

Ger'alın's head rang and his mouth tasted as if something foul had crawled onto his tongue and died. Grimacing, still half-asleep, he scraped his tongue against his teeth, hoping to scrape away the rancid taste. "Alayne, I had the strangest dream," he whispered. The door to the room banged open and he blinked, trying to wake up enough to see what was going on.

"Outside. Army. Aldor and Scryers. Huge. Seige!" Zerith yelled. "Where's Alayne?" he said, noticing his sister was not where she said she would be. He had not been happy at all with the idea of her returning to her own room but she had insisted. After all, she'd pointed out, Ger'alın would be leaving soon on Zerith's own orders. That the Blood Knight was still there made the priest's anger begin to surge again. Light blind him; Ger'alın was supposed to be gone by now!

"I don't know," Ger'alın muttered carefully. "She gave me that potion you mixed to help me and then I fell right back asleep. She was sitting at that desk; she wouldn't even look at me. Not that I blame her."

"Sitting here?" Zerith asked, seeing a note with his and Ger'alın's name on it. Ger'alın tried to nod but couldn't. Panic gripped him as he discovered he was paralyzed.

"What did you give me? Is it not enough that I'm going to die? Light, Zerith, I'd have left as soon as I woke up yesterday afternoon if you hadn't mixed whatever it was that put me right back under. I swear, priest, I did not lay another hand on your sister and I never will again for as long as I live! I am horrified at what I...no, I have no right to say it anymore. I will leave, Zerith, I swear, and I want you to see that Alayne's next husband is someone who would never dream of doing what I..." he trailed off, seeing Zerith's face turn white and his brow furrow as he began to puzzle things out.

"I didn't mix anything for you," Zerith muttered, his anger beginning to dissipate. "However, the mysterious depletion of the dreamfoil I'd been collecting is now suddenly explained. As are my wife's stomach cramps and the reason that even the Forsaken look dazed! To Zerith and Ger'alın," he read the note standing on the desk. "Dammit, Alayne, what did you do and why?"

"What's going on? Where is Ala...", Ger'alın started to demand, "why can't I *move*?"

"What did she give you?"

"I don't know," he swore. "It was in that flask there on the floor."

Zerith picked up the flask and sniffed it. His nose wrinkled in distaste. "Lotus mixed with dreamfoil. Surgeons use it. She *really* wanted you out. Now the question is why."

"What are you babbling about? You ran in here saying something about a siege and now you're babbling about Al...", he hesitated, uncertain if he still had the right to say her name.

"Listen to this," Zerith growled, still perusing the note in Alayne's flowing script. "Zerith and Ger'alın," it began, "I do not ask forgiveness or understanding. I do what I must. Zerith, Ger'alın found a Vial of Water from the Well of Eternity. That is the cause of his current malady. It is clear he is devolving into a Wretched; Illidan no doubt used the Vial on him in sufficient concentrations to cause his latent addiction – the addiction we all share – to grow beyond all bounds. His mind may have been damaged. Look after him until such a time as he is able to look after himself. Ger'alın: I do what I must. Know that. I have taken the Vial..."

"She took it? Where? Where is she? She can't take that from me! It's all I have left! It's my only hope!" Ger'alın wailed, gnashing his teeth and wishing he could move. "Damn her! She drugged me and stole it! How could she?"

"We'll discuss your finding an artifact of rare power and not bothering to tell any of us later," Zerith said mildly, forcing his temper down. This made sense of everything. He'd been completely mystified by Ger'alın's transformation. "Yes, she took it. To continue, 'I have taken the Vial to where I may study it at my leisure. Do not attempt to track me down;

you will not find me until I am ready to be found. I do what I must; nothing more and nothing less. Alayne.”

“I’ll...I’ll...How could she do this to me? She knows, dammit, she knows I need that Vial!” Tears of helpless rage leaked out of Ger’alin’s eyes. He had not felt this betrayed since waking up to find Ta’sia lying next to him. “Damn her!”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it before?” Zerith asked quietly. “Another Vial. That explains a lot about what is wrong with you. I’d been trying to figure out why you were suddenly succumbing to your addiction since I realized that was what was happening.”

“Because you would have taken it from me and handed it over to the naaru. You would have said it was too powerful. You wouldn’t have let Alayne try to break the warding on it so I could use it and be the man I know I still am!”

“Ger’alin, we’ll discuss this later. For now, I’m going outside to talk with our besiegers and find out just what is going on. I have a bad, bad feeling about all of this,” he said, clutching Alayne’s note in his hand and wondering if she had done something to bring the defenders of Shattrath down on their heads. He paused just before leaving the confines of the fortress, glancing back the direction he’d come. Ger’alin had been less than incoherent since Alayne left to go to the Black Temple. The priest had put it down to the man’s being worried and having just suffered through an unbelievable trauma. “However,” he said, tapping his lips thoughtfully, “just now, he sounded saner than he has since before we hatched that mad scheme to sneak him into the Temple. Maybe her taking that Vial away is a good thing.” Shrugging and giving his long hair a tug, he put his speculations aside and hurried out to meet his ‘enemies.’

In the meantime, Ger’alin lay on his back, wondering when he would be able to move again.

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“You there! Priest! Lift your hands to the sky and keep your mouth shut! One word that sounds like an incantation and you’re dead!” a Magister screamed at Zerith as the man stepped out of the gates of the fortress. Zerith did as directed, fuming silently. What had happened to turn the Scryers and, from what he could see, the Aldor, against them? “Have you come to surrender?” the Magister asked after he finished searching the priest’s pockets, satisfied that the man carried no weapon beyond his hands and his faith.

“Surrender? I came to ask why there is even a battle. Not that there seems to have been much of one,” he muttered sullenly, glancing back to see the few scorch marks marring the top of the wall. “Most of those on the inside are still asleep. Some are still paralyzed, it seems.”

“Asleep? Paralyzed?” the Magister said disbelievingly.

“By all means, go in and see for yourselves. None will harm you unless you threaten them,” Zerith replied graciously. “I think only ten have woken from their drug-induced sleep and only nine of them are mobile.”

The Magister gestured for the man to remain where he was and hurried off. A quick conference between the Scryers and the Aldor ensued, the result of which was a handful of Aldorite priests and Scryer magi entered the fortress, spells on their lips and wands in their hands. “May I ask why Shattrath sends forces against their allies?” Zerith asked. His words were perfectly polite, his tone, utterly sarcastic.

“Shattrath does not attack its allies. You...we have reason to believe your group has betrayed us,” the Magister said, glancing around uneasily. “The City of Light was attacked last night.”

“I assure you, no one here was in any position to attack anything other than a pillow last night.”

“So you say, priest, so you say. It was a nether dragon that attacked us. However, while we defended our homes against the rampaging beast, someone else, someone claiming to represent the Disorder of Azeroth, broke into the Library and stole an artifact. The lone guard who remained at his post has not yet woken; he was assaulted and left unconscious by the intruder. Whoever it was left this,” he continued, thrusting a note at the priest. Zerith sighed and took it. He recognized the handwriting; it matched the one he had stuffed in his pouch.

“I have come to claim what is mine by right. For too long have I simpered, ducking my head in obedience to those who are too fearful to reach out and grasp destiny with both hands. Know that the Disorder of Azeroth and our allies, the Mag’har and the Dragonmaw, will tolerate the naaru’s interference no longer. We have toppled Stormrage from his throne and taken control of the Black Temple. Should Shattrath wish to deal with us, it will do so on bended knee. Witness our strength; even the lowliest of us can shatter your sanctuary and take back what should never have been surrendered. Signed, The Disorder of Azeroth,” Zerith sighed and handed the note back to the Magister. “I want to show you something. It is in my belt pouch. It’s another note. Reach in and take it,” he offered, showing his good will by trying to allay the man’s suspicions. The Magister accepted his offer and, after squeezing the pouch in his hand to assure himself there were no traps for his hand, he opened it and removed the crinkled-up note.

“The handwriting is the same,” he muttered. Zerith nodded. “Who is ‘Alayne?’”

“She’s my sister. I don’t know what has come over her,” he said quickly, “she did not have my authorization to do anything, especially not lead an attack against Shattrath. I believe she may be...perhaps...over a week ago, we killed Illidan Stormrage,” he sighed. “After he was dead, one of my followers found a Vial of water from the Well of Eternity on the demon’s body. He took it and brought it back here, unknown to any of us. As you no doubt have heard, we were the ones who found the first one, the one that is stored in Shattrath. Had I known at the time my friend had such a thing, I would have arranged for it to be transported to Shattrath. I did not learn until this morning that he had it.”

“It was the Vial that your sister stole from our Library.”

“I had guessed as much. The man who found the one from Illidan is my sister’s husband. According to her note, you can see that she believes Illidan may have imbued her husband with so much arcane energy that his addiction has...flared up, for lack of a better way to describe it. At this moment, he lies in bed, unable to move, devolving and diminishing before our very eyes.”

“Turning into a Wretched,” the Magister muttered as he finished reading the note. “That’s a fate that I would not wish on anyone. But why would she attack Shattrath and steal back the Vial? I recall that someone with your group found it and it was turned over to our control peacefully enough.”

“That is a question I would very much like to know the answer to myself,” Zerith said sorrowfully. “I don’t know why she would. But, knowing my sister as I do, I think she may be desperate to help her husband. When it comes to those she loves, Alayne can quickly become irrational and unreasonable. She may have stolen the Vial, intending to find a way to use both of them to heal Ger’alin. I think she may be hiding in Nagrand or Zangarmarsh, maybe even Hellfire Peninsula, trying to figure out a way to...I have no idea what she would be trying to figure out what to do, honestly. Or why she would feel the need to steal both Vials.”

“Ger’alin? Ger’alin Sunrage? He is the one who has fallen ill?” the Magister asked, sounding stunned. Zerith nodded. “We will escort all of you back to Shattrath. A’dal and the Aldor speak highly of young Ger’alin. The naaru said he was well on his way to becoming a

true paladin and not just a Blood Knight. Shaina, what of those inside?" he asked the Aldorite priestess who approached them.

"The sin'dorei spoke truly. Only a few are awake. Almost everyone lies asleep, heavily drugged. We found dreamfoil and lotus blossoms mixed in with the food left on the cook fires. Whoever did this wanted to make certain that no one would wake up before this evening." Zerith shook his head, wondering why Alayne would have drugged everyone so strongly and why he and Dar'ja had escaped the worst of it; he'd examined the wine cups she'd brought them, finding traces only of dreamfoil. Clearly she'd wanted him awake.

"What are you up to, sister?" he muttered beneath his breath. "Come with me," he said to the Magister and the priestess. "Let us try to find enough carts and rig up enough litters to see the lot of us back to Shattrath. Perhaps there we can figure out where my sister is hiding and what she intends to do with two Vials."

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Zerith sighed and shook his head. "This is too convenient," he muttered sullenly. He and Har'lon, the Magister who had confronted him at the gate, stood in the library of the Black Temple, poring over tomes Alayne had left behind, hoping to discern the woman's mad plan. "Books on the nature of the Well of Eternity, arcane addiction, possible methods of treatment, kaldorei culture after the Sundering... All I can puzzle out is that she was trying to figure out how to help Ger'alín or why we devolve when our addiction takes hold. Nothing on where she might have been going or what she might be planning."

"Still, these books would be most useful to our cause in Shattrath," Har'lon murmured absently, thumbing through a tome on kaldorei wardings. "Most useful indeed."

"We will have to ask the rightful keepers of the Temple for permission to remove them," Zerith replied diplomatically. "I don't think they would prevent us from having access to them, though."

"Indeed, indeed. Your sister...she is a warlock, is she not?" Zerith nodded. "I remember the early days, just after we had come through the Dark Portal. Some of our magi took the fel path, becoming warlocks, hoping to figure out a method to siphon pure arcane energy out of demons. The results of their studies created the mana crystals that hover all over Quel'Thalas, powering many of our magics. Do you think your sister may have taken the Vials to try to use them to distill demonic energies? Perhaps to create a Well here in Outland?"

