

“No way she would go up there. She’d have to fly and you know how much she hates that,” Dar’ja grinned, trying to make light of the situation. “Besides, she’d have had to wade through those demons and, if what you say is true, they’d be attracted to the power of the Vials.”

“We cannot afford to leave any stone unturned,” Zerith sighed, staring up at the cliffs. “I wish Ger’alin were here. I wish he were well. He’s the only one who could or would scale that mountain. He’d do it in a heartbeat if he thought Alayne might be up there.”

“Do you really think she might be up there, though?” Dar’ja said absently, staring up at the heights.

“She ran off with a nether dragon, it seems,” Zerith replied. “And she said she didn’t want to be followed and she was going somewhere to study the Vials ‘at her leisure.’ I think that, if she were convinced it was to help Ger’alin, she could quite easily steel herself to hide in the high passes. Now, the question is this: how do we get up there? I’m not strong enough to climb that myself,” Zerith admitted, feeling a pang at the admission.

“No way,” Jez’ral muttered. “Not even for Miris and Tal’ar’s daughter.”

“I could give it a try,” Callie offered.

“Would you like your remains buried or burned?” Dar’ja teased. “No, Zerith’s right, the only one of us who could scale that with any hope of surviving is Ger’alin...were he in his normal good health. Ugh! The more I think on it, the more I’m convinced that you’re right and she’s up there. That would be the perfect spot to hide, knowing that only Ger’alin could get up there and he’s in no condition to make the attempt. What?” she asked, startled when Zerith suddenly snapped his fingers as if he had had an idea.

“Ger’alin’s the only one who could climb up there,” he said brightly.

“I know,” Dar’ja replied.

“Ger’alin’s the only one who could climb up there,” he repeated, his voice picking up excited heat.

“Yes, Zerith, we know that,” Callie muttered.

“Ger’alin’s the only one who could climb up there,” he said for the third time, a broad grin on his face as he stared up the cliff. “Ger’alin is the only one who could climb...”

“Up there! We heard you the first time,” Jez’ral snapped. “Ger’alin is lying on his deathbed in Shattrath. He’s not going to climb up there in this lifetime,” the warlock said testily. “I’ll give it a try. Light, how I hate heights,” he whimpered, stepping up and beginning to try to pull himself up the stone wall. Zerith ran over and grabbed the warlock around the waist, pulling him off the cliff and back onto the ground before he could get more than a few feet up. “What was that for? I said I’d do it!”

“Ger’alin’s the only one who could climb up there,” Zerith said, glaring at the warlock. “And I just thought of a way to pull him out of his despondency, reunite him with his wife, and stop Alayne from doing whatever crazy thing she’s planning on doing up there. Hear me out,” he continued, seeing the irritated looks on their faces at his constant repetitions. “We’re ninety percent certain she’s hiding up there, right?” The others nodded doubtfully. “We go back to Shattrath. We tell Ger’alin that we’re one hundred percent certain she’s up there. Tell him we saw a blue-tinted dragon flying around.”

“That’s a lie, Zerith,” Dar’ja said caustically. “If we lie to him and he goes up there, by some miracle of the Light, and she’s not there? Then what?”

“We’ll cross that canyon when we get to it. She’s got to be up there. If she’s not there, where would she be? Blade’s Edge Mountains or the Netherstorm. We’d still need him to climb in the mountains, right? So, this is a warm up.”

“It’s still lying to him,” his wife pointed out.

“It’s a lie for a good cause,” Zerith snapped. “It may give him the kick in the rear he needs to get over this sulking fit he’s having that is killing him! Do you have any better ideas, dearest wife?” he said, his tone biting.

“No, I don’t,” she said sharply, “I just don’t like the idea of going and lying to a sick man, getting his hopes up, getting him to climb up a huge mountain, and then not being able to do anything about it if he gets up there, doesn’t find her, and decides to have another pouting session. At least in Shattrath there are people around who can force feed him and take care of him.”

“Look, if he goes up there and doesn’t come down after, say, a day, we ride over to Shadowmoon Valley and see if we can convince Mor’ghor to talk one of the drakes into lifting one of us up there. They think highly of Ger’alin, after all.”

“And why don’t we just go and ask them for a lift now?” Callie wondered. “We go up there, find her if she’s there, and bring her back down here. Problem solved as far as I’m concerned.”

“Only that leaves us still having to find a way to sneak her into Shattrath or get him out of there. No, I think making him believe that he’s her only hope will be the best way of solving this whole mess,” Zerith said. “And, I’m going to do this whether or not any of you agree with me. If you are dead set against my idea, then just stay in Garadar and keep quiet until it’s over.” The others stared at the ground. Dar’ja lifted a hand to wipe her eye; she hated it when she and her husband were at odds but she could not condone lying to a dying man. “Look, it’s a desperate plan, I know,” he sighed, walking over to her and putting his hands on her shoulders. “It’s the only thing I can think of, though. Were I in his situation, hearing that you were in danger and only I could reach you would be a sure-fire way to get me up and about and focused on helping *you* instead of feeling sorry for myself.”

“Alright, alright,” Dar’ja said at last, reaching up and embracing her husband. “I’ll go along with it. But, the minute he heads up those rocks, I’m riding hell for leather for the Dragonmaw to make certain your rescue plan will be in place. Knowing you, you’d leave it until the last minute,” she teased, her eyes still sparkling with unshed tears. The other two looked away, giving the couple a moment’s privacy.

“And, if she is up there and we fly up to find them...um...celebrating,” Callie whispered to Jez’ral, “we make certain we’ve got some itchweed with us, just to make things interesting.”

~*~*~*~

Tau’re stood outside the door to Ger’alin’s sickroom, waiting to hear the day’s report on the man’s status. He’d been down to the pre-arranged meeting place already, looking for a sign that said Alayne had been found. Sighing, he tried not to think about the disappointment he’d felt at seeing nothing. “Any change?” he asked, his normally booming voice quiet. The Aldorite priestess who was leaving the room jumped as if he had shouted.

“I...cannot say,” she answered finally, wringing her hands as if she wanted to say more but were afraid of getting the big bull’s hopes up and having him crush her when he was disappointed. “He seems to be resting more peacefully now. He cries out less and, when he does speak, he seems to be pleading with someone. A’dal seems oddly hopeful, telling us to redouble our efforts.”

Tau’re nodded slowly. “That is good, then.”

“He still is very weak and still refuses to accept complete healing. His spirit seems...torn.”

“If only Callie were here,” Tau’re murmured. “She could probably tell you more about how he thinks. Aside from his wife, his Forsaken friend knows him better than any person in existence.”

“I see,” the priestess said, her distaste at the mention of the undead clear. “You may go in, if you wish. If you see a little girl sneak in there, try to keep her out. He’s got an orphan who seems to have adopted him and we’ve run her out of there almost every day now.”

“Ger’alin was an orphan himself,” Tau’re said. “Perhaps she has helped him in some way. Don’t worry; I will send her out to play. A sickroom is no place for a child. I agree with you there, priestess,” he finished politely. The draenei nodded uncertainly and swept off, bustling about on some errand understandable only by other healers. Tau’re watched her leave and then ducked into the room, pulling up a small stool to the side of Ger’alin’s cot and watching his friend sleep. “I hope you find answers or peace where ever you may,” he whispered to the slumbering sin’dorei. “Whether from an orphaned child or dreams, find whatever it is you need to be well. Your wife will sear all of us to the bone if we let you die. I wonder what she’s up to. What is her plan? Why did she do what she did? No worries, my friend,” he muttered in his native tongue. “Whatever she’s done, where ever she is, the Earth Mother will watch over her and welcome her home. You rest, now. I’ll just sit here and guard your rest until you awaken.”

~*~*~*~

The room was warm and bright. The smell of baking bread hung in the air, making Ger’alin’s mouth water. “Honey bread,” he said, drool on his lips. “Honey bread and roast beef with ground-up sansem leaves. What’s the occasion?” he asked as he sniffed the air, catching a faint whiff of his wife’s herbal soap.

“Your promotion, my fine Ranger-General,” Alayne laughed.

“I’m only a Captain of the Guard,” he laughed modestly, glancing down to see that he bore the uniform and insignia of the third-highest rank in the Silvermoon army. “Ranger-General Brightwing would be most displeased if I started claiming his rank.”

“You’ll get there one day. After all, you are one of Silvermoon’s finest.”

“And you are incredibly biased,” he grinned, walking up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. Burying his face in her neck, he inhaled deeply. “But I was promoted a month ago and you whipped up a feast that still has my stomach bursting. What’s the occasion this time?”

“You know me too well,” she laughed, her laughter like the golden peal of a bell. “I can’t keep anything from you, can I?” He smiled and stepped back just enough to let her turn around in his arms. His grin slid from his lips when he saw her face. Hovering over her smiling countenance was a mask of sheer terror.

“Alayne, what’s the matter?” he asked, concerned.

“Nothing,” she laughed. The mask over her face began screaming silently. Ghostly arms reached for him, fingers curled like talons, reaching for him. Ger’alin recoiled, staring at his wife in shock and fear. From behind the apparition of horror, Alayne regarded him with confusion. “Ger’alin?”

“What’s happening?” he demanded.

“What’s the matter, Ger’alin?” she asked worriedly. “It’s not that...that...what happened in Shadowmoon all those years ago, is it?”

“Alayne, for the love of all that is holy, tell me what’s going on here!” he shouted, grabbing her by the shoulders and trying to focus on her true face. The mask continued to obscure his view. “Please, sweetheart, please!”

“Ger’alin, you’re hurting me,” she whimpered. He pulled his hands away, running them over his eyes and peering at her between his fingers. Suddenly, her back was facing him and her arms were raised above her head as if she were channeling magical energies. A bright light in front of her made her appear as just a silhouette and blurred the figures standing near her.

“What the...Alayne? Alayne!”

She whirled around to face him, her face painted with terror as the mask had been earlier. Stumbling, she tripped, falling backwards, her hands clawing at the air in front of her as if to find something to cling to. Ger’alin rushed towards her but she fell, vanishing through the floor. He stumbled over to where she had fallen, startled to see a pool of golden water. But that was all he saw. No trace remained of his wife. Then, a shadow covered him and he heard dark laughter ringing through the air. Looking up, he saw...

~*~*~*~

Oh no, not again, Ger’alin thought as he tossed in his sleep. *Not these dreams again! Light forgive me! Alayne, forgive me!* he prayed, seeking that which he only now dared believe he could receive.

~*~*~*~

“Alayne, get back from there,” Ger’alin called out. “You know you have no head for heights.”

“But it’s such a nice view,” she muttered, craning her head to gaze down into the canyon gorge. “I’m glad you brought me out here. It’s very pretty. Albeit in a very arid, desert kind of manner.”

“I’m glad you like it but could you just come away from the edge, please? You’re making me nervous.”

“I’ll come away when I’m ready,” she replied. “I just want to enjoy the view. There’s something about it...it’s important to me. It’s important to you, too.”

“Please just come back!” he begged, his stomach clenching. “Alayne!”

“But it’s important!”

“Nothing is more important than your life!”

“Oh really?” she asked, sounding amused. “Then why don’t you come over here to me? It’s important.”

“Maybe I will,” he growled back, staring to move towards her. He glanced down at the ground in irritation and confusion when his feet were held fast. “Alayne, get back from there!” She had inched closer to the edge of the cliff, her toes hanging over the open air as she leaned forward... “Get back!”

“You’ll have to come to me,” she laughed. “I’m where I need to be. I’m where I must be.”

“You’re not making any sense. Get back over here, woman!”

“If I could just see a little further,” she said, stretching out on the balls of her feet, “I bet I could figure out...”

“Alayne, no!” he screamed, seeing the edge of the cliff crumble away beneath her weight. She fell, twisting and gripping the edge with her hands, hanging on for dear life. “I’m coming for you!” he shouted. “Just hang on!” Tugging at his legs, he tried to force his feet up, tried to walk forward, tried to reach her to help her. He managed to stagger a few inches before he collapsed, surprised at how much effort it took to lift his feet; the ground seemed to

hold him like quickly drying cement. He groaned as he pulled himself near to the edge of the cliff, sweat trickling down his face.

“Ger’alin, forgive me,” he heard her whisper as he saw her fingers begin to slip, “I was only trying to help...”

“Light, why couldn’t I reach her?” he shouted, tears streaming down his face. “Why did this happen? What was she trying to do?” Staring over the edge of the cliff, he could see her still falling into an infinite, foreboding darkness.

~*~*~*~

Whatever it was, he whispered to his wife across whatever distance lay between them, you did not have to do it. You are more important to me than anything else. Please, Alayne, please don’t risk yourself for me!

~*~*~*~

“What do you mean I need to be prepared to handle a starving man?” the Scryer priest muttered when Voren’tal passed along the message he had received from A’dal. “Honeyed roast? Who could possibly like something so vile?”

“I’m simply telling you what A’dal had relayed to me,” Voren’tal grouched. “If you think I like being kept in the dark about whatever this is, you’d better think again. All I know is that an Aldor archbishop just came in here telling me that A’dal was going to try something else to help heal that young Blood Knight. He said that we’d best be prepared to shove that man full of food because, once he’s well, he’s going to need his strength for ‘the fight of his life.’ Bah! While I reverence the naaru and serve the Light, sometimes their insistence on mystery gets even me riled up.”

“I certainly hope that young man gets well,” the priest muttered as he turned to walk off. “Right now, he’s our best hope for finding that heretic thief. Perhaps with his attachment to the Vial, we could...”

“If it didn’t work for the ones who actually tapped into it, it’s not going to work on him,” Voren’tal said flatly. “You will not try that again. Light only knows how the others managed to survive that handling in their condition. We’ll have to find her the old-fashioned way. Thalodien is already working on tracking her. He believes he may have found his first solid lead. Now, go and prepare what it is the naaru have asked of us. It’s infrequent enough that we’re allowed to assist them. We will not turn our noses up at the opportunity now, even if it does involve whipping up a human feast.”

~*~*~*~

Ger’alin groaned when he opened his eyes. The room he lay in was cool and dark. He could hear the crystalline chimes of the naaru outside the room and could sense their presence. Relentlessly, he shut that path off, feeling overcome with shame at what he had become in the past weeks. “I’m a monster. No matter what Sar’la says; no matter what I want to believe. I don’t deserve mercy; I don’t deserve anything except to wither and die. I can’t even save her in my dreams!” he muttered sullenly. “Light, part of me still craves the power she took away while the rest of me wants nothing to do with it again if only it would bring her back to me!” he raved. “Oh, Alayne, Alayne! Please be safe, where ever you are! Even if I never lay eyes on you again...”

“You may get your wish,” he heard a deep voice, filled with bitterness and regret, say. Turning his head, he blinked. There had been a wall there, before. There had been a *room*

there, before. He reached behind him, wondering where the bed had gone. "You're asleep, young man. This is a dream. Like the others you've been having where you kill her, or she dies and you can't save her," he heard a strangely familiar voice mutter irritably.

