmoon, or Zangarmarsh."

"Any suggestions?"

"When did I become the leader here?" she huffed. "I suppose we wait them out. If we can just stay calm and hidden, we should be able to elude them until daybreak when, if all goes well, they'll have found that note I left and will be heading to the Black Temple."

Several moments of silence passed. Finally, "This water is cold."

"No kidding," Alayne muttered, her face heating as she recalled the first night she'd spent in Ger'alain's arms. True, nothing had come of it, but the memory made her ache to be with him again.

"You'll see him again. You'll survive this," Mordenai thought reassuringly. "He'll survive, too. He's a strong one."

"I wish I could believe that as easily as you do," Alayne sent.

"It's simple. Just believe it. If you doubt yourself now, Alayne, you may as well plunge a dagger into your heart and be done with it. It's a bold plan; it's a long shot. But it will work. Bah! Water is for naga," he grumped, bringing a smile to his companion's face. "Dragons were meant to soar, not swim."

"Hurry up and get over here. I can hear you splashing around. Wait, be quiet!" she warned, straining her ears. Slipping into the underbrush near the road, she strained her ears to hear what the guards at the cavern mouth were saying. A sin'dorei Magister, his long cloak emblazoned with Voren'thal's crest, and a draenei priestess had just ridden up to the guards. She listened in to their hushed conference, forcing herself not to squeal for joy at what she heard. "It's working!" she sent triumphantly. "They're going to pull back to Shattrath and regroup to march on Shadowmoon!"

"So, they found your note?"

"It seems so. From what I could hear, Jez'ral must be fine. He may be a little upset with me, though."

"A little? You knocked him out!"

"I didn't have a choice!"

"I know. I'm teasing you a bit. Clear your mind and let me hear them as well."

"...knew we never should have trusted them. Such a band of vagabonds, low-lives, and undead," the sin'dorei was saying. "We should have known they would try to take it back."

"What does A'dal say of this? If the Disorder of Azeroth has decided to go its own way, that is yet another threat we must contain while trying to juggle your prince and Illidan Stormrage. And, what if they decide to taint the Mag'har and the Dragonmaw to control them?" one of the Vindicators asked. "Would you stand against your own younglings, even at that?"

"As soon as we can capture them, rest assured that what we're going to do to our 'younglings' would make anything you had in mind look like a day in the park! Such betrayal will not be tolerated! Now, call what you can spare of your forces out to Shattrath. We leave at first light to confront this Disorder of Azeroth and ground these overambitious children. Thus has A'dal ordered."

"That is not exactly what the naaru said," the priestess murmured. "He said that it is our destiny to confront those children. Not that we would be successful. It is ill-luck to boast of a battle yet unfought."

Alayne shook her head, hoping that they would leave quickly on their way. First light would be in a few hours; it would probably take that long just to finish assembling their forces. By the time they reached Dragonmaw Hold, Zerith and the others should be awake. If not, then the forces from Shattrath would be most surprised to find a fortress filled to the brim with snoring sleepers. She stifled a giggle and watched intently, waiting for them to move on. When they finally did, pulling all but two of the draenei guards away from the mouth of the cavern, she heaved a small sigh of relief. "Think we can take them?"

"Easily," Mordenai whispered, making Alayne shiver in fright. She had not heard him creep up behind her. "As a matter of fact, this will involve no fighting. Just give me a moment," he winked, staring in the direction of the guards and concentrating. Alayne felt the

rush of arcane power surge through him as he muttered in his native tongue, the words sounding flat and lifeless on his elven lips. He grinned in satisfaction when the guards toppled over, snoring brokenly. “Almost as effective as your herbs,” he joked. Holding a hand down for her, he pulled the warlock to her feet. “By the time they are found or wake on their own, the cards should all be out on the table.”

“I know,” Alayne said, taking his hand. “Come on. We’ve still got a ways to go before this is over.” Glancing back south, praying that all would be well, Alayne and Mordenai jogged into the tunnel, leaving Zangarmarsh behind.

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“This is it,” Mordenai sighed as they reached the border into Netherstorm. “Once we start, there is no turning back. Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be. You might as well shift now,” Alayne said tiredly. “Light, I’ll be so glad if this goes off without a hitch.”