"There is no telling," Zerith admitted frankly. "While I suffer as much as any other sin'dorei, I put my faith in the Light. I know little of arcane dealings or fel powers. In truth, among our group, it is Alayne who is the expert in both. Why do you ask? Do you have any glimmer of where she may have gone?"

"I have been puzzling over it all afternoon," Har'lon sighed. "I admit, I paid little heed to you children – don't grimace, I'm almost ten times your age, young man – but, I have been considering what I or another Magister might do in her situation. The best place to conduct such studies is in the Netherstorm..."

"Alayne wouldn't know that. She's never been there. Something tells me that she knew where she was going, though. That she had a location chosen and knew how to get there."

"We lost sight of the beast when he flew beyond the broken edge of the world. Only the guard on duty would have caught sight of your sister. Perhaps when we return to Shattrath, he will have awoken. Perhaps he'll remember something. Not that his memory is at its best," Har'lon sighed. "For now, we've done all we can here. I believe everyone should be awake back at the fortress and the effects of the drug should have worn off enough for them to

sit their saddles. Let us be on our way, priest.” Gathering up a few of the thicker books, the pair began to make their way to the exit of the Temple. Its great doors still lay in shattered pieces on the ground, a gentle, persistent breeze blowing through the entrance, cooling the sanctuary even while bringing in dust from outside. Coughing and blinking the sandy grit out of their eyes, the two sin’dorei stopped short at a peremptory shout from the far side of the balcony.

“Halt!” a gravelly voice called out to them, bringing them to a standstill. “Where do you think you’re going with those books? Who said you could take them?”

“Akama,” Zerith sighed, unable to think of anyone he’d rather see less at the moment. “We are merely going to borrow them. Perhaps some of the scribes in Shattrath can make copies and we will return the originals as quickly as we can. However, these are the books that...” he paused, uncertain of whether to mention his sister’s name around the former draenei priest. “They have information we believe may help us heal Ger’alin,” he said finally.

“Heal Ger’alin? Has he fallen ill?” Akama asked, hating having to deceive his brother priest. Though the Light had long since forsaken the Broken, Akama still felt a kinship with his fellow devotees of the Light. Especially now that the Temple of Karabor was being restored.

“He has been stricken with a malady that sometimes afflicts my people,” Zerith said truthfully. “Someone was here, looking through these books, looking for answers. Perhaps that person found some. However, whatever he or she found was not passed on to the rest of us. We must begin the research again.”

“It’s that death knight, that perversion, you’re referring to,” Akama spat. “She was here, yes. Tearing through Illidan’s library like a thing possessed. Only our disgust at her profanation stayed us from killing her for her presumption. Tell that woman she is never to set foot on our holy ground again! The next time, the penalty will be more than merely being tossed out on her rump.” Zerith’s eyes narrowed and he began breathing heavily through his nose, his nostrils flaring out in anger. “Take the books. Perhaps you’ll find whatever she found before she ran off and left her husband to die.”

“Now you listen here,” Zerith growled, reaching for Akama. The Broken eluded the sin’dorei easily and began stumping off quickly away. Har’lon raised his eyebrows at Zerith. “Alayne was one of those who fell ill and went to Northrend,” the priest muttered, straightening his stole.

“Light of heaven preserve us!” Har’lon gasped. “She wouldn’t have taken the Vials to...”

“No!” Zerith shouted. “Never! She fell ill; she was insane! She returned to us and foreswore him forever! She would never, never turn such power over to the Lich King. She’d sooner turn it over to the Legion!” Har’lon studied the priest. “Yes, I’m prejudiced. She’s my sister. But she would never return to Arthas. Never.”

“As you say. Come, let us gather in the rest of your friends and see ourselves back to Shattrath. From there, we can begin sending out search parties to see if we can find your sister before she does something even more foolish than what she’s already done.”

“Is she...how much trouble will she be in when she finally returns?” Zerith asked hesitantly, not certain he wanted to know.

“For leading an attack against the City of Light,” Har’lon said, ticking off her crimes on his fingers, “not to mention theft, assault, attempted murder on a scale I don’t believe you could begin to contemplate...she’ll be handed over to the Vindicators and the naaru to face whatever justice they decide to mete out. That is, if the night elves don’t find her first. Var’thanos has riled the entire Cenarion Circle up against her. If the kaldorei get their claws on her, she may not live to face A’dal.” Zerith sighed and wiped his hand over his face. For a moment, he prayed that Alayne would never be found. “The naaru are wise and just. Surely

A'dal knew what was in your sister's heart. Twice before when Kael has sent demons to attack our outposts in the Netherstorm, the naaru with us have utterly decimated them with but a single pulse of pure Light. I believe, if A'dal had felt we were truly threatened, your sister and her dragon would already be dead. Still, the ways of the naaru are not for us to understand," he admitted uncomfortably.

"Alayne, why do you always seem to leap in without checking to see if there is water below?" Zerith whispered beneath his breath. "Be safe, where ever you are. Stay there until I can figure out a way to keep your head on your shoulders. Light, look after her until we can bring her safely home."

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Alayne shivered, the blindfold still wrapped tightly around her eyes. She was well-guarded. Her small cell felt cramped; even blindfolded, she could tell that it was barely four paces across. She tried to hold on to her icy, arrogant demeanor, reminding herself that, while she should occasionally demanded to see her king and ask if she was under arrest, she shouldn't do it too often, lest she provoke her captors. She lifted her head, her nose to the ceiling, when she heard the door creak open. "Have you finally come to conduct me to King Sunstrider?" she demanded. "I cannot believe he would order such confinement to one who brings the keys of victory."

"Our king will see you," her guard muttered sullenly. "However, if you take so much as one breath that displeases our king, it will be your last."

"Nothing I do will displease King Sunstrider," she said wryly. "Have I not brought him a mount worthy of his exalted station? Have I not given him information vital to crushing the rebellion? I am loyal to House Sunstrider and King Kael'Thas or may the sun abandon me and I walk in the darkness of night for the rest of my days," she said formally.

"Come on," the guard growled, grabbing her by the arm and hauling her out of the cell. "Enough words. Let us see some action or let us see you dead." Alayne fought to keep her head held high as she was escorted – dragged, in truth – to see her ruler. She tried to keep track of the twists and turns, tried to count the stairs she ascended and descended, tried to get a feel for the floating fortress but, her efforts were in vain. With the blindfold covering her eyes, she could no more discern the layout of Tempest Keep than an infant could expound upon metaphysics. Soon, she tripped, falling to her knees when her guard halted suddenly. "You are in the presence of his illustrious majesty, King Sunstrider, lord of Quel'Thalas, ruler of the sin'dorei, defender of the Sunwell," her guard intoned, his sonorous voice ringing throughout the spacious chamber.

Alayne felt the blindfold being wrenched off her face. She groveled on the floor, her nose pressed against the tiles, prostrate before her rightful king and ruler. She could feel his presence without even seeing him; the aura of power and majestic magic emanated from him as light from the sun. For a moment, she shivered, wondering how she had ever dared even consider rebelling against such a wise, noble, and puissant being. "There is no need for all that," Kael'Thas said, sounding humbled and amused. Alayne blushed, pressing her face harder against the floor. Her heart thundered in her chest. "Come, rise. Let us see your face; let us see your eyes, my child." Pushing herself to her feet, she slowly lifted her eyes to meet his. She gaped, overcome with awe. Kael'Thas's eyes glowed green, amusement making them dance and sparkle. His face could have been carved from the finest marble, each feature carefully chiseled and sanded into a fel, fey beauty that made her think the statues of him back in Silvermoon did not come close to doing him justice. His long blond hair flowed down his back and framed his nearly perfect face; its only flaw a slight tint of desperation in the set of

his mouth. "You claim to have come from the rebels, child, with information that will lead us to victory. Speak; tell your king what he wishes to know."

"My lord," she said, falling to her knees once more, "I have. I have come from a group calling itself the Disorder of Azeroth. This group consists of many seasoned fighters, veterans of campaigns both in our world and here in Outland. Lately, they have vanquished the mongrel Illidan. Before that, they slew the Lady Vashj."

"That much we know, child," he said patiently. "Tell us something more. Tell us of who leads this group and how they may be defeated."

"Their leader is... Zerith Lightbinder, a priest of the Light and a man with an uncanny knack for military planning. He is assisted in that role by Ger'alın Sunrage, a Blood Knight, who learned much of campaigning and strategy in his adolescence among the humans of Stormwind and later Theramore, where he served as a guard in Lady Jaina's forces. Between the two of them, they possess creativity, ingenuity, and intelligence to quickly put together viable battle plans and adapt them as needed."

"What tactics do they favor?"

"They favor overwhelming the enemy with numbers and strength where possible. However, subtlety is not beneath them. In their conquest of the Black Temple, Lightbinder devised a cunning plan." Alayne quickly described the multi-pronged attack and the coordination required to pull it off. By the time she finished, Kael'Thas was obviously impressed. "As you can see, my lord, they are no mere rabble."

"Indeed they are not," he mused thoughtfully. "You come from them; you know them well?" Alayne nodded. "What of the chance they could be convinced, as you, to foreswear their rebellion against us? We would rather not kill such excellent tacticians as you describe."

"I... I do not believe they will put down their rebellion, my liege. They have thrown their lot in with Voren'thal and his Scryers."

"And you, child? You come here from them, claiming to have foresworn your rebellion against us. We have granted this audience because we once promised that if any of Voren'thal's followers came to their senses, we would be a gracious and forgiving ruler. Why do you come to us? And, this information, while useful, is hardly what we would call the 'keys to victory.'"

"I... I realized that you were right, my King," she groveled. "The Sunwell must be restored. Its rays must shine once again. I was wrong to persist in my rebellion against you, against that. I have come to offer whatever poor assistance I may in reigniting the heart of our power. To this end, my liege," she said, slipping her hand into her pouch and pulling out the two Vials, "I give you these Vials. They contain water from the Well of Eternity. One was taken from the corpse of Lady Vashj. The other, from Illidan. With these, you may be able to return us to our former glory."

"You would offer me this power freely?" Kael'Thas said, stunned out of his normal formality. "You would give me the last two Vials? Child, Illidan himself had given me a Vial when I pledged to aid him. And now, you give me the other two; the two I have hungered for."

"I do this as a sign of my obedience to you, my King," she said, her voice trembling. "Only you are wise and powerful enough to be able to use them. I give them to you to prove myself your humble servant."

"You are a good child. We are... pleased with your offer. Now, look me in my eyes, child," Alayne forced herself to meet his gaze. Her heart began to slam against her ribcage as she felt the magic washing over her. "So many have betrayed me; I trust so few. Swear your absolute allegiance to me and you may go free. Refuse, and you will be granted a swift, merciful death for your gift."

The words of the ancient pledge of fealty rolled off Alayne's tongue before she could think to recall them, "I hereby swear fealty to my lord, Kael'Thas of House Sunstrider. May my every action please my lord and may I strive to reflect only his glory. My life, as well as my death, is pledged to the service of my king." She could feel the sting of tears in the back of her eyes as the magic bore the oath down on her. She should have known Kael would demand such utter obedience. At least, she could maintain her true loyalties in her mind. She felt a calm brush of reassurance from Mordenai, giving her the strength to go on.

"I accept your pledge and vow that I will protect you against winter's chill and night's darkness," the lord of the sin'dorei said magnanimously. "Your name, child?"

"Alayne Dawnrunner," she whispered.

"Dawnrunner. Dawnrunner," he said absently, clucking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "I recall something about a Dawnrunner once. It was years ago; before you were born. Vangri," he said, more loudly, gesturing back towards the guard. "Escort my vassal to her new quarters in Manaforge Duro. See that her talents are put to good use. Obey those set over you, Alayne Dawnrunner, and you may rise high, like the sun."

Alayne shivered as she left Kael'Thas's presence. The memory of the overpowering awe she'd felt still gripped her. "Light help me," she prayed, "I do what I must." It had become so clear to her when she saw Ger'alín holding the Vial, saw him twisted into a mockery of the man he was. "The Sunwell must be restored," she said, uncertain of whether she was trying to convince herself or the Light. "Whatever the cost; the Sunwell must be restored."