"I thought you woke up the minute you realized you were dreaming," Ger'alın muttered.

"You think a lot of things that aren't necessarily true," the man laughed ruefully. Ger'alın blinked, looking around for the speaker. The mists of the dreamscape parted, revealing a man standing before a monument. The man was old and worn. His long brown hair was streaked with silver and white. He wore simple leather pants and a plain woolen tunic with a tabard bearing some strange emblem hanging from his shoulders. Ger'alın stared at it, trying to make out what it was. The image was obscured by the other elf's long hair spilling down his back. A blue hammer hung from the man's belt, adorned with a cabbalistic symbol. Ger'alın walked up beside the man and glanced at him, giving him a sidelong examination. His face was lined and creased, the set of his mouth speaking of a long period of bitterness and anger. His blue eyes stared at the monument as if, by sheer will, he could make it speak to him. "She was a brave one. Her brother was too. It is an infinite pity that they stood on opposite sides that day. Maybe if they'd stood together, they'd still...no use wondering. What's done is done. Neither of them had seen the dawn of thirty years that day. So young...they...we were so young!" he growled, his fists clenching, his right hand straying to the mace as if he wanted to hurl it at the monument. "And I just lay there. Gibbering like a babe! While they fought a useless war! A useless war I started!"

"What are you talking about, old man?" Ger'alın asked slowly.

"Look at it!" the man snapped at him, turning and grabbing Ger'alın by his chin. Forcing his face up, he set the younger man's gaze on the monument. Ger'alın blinked, his eyes momentarily dazzled by the sun. When the image resolved itself, he collapsed to his knees, his jaw dropping open in terror.

The monument before him bore an inscription, dedicating it to the memory of all who had fallen in the Brotherblood War. "Folly kept us apart," he read aloud, his voice leaden. "Desperation heated our blood. To the young we sacrificed in our madness, to the first-fallen of our war. May we remember the love they shared and may it light our way back to reunion."

"Look closely," the older man growled. "Look closely and tell me who they are!"

"I know who they are," Ger'alın said, shocked. "That's Zerith and Alayne. What are they doing on a statue? Callie will laugh fit to burst when she finds out I dreamed they became famous enough for someone to make a statue of them. So, Alayne's right. There's going to be a civil war. Looks like she and Zerith put an end to it, though."

"Have you always been this stupid or are you just doing this to annoy me?" the man said, forcing the words between gritted teeth. "Read that inscription again and take a damned good look at those two up there." Ger'alın rolled his eyes but did as directed, thinking that this was the strangest dream he'd ever had. "To the young we sacrificed in our madness; to the first-fallen of our war. May we remember the love they shared...*shared*? Oh no, they're not dead, are they?"

"Is Undercity under a city? Yes, young man, they're dead. They've both been dead five hundred years or more now. Five hundred twelve years, three months, one week, and two days, to be exact," he sighed. "Dar'ja's never forgiven me," he whispered almost too softly for Ger'alın to hear.

Ger'alın stared up at the statue. Alayne and Zerith appeared no older than he knew them to be now. Zerith was reaching out with one hand towards his sister, a look of infinite sorrow but firm acceptance on his face. The other hand was raised over his head, one finger pointing up, as if calling on the Light to be his witness. A short space away, Alayne stood, one of her hands stretched out towards her brother, her delicate ears laid back, her face graven

with desperation and sadness. In her other hand, held out and away from her brother, she held three Vials. Inscribed on the platform just beneath the pair but above the listing of names was the emblem stitched on the man's tabard: a noon-day sun split in twain by a lightning bolt. "What... what happened to them?"

"No one is certain," the man said quietly. "She had... run off. Vanished into the night with two Vials from the Well of Eternity. The next she was heard from, she was back here, on the Isle of Quel'Danas, trying to revive the Sunwell. Demons and undead were attracted to the power of the Vials; somehow, she'd gotten her hands on a third one. She was out here, alone, hunted by every creature from Kael'Thas to Arthas to A'dal. Alone, and far too young and ignorant for what she attempted. Her brother rushed out here the moment he heard she was here; he'd spent weeks searching for her, growing more and more frantic after the naaru said she'd departed Outland. Some of his followers came with him but he made his wife stay behind in Shattrath to look after someone Alayne cared about. Someone who wouldn't so much as turn his head for her!" the man spat angrily. "Kael had sent his own forces; Alayne had locked herself up inside the Magister's Terrace. She'd set all kinds of traps, summoned and enslaved demons and undead to keep any from disturbing her. Zerith was able to fight his way through her barriers, and that's where the story ends. The pair were found dead; her skull smashed in, his mace wet with blood. Her dagger was planted in his chest, shoved in almost all the way through. And there were the Vials. Those cursed Vials! The ones who found them fell to fighting over them immediately. On the ground where the two died – where they killed each other, it's said – the Brotherblood War began. It lasted four hundred and seventy-three years," he grimaced. "Quel'Thalas was completely destroyed, just as she said it would be. Only a few hundred of us still live. The last battle... fought not even a mile from where we stand...", he shivered. "And it was all for nothing! For nothing! They died for nothing! I should have been there; I should have put a stop to it. Instead, I was back in Shattrath feeling sorry for myself!"

"Who are you?" Ger'alın asked, feeling a squirming dread in the pit of his stomach.

"I'm an old fool who left his wife to die because I was too afraid to get up and follow her. Go back, young Ger'alın. Go back now and find her. Where ever she is, you follow her. There's a chance this can be averted; there's a chance she can be saved. Take it!"

"But I have no right to her any longer," Ger'alın stammered. "I tried to kill her! All because I wanted..."

"Oh, yes, the addiction," the man said, his voice acid that seared Ger'alın's ears. "Poor Ger'alın. Addicted, craving arcane energy so much he went mad for a moment. Listen to me, young man. Do nothing and you *will* kill her," the man growled. "Lay in your bed, gibbering over your addiction and your actions and she'll die as certain as the sun sets in the west. Get up, follow her, stay with her, and she might survive. At the very least, you'll die with her instead of spending the next five hundred and twelve years, three months, one week, and two days filled with remorse and regret that you never got the chance to tell her you were sorry. That you loved her; that you were going to get over your addiction and its cravings and you were going to be the husband she deserved! You will, young Ger'alın. You've got the strength of will and body to do it; you just need to decide to do so! Quit feeling sorry for yourself and wasting everyone's time. Your wife needs you. Go find her," he pleaded, "go find her before it's too late!"

Ger'alın stood up and brushed himself off, nodding vigorously. Turning on his heel, he began running back the direction he'd come. The older man watched him run off, a sad, but oddly peaceful smile on his face. Glancing back up at the statue, gazing tranquilly on the face of the warlock, he lifted a hand as if to reach out and stroke her cheek and whispered, "I'm coming for you, sweetheart. Just wait for me a little longer."

Reaching the bottom of the hill, Ger'alın turned, lost. Glancing back over his shoulder, he looked for the strange man he felt he should know. The statue and man had vanished, the green hill top replaced with a misty dreamscape once more. "I always thought that the minute you knew you were dreaming, you'd..."

"...wake up," he finished, his eyes popping open. Lifting a trembling hand, he was surprised to find traces of tears down his cheeks. "I've got to get up," he whispered to himself. "No more wasting time on what I've done wrong; it's enough to regret it and wish to pay the price of my sins. I've got to find her," he said, the words a talisman. "If I don't, she'll be right. And she'll never let me live that one down."

~*~*~*~

Jez'ral and Sar'la stopped, wondering what the crowds around the door to Ger'alın's room meant. Aldorite priests ran in and out, ignoring the sin'dorei, looks of concern and puzzlement clear on their alien faces. "Oh, Light," the man prayed silently as he tried to figure out what he would say to distract the girl, "please don't let him have..."

"He will see you soon," A'dal's chimes rang across their minds. "He is much better. The Light has shone upon him and, today, he has woken, spoken rationally, and is working to regain his strength as quickly as he can."

"When did this happen?" Jez'ral wondered.

"Since early this morning. The only answer he has given me," A'dal sighed, sounding somewhat frustrated, "is that he 'must find her before it is too late.' I fear he may be setting out on a dark path to try to save one who has surrendered herself to fate. I hope the Light will continue to shine upon him."

The warlock opened his mouth to demand a further explanation but was cut off by a struggle at the door, several scandalized shouts from women, and a barrage of Thalassian curses which brought Ger'alın, wearing only his undergarments, into the main room. "I'm going to find her!" he was shouting. "I don't care what you think, I'm going. You may think she's a criminal, a traitor, or worse, but she's still my wife! My *wife*! Give me my clothes and armor back or I'll go in what I'm wearing *right now*! I know what it means now. She needs me. She's calling out to me. I'm going to her whether you think I should or not!"

"Be at peace, young sin'dorei," A'dal chimed, his tones halting the man where the strong hands of the Vindicators had failed. "You are free to leave whenever you wish. However, would it not be wise to spend a day recuperating from your recent travails? You could discuss your visions with me or my brethern. Perhaps we could aid you in understanding the true meaning, if such foresight has come to you from the Light."

"The Light?" Ger'alın asked, sounding confused. "...A'dal, forgive me, but I have no right to call upon the Light any longer." Jez'ral sucked in a breath in horror at himself as he listened to Ger'alın speak. "No, hear me," the man said, speaking more clearly than he had in some time, "I turned my back on the Light, craving another power. Craving something that gave me ecstasy instead of peace, exhilaration instead of joy, excitement instead of contentment. Even now, I want that other power more than anything – up to and including seeing my wife again. I burn for it, A'dal. But...I cannot let her die! I heard what she did; I know what her crimes are. I know she faces execution several times over but I can't let her face this for me. I'm going to find her and let her know that and then I'll take myself off to die as I should. Some will be glad to see that happen," he muttered. "Now you know. I am going to follow after the one who attacked this city. I am going to join her and take back the fate I never should have cast aside...no matter how weak I was. It was supposed to be me who died from the Vials, not her!"

“Events have played out as they were intended,” A’dal murmured, his words for Ger’alin alone. “Trust in the Light that it is sovereign over all life. And, young mortal, the Light will ever seek you out, no matter how dark the path you walk. You are facing a trial now, one that will test you for the rest of your life. But it will teach you mercy, compassion, and gentleness. Already, I can see that it has humbled your former arrogance, bringing you low where you once believed yourself mighty with your strength of body and your skill at arms. Turn back to the Light, and know a joy beyond any that the Vials can bring. You who helped free the Dragonmaw from the Legion’s taint can likewise be free.”

A warm, gentle glow suffused Ger’alin. He gave himself over to it, letting it melt the chill he’d felt surrounding his heart since learning from guarded whispers that his wife had made a desperate stand against the city of the naaru, the city of the Light. Where the glow from Illidan had twisted him, sharpening his hunger even as it fed him, this glow brought only a sense of peace and fulfillment. Looking back, he could see a time when this had been what he lived for. Looking ahead, he could see a time when it would be once again. Sighing, tears of joy and hope flowing down his cheeks, he let the Light shine on him, bringing the one gift he’d forgotten: forgiveness.

Watching the man she’d promised to look after, Sar’la grinned. “Now we’ll get to go on an adventure and find Miss Alayne,” she whispered softly as the attendants carried Ger’alin back to his bed and to restful slumber.

“Come on,” the warlock whispered to the girl. “Let’s go find the others and tell them the good news about Mister Ger’alin.”

“Will we get to go on an adventure together next?” she asked as the pair set their steps back towards Lower City where most of the Disorder of Azeroth were gathered.

“Perhaps,” Jez’ral smiled to himself, grateful to the powers of the naaru that Ger’alin was well and praying that his own student would be found in good health also. “Perhaps.”

~*~*~*~

Ger’alin sighed and turned his head towards the door. He wished he had the strength to stand up and walk out of the room. He’d thrown away what little energy he’d managed to hoard when he wrestled his way past the healers earlier. After A’dal’s restoration, he’d been drained and had collapsed in a heap. “I’ve got to find her,” he growled to himself, “I’ve got to be with her and to save her! Come on, Ger’alin,” he berated himself as he felt his consciousness slipping away under exhaustion again, “rise! Move!”

Meanwhile, outside, Zerith chewed his lip nervously as he and the others strode up to the building housing the naaru and Ger’alin. He wondered idly where Jez’ral was. The warlock had gone to Lower City to visit the orphan who had adopted Alayne. Zerith wished he were here; the priest could use the man’s biting sarcasm to help him convince Ger’alin to get out of the bed. The closer he drew to the structure, the less certain he grew about his plan to deceive the Blood Knight. “But we’ve got to get him out of that bed, at least,” the priest argued to himself. “We’ve got to do something. Light, how I wish Alayne were here.” Pausing when he thought he saw his sister’s teacher striding off, Sar’la in tow, he continued his on-going argument with himself, trying to convince himself as he had been when he first hatched this mad scheme.

“It will go well,” Dar’ja whispered in his ear, taking a moment to embrace him and give him a gentle kiss on the cheek. “You’re right. We’ve got to do something. Even if it’s the wrong thing, it’s better than nothing.”

Sighing, he leaned down to return her kiss with one of his own. Then, with a shake, he straightened and gestured for the others to fall in behind him. Marching straight into the main building, ignoring the guards stationed near the door to Ger’alin’s room, he paused only when

he saw Tau're stepping out of the doorway. The tauren grinned when his eyes fell on the priest. "Have you found...?"

"Perhaps," Zerith said carefully. "How is he?"

"Better. Much better," Tau're laughed. "This morning I checked on him. He was worse. His dreams were...well, he kept shouting her name and saying something that sounded like 'shindo fallen hah,'" he hesitated, hoping the priest would translate the words. Zerith nodded, motioning for the tauren to continue. "I couldn't remain for that. I left for an hour and returned. I don't know what happened in the time I was gone, but his sleep had become more peaceful. He still cried out from time to time. He would call out to her but, after a time...well...he started speaking to A'dal in his sleep. Now he's resting. He woke briefly and knew me, asked after her, and said he wanted to see you – just you, Zerith – when you returned. Something about he needed to give you a message he'd received."

Zerith nodded and, hiding his shock, strode into the room. Ger'alín lay curled up on his side, the blankets bunched around him, sleeping. His face, while still gaunt, was no longer haggard. The dark circles had vanished from under his eyes though the orbs were still sunken too far back in his thin face. His chin remained a bony knob instead of the square, strong line it had been before his illness. Pulling a chair to the side of the bed, Zerith sat down and folded his arms over his chest, waiting for the man to wake up again. He did not have to wait long.

"Tau're?" Ger'alín asked, not even opening his eyes.

"No, it's Zerith," the priest said softly.

"Oh, Zerith," Ger'alín yawned. "I wanted to speak with you. She's in grave danger. I have to find her."

"Alayne hasn't been out of danger since the moment I first laid eyes on her," her brother muttered wryly. "We're looking for her. She may be hiding over..."

"No, you have to stop looking for her."

"Ger'alín, I'm not just going to leave my sister out there to face the dangers she's pulled down on her head alone," he said firmly.