“Before we take off,” he grimaced, “have you considered what might happen to you? I’m well aware of the dangers I run but, Alayne, they are not going to kill or harm me too greatly. An arcane-wielding dragon is too valuable. A young warlock, however...”

“We’re not exactly a dime a dozen ourselves, you know,” she muttered defensively. “The worst I fear, besides outright execution, is torment. Still, the story I’ve concocted has enough truth in it to convince any but the most paranoid. I just hope I’m able to speak with Kael soon. Even in the best of times, royalty can drag things out for years with their blasted ‘prerogatives.’”

“Remember that it’s King Sunstrider, not ‘Kael.’ One slip of the tongue like that and your head will go on a pike.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she muttered dryly, turning her back on the dragon. Mordenai uttered a quick prayer that the Light would keep them safe in this desperate course of action and then sloughed off his elven form, spreading his wings and sighing luxuriously in his true shape. Letting his belly lower to the ground again, he helped Alayne climb aboard his back once more. “Fly low,” she requested, feeling her stomach begin to churn.

“Calm down. I’m not going to drop you,” he promised, hearing her heart race. Shoving off the ground with his hind legs, Mordenai turned, dipping his wing, and began to fly towards their final destination: the floating fortress called Tempest Keep.

As they drew near, Alayne assumed her frostiest demeanor and forced the panic she felt at being so high off the ground down into the soles of her feet. Wrapping herself in arrogance, she sent mental commands to the dragon. Mordenai obeyed them immediately, aware of the change in demeanor and knowing that, from this point forward, he must play the role of a trapped minion perfectly or he’d give them both away. He hovered for a moment on the verge of landing on the crystalline dock, the sin’dorei guards standing stock-still and hiding their shock and awe quite well. “Land, beast,” Alayne said peremptorily, her voice carrying down to the guards below. Mordenai forced the area clear, his wings flapping, stirring up mighty gusts of air before he landed, surprised that the delicate crystal did not shiver under his weight.

“Who goes there?” one of the guards demanded when Alayne leapt lightly off her mount’s back.

“One who brings the keys of victory,” Alayne said airily. “I have come from Shattrath. I bring information about those who oppose our king as well as a gift of great power. I beg an audience with King Sunstrider at his earliest convenience.”

“No one just shows up and gets an audience with our king,” the guard said coldly. “If you are what you claim, you will not object to our...requirements before you are permitted within our king’s presence. First, your name?”

“Alayne Dawnrunner, daughter of the late Sergeant Tal’ar Dawnrunner and his late wife Miris of Fairbreeze Village.”

“Miris and Tal’ar’s daughter?” the other guard said wryly. “I’ve heard about your mother. Quite a scandal she caused before you were born.” Striding over to eye Alayne, giving her a weighing look, he nodded. “You are your mother reborn. You will come with us. Ted’roni, Narla! See that this beast does no harm.”

“This creature is under my complete control,” Alayne said smoothly. “I found him in Shadowmoon in the guise of one of our kindred. I believe our king will find his services quite...useful. Dragon,” she said contemptuously, “assume your elven form.” Mordenai shifted, the magic flowing around him as he transformed into the hunter guise he favored among mortals. As he changed shape, Alayne muttered an incantation that made the guards stare at her in awe. The words of draconic magic tumbled from her lips. By the time the transformation was complete, Mordenai stared blankly, sightlessly ahead, his will overpowered by the warlock’s magic.

“Do whatever they ask of you. Fight only if they try to kill you,” Alayne sent, worry gnawing along the link. “Remember, you are supposed to be my slave.”

“Blindfold them both,” the guard said, unable to suppress the shock he felt. “We will take you to where you will stay until our king is satisfied of your loyalty to his cause.”

Alayne tried not to panic when the scrap of cloth blinded her. Keeping her head held high, she tried to maintain an unworried, even glide as the guards led her into the shining crystalline vessel. A faint tingling sound from her belt pouch reassured her; Kael’Thas would not doubt her loyalty at all once she handed him the remaining two Vials. “I do only what I must,” she thought silently, hoping and praying that one day Zerith and Ger’alin would understand.