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Empty. Hollow. Abandoned. That was how Ger'alín felt as he watched the sky pass overhead through unblinking eyes. She had run off with Mordenai and had taken the Vial. Part of him gibbered in fear; knowing that she had no doubt gone off on some mad plot to save them all. The rest of him screamed in rage, warring against his fear and worry, shrieking that she had stolen it, that she had taken it, that she had betrayed him. Torn apart, his soul bleeding and weeping, Ger'alín lay on his back and watched the sky pass overhead, wishing he were dead. His brow furrowed in irritation when Callie draped a cloth over his eyes. He wanted the sun to blind him; maybe then he wouldn't be able to see himself strangling his wife, her face turning red then white as his fingers closed over her throat. He could still feel the skin of her neck rubbing against the palms of his hands. He shuddered, wishing he could find the strength to tear the cloth away; now he could see himself standing over her, his foot drawn back, ready to kick her the way he used to kick his toy ball when he was a child. He thanked the Light that Zerith had come in when he had. He wished the man had been earlier; he wished the man had never married them. He growled in his throat and tried to shut his ears so he wouldn't hear Callie and the priest speaking about one he no longer had any right to worry over.

"The last time he got like this, I had to dribble water between his lips. He went a week and a half with only water and soup to sustain him," the Forsaken was saying. "I'll tell you, *no one* can get in a funk like Gerry. It was back when he thought Alayne was dead. The whole first six months, whenever the month anniversary would roll around, he'd stay in his blankets and refuse to get up, refuse to move."

"He can't go so long without nourishment now," Zerith muttered distractedly, his mind centered on trying to figure out what his sister might be up to.

"I know," Callie sighed fretfully, "he's practically skin and bones now. Cheer up, Gerry; I'm sure Alayne's fine. She must have just gone to the naaru ahead of us. Though, how

that junk got mixed in with everyone's food is beyond me. I haven't slept like that in over a decade."

"You didn't tell her," Ger'alın said flatly. Taking a deep breath, he blew hard, dislodging the cloth so he could stare at the sky until the Light seared his eyes out for what he had done.

"I told her what I told everyone," Zerith said pleasantly, "somehow some herbs usually reserved for sedating people got mixed in with the herbs used to spice the stew. It's not so unusual when you think about how much lotus the orcs like to use. Dreamfoil looks a lot like it, after all. Why, Ger'alın, do you know something about it?"

"You didn't tell her the truth," he returned, his voice still flat and lifeless.

"Gerry, you're sick," Callie said kindly, reaching down and placing the cloth back over his eyes. "Zerith told me that the mix-up has you paralyzed for a while so I'll thank you to stop trying to blind yourself. Alayne's not dead. She just went off to Shattrath ahead of us."

"Zerith, it is not nice to lie to your friends."

"Who's lying?" the priest said, beginning to sound annoyed.

"What is going on here?" the Forsaken muttered, suspicious. She began eyeing Zerith thoughtfully, suddenly wondering if his story about Alayne going off to Shattrath ahead of everyone was true. She found it hard to believe that Zerith would lie to her. She also found it hard to believe Ger'alın would lie either.

"Nothing," Zerith said. "Callie, let me have a little man-to-man chat with my brother-by-marriage, would you?"

"Oh no you don't, priest," Ger'alın muttered, blowing the cloth away again. "Quit putting that back, damn you!" he growled at Callie, baring his teeth when she moved to replace it again, "Let me go blind! Maybe then I won't see...won't see..."

"Callie, go to Dar'ja," Zerith said quietly.

"Won't see what?" Callie asked, ignoring the priest.

"My hands on her throat; my foot going back to kick her in the ribs; my fist smashing across her face! I've become a monster; that's why she's left!"

"Gerry, you have obviously had a bad dream or something," Callie muttered breathlessly. "You've been ill, I know. You haven't been yourself since Illidan...well, I know you'd never hurt Alayne. You'd cut off your foot before you'd do anything like that. What you are doing is sulking because she ran off without you for a few hours and she didn't tell you exactly where she was going."

"Zerith, what nonsense have you filled Callie's head with?"

"He's not filled my head with anything. I know you, Gerry. You'd never do anything like what you said you did. You're just...confused like Alayne used to get, remember?"

"Stop mentioning her name! I did what I did, Callie! If Zerith hadn't run in when he had, I'd have killed her! All because she wouldn't do what I wanted her to. All because she was keeping that power, that joy from me, damn her! And damn me for damning her!" he raved, tears trickling down the corners of his eyes. "I hate her! And I love her! Light blind me and send me to the Nether to rot! As much as I love her, that much do I hate her!" he screamed in Thalassian. "How could she? How could I?"

Zerith reached out and, muttering one of the few arcane spells he knew, covered the man's staring eyes with his hand. He had to strain, concentrating hard enough to make beads of sweat pop out on his forehead, to force the magic on the elf. After a few moments, though, Ger'alın dropped into a deep sleep, his face still ravaged with grief, anger, and gnawing guilt.

"He didn't, did he?" Callie asked, seeking reassurance that the normally gentle and genteel giant she called her best friend was just confused.

“Light help me,” Zerith sighed, wiping the sweat away, “he did. I didn’t want you to find out, Callie, because he’s...ill. Otherwise, he’d never have dreamed of so much as raising his voice to Alayne, let alone his hand.”

“He...she’s not going to be waiting for us in Shattrath, then,” Callie said, shying away from the thought of her friend hurting his wife.

“No. Actually, she attacked Shattrath and stole the Vial that was stored there. I honestly don’t know what she’s up to. Her notes – she left one for he and I,” he sighed, gesturing towards the sleeping Ger’alin, “and another in Shattrath – don’t give much in the way of clues. All I can think is she’s hiding somewhere, desperately trying to use one Vial to lift the enchantment on the other or find a way to use both to reverse his transformation. Not that there is much hope of that...I’ve never seen a case this far advanced turn back.”

“A case of what?” Callie said, bracing herself.

Zerith clucked his tongue in irritation. He hadn’t meant to say that bit out loud. Seeing the look on the Forsaken’s face, he decided to tell her the truth, as difficult as it was even for him. “We’re...you’ve heard that elves are addicted to magic, haven’t you?” She nodded. “Do you know what that means?” Callie shook her head. Zerith sighed and tried to find a way to explain it. “For all of my childhood and youth, the Sunwell was there. It was like a bright sun shining out of the corner of my eye. I could feel it no matter where I was. It warmed me, spiritually. It did that for all of us. Some of us more than others,” he said sadly, thinking of his sisters and of Alayne. “At any rate, every sin’dorei was dependent on it as a source of strength, of power. That...dependency became apparent only after the Sunwell was destroyed. Many died; they couldn’t survive without that glow there.”

“What does that have to do with Ger’alin? He’s no magi,” Callie interrupted.

“I’m getting to that,” Zerith said gently. “He may not be a magi like Alayne was or like my sisters, Light bless their memories, were. Still, all of us are addicted. All of us suffered from the loss. All of us now have to...feed on certain free-floating energies that, while not being as pure as what we grew up on, are enough to sustain us, to keep us from...devolving.”

“Devolving? Well, never mind about that,” Callie muttered, confused. “What does that have to do with Gerry?”

“Ger’alin’s addiction has reared its head. He told me, finally, that Illidan had suffused him with enough arcane energy from the Vial to power our civilization for a few *millennia*. To take in so much energy in so short a timeframe...well, it’s made him hunger for more. He can’t get enough of what he craves, so he pulls from sources that are...less than ideal. Alayne could give you a better explanation – provided you could convince her to talk about it at all – understand, it’s not something we discuss often, especially not with...those who don’t share our weakness. At any rate, his addiction, his hunger, is slowly starving him to death. Unless he finds a way to control it or sate it, he’ll continue to regress until all that’s left of him is a shell of the man he was and the gnawing, mindless need to feed.”

Callie lowered her head, her heart heavy, “Do you think Alayne will come back before...before it’s over? I know you said he hurt her but, Zerith, he *loves* her beyond all reason! I remember the days after she vanished the first time,” she shuddered, recalling how Ger’alin had drunk himself near the point of death to try to drown the pain in his heart.

“As much as he loves her, that’s how much he hates her right now,” Zerith quoted the man’s earlier words. “It’s taking control of him. The fact that she spirited away what he believes is his only hope of survival is tearing him apart – as if the mere fact of what he did to her wouldn’t be enough guilt to drive him mad. Still,” Zerith sighed, wondering how he could dare feel this desperate hope, “either she’ll find an answer and return or she won’t and he’ll fade away until he can’t recall his guilt. It’s a small mercy but...we sin’dorei have had few mercies granted us since Medivh made the Dark Portal. Though...since she left with the Vials

last night, he's been speaking more clearly and making more sense than he had the four days she was gone to the Black Temple. Maybe we're being granted more than a small mercy."

"Or maybe it's just the calm before the storm," Callie said mournfully. "Sometimes when I think about what has happened to us – all the inhabitants of Lordaeron – I wonder if the Light shines at all."

"It shines," Zerith said firmly. "Without it, we could not see the shadow. Come on," he gestured, seeing the spires of Shattrath rising above the hill in the distance. "Let us hope that the Light will provide peace in the City of Light."

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Jez'ral craned his neck and tried to see if he could find the woman mixed in the crowd. The Vindicators stood, blocking off the road into the city, prepared to bludgeon to death any of the Disorder of Azeroth who drew so much as a displeasing breath. Tensions were running high in the city and tempers had flared more than once since word got out that Alayne had stolen the Vial. He'd already had to punch some night elf in the jaw just to get the man to stop screaming in his face. "Zerith!" he called out, seeing the priest. A pair of Vindicators glared at him but the warlock ignored them, trying to find a way through their barricade and to the others. "Zerith, is she with you?"

"No, Jez'ral, she's not," Zerith called back to the warlock. "I don't know where she is."

"He's lying," Jez'ral heard a human mutter. "I heard that she's working for that group and they're trying to out-do old Kael. Blasted elves."

"Garithos should have killed the lot of them," another human said, his voice intended to reach Jez'ral's pointed ears. "They're traitors, every last one of them!" Jez'ral forced himself to ignore them, they'd been trying to goad every last sin'dorei into starting a fight since before he'd woken up. Shoving his way through the barricade, offering apologies to the draenei he'd nearly knocked over, he hurried over to see why the Disorder of Azeroth was entering Shattrath largely by cart and litter.

"What happened?" he whispered to the Forsaken he remembered as being one of Alayne's close friends.

"She drugged us. The whole lot of us," the Forsaken sighed. Then, her face split in a sudden grin. "I'll admit, that was the best prank ever. Too bad it was done out of desperation and not for humor."

"Any clue where she might have gone?" he whispered.

The woman shook her head. "Zerith thinks maybe she may have let something slip while she was here. He wants to talk with whoever it was guarding the room; apparently she knocked him out."

"That would be me," Jez'ral muttered wryly, "and, aside from knocking me out, she said nothing about where she might be going or what she might be doing. Do you know why she...did what she did?" Callie gave a guilty start and shot the man a side-long glance. Finally, with much huffing and indecision, she grabbed him by the arm and dragged him over to the cart where Ger'alain lay. Zerith had covered the man's face with his blanket, tucking the ends behind his head so he couldn't blow it away should the sleep spell fail. Jez'ral's eyes widened, fearing the worst. "Oh no," he groaned, "Alayne must be out of her mind with grief over his death."

"Death?" Callie said, taken aback. "He's not dead! He's sleeping. Zerith had to cover his head so that he wouldn't blind himself looking at the sun should he wake up. It's a long story that begins with 'Ger'alain can throw one hell of a sulk.'" Reaching down, she pulled the

blanket back to reveal the Blood Knight's gaunt, emaciated features. Jez'ral recoiled in horror. "It's some sickness Zerith says happens to your people."