"No, don't stop looking for her entirely but *you*, Zerith, *you* have to stop. Otherwise you two might kill each other."

"Ger'alín, sometimes dreams are just that: dreams. They don't always mean something. I would never harm my sister. I love her as much as if she were truly my own. She is not Valara remade but she's precious to me nonetheless."

"Just stop. Stay in Shattrath. Or, if you do find her, don't go after her! Leave that to me," he muttered, pulling open his eyes and staring earnestly at his comrade and commander. "I'm her husband, after all."

"I'm glad you're feeling so much better," Zerith grinned, changing the subject, quashing the irritation he felt that Ger'alín would ever begin to believe he would harm Alayne. Dreamstruck the pair of them were, he thought. "Because we've found our first hopeful sign of her and we need your strength."

"My strength? Zerith, I'm not the man I was a month ago."

"No, you're not. But we can't reach her where she is. If you're feeling so much better, perhaps you will allow A'dal to heal you, restore you fully, so that you can go out with us and bring her out of danger."

"I don't deserve it," Ger'alín whispered hesitantly, not wanting to ask for more than he'd been given already, "but...I'll accept it. To help her. May I prove worthy of this gift. A'dal," he said, knowing that the naaru had heard every word, "if you could spare the energy to restore me enough that I could help my friends and loved ones..."

"May the Light give you the strength to fulfill your destiny, Ger'alín," A'dal's chimes sang throughout the room. "May it restore to you what you had before and give you the

patience and discipline needed to regain what you have lost. May its mercy shine on you forever, and give you peace.”

A soothing warmth filled Ger’alin’s heart and spirit and, closing his eyes, he could feel the strength returning to his limbs. With a sigh, he tossed the blankets aside and let his legs fall over the edge of the cot. Standing up, he staggered, on the verge of falling, before he caught his balance. Zerith masked his concern, letting the other man stumble and find his footing. The Blood Knight was better but...he was still so thin! The next words out of Ger’alin’s mouth put an end to that worry, “You know, Zerith,” he said softly, timidly, as if he felt he had no right to voice the words, “I wish Alayne were here. I’m starving.”

“You have got to tell me what has happened to you,” Zerith smiled, his eyes shining with tears of joy and thanksgiving. “But first, let’s find you some clothes to wear and some food to eat. You can’t scale that mountain in your undergarments and with an empty belly.” Both men gave a start when the door banged open to admit a string of servants carrying platters of food. “How in the Light...”

“A’dal,” Ger’alin thought suspiciously, “do you know something I don’t?”

“I know many things you don’t, sin’dorei. But, for now, I know you need to eat and find your wife. Take your path, warrior of the Light, and follow it to your destiny.”

~*~*~*~

Dar’ja stared at Ger’alin, almost as stunned at the changes in the man as she had been at the ones before, from his earlier torment. She watched, from a distance, as Callie dashed back and forth, bringing him food and practically dancing with delight to see her friend restored. The rogue had done cartwheels through the main building of the Terrace of Light when Zerith and Ger’alin had walked, the Blood Knight mince-stepping and relying on the priest for support and balance, out of the sickroom. She’d been hard-pressed to restrain her joy and keep her mouth from mentioning the one name that would get them the cold shoulder faster than anything else. “Not that I can blame Callie for celebrating,” Dar’ja thought to herself. “Seeing him walking and speaking clearly, not raving or blaming himself, made me wish *she* were here as well. She ran off for nothing! Why does she always do this?”

“I’m glad he’s better,” Jez’ral muttered behind her, “but I hope Zerith can snap him out of that melancholy he’s getting into. By the sun, that man has more passions than a human romance novel!” Dar’ja gave a start and turned and stared at the warlock with interest.

“You’re very...observant. I don’t think Zerith or Callie has even noticed that he’s brooding. All they see is him eating.”

“Young woman, do not start with me,” Jez’ral said, his tone distinctly annoyed. Dar’ja grinned despite herself. “I have lived with a man who can go from glacial to boiling with odd stops between in less than a minute! You would think that a half-century of experience would give one a little insight so don’t condescend to me again!”

“You have no idea how nice it is to have you snapping at me again,” she chuckled. “Your memories are returning. She’ll be thrilled.”

“When she gets back or we find her,” he growled, placing an emphasis on the pronouns that spoke the name unspoken, “I am going to tie her up in a bundle, cart her back to Mir’el, and tell him to make certain she doesn’t go anywhere without supervision until she’s my age! I suppose we’ll have to consider her...husband...as supervision. It still surprises me that she’s married so young. That you’re married so young. That children are marrying so young!”

“Do you remember the lectures you may have heard when the call came out to return to our homeland?” Dar’ja asked, her cheeks heating with a furious blush as she remembered the disconcertingly frank discussions some of the older women had given the younger ones.

“No, I had to hear enough of that garbage when I left childhood,” he said, sounding a touch chagrined. “The duty to the blood?” he asked. She nodded. Both turned red. “So,” he said after a heavy pause, “Ger’alin sure can eat.”

“Yes, yes he can,” Dar’ja grinned, relieved at the clumsy change of subject. “He eats each meal like it’s either his first or his last, especially when Al...,” she trailed off. “If you had the Vials, what would you do with them?” she blurted out.

“I’m not sure,” he said slowly. “The higher theories of the arcane are mixed in with the memories I know I should have but don’t,” he admitted. “But, I’ve been listening to gossip from the Magisters; they speak more freely around an adult than they do around you ‘children,’” he explained apologetically. “Let’s assume she was merely trying to study their properties. With an artifact of that magnitude, the best place to do that would be on the Isle of Quel’Danas. I can remember being there vaguely; the ley-lines are strong. She’d be able to use the sympathetic resonance to create a stable arcane frequency...you don’t understand a word I’m saying.”

“You lost me at ‘ley-lines,’” she confessed ruefully. “Oh, I know what they are. That’s it,” she explained at his irritated grimace, “I’m no magi. I wanted to be a priest or a ranger when I was a little girl. When I heard about Lady Liadrin’s studies and the creature Kael had given us, I devoted myself to studying that, to learning to wrest Light-energies from it. I believed, as many of the recruits did and do still, that the Light had abandoned us,” she explained. “So, I had no issues with learning to wrest its power from what I believed was just an energy vortex. I admit, I could sometimes feel the naaru’s pain and sorrow. I steeled myself against it, though. It’s funny,” she sighed, “I hated priests. Hated them with a passion. I thought they were doing exactly what we were doing but were lying and telling everyone they still had faith and access to the Light. Then I met Zerith... My studies have taken me into healing and the Light since then. Not into magic and arcana as Alayne’s have.”

“At any rate, the best place to do what she might be attempting would be on the Isle of Quel’Danas and in the heart of the remnants of the Sunwell. A’dal has said that she’s still in Outland. The only places out here where the kind of experimentation of that kind would be feasible would be in Nagrand or in Netherstorm. It has to do with the amount of power she’d be unleashing. Objects of that magnitude are best handled where there is a high amount of sympathetic resonance. It makes controlling the output of the energies easier. Now, if she’s not attempting to study them; if something she read taught her how to use them safely...,” he sighed heavily, his shoulders slumping with fatigue at the thought, “if she were to try to actually use them; she’d want to be some place safe. Well fortified. With an army at her back. She’s obviously not in Shattrath so...”

“So...?”

“Nothing. She’d never do that. She’d never go there. She’s probably hiding and trying to figure out how to use the Vials, not aware of just how deadly they can be in the hands of a novice. And, while Alayne was one of my best pupils and is my pride and joy...she’s a *novice*. She will need another fifty years of study before she could begin to take the first level of tests to become a Magister and she still cannot channel arcane energies herself. She’ll wind up being like Mir’el and I, I’m afraid. And he and I will have to retire and give up our studies in twenty or thirty years. Fel magic is just too...addicting. The allure...the rush...,” he trailed off, his eyes misty as if he spoke of an old friend. “Still, it’s harsh and galling compared to the gentle glow of pure arcane magic,” his tone changed. No longer did he speak of an old friend; now he spoke of a former lover, one long missed and desired. “If you did not study it before the Sunwell’s destruction, you cannot know what it was like, Dar’ja. Alayne, Light bless her, knows. She remembers. Her mother probably would have too, had Miris not died of heartbreak over Tal’ar. Nothing in this life; not even the warmest, fondest, most tender and ardent caress from the love of your life can compare to the joy that comes from channeling –

or perhaps, being channeled *by* would be a better description – the arcane. It's no wonder that Ger'alín fell so ill and became so desperate. As a non-magi, he would never have learned how to control that hunger, how to deny it and refuse to let it control him. Still, I *envy* him, in a way. To have experienced that bliss..." his lips were parted and his breathing shallow and swift. Dar'ja moved to interrupt him, to bring Alayne's employer and former teacher back to reality. "Only the glow of the Sunwell could begin to compare, and only just."

Staring at Jez'ral, Dar'ja began to feel a burning sensation in her middle as worry and suspicion gnawed at her. "The glow of the Sunwell," she thought to herself, "Light no..."

~*~*~*~

"So, Nagrand?" Ger'alín said, forcing his voice to be light and his tone reasonable. Part of him still wanted to sob for thankfulness for the gift he had received. Part of him still wanted to seek out the nearest source of arcane energy and drain it dry. Instead, he focused on chewing the warpstalker meat Callie had brought him. Skewered on a stick and oddly spiced, it was sweet and sour at the same time. Sweet...like the thrill of... Relentlessly, he shoved the thought to the back of his mind. "Up the mountains in the west of Nagrand, you say?"

"She could be up there. We're reasonably certain she is," Zerith said, feeling uneasy about the lie.

"I scaled about halfway up that cliff when we were there the first time," he sighed. "It looks more difficult than it is. A firm grip, a steady pace...you could climb it yourself, Zerith. *She* could climb it, if she wasn't terrified of heights," he said, grinning and remembering the beginning of the evening that ended with him waking up on the floor of Alayne's room, desperately wondering what kind of mischief he'd gotten up to in his cups. The thought of not lying next to her, of not seeing her and speaking with her – or even just being in her presence – seared him. "You're certain she'd have flown up there with that dragon she teamed up with? Alayne, my wife. Your sister. The one who has to be dragged onto a zeppelin? The one who left claw marks in the tower outside Undercity?"

"You'd be surprised what she can force herself to do when she thinks she has no choice," Zerith said mildly. "Remember the night of her trial? She forced herself onto the zeppelin then."

"You're right," he grinned, the warmth barely lighting in his still-blue eyes. "When she gets her mind set on something, she can be rather...persistent about it. Even to the point of flying. You might have someone set a watch, though, to see if they see anyone scaling down it or if they see that dragon. One or both will have to leave there to eat, eventually. If you can find sign of that, we know for certain she's up there. Have you seen anything like that?"

"No," Zerith said, dragging the word out, "but then, we didn't have much time to look. We've ruled out Hellfire Peninsula, Shadowmoon Valley, Terokkar Forest, Zangarmarsh, and almost all of Nagrand except those mountains. Where else would she have gone?" he asked, congratulating himself on his quick-thinking even while berating himself for his dishonesty. Ger'alín gave him a measuring look. Finally, the man sighed and set his food aside. Staring down at the ground, he replied.

"She could have gone to Blade's Edge Mountains. Light help me, though, I hope not. From what I heard from Garrosh, those hills are infested with ogres. Alayne wouldn't last a minute against those brutes," he growled, "and if she was foolish enough to go there and one of those barbaric beasts has so much as laid a hand on her..." he lifted his eyes, the crackling lightning in his eyes making the hair on the back of Zerith's neck stand up. "There are few things in the life that I hate. The way I have acted recently for one. The Scourge and the Legion for second and third. And ogres. I hate ogres."

“Well, I’m sure she wouldn’t have gotten mixed in with them. She wanted to get away from everyone, remember? Far away to study those Vials. The top of the mountains in Nagrand seems about as far away as you can get...”

“Baring, of course, the Netherstorm. She heard enough about that place to be very intrigued by it.”

“But Kael’s in the Netherstorm,” Zerith pointed out. “She would not want to risk being captured by him. He’d take the Vials away from her in a heartbeat.”

“True, true,” Ger’alin said beneath his breath. “Well then, let us be on our way. I want to stop by Garadar as we pass and speak with Garrosh. There are words I need to speak to him concerning his sister-by-marriage,” Ger’alin said bleakly. “Things he must understand...or, she’ll be right.” With a shake, Ger’alin resumed eating, chomping down the food so quickly Zerith knew he couldn’t even taste it. The priest watched in silence, wondering just what was going on between his sister and her husband and whether they’d both be donning sackcloth and scrying prophecies in the near future.

“Dreams,” the priest thought as he watched Ger’alin eat, “why can’t they just be *pleasant* things for all of us?”

~*~*~*~

“Twenty gold he takes all day to scale that,” Tau’re whispered to Callie as they watched Ger’alin prepare to climb the cliff.

“Deal,” she laughed. “With him believing Alayne might be up there, I’d be surprised if he took an hour.”

“Is she up there?” the tauren asked. Callie spread her hands and shrugged. “So, he could be expending precious energy he needs to fully recover from his ordeal on a wild kodo chase?”

“She’s up there. She has to be. It’s the only place she’d know that was remote, accessible, but difficult to get to. It’s the best hiding spot in all of Outland.”

“How much of my gold are you going to lose for me if I fall?” Ger’alin called out loudly, making everyone laugh.

“None of your gold,” Callie quipped. “Losing that is someone else’s job now.”

“Well, if that someone else is up there,” he hollered, pointing, “you may not see either of us for quite some time. I hate arguing with her but...making up should be fun.”

“Making up?” one of the shaman shouted, “try making out!”

The entire Disorder of Azeroth roared with laughter when the Blood Knight blushed furiously and nodded. “Good one, Grogak,” Callie heard someone hoot. “Good one!”

“I guess I’d better get started, then,” Ger’alin muttered to Zerith. Squatting down, the man rubbed dirt into his palms, clapping them together to remove the excess and then leapt up, grabbing onto the rocky holds and pulling himself up the cliffside. Cheers broke out as the entire gathering watched him ascend. Ger’alin let it warm him and give him strength; he’d said this would be easy. He had thought it would be until he attempted it. After a half hour, he realized he may be in a bit of a sticky situation. Stopping to sit on an outcropping, he glanced down, his stomach fluttering. The crowd below was an indistinct mass. He could have counted them all but could not tell who was whom. His arms shook with the effort that climbing the few hundred feet had cost him. Looking up, he saw he had at least two-thirds more of the way to go. He let his head fall back against the wall of the cliff and let the cool breeze dry the sweat dripping down his face, arms, and chest. Had the others been gone, he might have doffed his shirt. He considered it now, deciding not to. “I may need it to keep those rocks from scratching me bloody,” he told himself. “But, I just need a little break. Just a little one, mind,” he whispered, closing his eyes and letting himself enjoy the cool, gentle

breeze. “I still have no idea what I’m going to say to her to convince her to give up whatever mad scheme she’s on. This whole thing is my fault to begin with. Had I never given in to my addiction, had I been stronger, had I fought it, she never would have felt like she had to run away and figure out how to use those blasted Vials!”

“Enough of that,” another part of his mind said, stemming the tide of self-recrimination. “Beating yourself up does nothing to find her and put a stop to the danger she’s in. You heard the rumors around Shattrath about what happened to those who did try to tap into it. They were destroyed. The sooner you pull yourself up this cliff, the sooner you can stop her from obliterating her mind or bringing a horde of demons down on her head. And,” the voice sighed sadly, “if she’s already done one or the other or both, you can at least be there to help her. Stop worrying about yourself and start worrying about her.”

“Light, I am,” he told himself. Standing up, he gave a small jump and resumed his climb. Losing himself in the steady motion of reaching, pulling, pushing, and pausing to look for his next step up, he never noticed how tired he was or how late it had grown until he pulled himself over the top and onto soft green grass. “I don’t think I can move,” he said aloud, his face pressed to the ground. His arms quivered and his legs burned. Turning his head, he saw that night had long since fallen. Stars dotted the inky sky, twinkling down through the oddly beautiful nether clouds. Rolling over on his back, he watched the sky for a while, dozing, his body needing to recover the energy he’d spent climbing. “I need to find her,” he would mutter to himself whenever he woke from his light napping. “She needs me. I have to stop what we both foresaw.”

He glanced over and saw a misty form in the distance. Rolling back on his stomach with a grunt, feeling the weight of his body press against his bruised chest, he laboriously pushed himself to his feet, surprised at how painful and difficult it was. A glance at his hands told the tale; they were raw and bleeding. Wiping them on his pants, careless of the stains he would leave, he hobbled over on bruised feet, searching out the form.

The clouds lay thick on the mountain this high up and he wandered through their fog, praying he wouldn’t step over the edge of the cliff to his death. Ahead of him, he saw the figure once more. His heart leapt to his throat and he sprang, running after it. “Alayne!” he called out to her, “Alayne! My dear, my love, forgive me!” he cried out, tears of joy spilling down his cheeks. “I’m sorry! You don’t need to do this! I can get over my addiction. Sweetheart, please!” he pleaded as the figure ahead of him continued to walk away.

“Don’t follow me,” he heard her voice ring in his ears. “Stay away from me. You cannot help.”

“That’s ridiculous!” he shouted to her. “Whatever it is you think you must do to help me, you can stop it! You can come back to me; to us! I know you attacked Shattrath and stole the other Vial. I know you’re wanted by just about every organization in Outland. Still, come back with me, dearest. Come back and we’ll find a way to make it right, together! I am so sorry for all that has happened in the past weeks. It’s my fault. Come back with me, Alayne.”

“You cannot help me. I must accept my fate. Even this. Even this to bring back the light of our hope,” he heard her say, her voice sounding empty and hollow. “I cannot allow you to interfere. Stay away or our lives will be forfeit.”

“Alayne, what are you talking about? What must you accept? Come over here, woman! At least look at me! Alayne?” he called out, seeing her misty form vanish in the fog. “Alayne!”

With a roar, he ran after her, losing himself in the mists.

~*~*~*~

Light trickled in from gaps in the leather hut's roof, tickling Ger'alín's eyes. With a moan, he opened them, his head throbbing and his mouth dry. Running a tongue that felt like sandpaper over lips that felt like cracked ground, he opened his eyes. "Alayne?" he asked, wondering if he'd found her and she'd brought him back here to rest. "Sweetheart?" He gagged, his mouth tasting as if he had been eating arcane dust. Lifting his head, he let it drop immediately, overcome by a sense of drunkenness. "Blech! Dearest, what is going on?"

"I've been called that before but I prefer my men a little hairier, no offense," he heard a woman laugh. Turning his head, he saw a tauren carrying a water skin. "Would you like something to drink? You look dehydrated. You look as if you should be in a sickbed, actually, not scaling the mountains of Nagrand," she admonished lightly. "Whatever were you doing out there in the dell?"

"I've got to find her!" he said quickly, tossing the thin blanket away. The tauren woman chuckled and reached beside her, tossing him his clothes. He flushed in mortification and dressed quickly. "I've got to find her. She's in danger."

"Find who, young sin'dorei? The only ones up here other than you and I are demons."

"No, she's up here. I saw her last night, wandering in the fog. She told me not to follow her but Light blind me and sear my soul if I'll listen to that!" he spat as he fumbled with his belt. Thick bandages swathe his hands, making it difficult for him to fasten the buckle. And still, he felt thirsty. And hungry. A hunger for more than just food gnawed at him. With an effort, he refused to let it control him, refused to reach out and search for a source of energy to slake it. He shook with the effort of denying himself but busied his mind with focusing on finding his wife.

"Here," the tauren said, hefting the water skin. "Take a drink. I was just coming to check your hands and feet," she explained, glancing at his limbs. "I found you this morning, wandering in the dell, raving. When I took hold of you to keep you from walking straight into a tree, you collapsed in my arms, shouting at me in your native tongue. Let me see how your wounds are and then I'll help you find whoever it is you followed up here." Ger'alín clamped down his impatience and let the tauren check his hands and feet. She tossed the bloody cloths away with a grimace and poured a soothing balm on his hands. Rubbing it in gently, she rewrapped his hands with clean cloths and then inspected his feet. "I never know what to do about fleshy feet," she apologized. "I'd say you bruised your hooves good, were you a tauren. As it is, you probably shouldn't climb any mountains today," she teased. "If you can bear the pain, it's not serious. Come on," she said, helping him stand. "Drink some of that water and we'll go."

~*~*~*~

Ger'alín hobbled along after the tauren, hoping they would find sign of Alayne soon. His heart pounded in his ears and a mixture of joy and rage rushed through him; joy that he had found her. Rage that he had lost her again. "I see no sign of anyone, Ger'alín," the tauren woman muttered. "I've not seen any indication of another being up here – barring the demons, of course – since I arrived myself. I don't think this person you're looking for is up here. You were delusional from exhaustion, no doubt."

"No," he said firmly. "I saw her. I heard her speak to me. She's up here. Maybe she's over near these demons. If they're nothing too powerful, she may be using their presence as a cover for the energies she's testing."

"These Vials sound dangerous to me."

"They are, Elaira," he agreed. "That's why I climbed up here to find her."

"I see," the tauren sighed. "Well, I wish you luck with your search, Ger'alín, but I must return to my sparrowhawks. They're skittish enough as it is. If I deviate from my

routine, they'll never become accustomed enough to me to allow me to commune with them. If you need my aid, seek me out again," she offered. "The sparrowhawks go to sleep with the setting sun. Perhaps, if you've not found her or found that she's not here by then, we'll find her together, tonight."

"Perhaps," he agreed, wishing the druid well as she loped back down the slope to her camp. He sighed and glanced over at the twisting path that led to the pass to the demon camp Elaira had mentioned earlier. He didn't think Alayne would risk hiding among demons but... "There's no telling what she's doing," he admitted. "I might as well check it out. If she's not there, I'll... well, where else would she be?" he asked himself. "I saw her, didn't I?" Wishing desperately he had brought his sword with him, Ger'alín set his feet on the path leading to the demons' camp. Following the twists and turns of the path, he paused when he smelled smoke and sensed the tingle of raw magical energy. Closing his eyes, he cleared his mind, forcing his hunger back once more. "Light be with me," he prayed. "I know I don't deserve it. I know I have asked more of you than I have a right to. But, I need your aid in finding my wife. She has put herself at a grave risk," he explained, "at a risk that... there are fates worse than death. If the Vials she carries fall into the wrong hands, the Legion or the Scourge might triumph over all life. You cannot want that," he pleaded with his unseen benefactor. "It must not be allowed to happen. Therefore, I ask that you be with me now and allow me to see if she is in this camp. Should I be found out, I ask your aid in vanquishing those who would serve the Legion and its blasphemy against your gift of life and creation. As the Light wills," he concluded, "so let it be." Feeling a gentle peace he had not felt since before his time in the Black Temple, Ger'alín crept down the path, keeping himself hidden in the rocks, while he scouted the camp.

The camp was large and dominated by fel orcs. He felt his stomach clench and writhe when he saw a group of warlocks summon several demons and begin channeling, broadcasting their fel energies throughout the camp. Part of him wanted to reach out and partake of the energies. Firmly, he held the desire in check. "I'd give myself away," he told himself. "It's not worth the risk." Slithering on his belly, Ger'alín listened in on several conversations, praying that someone would mention an elf woman. Finally, just when he had given up hope, a stray bit of discussion came to his ears.

"That elf prince isn't half so bad," an orc grunted. "He's got himself set up in that fancy naaru vessel like it's a palace. And those forges he's got. Not bad at all."

"It's good that we're all on the same side now," his comrade snorted. "But I don't trust those pasty-faced elves. With their pointed ears and their looking down their noses at everyone, they can't be half as good as they think they are. The Master cannot seriously consider placing them in command of our legions."

"The Master's plans," a booming voice rang throughout the camp. Ger'alín gave a start and nearly ran gibbering from his hiding spot when he saw an enormous red-skinned demon stomping over towards the pair. "The Master's plans are none of your concern, dogs. Your concern is to harness the energies on this ridge. If our plans are to succeed, the portal must be opened quickly! We lost control of Azeroth once before because we were not swift enough. This time, the portal will be open almost at once. Now that we have the," the demon paused, an ironic grin on its face, "the 'keys to victory' as he likes to call them, we will be able to open the portal faster than anyone would dare believe."

Ger'alín's breath caught in his throat at the demon's next words. He feared that he pounding of his heart would give him away. Black specks floated in his vision before he remembered to breathe. "Kil'jaeden will be in Silvermoon within two month's time. Already, the beginning of the attack is underway. Just a little more energy sucked out of the Netherstorm and the first phase of the battle will begin. That elf prince assures us his followers will allow our armies 'safe passage' through their lands and city as long as we do

not 'despoil' them too much." The orcs hooted with laughter, slapping their thighs. "Now, get back to work. If you maggots want to serve the Legion, you'll do it with no slacking!" Ger'alın heard and felt the demon storm off and, flitting his ears forward to better catch the sound, knew that the pair of orcs were gone as well. Scrambling back the way he came, he prayed he would be able to get back down the cliff without falling. "Light," he thought, speaking as if to an old friend, "thank you for letting me hear that but why oh why couldn't it be 'by the way, that elf lady, Alayne Sunrage, is alive and well and just the next mountain over?'"

~*~*~*~

Ger'alın stared at the ground in front of him, wishing he could find the energy to drag himself back to Elaira's camp. The fire he'd laid crackled in front of him, giving off warmth and light. Idly, he plucked a blade of grass and, pulling it apart with his fingers, tossed it into the flames. "No sign of her," he muttered. "I should have known this was a wild kodo chase. But why would he have suggested it at all?" Laying back, he tucked his hands beneath his head and stared up at the sky. "Where would she be, then? They said they searched Terokkar, Hellfire, and Zangarmarsh. She's not in Nagrand. Ogres," he spat, thinking of what Garrosh had told him of the brutes in Blade's Edge Mountains. "If they've harmed a hair on her head...or worse," he said, thinking of the elves loyal to Kael in Netherstorm. "I'll raze Netherstorm from north to south, east to west, and top to bottom if they've harmed her."

"Ger'alın, is that you?" he heard Dar'ja ask, her voice filled with fright.

"Yes, it's me," he sighed. "I was going to have a night's rest before trying to climb back down. There was no need for you to climb up here after me."

"We grew worried after the first night," she said quickly, the terror in her tone flogging her for haste. "We went to Garrosh. Mor'ghor sent drakes to fly us up here to find you. You've got to come back with me," she pleaded. "It's Zerith. I think he's suffered the same thing you did when you drank that...whatever it was that Geyah mixed up for you. He's been pacing a hole in the ground all day, talking to himself and talking to..."

"To who? Alayne? She's not..." Ger'alın asked, tears springing to his eyes and his voice catching. "I mean, she can't be..."

"No, not her," Dar'ja said. Ger'alın heaved a sigh of relief. "Her father. And his own. It's like he's gone mad; everyone is keeping their distance, afraid of him."

"I'm coming," Ger'alın said, standing up and kicking the fire out. Stomping the ashes out completely, he strode after Dar'ja. Within minutes, they were aboard the back of a nether drake and were circling down to the fields beneath the mountains.

The camp that the Disorder of Azeroth had set up was a hodge-podge affair. Leather and cloth tents stood in haphazard lines. The mounts were stabled, each one outside its owner's tent. The soldier in Ger'alın wrinkled his nose in distaste at such disorganization. "Picket lines," he thought to himself. "And straight rows. Makes for easier guarding and easier defending." Shoving the military thoughts to the side, he followed Dar'ja into a spacious silk tent. It had been his gift to the couple for their wedding...once they'd calmed down, of course. The priest sat inside, his ankles crossed, elbows on his knees, and his chin in a hand. "She's not up there," Ger'alın said flatly. "But I did hear something of inter..."

"But why? Why? Just tell me where she is and if there's a good reason, I'll give over," he muttered angrily to someone who wasn't there. "No, no. Now you know I wouldn't do that anymore than I would if she were truly Valara. Stop it. Make sense, Father! No," he growled, swinging his head as if to glare at another person, "you are her father. Light, according to Jez'ral, you cared for her and her mother more than life itself. Why would you try to stop me from rescuing her from danger? Stop this, both of you! Leave me!"

“Zerith, who are you talking to?” Ger’alin asked, giving a confused look to the man’s wife. Worry tinged with stupefaction painted his words. Zerith glanced up at him irritably and gestured in front of him.

“My father and Tal’ar Dawnrunner, Alayne’s father,” he said. “They say they’ve come back from beyond with a message for me but it does not make sense. They say we are to return to Shattrath and live out our lives in peace. That we are not to search for Alayne any longer. Some business about ‘disaster coming assuredly if we find her or try to stop her.’”

“Could it be the same thing that happened to you?” Dar’ja whispered in Ger’alin’s ear. Ger’alin shrugged and, recalling the lessons in handling the dead Alayne had passed on to him, he opened himself, allowing himself to see any restless spirits nearby. The tent, save for the three living elves, stood empty. He shook his head.

“There’s nothing there,” he said flatly.

“I swear to you,” Zerith said, “they are standing right here. My father, dressed in the priestly robes he wore in life; the ones I put on him with my own hands when he died. Her father, looking years younger and more vital than he did when we saw his mistreated corpse shambling about that citadel. They are both there! It’s just that this message from beyond makes no sense!”

“When was the last time you slept?” Ger’alin asked gently. Zerith shot a frosty look filled with daggers at the Blood Knight.

“I’m not the one who’s crazy,” he said, his tone as flat as a becalmed ocean. “I’m not the one who was struggling with my arcane addiction and then refusing to accept the Light’s healing. They are right there; they just won’t tell me anything that makes sense.”