"I'm not aware of any illness like that," Jez'ral muttered, "but then, the things I don't remember could fill a library. How long until he's well? Or did Alayne go off to find a cure? Is that why she attacked? I remember that she can get...well, reckless is putting it mildly...when someone she cares about is in danger." For a moment, he grinned, lost in thought, "Mir'el said he'd have to find her a husband strong enough to keep her from worrying. Said she was so much like Tal'ar in being overprotective that it wasn't funny. He nearly soiled himself when he found out I'd let her take the first trials alone. Never mind that our Order's rules are quite clear on that; he *bit* me over it," he muttered, lifting a hand to rub his neck.

"As interesting as hearing that story was the first time," Callie said slowly, "what Zerith is going to want to know is if anyone has seen sign of her. How did she manage to break in to the vault or whatever it was to begin with?" the rogue wondered aloud. "Magic locks stop just about everyone," with a sigh, Callie tucked the blanket back around Ger'alín's head and nodded for the cart driver to continue on into the structure housing the naaru. Zerith had vanished into its looming shade, desperate to try to plead his case to the naaru as well as praying that one of the beings would have some inkling what Alayne might be up to.

"Oh, that? She blasted right through the wall on the side of the warding. A situation we have since remedied. Still...why would she attack...? Ach. So much I don't remember that I wish I could because maybe then I could help you find that little girl if she's run off."

"You're really worried about her."

"Of course I am!" he snapped. "I remember when she was still a toddler. She makes me think of the times before the wars, of the times when my only concern was keeping stock on the shelves and making certain Mir'el didn't do anything too stupid. She reminds me of my own youth. Besides, I've had those blasted children she met begging me to tell them when she'll be back. I told them 'soon' but I don't know how happy they'll be to find out 'soon' may mean 'never.' Speaking of children, what are you doing here?" he growled at a little girl who was wriggling through the crowd, the adults' legs making a forest for her to hide in.

"Hi Mister Jez'ral. Miss Alayne said her friends might be back today. Are those them?" she asked, pointing to the crowds still being carted in. "They're all sleeping! I wonder why."

"You spoke with Alayne?" Jez'ral muttered, sounding doubtful. "Little girl, when?"

"Last night, before the dragon attacked," Sar'la said, standing on her tiptoes and trying to see if she could spot her idol. "I saw her in Lower City. She told me she'd come to warn everyone and fight that dragon off. She asked me to look after two of her friends, Zerith and Ger'alín. She said she would come for me when it was over but she never did. She's not hurt, is she?"

"You spoke with her last night?" Jez'ral repeated, sounding as if he were choking.

"Yes. What's the matter with you?" Sar'la said, spotting Callie and speaking with the forthright innocence of childhood. "Are you sick, too? She said one of her friends had been really sick but that he was a boy."

"I'm sick but it's not catching," Callie laughed. "And, I suppose she was talking about Ger'alín being sick?" the orphan nodded. "He is *very* sick. Did Alayne sound worried about him? Did she say where she was going or if she would be coming from some place to get you?"

"No. She just told me to get someplace safe and stay there until the dragon was gone. Me and my friends hid in the attic of our orphanage. I could see the fighting. I'll bet Alayne was the one who hit that dragon a good one with a firebolt! After that, the dragon flew away and all of the soldiers got on their horses and hawks and elekks and chased it to the end of the

world. I'll bet that's where she is! She's probably down there making sure that old dragon doesn't come back ever."

Callie and Jez'ral exchanged glances over the girl's head. Sar'la continued to crane her neck, going on tiptoe, trying to see if she could find Alayne. Standing on either side of the orphan, the adults grabbed hold of her arms and, nodding to each other, began half-escorting, half-dragging the child into the main structure. Zerith had already ducked inside and was making his report to A'dal. As the warlock and the rogue dragged the protesting and awestruck girl over to him, he glanced up at them in irritation, wondering just what was going on now and why it couldn't wait until he'd at least had time to take in all that had already come to pass. "I've no time for games, Callie," he growled.

"Zerith, this girl talked with Alayne the night she attacked Shattrath," Callie interrupted quickly.

"Miss Alayne didn't attack us! She fought off the dragon!" Sar'la shouted angrily, twisting and trying to pull her arms out of the adults' grips. "She's brave and powerful and pretty and I want to be just like her when I grow up! Tell them, A'dal! Tell them that she didn't do what they just said and that it's not nice to say untrue things!" Hovering above their heads, the being of light sent down crystalline chimes that calmed and soothed, but said nothing. "She wouldn't!" Sar'la protested, her defiance fading. "She wouldn't. She's not a bad person!"

"No one said she was, child," Zerith said calmly. "We're trying to figure out why she did what she did. Callie here says that you talked with Alayne that night." Sar'la nodded her head. Zerith knelt down so he was on eye-level with the girl and then glanced up, requesting with a gaze that they let go of her. Placing a hand on her shoulder, he tried to make his face warm and friendly. "Tell us about that night. It's important," he added. "If you have any idea where Alayne might have gone; if she told you *anything* at all, we need to know. She could be in danger." Callie's head jerked up at that and she glanced over her shoulder at the naaru.

"She...she was upset about something," Sar'la said, the words spilling out of her. "I could see from the way she jumped at everything that she was scared. That made me a little scared too but I thought maybe it was just the dark? Then I ran up to her and she told me the dragon was going to attack and I needed to get somewhere safe and hide until it was over. She asked me to look after two of her friends, Zerith and Ger'alín. Then, she sent me back to the orphanage while she went up to fight the dragon."

"She asked you to look after us?" Zerith said, surprised. Sar'la nodded, her lower lip quivering and a tear trickling past her nose.

"She said Ger'alín had been very sick and needed us to make him laugh a lot. Then she was gone. She didn't attack our city! She couldn't! She let me ride her magic horse! She told me she'd teach me about magic when I got older! She couldn't have done anything bad! Not Miss Alayne!" Sar'la sobbed. "Not her! She's my friend!"

Callie bit her own lip to keep from crying and Jez'ral looked stricken. He'd known that the orphans had taken a shine to his former student but he'd had no idea just how much they'd come to idolize her. Zerith had covered his own eyes with his hand, trying to sort out what he had heard, trying to make sense of it, trying to find some secret, hidden message his sister might have left. With a sigh, he stood up. There was nothing. She had taken the Vial and vanished. "A'dal," he said, having to pause to clear his throat, his voice breaking, "A'dal, one of our own lies stricken with an illness that we cannot hope to cure. After what my sister did here, I know I have no right to ask this, but could you give him ease?"

"Your sister did nothing that would rebound on you or those who follow you," A'dal's gentle chimes rang across Zerith's mind. "She did only what she believed she had to do. Right or wrong, for good or for ill – that has not yet played out. Only time and the Light will tell.

Bring Ger'alín to me. If the Light wills, he will be restored. If the Light does not will... I can give him peace."

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Zerith lifted a hand and wiped the tears from his eyes before the others could see them. He could sense the healing energies from A'dal cease their flow and could tell that, whatever the naaru had done, it had not been enough. Ger'alín still lay, staring blindly at the ceiling, his entire body clenched. He responded to nothing. Callie had given over trying to pull him out of his sulk the day before. "Damn them for telling him," the priest muttered. "If only he thought she was just hiding still." The Blood Knight had grown more despondent and less responsive since learning that, not only had Alayne attacked Shattrath and not only did she stand a good chance of being executed should she show back up, she also had a price on her head from the Ashtongue Deathsworn, the Aldor, the Scryers, and the Mag'har – in spite of Garrosh's best efforts to explain her momentary insanity. The priest himself still found it hard to believe just how quickly everyone had turned on his sister. Only the Forsaken seemed to have relented, and even then, some of them seemed more than happy that she was not numbered among the Disorder of Azeroth any longer.

"He resists it still," A'dal chimed sadly. "His body has been healed. It is his spirit, his mind, his will that resists the peace we offer. Unless he accepts of his own free will, he will continue to wither, continue to suffer from his addiction, until it kills him."

Zerith slammed a fist against the wall, feeling a moment of satisfaction when he felt the wall shiver and saw a crack form in the plaster. He stared at his bloody knuckles and swelling fingers in fascination; he was so angry, he felt no pain. "There's nothing left for it but to go out and find her, is there?" he asked rhetorically.

"Alayne alone is not the only reason he holds back," A'dal rang. "Though, his love for her, his fear for her, his repulsion at what he did – all those do have their part. The decision to search her out, to bring her here, is yours to make, mortal priest. Know that, should you seek to do this, you may find answers you do not want."

"And you have no idea where she might be hiding?" Zerith asked dryly. "That's one answer I know I would want." The naaru remained depressingly silent. Zerith sighed. He was beginning to believe that A'dal knew far more than the naaru would reveal. He just wondered why the being, if he were so powerful and so wise, was leaving the elf to flounder about, lost in confusion over what to do next.

"Why won't you just tell us out straight?" Jez'ral pleaded. "He's *dying*, A'dal! She could be dying too, for all we know! And you hover there, knowing something that could help us, refusing to tell us! Why?"

"If the naaru told us everything they knew," Callie said, her voice sounding loud in the silence, "if they made all of the decisions for us, they'd be no better than the Legion they oppose."

"That's foolish," Dar'ja muttered irritably. Callie opened her mouth to reply in kind but soothing chimes from A'dal halted her sarcastic words.

"The undead speaks wisely, as one who knows from experience what it is to have your decisions made for you," the naaru answered. "But, we do not know exactly where Alayne may be hiding. We have our suspicions, but that is all they are – idle speculation. Sharing them would serve no purpose and would, perhaps, cause great harm."

"Can you at least tell us if going out and looking for her would do any good?" Zerith asked. He shook his hand, drops of blood sprinkling the wall and his robes. Dar'ja took his broken and bleeding hand in her own hands and wove the healing energies through it. Zerith thanked her with a loving look, waiting for A'dal to reply.

“Tell us where she is!” Jez’ral demanded, his eyes bright with tears of begging. “The shades of her parents will never forgive me if anything happens to that child! Mir’el will kill me! I would never be able to look myself in the mirror again! I still have nightmares about what might have happened to her the night of her Trials!”

“She remains in Outland,” A’dal answered. “But the journey to find her is yours to make. The answers to her questions are yours to find. It is your destiny to find her, to confront her, and to return to her again.”

“What under the Light does that mean?” Zerith asked. He ground his teeth when the naaru remained silent. “We’ll go,” he said at last. “Will you look after Ger’alin while we try to find his wife? Try to figure out a way to sneak her back to him that won’t get her killed?” Silver chimes tinkled across their minds, giving affirmation and a measure of peace in the decision made. “Let’s get back to the others,” the priest said to his friends. “I need to make arrangements for our failure – and for our success.”

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Zerith watched as the other two peeled off, leading their horses towards Hellfire Peninsula. Having no clear idea of where Alayne might have headed, they had decided to go over ground they knew to see if they could find her there. Zerith felt that was the most likely way to find her. “After all,” he said to himself, “she sounded as if she knew exactly where she was going to ‘study the Vials at her leisure.’”

“You’ve said that so often,” Dar’ja chimed in, “that I’m beginning to wonder if you really believe it, or if you’re just trying to convince yourself that it’s true.”

“Either it’s true or it’s not,” he said, smiling sadly. “I estimate three days to explore both Hellfire Peninsula and Zangarmarsh. Hopefully, within three days, we’ll be sneaking her into Shattrath. If not, we’ll need another two days to explore Nagrand. The Aldor and Scryers are watching every inch of Terokkar so, if she’s hiding there, they will flush her out. Same for Shadowmoon Valley. The naaru have sent agents to Akama. Between the forces of Shattrath and the Ashtongue Deathsworn, if she’s in Shadowmoon, someone will find her.”

“Honestly, I think we’ll find her in the caves where we slew Vashj,” Dar’ja muttered. “If I were doing what we think she might be doing, that’s where I’d go.”

“I agree,” her husband grinned. “Which is why we’ll be checking there first. After that, well, there’s a lot of Zangarmarsh we missed the first time around what with the naga. Alayne had a chance to see some of it when she was running from Ger’alin that morning,” he continued, his voice catching. Had it really been less than a month ago that she and Ger’alin had turned the tricks around on everyone? “It seems like it’s been a lifetime,” he sighed. Dar’ja reached over and patted his knee fondly, knowing he was thinking about the day Alayne and Ger’alin had discovered what the rest of them had known for some time.

“Once it’s all over,” she said, “we’ll bring them back here. Then, at night, when they are not sleeping, we’ll toss itchweed into their blankets and then head for the hills.”

“Have I told you I love you today?” he laughed. “Because I do. We’ll do that. Now, come on,” he sighed, turning serious. “We’re going to have to get out to the middle of the lake and swim down that pipe to see if she’s hiding there. Don’t worry,” he added softly. “I won’t rock the boat or mention food.”

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“I hate caves,” Dar’ja whispered, wincing when even her softest words seemed to echo back to her loudly in the vast emptiness.

“Considering you’ve said that at least forty-seven times in the past hour,” Zerith said absently, “I think you can assume I know that.”

“I just feel like someone’s watching us. Like we’re trapped and we’re never going to get out of here,” she muttered, reaching out and taking his hand, seeking comfort. Zerith continued to study the cavern, twitching an ear whenever he thought he heard voices or footfalls. He reached back to his wife, putting an arm around her and patting her on the shoulder, knowing that she disliked being underground. “We’ll be out of here in a bit,” he promised. The pair crept quietly over the bridges, headed first towards Vashj’s chambers. As they neared the final bridge, Zerith stopped and cupped a hand over his ear. “I swear I hear pick-axes against stone,” he muttered. “This cave is getting to me, too.”

“It’s getting to both of us because I hear it as well,” Dar’ja whispered. “Down that way, where we freed the Broken the first time we were here.”

“We’ll check it out in a bit,” he promised. “For now, I want to see if she’s been here,” he said, pointing to the room ahead. “Because it’s obvious that someone has been.”

Vashj’s corpse had been dragged away from where they had left it. Zerith wondered if the druids had set it to pyre in spite of their hatred for the woman she once had been. The room itself had been stripped bare; all of the books, scrolls, and personal effects removed. “The druids mentioned nothing of this,” he said to Dar’ja, gesturing around the empty room. Even the tapestries had been torn down and taken away.

“They were closed-mouthed when we passed through the Refuge. I wonder what is going on.”

“We’re obviously not going to find anything here,” the priest sighed. “Let’s go see what that noise was.”

Creeping back out of the room, keeping to the shadows and being careful not to make any sound, Zerith and Dar’ja picked their way back across the cave and down into the water. Swimming, keeping their arms and legs beneath the water and pulling themselves across the pool silently, they scrambled up the rocky ledge and took the path that would lead them into the former slaves’ pens. A little over an hour later, the couple was catching their breath and staring, wide-eyed, as sin’dorei and demons lashed out at new slaves. Numbered among the slaves were mostly Broken and ogres. The odd sin’dorei or troll stood out starkly against the rest, their backs no more or less lacerated than the other slaves’. Zerith’s stomach clenched and he felt as if he might be sick as he watched free-roaming demons lash out, their whips cracking against the backs of the workers.

“Keep up the pace, you rats!” one of the slave-drivers shouted, her voice clear and bell-like. “King Sunstrider’s plans will not be delayed for your slacking!” Dar’ja and Zerith exchanged glances, wondering just what their ‘king’ was plotting. Scooting closer to the edge, careful to keep low and quiet, they strained their ears to try to hear more.

“I hate these squalid caves,” one of the sin’dorei whip-handlers muttered to his partner, the shouter. “They’re so dank and dreary. It’s even worse now that we had to send all of that overgrown snake’s possessions back to Tempest Keep. Why couldn’t that newling keep her trap shut?”

“If you hadn’t been so eager, we wouldn’t have lost our posting at Duro to her. Now, try not to get us in trouble here. If we get sent any further away from the action, we’ll be standing back in Quel’Thalas twiddling our thumbs.”

“Rumor has it we’ll all be going back soon enough,” the man muttered. “Today couldn’t be too soon for me.”

“Listening to rumor is what got you sent out here. Listening to you is what got me out here,” the woman said wryly. “Come on. Ran’ma and Je’ila should be coming up for their shift shortly. I know I could use a warm cup of spiced wine and a few hours off my feet. Getting these brutes to work takes a lot out of me.”

“Aye, I know,” he laughed. “You there, that axe is for working with, not lounging about! Do you want to feel the heat of my wrath again, scum? Good! Put your back into it! Please our king and you’ll find a merciful end to your sufferings!” he shouted. Pitching his voice back to normal, he continued, “They grow more sullen with each day. I swear, sometimes I wonder if it was worth rooting the druids out of here. Surely King Sunstrider could find a better way than relying on these infernal gnomish devices.”

“Don’t speak so of our king,” the woman hissed. “He knows well enough that the mongrel was right. Whosoever controls the waters, controls Outland. Besides, the sooner we finish here, the sooner we can all go home and return our lands to their rightful glory.”

Zerith and Dar’ja listened for a few moments more before carefully pushing themselves away. Thinking over what they had heard, Zerith began wondering if searching for his sister was the best use of his time right now. He knew it was selfish that he should be so concerned with Ger’alin and Alayne – to the point of almost no longer caring what Kael did – but he couldn’t help how he felt. Still, duty tugged at him. As he helped Dar’ja off the rocky wall and stood, his back to the water they would have to swim across, he sighed. “What do you think?” he asked, pointing back the way they had come.

“I think that we’d better consider sending the Disorder of Azeroth to help the druids clean out these caves again. Though how the Horde, Alliance, and the Circle lost control of them once – after we handed them over to them! – is beyond me.”

“Overstretch, no doubt,” Zerith muttered. “Their forces were already spread thin before we got here. Perhaps our antics have not been as great a help as they should have been. After all, we’ve kept the Mag’har and the Dragonmaw to ourselves.”

“Oh, don’t start blaming yourself,” she sighed, turning to glance back up the same direction as her husband.

Zerith started to nod in agreement when he felt strong arms reach around him and a firm hand clap over his mouth. Next to him, he could see Dar’ja struggling against her own captor, squirming silently in a strong grasp. The priest tried to free himself, fearing the same kind of torment that had broken the Blood Knight. Careful of the sound, fearful of capture, wondering what was going on, Zerith and Dar’ja struggled to free themselves. Still, the clutches of their captors held fast, preventing them from fleeing or fighting. Zerith felt himself being dragged back towards the water. Careless now of the noise, he kicked and made strangled groans against the hand pressed firm against his mouth. His eyes widened in shock as he felt the water rushing over him. He wondered if there would be anything left for the druids to find and show to his sister, should she still be alive.

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“He’s coming around,” a harsh voice muttered. Zerith coughed and felt salt water dripping out of his mouth and nose. He sucked in great gulps of air, thankful to be alive.

“Dar’ja!” he demanded.

“She’s fine, priest,” a familiar voice said flatly. “What were you two doing here?”

“Dar’ja!” he said again, his voice a feral growl. Struggling against the bonds that held his hands behind his back, Zerith pushed himself onto his stomach, sighing with relief when he saw Dar’ja, tied up as he was, sleeping. “Who are you?” he demanded of his captors.

“What were you doing in the cavern?” the other demanded back.

“That’s none of your concern,” Zerith snapped, twisting himself around and looking for the speaker. At first, he saw nothing. Then, squinting, he could see a shape squatting in the shadows of the room. Golden eyes glowered at him. “You’re a druid,” he muttered. “Why are you holding us like this? We’re friends with the Cenarion Circle.”

“I don’t trust you blood-borne fools,” the night elf spat. “I trust you and that so-called sister of yours even less.”

“Var’thanos,” another night elven voice said warningly.

“What were you doing in that cavern?” he demanded again, ignoring his companion.

“We were trying to see what was going on,” Zerith said angrily.

“I find it hard to believe you wouldn’t know what your own people have done in the past week.”

“I follow Kael’Thas no longer! I have sworn my allegiance to the naaru and to the Light! I will have nothing to do with one who has allied himself with the Legion!” Zerith shouted, forgetting for a moment where he was. When his words echoed back to him, he winced, praying they had been dragged far away from where he had seen and heard the sin’dorei slave drivers.

“Why then did you steal the Vial from those the naaru had entrusted it to?”

“We didn’t have anything to do with that,” Dar’ja said sleepily. Zerith turned, overjoyed to see that his wife was well. “Alayne went off on her own hook. We’re out here looking for her.”

“That witch is not in these caverns, more’s the pity,” Var’thanos muttered. “I have been watching for her ever since we heard that she was behind the attack on Shattrath. Why the naaru did not kill her for her transgression of the peace is beyond me.”

“What do you know of your prince’s plans?” his companion asked, stepping out of the shadows. Squatting down, she hovered over Zerith, her presence formidable but not threatening. “You claim to have come here seeking the one who stole the Vial; why *here*? It seems rather convenient.”

“I believed she might have come looking for information from Lady Vashj’s personal texts. When we searched the Black Temple, we found much information about the nature of the magic in the Vials. When we saw that Vashj’s chamber had been stripped...”

“Kael’s forces looted it.”

“When we saw that,” he continued, ignoring the interruption, “we figured that, if she had been here, she wasn’t any longer. It looks as if we’ll have to search the rest of the blasted swamp for signs of her,” he sighed. “I wish I knew where she was and what she was doing! At any rate, after we saw that Vashj’s chamber was bare, we decided to see who was here; that’s why we were spying on Kael’s forces. Tell me, if you have been watching for my sister for days, why have you allowed Kael’s forces to retake these caverns? We cleared the naga out of them for you; we handed them over to the joint forces of the Horde, Alliance, and the Circle. Why have you let the hard work we did – the sacrifices we made – go for naught?” he demanded, his voice hot with anger.

“We did not just let them walk in and take these caverns on a whim,” Var’thanos argued. “The Circle set guardians and warders to keep out all intruders. Our allies, the gnomes, were setting up a settlement for their kind among the machines; they had agreed to oversee the division of water and maintain those devices that provide this ‘steam power’ they mentioned being used to control ‘dams’ and ‘levies.’ I don’t pretend to understand,” he sighed. “But, a little over a week ago, we noticed that the amount of water we’d been getting had been dwindling. Consulting with Zabra’jin and Telredor, we learned they also were suffering from shortages. Our first forays back into these caverns were unsuccessful; Kael’s forces must have captured them. I believe they may be numbered among the slaves.”

“Why would Kael’s forces want control of the waters of Zangarmarsh?” Dar’ja wondered aloud.

“The gnomes believe...” Var’thanos began, eyeing the sin’dorei warily. His companion sighed and took over.

“The gnomes believe that some of the pipes carry water to some operation in Netherstorm. They mentioned that some kind of energy had increased the last time we heard from them. Perhaps Kael is working on something and requires water. That is speculation, but it is all we have to go on until we can learn more.”

“The naaru should order an attack on Tempest Keep immediately,” Var’thanos muttered. His companion rolled her eyes. “He’s planning to summon the Legion!”

“The naaru will do as they will,” his companion said evenly. “They have stepped up plans for their outposts in the Netherstorm. Be patient, Var’thanos. Your balance is disrupted.” The man flushed an angry purple and stormed out of the cell. “He mistrusts all of your people,” she explained. “Try as we might to convince him that not all of you are evil, he harbors a hatred towards magi. When first I spotted you, I believed that, perhaps, you were merely agents of the Horde seeking to find a way to free the prisoners.”

“Had I the time and the means, I would,” Zerith said sincerely.

“The Circle has made its own plans to retake the caves. We will not ask you to risk yourselves to reclaim what we lost,” she sighed sadly. With a flick of her wrist, the night elf produced a knife. Pulling Zerith upright, she cut loose his bonds and then performed the same task for Dar’ja. “I will see you both out. Know that none who have the Vials have entered these caves. Of all people, Var’thanos and I would know if that Water had entered here.” Zerith quirked his eyebrows in interest. “It is a long story,” she smiled. “Perhaps one day, when we have the time to discuss such things...but for now, I will see you to the surface. Your prayers for the Circle’s success would be most welcome.”

“Should the Circle need assistance,” he offered. Dar’ja nodded, adding her offer. The druid shook her head.

“It is not necessary. You have proven yourselves to us already – regardless of how Var’thanos acts of late.”