“Zerith, there are no spirits in this tent,” Ger’alin said calmly, refusing to let himself react to the goading. “This is a prank of some kind. Take a deep breath; you can practically smell the magic in the air.”

Dar’ja and Zerith both sniffed deeply. They turned twin glares on Ger’alin. “I sense nothing out of the ordinary,” the priest muttered. “Perhaps they have simply chosen not to reveal themselves to you?”

“I doubt it,” Ger’alin said. “You say they say we should give up the search for Alayne?” Zerith nodded. “Do they seem aware of my presence at all?” The priest shook his head. “Tell them what they want to hear.” Zerith’s jaw dropped in shocked outrage. “Just do it. I want to test something.”

The priest nodded and sighed. “I still don’t understand,” he said to the spirits Ger’alin could not see, “but if it’s that important, we will return to Shattrath for the time being. Still, if I hear word of her and she’s in danger, I’m going after her.” That seemed to satisfy the spirits because, seconds later, Zerith blinked and sighed with relief. “They’re gone.”

“Right. So, we head to Blade’s Edge Mountains next,” Ger’alin said flatly. “But first, I want someone to return to Shattrath and bring back a Magister. The air in this tent reeks of arcane currents,” he explained. “I don’t think you were visited by spirits at all.”

“Why would someone go to the trouble of creating such a powerful and accurate illusion? Is it even possible?” Zerith demanded. “That was my father! Down to the way his hair fell in his face all the time and he had to pull it back with a braided cord. And her father; he looked exactly as she’s described him.”

“What did their voices sound like? The same as you recall?” Ger’alin pressed.

“They didn’t speak with voices,” Zerith whispered. “It was more like... thoughts forming in my head. It took me a while to figure out what they wanted.”

“Still, we report this to the Magisters and let them investigate it,” Ger’alin said firmly. “And then we strike camp and head to Blade’s Edge Mountains tomorrow. If Mor’ghor will continue to loan us the drakes, we should be able to find her there quickly.”

“I just told my father...,” Zerith began angrily. Ger’alin cut him off with a gesture.

“That wasn’t your father. Something damned odd is going on here. While I was up on the ridge, I dreamt I saw Alayne and that she ordered me not to follow after her. When I woke up, my mouth tasted as if I’d been eating magic dust. I still felt woozy; as if I had been standing too close to the Sunwell,” he said, recalling his one childhood visit to the elven shrine. “Just now, when Zerith was babbling on about ghosts, I felt more arcane power being channeled into this tent. Someone is trying to trick us into halting our search for her and I’d love to know who and why.”

“You’ve suddenly become knowledgeable about arcane matters,” Dar’ja muttered dryly. Ger’alin glared at her.

“Perhaps it escaped your attention,” he said, his tone coated with sugar, “but my wife is one of the most skilled and able students of such matters. I did spend a not-so-insignificant amount of time reading over her shoulder while breathing in the scent of her perfume and soap. I learned a few things. Also, it seems that what has happened to me on this side of the Dark Portal has...changed me in many ways. Three weeks ago, I wouldn’t have been able to sense the arcane currents in the tent just now. Three weeks ago, I wouldn’t have cared enough to try. But now...now I want to learn more about them so that I can learn how to control my hunger and turn it to service of the Light and naaru. I have to, Dar’ja,” he said bleakly, his change in tone wringing her heart. “What I did while under the influence of my addiction was something I never dreamed I’d be capable of doing. I have to make it right; I have to pay for the gift of forgiveness I’ve been granted. And,” he said, staring off into the distance, “I have to follow my wife where ever she goes. I can’t let what I foresaw become reality. I just can’t!”

“Calm yourself, Ger’alin,” Dar’ja said softly, soothingly. Reaching out, she patted the other paladin on the back, rubbing his shoulder as if to smooth his feathers. Zerith stared at the man in rapt fascination. “I’m sure there’s a logical explanation behind all of this. There has to be.”

~*~*~*~

Alayne sighed and knuckled her back. Weariness and long days with little rest and less sleep had augured fatigue into her back. Her steps dragged on leaden feet as she told herself that, in celebration for her success, she would permit herself a few hours of un-interrupted napping. “Tricking them wasn’t very nice,” Mordenai teased.

“Be quiet, you,” she thought irritably, wishing she could summon up some good humor. “It was necessary. You heard what my Lord’s watchers said. They said that there had been parties out searching for Lightbinder’s sister and Sunrage’s wife. Thank the Light none of them have put two and two together yet,” she sighed with relief. “Had they kept up their search, someone would have eventually. Desperate and foolhardy as most of the Sunfury are, they aren’t stupid.”

“I know,” Mordenai said quietly. “But you’ve been so...distant and hard lately. Sometimes I wonder if this was a good idea at all.”

“It wasn’t,” Alayne admitted. “It was a plan borne of complete desperation. I thought that, with the Vials, my Lord would give up his plotting to summon Kil’jaeden into our world. But he hasn’t. He’s handed the Vials over to the eredar. He’s increased production from the manaforges to the point of where I wonder just how much longer reality in the Netherstorm will hold together. But, even in the midst of all that...he’s still the only hope I can foresee for re-igniting the Sunwell and saving Ger’alin and the rest of our people.”

“I know,” Mordenai replied. “I know the plan forming in your mind. As long as we’re connected like this, I almost know what you think before you think it. It is...can you be certain he’d want you to? That he’d be willing to go on like that?”

“He’s not going to have much of a choice,” she replied wryly. “If you can see the end, then you know my mind’s already set. Two sparrows with one stone.”

“Still, why the tricks on them?”

“To keep them in Shattrath. To keep them far away from me. According to Zerith, they’ve not even heard a whisper of where I am or what I’m doing. From what little I could glean from his mutterings, they were in Nagrand. If I can keep them off my trail long enough, my Lord will order me to Quel’Danas. Once there, hopefully I’ll be so immured in work that no one will know I’m there until...”

“Until we leave,” he finished for her. “Just don’t play any more tricks on them. You know that what you were doing had to leave some trace. You can’t count on them not to ever have a Magister handy.”

“They’re returning to Shattrath,” she said. “Zerith would sooner lie needlessly to me than to his father. I think that doing that again won’t be necessary. I will have to keep an ear open for word that they’re still on the trail, though. Light, I hate what I’m doing but I have no choice! Zerith would never understand the price that has to be paid to bring our people back! He’d never understand it. Neither would Dar’ja or Ger’alin.” She grimaced, her mouth twisting with distaste. “Only Ta’sia would and likely she’d let Ger’alin die of his illness before she’d lift a finger to help either of us. Mir’el...Mir’el is too much like Voren’tal. He’s conservative. Takes his time. Doesn’t like to be rushed. But we can’t wait! Ger’alin will die if we wait!”

“I know, Alayne, I know,” Mordenai said gently. “You don’t need to convince me. I knew before we left Shadowmoon that there was always a chance that... but you’re right. Your people have suffered far too much. Yes, this path is a deadly one but you’ve convinced me you can walk it. Someone has to.”

“And I can’t trust anyone other than myself to do it,” she returned. His silence spoke his agreement. “Besides, most of them are no doubt glad to be rid of that perversion, that death knight. With me gone, Garrosh and Mor’ghor should hold their alliance with the rest of the groups allied against my Lord. That’s my last hope,” she thought forlornly. “That, if I fail, if I falter and fall, that Shattrath can come and do what I’d leave undone.”

“Plots within schemes within stratagems,” the dragon mused fondly. “You really will earn that title he’s trying to thrust on you.”

“I may have no choice but to call him ‘my Lord’ and bow and scrape and leap to do his bidding,” she thought angrily. “I may be bound by a geas until he lifts it or dies, but I do not have to accept ludicrous offerings from him. I can refuse a patent of nobility. He thinks even more highly of me for not leaping at the chance to ‘shed my common name for a higher.’”

“Still, it would make your job easier. Perhaps if your workers had to bow and scrape to you, they wouldn’t argue with you so much and would take better care of you. You are wearing yourself out, Alayne, working two shifts out of three with only a few hours sleep.”

“Do you remember the mess that this place was in when I assumed command?” she said acerbically. She felt his sighed acquiescence. “I have no desire to die before my time,” she muttered, “and if I don’t make certain that the rift remains stable, we’ll be swarmed with netherspawm again. You know what happened at Ultris. They lost every man at the forge when that demon swept in. They should never have let the rift grow so wide or so unstable. I will not lose my life or my crew to carelessness!”

“Still, you should sleep.”

“I can’t sleep,” she thought, careful to keep the thought to herself. “My bed is so empty without him there. My life is so empty without them here. I never knew just how much I relied on their strength and wisdom until now when it seems that everyone is turning to me.”

Her introspection was interrupted when a runner stepped up to her, bowing and ducking his head politely. “Go ahead,” she said, grating her teeth at the formality.

“King Sunstrider wishes you to join him for lunch before you take your rest. He wishes an update on the status of the forges under your command. You are to attend him immediately,” the messenger said, puffed up with his own self-importance.

“Knock it off, Sam’vah,” she muttered. He grinned boyishly in return. “Do I have time to run a brush through my hair or does my Lord intend to count the seconds?”

“While our lord does wish for you to answer his summons with all haste,” he laughed, “I think you have time to change clothes and do something about those bags under your eyes. Go on, Alayne. I want to hear every word when you’re done. You’ve been called before King Sunstrider quite often of late. I think he’s taken with you.”

“Oh please,” she groaned. “He is not. Not in that manner, at any rate. He’s impressed by my abilities. That is all.”

“Still, to be taught personally by one of the members of the council of Dalaran. That’s something to brag about. But then, you were Darkreaver’s apprentice back in Silvermoon for a time, right? He’s... a strange one but he’s quite skilled nonetheless.”

“Who? Oh, Mir’el,” she said tiredly. “He’s very skilled.”

“You’re asleep on your feet,” Sam’vah giggled, “and I’m keeping you from your meeting with our king. Go on, Alayne. I promise, I will guard the rift with my life while you sup with the great ones and nap.”

“You’d better guard it with your life until my second gets here,” she growled, turning serious. “Do you want a repeat of Ultris?” He shook his head, his long blond hair flying in his face. “Then see that it remains stable. If the slightest instability comes up, you send for me right away. Don’t try to handle it yourself. You’ve seen me force them out of flux; you know that you don’t have what it takes. By the sun, *I* barely have what it takes,” she sighed. “It’s always just by the skin of my teeth that I get it stabilized. Always just. I’m going, I’m going,” she muttered, striding off.

Outside the massive manaforge, Alayne took a moment to lean against the smooth, cool wall. Constructed of some sort of crystalline material she’d never seen before, the forge, like its twins, rose up high into the Netherstorm, its peak containing the magical apparatus that created a swirling vortex of purple striated clouds above the forge. She could hear the reassuring hum of the turbines and engines as they gathered and processed energy. A gentle spray of mist from one of the conduits spoke of a leak that would need to be fixed while reassuring her that the flow of water from Zangarmarsh continued in spite of whatever her friends and the druids were doing. Pushing herself away from the wall, she strode down the cobbled pathway, nodding formally to the Blood Knights standing guard around the perimeter. Her heart turned over in her chest whenever she saw one of the men in their battle-worn armor. With their helms on and their swords and shields held ready, any one of the larger men could have been Ger’alin. Continuing her swift but graceful stride to the edge of the broken isle, she signaled one of the magi on duty near Cosmowrench that she needed to gain access to the Keep. Providing today’s passphrase – “night will fall and day will rise” in old Thalassian – she felt herself being transported through the currents of the arcane corridors and into Tempest Keep. As always when she was transported by an arcane spell, Alayne felt a pang of jealousy. She would sell her soul and count it cheap at the price to be able to wield arcane energy again. Of late, when she channeled fel powers or reached into the Nether to force a demon to her will, she felt the tingling thrill that tempted her to drink in more. “Either I’m beginning to succumb to the corruption Mir’el and the other warlocks warned us over or I’m around too many demons,” she thought to herself, feeling Mordenai’s agreement. “At least I managed to convince my Lord not to let them work in Duro. Letting them have control of Ara was bad enough but our numbers are too few after our losses at Ultris.”

“You’re an excellent commander, Alayne. Really and truly you are,” Mordenai said suddenly, making her blink.

“Thank you,” she sent back to him, feeling a warm glow of pleasure at his praise. Striding through the corridors to her room, her step a little lighter for all her weariness, she quickly changed her robes and straightened her hair. Wishing she had taken the time – or interest – in purchasing face powders, she prayed that the bags under her eyes would not be too noticeable. Only moments after she’d entered, she left her quarters once more, setting out for King Sunstrider’s personal suite. The guards at the door grinned and announced her quickly, nodding in respect. Her talents in battle had put the Sunfury Blood Knights firmly behind her; they respected nothing so much as combat experience. “You wished to see me, my Liege,” she said, kneeling and pressing a fist to the floor.

“Rise, rise,” he said, his airy voice sounding amused. “I tell you, my dear, that you must not be so formal. You have earned my respect and my confidence many times over. When the Sunwell is restored and Quel’Thalas shines once more in glory, I will raise you to the station you should have been born to. I would raise you now but...”

“You esteem me too highly, my King,” she said humbly, spreading her skirts as she dipped her head. “I have done little; those above me have done the true work. I stand tall only because I stand on the shoulders of the mighty.”

“Such humility,” he sighed. “So many want power. So many seek it out. But you, young woman, you refuse power and privilege while taking on greater and greater responsibility. That by itself marks you for greatness. Now, come, sit,” he said, gesturing to a lightly laden table. “Refresh yourself and tell me of the progress at Duro. Are we on schedule?”

“Ahead of it, actually,” she said, taking a seat. She murmured her thanks to the servant who brought her spiced wine and sipped at it. Selecting a few pieces of fruit and cheese from the table, she nibbled at them as she gave her report. Kael’Thas watched her eat with delight. Something in his gaze reminded her of the way Mir’el and Jez’ral had hovered over her when she was ill. “Since we happened on a way to handle the fluctuations in the vortices, we’ve been able to step up production by one hundred percent. As we no longer have to deal with Netherspawn dropping in on us unexpectedly, we can dedicate our full resources to the harvest. I have written out our procedures to the letter and sent them on to Ara, Coruu, and B’naar. Hopefully, if my calculations and speculations are correct, we will avoid another Ultris altogether and can speed up the harvest greatly.”

“My advisers and magisters have looked over your calculations and find them to be sound,” he whispered absently, his fey gaze studying her features minutely. “They find you to be rather...advanced for one who has not yet seen the change of thirty springs. Tell me, young Dawnrunner, is Darkreaver your father? I know many have said you have Ta’lar Dawnrunner’s spirit and determination, but your raw talent...”

“Ta’lar Dawnrunner was my father,” she said firmly, “he was the only man my mother ever took to her bed. His death...” she sighed, remembering the day news had come of her father’s death. “His death killed my mother,” she said faintly. For years, she had hated her mother for dying and leaving her alone in the world. She hastily blinked back tears as she realized she understood why her mother had given up. If word reached her of Ger’alin’s death, she would... “Enough about me, my Lord,” she said firmly. “Production will increase at Duro,” she promised. “We will wring every ounce of power out of the Twisting Nether as quickly as we can. The Sunwell must shine once more!”