“It may not be necessary,” Zerith agreed dryly, rubbing his wrists where the ropes had cut into them, “but we make the gesture all the same.”

“It is not me you need to convince, sin’dorei,” the woman replied. “Those who need it, will never be convinced,” she added softly, looking off the direction her companion had gone. “Come now. Let me lead you to the sunlight again. May Elune light your path, priest of the Light, and guide you to the one you seek.”

“May she guide us all to the answers, the wisdom, and the peace we pray for daily,” Dar’ja whispered as she and Zerith followed the woman out of the cell and up towards the light of day.

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“Look, Zerith, there’s more of them,” Dar’ja whispered, pointing. “It is a path; I told you!”

“It looked like rock to me,” he sighed. “So, more of them. What do you want to do about it?” he muttered, gesturing towards the sin’dorei creeping along the mountain path out of Zangarmarsh.

“Follow them,” she replied. “Zerith, we’ve searched every inch of this swamp and found no sign of your sister. I’m beginning to doubt we’ll find her in Hellfire Peninsula or Nagrand. I know, I know, we’re supposed to be meeting Jez’ral and Callie at the Refuge later this afternoon to see how their search has gone. Still, we could follow this group into the mountains just to see what they are up to. Perhaps we’d learn something that would be useful to the druids.”

“Admit it, dearest,” he teased, “you just want to get out of this lovely dank, chill, creepy, humid swamp.”

“That too,” she grinned. “That too. Come on. We’ll keep far enough behind them to avoid being seen but close enough to keep track. It’s rock, Zerith; we’re not going to make a lot of noise sneaking over it and we can hide behind these dagger-like outcroppings if we need to.”

“Alright, alright,” he said, watching as the other elves rounded a bend in the path. “We’ll follow them but only to the border. We are not going to leave Callie and Jez’ral to wonder what happened to us.”

Creeping behind the elves, they both tried to calm their irritation when all they overheard was banal, common bragging and swaggering. Dar’ja clasped a hand over her mouth to keep from giggling. Zerith just shook his head and wondered if he had ever been so coarse and vulgar. When the conversation moved from women to weapons, the priest felt a pang, wishing Ger’alin were well and able to be there. The Blood Knight would have been amused – if not mortified; for all his talk, he could be more prudish than Alayne – and would have understood more about the arcane weaponry and tactics the soldiers were discussing. Just when the priest was ready to signal his wife that they had heard enough of nothing, a runner burst onto the scene, staggering into the elves ahead of them, blinded by sweat and completely out of breath. The priest and the paladin hid themselves more deeply in the shadows of the spiky spines and listened to the runner’s report.

“Whoa there,” one of the soldiers muttered, catching the runner just before he fell to the ground. The other quickly unstopped his canteen and offered it to the shaking messenger. The weary elf gulped down the water gratefully between gasps for breath and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “What has you running like it’s the end of the world, Tosmi?”

“Disaster! Ultris! Completely overrun. All the forge-workers dead,” Tosmi said as he fought to catch his breath. “Production completely shut down. Duro is seeing the same problems. Nether beasts, mana eaters... Athanel’s dead. His assistant, Dawnrunner has done what she can but our prince needs every hand he can get.”

“We’ll run the rest of the way there,” the soldiers muttered. “Keep the water. The access tunnel is a quarter-mile southwest of the end of the pass. You know today’s passphrase?” The runner nodded and, taking a last swig of water, began loping back down the path. Zerith and Dar’ja kept themselves hidden, not daring to follow the soldiers now that they ran as fast as their legs would carry them north. Waiting until the runner must have been off the path, they sat silently, pondering what they had just overheard. When he was certain it was safe, Zerith stood up from the shadows and helped Dar’ja to her feet.

“What do you think of that?” he asked. “Sounds as if Kael has suffered a setback.”

“It does sound that way. I wonder if that means he’ll be increasing his attacks or decreasing them. And what was that ‘Ultris’ and ‘Duro’ they spoke of?”

“I don’t know,” Zerith said, shrugging and spreading his hands. “I remember hearing some of the Scryers mention the manaforges in Netherstorm. The only one whose name I can recall is Ara. I wonder who that Dawnrunner they mentioned is. Alayne’s mother was a Dawnrunner. She’s never mentioned having any cousins to me.”

“Zerith, when I was a child, you couldn’t range very far north or east of Suncrown Village without running into a Dawnrunner or Dawnstar. It’s not exactly an uncommon last name,” she chided. “I know you’re worried about Alayne, but she wouldn’t be mixed up in something involving Kael’Thas. Come on,” she said more gently, reaching up to pat his cheek. Her husband stared off towards the north, wishing he’d listened to the Magisters more and wishing he could cut himself in half and go both north and south. With a shake of his head, he glanced down at Dar’ja, kissed her palm, and nodded.

“We shouldn’t keep the others waiting,” he finished for her. Taking her arm in his, the pair began to walk quickly back to the Refuge, each pondering over what they had learned.

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“Why will he not accept that which is freely offered?” the Aldorite priestess wondered to herself as she took her turn at caring for the sickly sin’dorei warrior. “And why does A’dal insist on us wasting so much of our time and energy on one who seems to have given up hope?”

“The naaru see far more than we ever will, Aliria,” a deep voice replied to her musings. “It is not for us to question them; merely to accept that they have divined a plan and our parts in healing this fighter are part of it.”

Sar’la listened to the adults speak from her hiding spot, not understanding all of the discussion and wishing they would talk about something interesting. Miss Alayne had asked her to look after that boy...*well, man, really*, she thought to herself...and the other one who was a priest. But the priest had gone off to look for Miss Alayne while the other man, Ger’alin, just lay in bed, sleeping. Waiting a while longer, the healers left the room, leaving Sar’la alone with the muttering man.

“Alayne, no,” he moaned in his sleep. “Don’t go there. Stay. Wait! Stop, please!” he groaned.

“Hey, Mister Ger’alin,” Sar’la muttered, reaching over and shaking the man gently. He barely moved though she tugged and pushed with all her might. “Wake up. Miss Alayne’s not here. You’re having a bad dream.”

“No! NO!” he shouted, sitting bolt upright in the bed. Sar’la had a firm grip on his shoulder when he jerked upright, pulling her off the ground and making her tumble onto his cot. “Who the devil...?” he asked, blinking.

“Miss Alayne asked me to watch you,” Sar’la said quickly. Ger’alin scowled. “She said you were sick and needed someone to make you laugh.”

“Little girl, get out of here before I hurt you,” he growled. “I’ll do it. I’m a monster!”

“No, you aren’t,” she giggled. “You’re an elf.”

“Just go away!” he groaned, tugging the sheets back over his head and slamming back into the cot. His violent jerking pulled the sheets taut, making Sar’la bounce and tumble from the cot.

“Ouch!” she said when she hit the floor. Ger’alin threw the sheets aside and tried to clamber out to help her up, guilt-stricken that he had hurt a child. “That was fun!” she laughed. “Can we do it again?”

“You’d better get out of here,” he sighed, collapsing on the floor at her feet, unable and unwilling to move. “I might hurt you for real next time.”

“No, you won’t. Besides, that was a fun game. Want me to try to bounce you off the bed this time? It was fun.”

“I don’t think you could do that if you wanted to, little girl,” he said wryly. “What are you doing in here?”

“I told you. Miss Alayne asked me to look after you. She’s my friend and I want to be just like her when I grow up so I’m going to do what she asked me to. Want to get up here and let me try to throw you off this bed? It’s fun!”

“I’m...not certain that’s a good idea, little girl. You should get out of here...”

“Sar’la,” she said simply.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s my name. Sar’la. Not ‘little girl.’ And, besides, you’re awake and talking now. You’ve been asleep and talking since you got here. Maybe that’s why Mr. Zerith went to Hellfire Peninsula. To get you something to make you wake up.”

“He left me here to die,” Ger’alin said bleakly.

“You’re not dying. You’re just sick is all,” Sar’la told him. “You’ll get better. I was sick once and I got better.”

“I’m not...”

“Sar’la, what are you doing here?” a woman’s scandalized voice called out from the doorway. “You know you’re not allowed out of Lower City without permission.”

“I made a promise to a friend to look after her friend,” the girl explained, gesturing to a confused-looking Ger’alin. “You said it’s important to keep our promises.”

“It’s also important for children to obey the adults who take care of them and to follow the rules,” the woman said sternly. “I apologize if she has disturbed your rest, sir. Sar’la, come with me. We must let this man rest and recover from his illness.”

“I’ll come back to visit you again. Next time, I’ll bring my kitten. He can make you laugh,” she whispered confidently as she climbed off the cot. Ger’alin watched her go, feeling strangely comforted and sad. “*Miss Alayne asked me to look over you,*” she’d said. Perhaps...despite everything...perhaps he could...

“No!” he told himself harshly, refusing to consider hope an option. “You are a monster! Die like the other Wretched, you wretched creature!” he growled to himself as he pulled the blankets back over his head and closed his eyes, praying for the final darkness to wash over him. “*Next time, I’ll bring my kitten. He can make you smile,*” he heard as he drifted back off to sleep and its dreams.

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“Any sign of her?” Callie asked, shouting across the inn the minute she saw Zerith and Dar’ja duck in. Her heart pounded with hope; she’d risked a trip back to Shattrath and seen that, if anything, Ger’alin had grown worse in the few days they’d been gone. “Anything?” she asked more quietly when the priest and his wife sat down at the table.

“No sign of Alayne,” Zerith muttered. “But Kael’s forces have retaken the caves where we fought the naga and killed Vashj. Also, we overheard something about a disaster at Ultris and problems at Duro. I have no idea what that means,” he added quickly, seeing the question in the Forsaken’s eyes. “But I’ve let the druids know that something is going on.”

“They lost the caves to Kael?” Callie said, her ire rising and her hand twitching towards one of her daggers. “After everything we did, they just...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Zerith sighed. “They have a plan to take them back again. One that, thankfully, doesn’t involve us. As much as I would love to lend our assistance, we have other priorities at the moment. Did you two find any sign of her?”

“No,” Callie replied, her face turning paler than normal. She licked her lips nervously. “I don’t want to talk about what we did see.” Jez’ral shuddered and rose quickly from the table, running out of the inn. Zerith could hear gagging noises and felt his own stomach turn in sympathy as the other man threw up. “It wasn’t pretty.”

“Pretty or not, it sounds important. What did you find that has both of you green around the gills?” Dar’ja demanded, steeling herself for bad news. Jez’ral staggered back to the table and collapsed, his legs turned to water.

“After speaking with Nazgrel, we were able to fan out and cover most of Hellfire Peninsula the first day,” Callie began. “Jez’ral and I searched the entire area around the Dark Portal and stopped to ask if Alayne had passed through. She hasn’t. A’dal was right about that. After we finished exploring the caves over by Zeth’gor and spoke with the orcs there, we headed back to Thrallmar to get some sleep. The next morning, we spoke with the Thrallmar forces that had ranged out on our behalf. Aside from ghosts and the odd hell boar, they found nothing. So...well...we know that demons would be attracted to the power she’s carrying around, right?” Callie asked, stalling, not wanting to discuss what came next. “So...we

borrowed a couple of wyverns from the roost and flew up to where Kazzak is. That demon is enormous,” she said, spreading her hands as far apart as they would go. “And, when you’re on that ledge with him, his roars are deafening. We could scarcely hear ourselves think.” She cut off when Jez’ral leapt back to his feet and raced back out of the inn, gagging and choking. “It was there that we saw...we saw...oh Light, excuse me,” she murmured, running outside to join the sin’dorei warlock. Zerith and Dar’ja exchanged glances, their eyes widening and their hearts pounding as they began to fear the worst. When the Forsaken stumbled back to the table moments later, both sin’dorei braced themselves to hear about Alayne’s death. What the rogue told them made both of their stomachs clench and begin roiling as fiercely as tempests.

“Up on the high ridge, where the Doom Lord Kazzak roams, we saw elves mingling with demons,” the Forsaken grimaced, scrubbing her mouth with her hand as if to remove a foul taste. “The elves were...welcomed. Tolerated, at least. The demons did not attack them. We saw them...the elves...they...some of the demons opened their arms, dripping their blood into chalices. The elves...they *drank* it and...” Zerith held up a hand for silence. He clenched his fists, pressing them against the table as he tried to hold down his breakfast. Dar’ja rushed outside to join Jez’ral. After long moments, Zerith slowed bitter bile and, taking a deep breath, stared up at the Forsaken, dumbfounded.

“Kael has his followers...,” he whispered, unable to continue. Callie nodded, knowing how he felt.

“That’s not the worst bit either,” the Forsaken said, tears springing to her eyes. “I think...I think Alayne may have run afoul of them. One or two mentioned something about a Vial from Illidan. Now, I know; Kael’Thas was one of Illidan’s trusted lieutenants. So was Vashj. Maybe Kael had a Vial just like the snake-lady did. Or maybe...maybe when she ran off, Alayne was found out by some of Kael’s followers and they captured or killed her...”

“Light, I don’t want to think about it,” Zerith whispered, pressing fingers to his lips and closing his eyes. “She can’t be dead; she has to be captured or still wandering free. We can’t keep thinking the worst. We just can’t!”

“A saying among my people,” Callie muttered softly, quoting, “‘Hope for the best, prepare for the worst; that way, surprises are pleasant.’ At any rate,” she finished, “we need to return to Shattrath and pass this news on to the others. Maybe one of the Scryers can tell us if Kael already had a Vial. If so, we go over to Nagrand and then up to Blade’s Edge Mountains to find Alayne. If not...”

“If not, we head straight to Tempest Keep and make an end of it once and for all. For Alayne and for Ger’alin, the two latest casualties of my mad plan to assault the Black Temple,” Zerith growled, his voice thick with self-loathing.

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Voren’tal settled himself on the stone bench outside of the Terrace of Light. Midday was well past; he could sit out in the sun, now, without having to worry about it searing instead of warming his bones. He leaned his head back, letting the warm, but still cool, stone of the building support it while he closed his eyes. Hopefully passers-by would think the old man was just taking one of the short naps common to those who had reached his advanced age. As he sought the peace that he’d found in serving the naaru, his thoughts turned to the young man lying in the sickroom. The naaru were no longer confident that the man would recover. Too much of his strength had been spent – thrown away – resisting their efforts. Instead of staring sightlessly at the ceiling, Ger’alin slept. His sleep was deep but restless, no doubt plagued by the nightmares and terrors only a mind succumbing to despair could create. He had not woken, had not moved, since the morning after his friends had departed to search out his wife. “Light, let her return before the end,” he muttered, setting aside his anger at the

warlock who had violated the sanctuary of the city he'd come to call home. Settling back down, crossing his arms over his chest, Voren'thal sought the inner peace he'd learned to cherish after foreswearing his vows to Kael'Thas and pledging allegiance to the naaru.

"The Light can hear you where ever you are, Voren'thal," A'dal chided gently, his chimes sounding amused. "There is no need to go outside, into the sunlight, and make your prayers facing the star of the day."

"I'm an old man, A'dal. Set in my ways. I'll pray how I want," he grumped. He and the naaru had had this discussion many times. "Still the same?"

"He sleeps still. We all pray he will awaken well in his body and mind. The choice is his."

"And you still think we should let that wife of his just walk back in here if she wants to?" he asked. "That's what I came out here to ponder over. Whether or not I should – or even could – keep the Vindicators, the druids, and my Magisters from killing her should she show her face back here again. Right now, that's the only thing we and those blue brutes can agree on – that she ought to be punished and punished soundly."

"She did as she was destined to do," A'dal said, his chimes irritatingly reasonable. "Now it is up to you and the others to do as you are called to do by the hand of fate." Voren'thal snorted elaborately.

"Would that you would speak more clearly," he sighed. "I'm too old to waste time figuring out riddles and enigmas, A'dal."

"We only ever..."

"Guide, you never command, direct, or dictate," Voren'thal finished wryly. "I've heard that answer every single time I've complained. I'm sorry, old friend. I should be more patient like the Aldor but I burn for the chance to..."

"Your day is quickly approaching," A'dal whispered softly. "Defend the bridge, Voren'thal." The elder man scrambled off his bench, his heart pounding as he raced to the bridge, the words of spells to sear the attackers ready on his lips. Embarrassment flooded his face, heating his cheeks and making his eyes bulge when he saw only the denizens of Shattrath and its allies crossing the bridge. The elder gave himself a shake, ready to flay the naaru for this latest joke, when his eyes fell on a trio of sin'dorei and a Forsaken making their slow way over the path. The four looked as if they had been told the hour and the manner of their deaths and saw that day swiftly approaching.

"What news?" he demanded, striding up to the priest who led the Disorder of Azeroth. "Did you find your sister?"

Zerith blinked, taken aback. "How did you..."

"You live a few more centuries and then you can tell me how insulting it is to have a youngling try to pull a stunt like that right under your nose," Voren'thal growled. "Your sister will never set foot back in the city she attacked and no order I give can make it otherwise. Now, did you find her? Or her corpse?"

"We found no sign of her," Zerith replied, "and had we, I would not tell you, ally or no, liege lord or no. Instead, we learned that Kael has finally descended completely into madness. He has taken control of the underwater caverns of Zangarmarsh, staffing them with slaves again, draining water for some plot he has on-going in the Netherstorm. Dar'ja and I followed two of his soldiers and overheard them speak with a messenger sent to recall troops back to the Netherstorm. Something about a disaster at Ultris and problems at Duro. Do those names mean anything to you?"

"Ultris, Duro, Coruu, B'naar, Ara: they are manaforges Kael has constructed in the Netherstorm," Voren'thal replied. "You would know that had you paid attention and remained in Shattrath more than a few days, young man. I would surmise that Kael needs vast quantities of water to keep them running. If he's stepped up production, he could be planning an attack."

I'll warn A'dal. Is that all that you learned? That hardly constitutes 'madness.' We are at war."

"No," Zerith said, his lips quivering and his stomach churning. "Some of Kael's followers have..." leaning over on the other side of E'la, Zerith let his stomach empty itself. The other three grinned at him, their grins closer to frowns, in commiseration. Voren'thal raised an eyebrow, wondering what news could be so ill that it would make one physically ill. "Demon blood," was all the priest managed to gasp out after he finished spewing the contents of his stomach. Voren'thal clenched his jaw tightly, fighting down his own illness at the words. Zerith, pale and green around the lips, opened his mouth to try to explain but the elder cut him off with a gesture.

"That's...faugh! That even Kael would do that makes me sick!" Voren'thal spat. "No, say no more, priest. That is dire news indeed. To fight our own is bad enough. To fight our own when they are twisted into mockeries of their former selves...well, we will soon learn how the orcs must have felt. Did you see your sister among *those*? Is that what has you spewing?"

"We did not see her among them, no," Jez'ral said coldly, his frost taking the heat from the elder man's face. "She would never betray us to them. Still, we have a question and you will answer it."

"Oh, I will, will I?" Voren'thal muttered.

"You will or I will make you wish you had," Jez'ral said, the chill leaving his voice, making his tone bland and banal. Zerith, Dar'ja, and Callie stared at the warlock. His placid tone made his threat even more horrifying. "We overheard some of Kael's followers mention a Vial. Did Kael have one already or does this mean that we can end our search for that young woman and begin preparations for her funeral rites? She will have them, Voren'thal! She'll have them if I have to kill every being in this city to make it so!"

"She'll have them, warlock," A'dal's chimes rang across all of their minds. "She'll have them when her time comes. Voren'thal, tell them what they wish to know. The information they have gleaned is worth that much, at least."

"Illidan gave Kael a Vial when Kael swore allegiance to him. It was a way of...binding Kael to him. That Vial was both a blessing and a curse. By itself, it's not enough to re-ignite the Sunwell. Oh, believe me, we tried," Voren'thal sighed sadly, remembering the desperate hopes of those days when they dared to believe they might be able to free themselves of their oaths to the mongrel Lord of Outland, the hope that they might be able to reverse the withering trend and cure all of the Wretched. "If Kael knew that the other two Vials were out there, freed from their powerful masters, in the hands of a little girl...he'd have his scouts scouring every inch of this broken world. What one cannot do alone, all three together might have enough power to accomplish. It was a scheme Kael raved over, sometimes. As much as he wanted the other two Vials, neither Vashj nor Illidan trusted him enough to give him that power. At first, we all thought it was just a ploy to keep us dependent on them. Now, however...dark as they were, they were right not to trust Kael!"

Jez'ral's face fell. "So, he had a Vial already." Brightening, the warlock grinned, "Well, that means that we still have a chance. She may still be alive and well. We'll search Nagrand and then Blade's Edge. She's got to be in one of those areas."

"Then we search still," Zerith sighed. Glaring down at Voren'thal, he heeled his hawkstrider on, leading the others through the shortcut on the Aldor's tier. The elder watched the four ride on, his heart heavy, wondering if the young woman hadn't betrayed them all.

"Have Thalodien report to my office at once," Voren'thal whispered to a young elven hunter. "Send Larynna as well. I have a task for the pair of them and they need to get started on it as soon as they can."

"As you wish, commander," the hunter said, bowing and striding off.

“This isn’t what I wish at all, young man,” Voren’tal muttered to the hunter’s back. “If I had my way, we’d all of us be back home, basking in the sunlight, taking our ease. No,” he said, shaking his head and feeling the gnawing, mindless worm of dread begin to twist his guts as he thought about what Kael was doing and what that young woman might have just handed to him, “this isn’t what I wish at all.” Giving his head a firm shake, praying Thalodien would not find what he feared the man would, Voren’tal began walking as quickly as he could back to his library and office, hoping they would be able to put an end to their insane prince’s schemes before disaster fell on them all.

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Ger’alin tried to stifle his anger, to keep from unleashing it upon the child who persisted in pestering him almost daily. All he wanted was to sleep. Even if sleep brought nightmares and terrors, it still was better than laying awake knowing that Alayne was going to be killed and it was his fault.

“This is Equina,” Sar’la said, holding up a pony doll. “She’s my favorite. One day, when I get a magic horse like Miss Alayne has, I’ll name her Equina too. Do you like horses, Mister Ger’alin?”

“I like horses,” he muttered sullenly. “I have one named Lucky.”

“Is he magic?”

“No. He’s stubborn.”

“Oh. Well, maybe you’re not nice enough to him. I’ll bet he just wants to be friends and you probably don’t give him any apples or sugar.”

“If he’ll promise not to tell on us, I’ll give him a whole orchard of apples,” she had said, he recalled. Closing his eyes, he could see the sly, self-satisfied grin on her face. She’d been proud of herself for that plan. He’d been proud of her for pulling it off, even if she had scared the life out of him by sneaking away to try it on her own. With a sigh, he lifted his hand to gently pet the kitten curled up on his chest. The warmth and the weight reminded him of how Alayne used to curl up next to him, her head on his chest, sleeping peacefully and trusting that he would not let anything happen to her while she left herself open to attack from any side. Fighting back the anger, depression, and frustration that made him want to grab the kitten by the scruff of its neck and fling it off of him, to fling away the painful memories it awoke, he continued to rub between its ears. In its sleep, the kitten purred and flicked its ears.

“He likes you,” Sar’la laughed, clapping her hands. Ger’alin had been listening to her babbling with half an ear. “I want you to have him. He can keep you company when I can’t sneak in here.”

“Take him back with you,” Ger’alin said, forcing himself to adopt a pleasant tone. As irritating as the orphan was, he knew he would feel worse without her daily visits even if he did want to sleep. “You should go now. I’m really tired.”

“Okay,” she said pleasantly enough, gathering up the few toys she had brought to try to tempt him out of bed. Gathering the kitten in her arms, she smiled at Ger’alin. “I’ll bring a game tomorrow. Are you any good at jacks?”

“I was an expert at it when I was your age,” he muttered. “Marbles, too.”

“Oh wow,” she said in awe. “What about war?”