“It must and it will,” he agreed. “You may withdraw and go to your rest. Would you like me to appoint a second to attach to Duro? Rumor has reached my ears that you work two out of three shifts.”

“I do only what I must, my Lord. And, there are no others to send. The butcher’s bill at Ultris ran too high,” she whispered, making her courtesies once more. Kael’Thas nodded to her and made a gesture of dismissal. Alayne quickly strode out of his chambers and all but ran to her own. “Light help me,” she thought as tears streamed down her cheeks once she reached the privacy of her own rooms. “Ger’alin...,” she croaked, wracked with sobs, “I have to speed up production! I have to! The Sunwell must be restored before he... It must be,” she said, forcing a halt to her weeping. Tossing a cloak around her shoulders, she glanced at the bed and shook her head. Striding back out into the hallway, she headed back towards Manaforge Duro, determined to see more increases in productivity if she had to fight back half of the denizens of the Twisting Nether alone.

~*~*~*~

“A remarkable child,” Kael’Thas said to himself as he watched the young Dawnrunner trot out of his quarters.

“A rare child of many talents,” Capernian agreed as she ducked in from the study. “Telonicus has never been so overjoyed. Few of our people are able to see how to combine technology and magic as she is. I think he’d adopt her himself were she not past her majority.”

“Yes,” Kael’Thas murmured slowly. “She is a woman of many talents. Still, why does she claim to be a Dawnrunner? With such talent in shadow magic, certainly she is Darkreaver’s daughter. I never bought the story that Miris Daystar fell for Ta’lar Dawnrunner and ran off with him because Mir’el was...eccentric.”

“The Darkreaver line is noted for its eccentricity and insanity,” the High Astromancer replied as she poured out a glass of wine for herself and her king. “Perhaps she feared you would believe her tainted with her father’s touch of madness. Nether knows that Baron Bor’in was not the most stable of all people. Besides, I think I remember hearing something about that young woman falling ill with a plague of insanity or some such not terribly long ago.” Kael’Thas quirked his eyebrows in interest. “It was only a rumor that came along with some of the pilgrims a year ago. Some wild tale about a plague of madness afflicting some of our people in Quel’Thalas. I remember hearing that an Alayne Dawnrunner was numbered among them.”

“Then she has recovered remarkably well,” the lord of the sin’dorei muttered, pressing his fingers to his lips thoughtfully. “How old do you believe she is? Past her first sunchange?”

“Nearing it, more likely than not,” Capernian said, blushing slightly. Some things she still found difficult to discuss in mixed company, even when it was her king.

“Telonicus has a nephew, I believe,” Kael continued thoughtfully. “He is currently working with our allies in Hellfire Peninsula, helping to learn how to better control our new powers. I believe I will arrange a marriage between the pair. With her raw potential and his native talents – not to mention his enhancements, of late – their children will be our future. Inform Telonicus,” he said, his tone direct. “Afterwards, meet me on the Bridge. If young Dawnrunner’s calculations prove correct, we will be ready to begin the next phase of our plan well before I had ever hoped we would. We had best be prepared to move quickly.”

~*~*~*~

Alayne nodded off, barely catching herself from falling face-first onto her desk. She ignored Mordenai’s non-stop orations on how she should get herself to bed. The figures on the page before her danced and wavered before her grainy eyes. “Have to set up a shielding,” she whispered to no one. “Otherwise the polarity of the standing weave here will react with

the resonance caused by the channelers' harmonic frequencies. Whole thing could go splat then," she said, scribbling down her thoughts. "This will let us increase production another five-fold." Blinking, she realized what she'd done. "Five-fold! We could be back in Silvermoon within two weeks!" she shouted. "I have to inform my Lord Sunstrider," she gasped, standing up from the desk. She grabbed at her notes, balling them up in her fists and staggering wearily out of the office. "Sam'vah," she slurred, surprised to see him still attending his duties at the forge. "Your shift ended hours ago. You should not be wearing yourself out," she said sternly, drawing herself up into a modicum of command.

"You're not in your rooms?" he said, sounding stunned. "My Lady Alayne, what have you been doing in there? King Sunstrider ordered that you be allowed to rest undisturbed after your last suggestion increased production by fifty-percent. He's set guards on your room to see that you are not disturbed. We thought you were resting. Light, how long have you been awake?"

"Not long," she said smoothly. "I'm quite well-rested. I must speak with our King immediately," she continued, unable to hide her excitement. Waving the papers she held in her fists, she carried on, her voice picking up steam. "I have hit upon a method that will allow us to widen the rifts while maintaining their stability. We'll see easily a five-fold increase in productivity with this new method. And stop calling me that!"

"That's wonderful," Sam'vah laughed, "but you are not going anywhere near our King until you're less likely to pitch over in his lap and begin babbling about candied trolls dancing. Oh yes, my Lady, we know all about your little idiosyncrasy."

"Sam'vah," she growled.

"You are my Lady whether you like it or not," he said pleasantly. "And you are going to go take a nap. And a wash," he giggled. "You've got inkstains in your hair, my Lady."

"I give up," she said, throwing her hands in the air but still clutching the sheets of paper. "I'll go clean up then I want you to arrange for me to speak with our King. He'll want to know of this right away."

"My Lady, all you have to do is walk up to his doors. He said himself that you had no need of such formalities with him any longer. But please rest, Alayne," he pleaded. "All of us want to see the Sunwell restored but you can't keep using yourself so hard. You'll burn yourself out and you're not even twenty-five. You're not one of the felbloods who has enhanced endurance and strength," he shivered. "That honor – if you can call it that – has not been granted those of us working in the manaforges."

"Because we need perfect clarity of thought," she explained. "I myself, along with Lord Telonicus, helped convince King Sunstrider of the necessity of leaving us unchanged. *Not to mention that I'd die before I drank demon blood,*" she said, keeping the last thought to herself.

"Promise me that you'll sleep tonight instead of working," Sam'vah said, taking her shoulders in his hands and forcing her to look up at him. "I know you normally take evening and night shift but you've been in there for three days! Three days it's been since I last escorted you to speak with our king and you spoke of your idea for speeding up production. You were supposed to be resting this whole time," he chided. "You're going to get me in trouble. Besides, there's some feast in a few hours and I'm sure you'll be invited."

"Oh please," she groaned. "I'm not going to any silly party. I will skip the evening shift but I'll be here for tonight's third shift. No, Sam'vah, I'm not going to go to a party while there is work to be done. I'll celebrate the rest of my days when the Sunwell is restored. All of us will," she promised. "I'll have a huge party and I'll even cook for it. You'd like that. My hu...my friends say I'm a great cook," she grimaced, berating herself for that slip of the tongue. "I do need sleep," she sighed. "After I've spoken with our Lord." Sam'vah let his

hands drop with a roll of his eyes. Nodding firmly, Alayne strode out of the manaforge, ignoring the shocked stares that followed in her wake.

“You should listen to him,” Mordenai said angrily along the bond. “Your weariness is making me tired! Get some rest, Alayne. You’ll kill yourself if you keep this up.”

“Be quiet,” she said, muttering the words aloud as well as thinking them in her exhaustion. A Blood Knight guard, his hair the same color as Ger’alin’s, looked at her in confusion. She gave him a gesture of apology, flushing furiously, as she continued towards the coop where her personal mount – a gift from Telonicus and Kael – nested. Climbing aboard the phoenix’s back, she whispered the incantation that lifted the enchantment and allowed it to fly. Straight as an arrow, it soared through the air, headed towards Tempest Keep. Though the flight lasted only moments, Alayne found herself nearly falling out of her saddle, jerking awake with a start of pure fright until she realized she had landed safely at the entrance to the keep. Handlers hastened over, whispering their own incantations and helping her off the bird’s back. She was forced to let them. Between her weariness and her fright over nearly falling asleep while flying, Alayne’s legs felt like rubber. She sighed as she realized that she *was* tired. Beyond tired, in fact. “I cannot speak with him like this,” she whispered to herself. “I’d trip over my words and fall asleep the moment I sat down. But...I can’t wait,” she said, torn by indecision. “I’ll wash off and that should perk me up a bit. A cup of tea would help as well. Then, I will sleep; once he’s heard my proposal and once it’s on its way to the others so that we can hasten ourselves along.”

“Please sleep!”

“I will!” she snapped. Glancing around, she sighed in relief when she saw that no one stood in the corridors to hear her talking to herself. Brushing past the stunned guards before the door to her quarters, she locked the door behind herself and began disrobing and washing mechanically, telling herself over and over again that she would sleep – briefly – after she’d spoken with Kael. Donning fresh robes and feeling slightly more awake after her ablutions, Alayne sat down to change her boots.

A loud banging on the door nearly made her jump out of her skin. “Wha?” she muttered thickly, wondering how she’d wound up on the floor. Pushing herself up and scrambling to her feet, she wiped drool from her chin and cheek and hoped that her hair wasn’t too mussed up from her nap on the floor. Long slanted shadows from the windows told her it was early evening. She had sat down to put on her boots at mid-morning. Opening the door, Alayne prepared to take the head off of whoever had woken her. Now that she’d had a taste of sleep, she wanted to make a meal of it.

“My Lady Dawnrunner,” one of Kael’Thas’s personal guards said, his voice sonorous and ringing down the hallway. “I have the pleasure of escorting you to a feast held in your honor this evening. It would please King Sunstrider to have you attend to him immediately before the festivities begin.”

“May I have a moment to prepare myself to attend my lord and king?” she asked dumbly, wondering how she would get out of this banquet without getting herself into hot water. The guard nodded and she closed the door, leaning against it and trying to catch her breath. “He really means me to attend tonight,” she said breathlessly, thinking back to the several feasts, dinners, and small parties she’d managed to skip out on or leave early. Since bringing the Vials to him and since proving herself a capable and dedicated commander, Kael’Thas had insisted on making certain all his followers knew that one of Voren’thal’s younglings had not only returned to the flock; but one of his most promising younglings at that. Giving herself a shake, Alayne quickly ran a brush through her sleep-matted hair, washed the traces of sleep away from her face, and straightened her robes. Slipping on her satin slippers instead of the normal boots she wore, she threw a shawl around her shoulders against the chill of late evening and opened the door. The guards stood at attention, waiting

for her patiently. She locked the door quickly behind her and strode after them, her heart pounding as something in the back of her mind told her that this would be more than just a dinner party.

“Ah, my dear Alayne,” Kael’Thas said warmly when she was conducted into the small sitting room that led into his private quarters. “Are you quite rested, child? I heard that you had been back down to Duro even though I had given you permission to take a few days to rest. Sam’vah said you had something you wished to speak with me and Telonicus about. Is it another way to improve efficiency?” he smiled, his eyes twinkling with delight.

“Indeed it is, my Lord,” she said, spreading her skirts and dipping low. “I...I left the diagrams and equations in my chambers but...”

“Hold that thought for a moment, my dear,” he chuckled. “Ran’ar, fetch Telonicus. Anything the Lady Dawnrunner suggests is something he wants to hear.”

Alayne tried not to fidget while the guards hurried to find and bring Telonicus. She did not have to wait long; the Master Engineer and elf behind most of the great machinery that would help to restore the Sunwell all but ran into the room a few moments later.

“Telonicus,” Kael grinned, “our Lady Dawnrunner may have come up with a way to wring yet more production out of our manaforges. Go ahead, my dear. Let us hear your suggestions.”

Taking a deep breath, Alayne quickly outlined her thoughts and, taking a quill and parchments from Kael’s table, sketched out a few rough diagrams and equations. Telonicus frowned thoughtfully and peered over her shoulder as she scribbled, interrupting her only to point out potential problems or suggest a method with a touch more finesse. By the time she had finished, he was staring at her, his expression a mixture of surprise, disbelief, and awe. “It will work,” he said finally. “Instead of a month, we can begin transporting our forces now because we’ll be ready in two weeks at the most.”

“Then see that the transport begins first thing tomorrow morning. Tonight, I want these new procedures sent out to the forges and I want them operational by tomorrow evening,” Kael’Thas said, his voice carrying the assurity of a command that would be carried out. “For now, let us add this to our many reasons to celebrate this night.”

“My Lord,” Alayne began, dipping deeply and praying she would find the words to get her out of this feast. Her message delivered, she wanted nothing more than to climb into her bed and try to pretend Ger’alin was next to her. “I ask that I be excu...”

“Nonsense,” he said firmly. “This feast is in your honor. You are the star, the guest of honor, the reason for the celebration. You have managed to head off every one of my attempts to elevate you to your proper stature since shortly after you arrived. You will partake of these festivities tonight, my child,” he sighed. “Your humility is most becoming. But please, my dear, let us honor you this night. Never before has one so young done so much for our people. You have become a symbol of hope and achievement among the others. That is why I have raised you to your proper station. As a noble, it is your duty to show yourself to the people, to set the example they need, and to let them bask in the glow of your accomplishments. Do not hide yourself behind the clouds, my young Dawnrunner. Step out of them and shine down as you were born to. It is your duty now. But first, a small gift from your grateful lord and king,” he grinned, plucking a blood red rosebud from his pocket. “Wear this tonight. Behind your right ear,” he explained when she took it from him and held it between her thumb and forefinger. Doing as directed, she tucked the long stem behind her ear and wove it beneath her hair. Kael’Thas nodded in satisfaction and, offering her his arm, escorted her out of his sitting room and down to the grand hall for the feast.

Alayne struggled to stay awake through the waits between courses. She also struggled not to be sick every time she saw Telonicus's nephew out of the corner of her eye. Ordinarily Van'gri would have been an extraordinarily handsome elf. Normally, his long black hair was pulled up in a top-knot that flowed down his shoulders and back. Normally, his skin was clear with just a hint of red from his time channeling fel magic. Normally, his shoulders and arms were slim but well-muscled, speaking of a wiry strength and agility. Now, however, since his transformation, Alayne tried to ignore the heat she could feel emanating from the man. His smile was stretched into a rictus grin, his skin dark and ruddy, red on the verge of purpling. He had let his hair down, binding it out of his eyes with a decorated band. Alayne wished he'd let it fall into his face and obscure his eyes. The burned like emerald fire. His whole body looked swollen to her, engorged by the power that came from drinking demon blood. She shuddered whenever her gaze fell on him. Whenever she shuddered, his grin would deepen. The way he gazed at her possessively was feral, fel, and frightening.

"My honored guests," King Sunstrider said, rising from his seat at the center of the table. Alayne took a deep breath and concentrated on his words, wishing she could ask for tea in place of wine. "I have called you here tonight to celebrate a very special occasion and to make a few important announcements. Several weeks ago, Lady Dawnrunner saw the error of her ways and joined our cause, bringing with her the two Vials of Eternity which we lacked. She also brought the gift of a nether dragon mount which I will cherish forever," he smiled at her. "She is quite young – barely past her majority – and yet, in a few weeks, she and Telonicus have managed to work out new production methods and ratchet up the efficiency of our manaforges several fold. For her hard work and dedication, I created her Lady Dawnrunner, Baroness of Tranquilien. Once we have, with much help from her, restored the Sunwell and our people's proper glory, she will attain yet a higher rank," he announced, lifting his hands to request silence from the startled murmurs that had sprung up. "My Lady Dawnrunner, would you please step forward?" he asked politely. Alayne blinked and nodded, folding her napkin and setting it on the table and standing up to walk before him, confusion and uncertainty plain on her face. "My Lord Sunfury?" he asked, gesturing towards Van'gri. The felblood elf stood up and, smirking, slunk over to her, a knowing grin on his face. "As Telonicus is my cousin – albeit a distant relation – and his nephew Van'gri a member of House Sunstrider, I have conferred with your guardian, Lord Darkreaver, and received his blessing to offer your hand in marriage to a member of my House," Kael'Thas explained to Alayne. "Once the Sunwell is restored and our people returned to their proper glory, you will become Countess Sunstrider. Your children will be fifth in line to the throne of Quel'Thas. Now, you two may embrace before these witnesses, in symbol of the union that will take place once the Sunwell shines again."

Alayne stared dumbly at her king, shivering when she cast a wary gaze at Van'gri. "My Lord," she said breathlessly, her lungs feeling as if twin iron fists had squeezed all of the air out of them, "you esteem me too highly. I have done only what is necessary and only what I am able to do. You need not dilute the purity of your House and Line with peasant blood. I am...most gratefully aware of the high honor you are bestowing upon this unworthy subject but I cannot..."

"Nonsense," Van'gri cut in, flashing what he imagined to be a becoming and charming smile. "The blood in our line has grown thin. Your blood will restore it. I am eager to take you to wife, my dear. Do not refuse me this rare privilege," he said, his eyes roving over her rakishly.

"My Lord," she protested, her voice so faint the pair struggled to hear it, "forgive me, but I cannot marry..."

"I know, I know," Kael'Thas laughed lightly. "You cannot marry now. There is work to be done. I have heard you say that many times, milady. Your wedding will not occur until

after the Sunwell is restored. However, it will occur. Lord Darkreaver has signed the contract of marriage on your behalf. You cannot back out now, my dear.” Pitching his voice low and leaning down to whisper into her ear, he continued, “Van’gri will not be a bad husband. And, though you may not love him, I’m certain you will come to, eventually. Now embrace,” he said, his tone carrying throughout the room. “Embrace and then we will finish our feast with rejoicing.”

Alayne glanced awkwardly at the man Kael’Thas had arranged for her to marry. He was still grinning at her slyly, hungrily. Stepping up to her, he pulled her into his arms, crushing her against his chest. Dimly, she could hear cheers and applause when he pulled her face up and pressed his lips against hers. Kael’Thas said something congratulatory but she did not hear it as weariness, hopelessness, and panic washed over her, darkening her vision.

“That must have been some kiss,” he muttered to Van’gri as Alayne collapsed in a heap at the man’s feet. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a woman actually faint like that.”

“Carry on the feast without us, my Lord,” Van’gri chuckled. Kael shook his head, knowing what his cousin was about. “I’ll just go and tuck my wife-to-be in. After all, looking after her is my first duty, now.”

“As you will, Lord Sunfury,” Kael’Thas said by way of dismissal. “As you both will.”

~*~*~*~

“Not another word,” Zerith growled between clenched teeth. “I’ve had it up to here with this foolishness,” he muttered, raising his hand over his head.

“We’ll stop, we’ll stop,” Dar’ja giggled. “You have to admit, it is pretty funn...” his glare made her swallow her words. “Very well.”

“You are taking this surprisingly well, though,” Callie commented. “I mean, most men would... Right, shutting up.”

“I don’t know why I let myself get talked into staying here to continue this wild dragonhawk chase,” the priest sighed heavily. “We should have reported to the Scryer spy camp in the Netherstorm yesterday. Maybe she’s out there. Maybe they’ve found her and she’s under arrest. She could be needing us right now.”

“And maybe those lights on the horizon are just really large fireflies, Queen Zerith,” Ger’alin said mildly, making Zerith jump and then stare daggers at the paladin. “I must say, I am looking forward to the coronation. If the Scryers had found her, my Lady Queen, we would have heard about it already.”

“One more word,” Zerith hissed. “Just one more word and I will...”

“Oh don’t get your ermine undies in a bunch, my Queen,” Ger’alin continued. “It was funny and you know it. Find what humor you can while you can. *She*’s going to laugh until her sides split.”

“*She* is going to owe me a debt for the rest of her life. I’m thinking that she is never going to take a vacation because she’s going to be watching my children all the time. And cleaning the house from top to bottom everyday.”

“And cooking you a seven course meal twice a day,” Ger’alin said, turning to grin over his shoulder at the priest. “Don’t leave out the best part of her punishment, O Lovely Queen Zerith.”

Zerith snorted and started giggling. “I suppose it is amusing. They are rather stupid, aren’t they?”

“And stinky and uncivilized and able to brew up an ale that will put some hair on your chest, Queenie,” Ger’alin agreed. “I cannot believe I am actually going to walk into the midst of ogres and not fight them.”

“I’m starting to wish I’d let you kill that one we found,” Zerith muttered. “This ‘queen Zerith’ business is really getting on my nerves. Sin’dorei cannot be the only ones who let their men grow their hair out long as a sign of adulthood. Humans do it as well. Even among dwarves it’s not uncommon.”

“Orcs tend to be bald,” Ger’alin pointed out. “Ogres too. That’s why he thought you were a woman. Still, I must ask,” he said, sounding earnest, “was that kiss as good for you as it seemed to be for him? Just curious,” he wondered, forcing his expression to remain innocent when Zerith’s face turned red with rage and embarrassment. “It did drag on for quite some time. Dar’ja, you’re not worried, are you?” Dar’ja shook her head, clutching her sides as she laughed without breath.

“I am going to spank Alayne for doing this so that I ever got in that situation to begin with,” Zerith vowed.

“Hey, that’s my job!” Ger’alin said, deadpan. Zerith stared at the paladin, his face turning pale and his mouth opening and closing but no words coming out. “Light of heaven, Zerith, I’m kidding. Zerith? Are you okay? Dar’ja, I think I broke your husband,” Ger’alin muttered, turning around and hurrying back to lift the priest off the ground. Zerith was laughing so hard that tears streamed down his cheeks and he was having trouble breathing.

“I just had the best mental picture of you trying that,” he gasped, “and of her siccing one of her demons on you – that big fel guard of hers – and then you running all over creation while it was trying to spank *you!*” he guffawed. “Oh my,” he said long moments later when he finally began to sputter down. “Do that to me again and I’ll have to ask the High King to exile you.”

“How Queen doing?” an ogre asked, plodding up to the four. Zerith and Ger’alin both began laughing again, the paladin throwing his head back and letting his booming baritone chuckles ring throughout the canyon. Dar’ja tried to explain that Zerith was fine; the ogre’s expression was one of weighty concern and he looked as if he might gather the priest into his massive arms and carrying ‘their queen’ to safety. The thought of that set her to giggling so much she could barely make herself understood. Callie just chuckled, knuckling tears from her eyes and shaking her head.

“Dumber than a box of rocks,” she said when the ogre stomped back off, satisfied that his ‘queen’ was in good health and humor. Zerith’s laughter had finally wound down but Ger’alin’s continued. Callie lifted an eyebrow, seeing that the fighter’s face was no longer amused. Instead, it was contorted with near-hysteria. “Ger’alin, calm down,” she said quickly, walking over and grabbing him by a shoulder.

“Ger’alin?” Zerith asked, taking the man by the other shoulder. Ger’alin’s guffaws turned to sobs as he began shaking, the tears of mirth streaming down his cheeks becoming tears of panic and frustration. “Calm down, Ger’alin. What has you bouncing from one mood to the next like this? I thought I was supposed to be the woman here,” Zerith said, making mock of himself. Dar’ja and Callie gave the priest even looks. Ger’alin buried his face on his knees and his hands in his hair, shaking all the while.

“I’ve got to find her,” he finally was able to say. His voice was hoarse as if he had not had a drop of water in years. “I’ve got to stop her from doing whatever it is she’s going to do. I can’t sleep anymore for worrying, for dreaming, that I’ll be too late!”

“Gerry, what are these dreams you’re having?” Callie asked solicitously. Ger’alin waved her off, trying to compose himself. “You’ll feel better if you talk about it,” she insisted.

“Leave him be,” Zerith said firmly. “Dar’ja, you and Callie go on with the others. Make certain everyone is following the queen’s commands to the letter. We’ll be along in a minute when we’re calm.” Dar’ja and Callie stared at Zerith for a minute before nodding blankly and falling in with his wishes. Zerith made a mental note to remember that tone of

voice and expression. Whatever it was, it had gotten them to obey him when they were more inclined to argue. “You okay?” he asked when Ger’alin seemed to have regained control of his emotions. “You want to talk about it?”

“No,” the paladin said flatly. “What I’d like to do is find the nearest source of arcane power and drown myself in it. Failing that, I’d like to get drunker than a sailor on leave. Neither is possible, I know, I know,” he sighed. “But...I’ve got to find her.”

“We will.”

“No, not we. Me. I’ve got to find her. She’s calling out to me whether she knows it or not and I’ve got to be there or something dreadful will happen. Maybe it already has. Maybe I’m already too late what with the wallowing in my own self-pity. But, I’ve got to try still.” Pushing himself to his feet, he stuck out a hand for Zerith. “C’mon, my Queen. We’re going to heaven to find an angel...I hope.”

~*~*~*~

“Oh no, not again,” Ger’alin groaned as the painfully familiar dreamscape coalesced around him. He blinked, realizing it was different this time but not quite able to put his finger on what was different about it. Ahead of him, Alayne stood, her figure shrouded in mists and shadows, weaving some kind of currents. The magic she wove made her dark outline glow against the fog. Ger’alin watched, fascinated, as a gentle, soul-warming peace began to flow towards him. A sensation barely remembered from his childhood tugged at him as the floor in front of his wife began to shimmer and shine. “The Sunwell,” he gasped. “Alayne, is that what you’re doing? Reigniting the Sunwell? But how? Alone you don’t have the power...I see,” he sighed, seeing three Vials appear around her. Dark, enigmatic figures held them, the trio channeling their own energies through the Vials and into the Sunwell. “I knew there was a reas... *No!*” he shrieked as he saw Zerith enter the dreamscape. The priest said something that made his sister turn and stare at him. “No, no, no, no, no!” Ger’alin pleaded. Suddenly, Zerith and Alayne began to move towards each other; the priest fumbling jerkily for his mace while Alayne’s hand twitched towards her dagger. Oddly enough, from the expressions on their faces, it seemed as if their bodies were moving against their wishes. Diabolical laughter rang in Ger’alin’s ears as he watched the pair continue to draw nearer each other, Alayne’s hand with the dagger rearing back, Zerith raising the mace high above his head. Their faces contorted with fear and anger as the laughter continued. Then, a flash of light that burned Ger’alin’s eyes like the heat of a hundred fires.

When he blinked, he saw Zerith face-down on the ground, blood pooling beneath him, his body still. Behind him lay Alayne. Ger’alin scrambled over the priest’s body, reaching for his wife. He shuddered, bile rising in his throat, when he saw the ghastly dent in her skull and her wide, staring eyes. Pulling them shut gently with his fingers, he smoothed her hair back, hiding the horrible wound. Careless of the gore staining his hands, he wiped them on his tabard and gently stroked her face. “Alayne, why? Why does this happen? Tell me, please, someone, anyone!” he pleaded. “Why do you keep tormenting me with visions of their deaths? Of her death?”

Silence was his only response.

“Why? What can be done to prevent this? Light help me, what is it you want of me?”

“Just wake up already,” Zerith growled. “We’re never going to find her if you lay in bed all morning.”

Ger’alin’s eyes popped open and he jerked back from the priest, startled to see the man alive and well. “Just another dream,” the Blood Knight muttered when the priest stared at him, his eyes asking the question. “I’ll be out in a moment. I just need a few minutes.” Zerith nodded and left the tent. Callie ducked in as the priest ducked out, making Ger’alin dive back

under the covers and mutter about needing a few moments' warning before she entered like that.

"Get over it. You're not my kind," she grinned roguishly. "Not nearly enough hair on your chest, for one thing. And, you blush like I would have when I was alive. I just wanted to let you know that there's a runner from the Scryers in the camp. He had an urgent message for Zerith about something going on in the Netherstorm. I just told Dar'ja and she was waiting for Zerith to finish getting you out of bed to tell him."

"We can't stop looking for her," Ger'alín muttered, his voice muffled by the shirt he was pulling over his head. Pulling his long hair out of the neck of his shirt, he ran his fingers through it to straighten the tangles and then tied it back at the base of his head. "I thought we'd found a good lead last night near those glowing energy creatures. A trail of arcane energies that put me in mind of what I sensed back in Nagrand," he explained.

"Well, the runner was pretty upset that we haven't already started towards Netherstorm. He said something about them needing every hand they can find. I think Kael's up to something big now. We may not have time to continue looking for Alayne," she said gently, trying to break the news to her friend. "As important as it is we find her, stopping the Legion is more important."

"I have to find her. That is the one thing I know almost as well as I understand that forgiveness was a gift to me that I will spend the rest of my life repaying. I can't let what I see happening..."

"Gerry, they're just dreams," she sighed. "It's probably just that you're worried sick about her. She's probably safe and sound in some cave somewhere reading Light-knows-how many books and scrolls while staring at those Vials all day. Surely she'd be cautious in using them," Callie added, seeing the man's face pale. "She's a magician, right? She'd know to be careful with things like that. They can attract demons and even if she's a warlock now..."

Ger'alín scowled at Callie. Something she'd said had jogged his memory a tad but then he'd lost it. "All I know is that I have to find her first." Callie threw her hands up in the air in defeat and ducked out of the tent while Ger'alín stamped his feet into his boots. Settling his chain shirt on over his cotton shirt, he slipped his tabard over his head, belted on his sword, and decided to leave his helm behind for now. He straightened his clothing before he left the tent, recalling all the times in Desolace when Alayne would stop him from leaving until she'd settled everything on him just so. "You may not have been my wife then but you certainly did act the part. The less pleasant parts, that is," he whispered fondly. With a sigh, he left his tent and glanced around for this runner Callie had mentioned. "Demons," he muttered, wondering why that seemed to jostle something in his mind. "A magician. We certainly could have used her lately. I wonder what's behind all the strange things Zerith's been seeing."

"We can rendezvous with you in a few days," Zerith was saying to the messenger as Ger'alín walked up. "We still have business here in Blade's Edge that we cannot abandon just yet." The messenger snorted but said nothing. "Why the sudden urgency? Has Kael uncovered some of your infiltrators?"