“Sar’la, by the time I was your age, I had killed at least a million dragons, skeletons, and ogres. But war isn’t a game. It’s a horrible thing. I hope you never experience it as anything other than a game.”

“If it’s so bad, then why do people do it?” she asked curiously. The wars that had wracked her world and had taken her parents had been old when she was born. A world filled with war was the only kind the orphan girl knew. Ger’alin looked at her, seeing so much of

himself as an orphan. Only, he had grown up and had his childhood in a world where war was a far off concept. Something the humans did and the elves only got involved in because of ancient ties and promises made centuries before Ger'alın's own parents, let alone Ger'alın himself, had been born. The girl deserved an answer of some kind. She had been faithful to her promise to 'Miss Alayne' even if it tore Ger'alın apart trying to be kind to her when all he wanted to do was wallow in self-pity and recrimination.

"I don't know, Sar'la," he said honestly. "We fight because there are others who force us to. If we had our way, we'd have peace. But, as long as one side wants to fight or wants to force the other side to be its slaves, there will be war." The girl watched the Blood Knight solemnly. He continued, trying to make sense of something that still confused him. "Frankly, if the alternative weren't so bad, I would say we should stop fighting. But, the alternative is to be enslaved. To never be able to choose for ourselves what we want to do or who we want to be. In some cases, not even dying would free us," he shivered, recalling the horrors of the Scourge advance from his youth. "We're fighting because we have no choice. There are bad people out there who..."

"Is Miss Alayne a bad person now?" the girl asked, her tone quavering. Ger'alın stared at her in shock.

"I...ye...not...I don't want to believe she is," he answered lamely. "I believe that everything she's done is my fault. I...I did something to her that may have set her on the path to attacking this city. Really, it is my fault," he said harshly. "If anyone is a 'bad person,' it's me."

"But you're not a..."

"Evil can wear many faces, you know," he said quietly, staring at the ceiling. "Someone you trust, someone you think would never hurt you...they can turn on you in a second. Someone you put all of your faith in can betray you. I did it. I forced her down this path and, Light help me, if they find her, if they kill her...her blood will forever stain my hands!" he shouted, clawing at his eyes. Sar'la backed out of the room, her eyes wide, her mouth hanging open, and her heart pounding. Ger'alın continued to wail and shriek that he was one of the most vile, evil, black-hearted creatures the Light had created. Aldorite priests and Scryer retainers came running to the room, carrying vials of sedatives and cords to bind him. None of the adults noticed a little girl, terrified and confused by the drastic, quick-silver changes in someone she'd been asked to look after, backing away, her kitten clutched to her chest.

"You're not bad, Mister Ger'alın," she whispered, rubbing her cheek against her kitten's head, seeking comfort. "If you were bad, you wouldn't feel so guilty all the time. At least, that's what Matron says. That if we feel guilty for doing wrong, then that means that we're good children and, as long as we don't keep doing wrong, we will continue to be good and the Light will continue to protect us."

Turning on her heels, Sar'la shuffled back to Lower City, pondering over what Ger'alın had said before he started screaming.

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"No, no," Ger'alın moaned over and over again as he saw Alayne riding on the back of a nether drake, casting bolts of flame and shadow upon the inhabitants of Shattrath. Bodies burned and flew apart as her spells landed. He winced as he watched her tear through those who should have been her allies, her face blank and expressionless as she watched friend after friend die. "No, please, stop," he pleaded.

The scene shifted suddenly, causing Ger'alın to lose his balance. Landing heavily on his seat, he watched as Alayne cast some spell over the Vials. A golden light began to shine

forth from them, lighting her face up like the sun at high noon. He threw a hand up in front of his eyes as the glow grew, enveloping both of them, blinding him and defeanening him as it roared past. He felt as if he were being torn apart by the power she had unleashed. Howling winds lashed at him, pushing him back until he felt himself smack into a wall. Covering his eyes with his hands to protect them from the grit being flung against him by the wild winds, Ger'alin prayed that they would subside and that he could ask Alayne what had happened. When the howling air finally grew calm again, he slowly lowered his hands from his face, bracing himself for it to start up again. He screamed when his eyes fell on the form of his wife laying on her side near where he had been sitting earlier. Scrambling over to her on his hands and knees, Ger'alin turned her gently, praying that she was merely unconscious. Her staring eyes spoke the truth. "No, Alayne," he begged. "Don't be dead. Don't have killed yourself trying to help me. I'm not worth it!" The bodies of those she had slain to steal back the other Vial appeared around him, their sightless gazes accusing him, damning him. "I wasn't worth it!" he screamed. "You didn't have to do this! You never had to walk this path for me!"

"Is Miss Alayne a bad person now?"

The bloody corpses shivered as if she were casting her spells anew. Once again, he could see her flying over Shattrath, raining down death and destruction to try to help him. He knew that had to be the reason she'd done it. No matter that the Scryers and Aldor all thought that, as a warlock, she lusted after power. She would do anything to aid those she loved. Anything.

"Is Miss Alayne a bad person now?"

"No!" he yelled. "No, it's my fault! Mine!" Alayne dismounted and rushed into the library. A pair of Vindicators grabbed her, pulling her back, dragging her towards a block stained with wet blood. Tying her down, one of them hefted a sword over her neck. "No! She did it for me! Me! Kill me and not her!" Again, the scene shifted. Alayne remained strapped to the chopping block, the Vindicator holding his sword over her head but the bruises on her neck and face, the bruises he had put there in his anger and frustration, appeared again. He could see himself standing beside her, his foot reared back to slam into her ribs. Fear twisted her features as she stared at him blankly.

"Is Miss Alayne a bad person now?"

"No, she is not!" he screamed. "No matter what she's done; she did it for me! Blame me for it! Don't hold her to account for whatever insanity she wrought because I pushed her to it! It's my fault! Mine!"

"I make my own choices," he heard her whisper, staring up at him from the block. The sword hovered inches above her neck. "I have wrought my own destiny. Do not blame yourself for my actions. Had I it to do all over again, I would do no differently. This is the fate I have earned."

"Alayne, no!" he cried, collapsing to his knees as he watched her be executed for her crimes. "I pushed you to this no matter what you say... It's my fault..."

"Is Miss Alayne a bad person now?"

Ger'alin could feel hot, bitter tears of remorse and recrimination trickling down his face as he slept.

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"Hey now," Ger'alin heard a gentle voice whisper. "Don't cry. It will be okay. Look, you're upsetting my kitten."

"Sar'la, what are you doing here?" he groaned as he opened his eyes. She was sitting up on the cot next to him, her little kitten curled up next to his ear, licking his temple as if to comfort him. "It's well past your bed-time," he muttered, noting that the room was dark and

the only sounds, apart from their voices, were the soft chirps of crickets and other nocturnal creatures scampering about while the sentient slept.

“Beli came up here. He was worried about you,” she replied primly, pointing to the kitten. Ger’alin reached back and, taking grip of the girl’s pet gently, lifted him and set the kitten on his chest as he normally did. The little cat pawed the elven man’s chin softly in greeting before settling himself down in his accustomed spot. “I told you he likes you.”

“You still should not have sneaked out of the orphanage and up here. You shouldn’t be visiting me so much no matter what promise you made to Alayne. She wouldn’t want you to be upsetting yourself and worrying about me. I’m a grown man, Sar’la. I can take care of myself.”

“If you can take care of yourself, why are you in here still? Even Dar’lio wasn’t sick as long as you have been and he was really bad sick with lung fever last winter. What’s happening to you? After the priests leave, you look fine. But then, by the next morning before they come to look at you, you’re all bony and pale again.”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” he said stoutly.

“But it scares me to see you get like that. What did you do to make it happen? I don’t ever want it to happen to me.”

“It won’t. It only happens to people who deserve it.”

The girl paused for a long while before exhaling slowly. “It only happens to bad people?” she asked at long last. He nodded slowly and she drew a shivering breath. “Then will it happen to Miss Alayne, too?” she asked, her voice quavery. Ger’alin’s eyes flew open in shock.

“No, no it won’t,” he said quickly. “But, you shouldn’t be around me so much. You don’t need to worry about me anymore.”

“But we’re friends...”

“Sar’la...”

“No, we’re friends now,” she said firmly.

“Yes, we are,” he said quickly, “which is why, as your friend, I want you to go back to the orphanage and get some sleep. You need to rest. And, I want you to stay outside all day tomorrow and play in the sunshine. You’re going to be as pale as I am if you keep staying inside with me all the time like you have been,” he added, congratulating himself on a way of getting the child out of his hair for a day or two. He liked the little girl but the constant attention had been wearing the last few days when all he wanted was to be left alone. The girl said something so softly Ger’alin couldn’t hear her. “What was that?” he asked.

“I can’t sleep. I keep having bad dreams about Miss Alayne getting hurt and about you getting sicker.” Ger’alin’s face softened while part of his mind began shouting at the other part for letting the little girl get this involved. Children should be protected from, not exposed to, the failings of their elders. “Tell me about how you made the orcs be our friends?” she asked. “I heard it was you and Miss Alayne and Mister Zerith who did it.”

“We learned that the orcs had drunk demon blood,” he began, grinning when Sar’la winced elaborately in disgust. “Well, they had a good reason for doing it at the time. They were afraid of the Legion. Illidan Stormrage offered them his protection and convinced them to drink the blood so they would be stronger.”

“Drinking demon blood makes you strong?”

“Yes, but at a very high price. It makes you easy to control by those who know how. Like, Alayne, she could use her magic to force the orcs to do what she wanted. But, she wouldn’t ever do anything like that unless she believed they were beyond saving and were completely evil. Alayne hates slavery,” he muttered to himself, recalling her reaction to seeing the Broken slaves in Zangarmarsh. “Well, the orcs drank it because they believed they needed to be stronger in order to fight the Legion. Illidan started using them to make weapons

and enslave dragons so he could take over all of Outland. We found out which demon Illidan had used...”

“It was Magtheridon,” Sar’la interrupted.

“Yes, it was,” he agreed. “When we figured that out, we killed that demon. Doing that freed the orcs from the effects of drinking his blood and I was able to get them to listen to me about serving the naaru and fighting the Legion without having to corrupt their own people. After that, they decided to join with us if we would help them kill Illidan so that he couldn’t threaten to hurt them again.”

“So, the orcs did something bad but they are making up for it?” she asked, summarizing. Ger’alin nodded. “So, Miss Alayne can make up for the bad thing she did later on because, like the orcs, she probably had a really good reason for doing it. You should go find her and ask her why and then tell the Aldor and Scryers so that she won’t be in trouble.”

“It’s not that simple, Sar’la,” he sighed sadly.

“Why not? If we can forgive the orcs and be friends with them after they all drank demon blood,” she grimaced, sticking her tongue out, “then we can forgive Miss Alayne. The orcs did a lot worse than just blow up a building. They tried to *kill* people. Kids, even.” Ger’alin stared at the girl in shock. “Miss Alayne didn’t kill anyone. She just knocked out Mister Jez’ral. Everyone was talking about it the morning after it happened. The worst hurts were bruises and broken bones from where big rocks fell off buildings when the dragon breathed on them. They can’t blame all of that on her. That was the dragon’s fault.”

“She didn’t kill anyone?” he asked uncertainly.

“Nope. She just took something important and ran off from what I hear. I asked Matron what it was that got taken and she told me it was none of my business. Do you know what it was?”

“Sar’la, it’s time for you to go to sleep now,” he said suddenly, feeling a rising hope. Alayne had not killed anyone. She hadn’t even seriously injured anyone. All she’d done was...*attack the sanctuary city of Light to steal an immensely powerful object and run off to the Light-alone-knows-where with it to do the Light-alone-knows-what with it*, he reminded himself bleakly. “Go on, Sar’la. And, thank you.”

“Thank you for what?” she asked as she scooped up her kitten and climbed down from the cot.

“I’ll explain it when you’re older,” he grinned as she rolled her eyes and snuck out of the room. Settling back into his bed more comfortably, Ger’alin tried to close his eyes and find a moment’s peace from the long battle he felt beginning within him. Hope and despair pulled him in opposite directions as he prayed for the peaceful darkness of undisturbed – and possibly unending – sleep.