"No," the messenger said, his lips taut and his jaw clenched. "We just need more numbers. Something is going on over there and we need to be prepared to launch an attack at any moment. We're working on a way to shut down those forges but that blasted Lady Dawnrunner has procedures set in place to prevent just that. Apparently, no forges are to be halted without her personal ensignia and some key she's been given from Kael himself."

"If nothing has changed, then our plans will not either," Zerith said firmly. "We're your allies, not your attendants. From now on, I'd appreciate a little respect when you come into my camp," he growled. "And if you tell me you're old enough to be my father, I will have the High King of the Ogres toss you down that ridge so hard you bounce thrice off of

every rock.” Ger’alin blinked; he’d never heard the priest get so annoyed so quickly. The messenger bowed sarcastically and began to stride off, muttering beneath his breath.

“Let’s go,” Zerith said before Ger’alin could open his mouth. “The sooner we can find Alayne and spirit her away, the better. As it is, I’m not entirely certain we shouldn’t be running for the Netherstorm now. Something is brewing,” he sighed, his ears laying flat against his head. Ger’alin nodded slowly. Even he could sense the arcane energies dancing in the air around them. It took all of his willpower not to drink them in. “Let’s go.”

~*~*~*~

Ger’alin rubbed his eyes wearily and let himself collapse in the shade of a boulder. He wished he could take his boots off and rub his sore feet. Next to him, he heard and felt Zerith topple down to the ground, cursing about his own thin boots. “I’m going to borrow Dar’ja’s leather ones next time,” the priest muttered sullenly.

“Your feet really will hurt then,” Ger’alin quipped. “Dar’ja’s feet are about half the size of yours. You should go on back to the camp, Zerith. I’ll stay out here looking for...Zerith?” he asked, seeing the priest’s face pale and his jaw drop.

“We’ve been looking all over for you!” Zerith shouted, leaping to his feet. He shuddered at the pain shooting up his legs but began running back into the baking heat of the sun. “Wait, where are you going?”

“Mirage,” Ger’alin sighed. “I think we didn’t bring enough water,” he muttered to himself as he hopped up and followed the priest. “Zerith, where are you going?”

“Alayne, wait! Don’t go in there! Those birdmen are mad!”

“Zerith, she’s not there,” Ger’alin said, jogging up to the priest and grabbing him by the shoulders. “She’s not...Alayne?” he asked, agog at seeing the woman in front of him. “Alayne, please, don’t go!”

The warlock continued to retreat, running through the forest soundlessly. Ger’alin and Zerith jogged after her, calling out for her to stop running, promising that they weren’t angry and would see her to safety. Finally, after an hour of chasing after her and losing her in the trees and undergrowth, the men staggered to a halt, out of breath. “When did she get in such good shape?” Zerith panted. “We should have caught up to her by now.”

Ger’alin nodded wearily, sniffing the air. The odor of arcane magic that he’d sensed in Nagrand struck him like a blow. “She wasn’t here to begin with,” he muttered. “This was another one of those illusions.”

“Why would someone try to trick us into thinking she’s here?” Zerith asked. Ger’alin shrugged. “You keep saying someone’s using illusions on us. Why?”

“I don’t know. It may be that someone doesn’t want us to find her. Here’s what I suggest,” he sighed, wiping sweat from his forehead and forcing himself to stand upright. “We’ll move camp to this forest. If she’s here, we should find her in the next day or two. If not...there’s still plenty of mountains to explore here before we move on.”

“But I promised the Scryers we would...”

“Then take the others and meet with them in Netherstorm,” Ger’alin said flatly. “I can stay here and look for her myself.” Zerith shook his head. “I can do it, Zerith. I’ve recovered much of my strength and stamina since my...illness.”

“Let’s just...let’s just search this forest for now. I’ll have to decide what to do if we don’t find her.” Diving back into the thickness of the forest, the priest began calling out frantically for his sister. Ger’alin sighed and growled in frustration when the sense of the arcane brushed against him again and Zerith began hollering that he’d spotted Alayne.

“What is going on here and why?” the Blood Knight wondered as he and the priest continued their futile search.

~*~*~*~

“I just had the strangest dream, Ger’alin,” Alayne murmured thickly as she rubbed her head. “You’ll never believe it...”

“I must admit,” Vangri grinned, “it is somewhat incredible for a commoner to marry royalty but who is this ‘Ger’alin?’”

Alayne bolted upright, clutching the sheets to her chest. Wide eyes scanned her room. Blinking to adjust them to the darkness, she finally found Vangri, a massive shadow with burning green eyes sitting in the chair in the corner. “My Lord,” she said breathlessly.

“Oh please,” he sighed, gesturing. “We’re engaged. Vangri will do.”

“My Lord, I cannot marry you.”

“In love with another?” he asked mildly. She nodded. “Well, I must admit that as attractive as you are to me, you aren’t exactly the woman of my dreams either.” Alayne gave a guilty start at the word ‘dreams’ but said nothing. “You’ll find me a most gracious and accommodating husband,” he continued. “You will, of course, lack for nothing. I do expect you to live up to the Sunfury name and uphold my house’s honor. Beyond that, as long as it’s not obvious that you’ve cuckolded me, I’ll consider any children born to your bed my own. Please don’t look so shocked,” he chuckled. “If you think I didn’t sow my wild oats before you were even *born*... I’ll bid you good night, my dear, this once. In the future, I will expect a warmer welcome. Perhaps I can put this Ger’alin fellow out of your mind? It will be...interesting either way,” he smirked before leaving her room. “Commoners,” he thought to himself. “She should be thrilled beyond imagining at the mere thought of bedding me, let alone wedding me.”

Alayne watched him go, proud that she was able to stifle the sobs that wanted to climb from her throat and that she had mastered the shivers. The thought of that demon-blood drinker touching her shriveled her flesh. Actually touching him herself? She shuddered, feeling bile rise in the back of her mouth. Lurching out of the bed, she gripped the chamber pot firmly while her stomach emptied itself. “How am I going to get out of this one?” she wondered.

“The wedding won’t take place until after the Sunwell is restored,” Mordenai reminded her, making her jump with fright. She’d forgotten he could read her thoughts and could hear what transpired around her, even if she was unconscious. “By then, it won’t really be an issue, will it?” he asked softly, sounding sad.

“No, it won’t. But still...I don’t want him thinking that I ever even entertained the thought of...”

“He won’t. I’ll make certain of that.”

“No, I will,” she said, lighting a candle and stalking over to her desk. Pulling out her journal, she tore several blank pages from it and let the words pour out of her. Words of pleading, words of forgiveness, words begging for that very thing, words of comfort and consolation. Promises to look after them all from afar. Explanations she was certain they’d never understand but facts they would have to accept. By the time she was finished, dawn was lightening the long shadows in her room. Sealing the letter with her personal insignia, a sun rent in twain by dark lightning – something she’d once seen at Mir’el’s house that had struck her fancy – she wrote Mir’el’s name on the outside. Knowing he would read it and know who it was intended for, she sighed. “I’ve done what I had to do. You must understand that. All of you must! Ger’alin, Zerith, Vangri, Kael... The Sunwell is our only cure. Once that is done, the rest...”

“I’m not so certain of that as I was once,” Mordenai whispered. “Forgive me for adding to your troubles, Alayne, but I’ve been watching these felbloods. I don’t believe there

is a cure for fel addiction. Not when it's reached this stage of advancement. Even if you did restore the Sunwell – and I truly believe you will! Your plan will work! – even if you do, it may not help them the way you hope. Perhaps the price you're willing to pay is no longer worth..."

"It is," she said coldly. "Whether it works or not. I've known since before I left Shadowmoon that blood would be the price. As long as it flows from my own veins, from my own heart, I am willing to make that sacrifice. Now, Mordenai, please give me some privacy. I...I need to come up with a schedule that will let me keep Vangri out of my chambers until the end has come."

"Just remember to sleep once every third day, at least," Mordenai sighed. "Otherwise, you may not make it to your own grand finale."

~*~*~*~

Zerith sighed and tucked his hands behind his head. A full three days searching the ridge up here in what the ogres called 'ogre heaven' and they'd seen no sign of Alayne. Merely some of those strange creatures they'd found around Oshu'gun so many weeks ago. "Light, it seems like forever ago when all I had to worry about was whether or not Ger'alín was doing something stupid with that 'spirit journey' business."

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?" Dar'ja asked softly as she crawled onto the pallet next to him. "My feet are killing me."

"I'm tired," he sighed. "I can barely sleep anymore for having strange dreams that warn me to stay off her trail. Ger'alín says it's magic and I'm starting to believe him. But mostly, I'm tired of forever looking for Alayne. Why does she do this? How's Ger'alín holding up? He seemed almost crushed that those lights were from those weird creatures and not Alayne conducting some kind of experiment up here. I wish we could find her. Maybe she would know who's behind all these illusions I keep seeing."

"He's asleep," she replied, rolling over and propping herself up so he could see her face. Idly, he lifted one of his hands and began rubbing his thumb over her cheek. "He's out cold. Not even babbling. Callie says he only sleeps so soundly when he is really upset about something. Well, she's not up here. What are we going to do now?"

"The only thing we can do. Head over to the Netherstorm and begin looking there. Pray to the Light that she's safe and hidden there and hasn't been found by Kael's followers."

"And if she has and Kael's got the Vials now?" Dar'ja asked softly.

"Then that's just another reason to go along with the Scryers and try to get to her before they do," he said firmly. "I'm so tired I can't even sleep," he whined. "I'm going to take a walk." Dar'ja nodded and rolled on her side, letting him sit up. "I...still have no idea how I'm going to keep her safe when we do find her. She's stirred up so many people against her with these stunts. How am I going to keep her head on her shoulders or her back unscarred?" Dar'ja shrugged helplessly, wishing she had the answers. "And there's no place she can run. We can't return to Silvermoon; if it comes out that we've stood against Kael, we'll all be in prison. Thrall will harbor us but who honestly wants to live in the desert? Some of the tauren may take pity on us but there's not many places close to Mulgore and I don't want to become a hermit."

"Neither do I. Alayne and Ger'alín might not mind it, though," Dar'ja sighed.

"I know but I want my family close. Call me selfish but I've lost one family already. I'm not willing to give up this one." With a huffing sigh of frustration, he pushed himself to his feet. "I need to clear my head. I need to wear myself out so that I'll sleep. Don't wait up on me, Dar'ja. I'll be back when I'm ready for bed." He grinned when she nodded sleepily, her eyes already dragging shut. She had had a busy day helping him search for sign of his

sister without letting those strange glowing creatures know they were being observed. Zerith made a mental note to try to learn more from the ogres about these beings. Perhaps they could also become allies. Perhaps they would need to be watched. Perhaps he was thinking too much. He sighed and tried to clear his mind as he walked. Settling down on a boulder near the outskirts of the camp, he laid back and let the night sky fill his vision. None of the constellations he knew could be found. Instead, to pass the time and force his problems out of his thoughts, he began to invent new ones.

“That looks more like the Weaver than a wheel,” Callie said, startling Zerith out of his trance. The priest hadn’t realized he’d been speaking aloud. “You should go and get some sleep, Zerith. You’re tired and…”

“I’m so tired I can’t sleep,” he said wearily. “My mind just won’t let me fall under these last few nights. I can’t see how Ger’alin sleeps at all…”

“Training. Years of forcing himself to be able to fall asleep when he must rest. It’s a trick that soldiers learn,” she explained. “Otherwise, he’d be out here pacing like a restless tiger and growling like one too. When we finally find your sister, I’m going to have a robe woven out of itchweed and she will have to wear it one week for every day she’s made us worry. Oh, and a month for that attacking Shattrath business. She’d better have a great explanation for that one. Keeping her out of the boiling pot is going to take every last bit of creativity we have.”

Zerith grunted in agreement. He’d been close to falling asleep but Callie’s words had his mind racing again. Part of him wanted to tell her to go away. Part of him wanted to sit there and try to come up with a plan for how to find and keep his sister safe. “I’m going to go check on Ger’alin,” he said suddenly. Callie blinked at him in surprise as he sat up. “Ger’alin has a great mind for… okay, he’s not so great at this but I… I have some things I need to say to him,” Zerith muttered. “Things for his ears alone,” he added when it seemed Callie would follow him. Standing up, he groaned in frustration, pounding a fist against his thigh when he saw a runner, her tabard emblazoned with the Scryer’s crest, jogging into the camp. “Why oh why can’t they accept ‘we’ll be out there the day after tomorrow?’” he growled as he stormed over to her.

“Ah, Lightbinder,” she said coldly. “Just the man I wanted to see. We have…”

“We’ll leave for the Netherstorm tomorrow,” he cut her off. “I’ve told the others we would be just a few more days here taking care of personal affairs.”

“Well then,” she huffed, offended. “Perhaps you already know. Perhaps this is all just an elaborate delaying tactic to keep your sister,” she sneered, “from being brought to justice. Lightbinder, you had best rouse your followers and come with me tonight if you want to keep yourselves from being exiled and considered enemies of Shattrath. No matter what mumblings the naaru make, I don’t trust you. Especially since we found out that your dear little sister is in charge of Manaforge Duro!”

“What?” Zerith asked, sounding as if the air had been knocked out of him. Callie grabbed his arm, steadying him. She helped him collapse to the ground in a heap. The priest stared up at the messenger dumbly. “That Lady Dawnrunner could be anyone. It’s not an uncommon name at all and Alayne married Sun…”

“It’s her,” the messenger said between clenched teeth. “Our spies have confirmed it. Several of the guards who saw her during the riots can state that the woman they saw and heard named as Alayne then is the same woman who is running Manaforge Duro.”

“That’s not… that’s not possible,” Zerith gasped. “She wouldn’t… she must have been captured and forced to work for Kael. That’s the only explanation!”

“Had she been captured, she’d have been sent to the Slave Pens or confined to Tempest Keep and tortured for information,” the runner said icily. “She’s in charge of the Manaforge! The guards bow to her. They obey her orders on the moment! She’s developed

the methods that have sped up production by unbelievable amounts! She's thrown her lot in with Kael and she is now at the top of our Most Wanted list, right below Kael'Thas and his councilors!"

"But, but..." Zerith said, tears of heartbreak coming to his eyes. "There's got to be an explanation. She wouldn't just betray us..."

"She's a warlock, after all," the messenger replied pitilessly. "Perhaps she craved more power. That's why she stole the Vial from Shattrath and ran off. Power. All of us who are addicted to the arcane know the craving for power. Among the shadow weavers, that craving can become an obsession. I'm sorry this hurts you so," she said calmly, not sounding sorry at all, "but she's joined the enemy. Rally your forces and join us in Netherstorm now. That will be a step towards proving to Shattrath and the naaru that you really aren't traitors like that sister of yours." Turning on her heel, the messenger began loping back to the east, towards Netherstorm.

"So what now?" Callie asked quietly. Zerith gaped at her, his mouth opening and closing but no sound coming out. He stared at her for a long time, dumbfounded, his mind reeling from shock. "I...she wouldn't betray us; not without a good reason. But...until we know what led her to this, we have to... Light, damn her!" Callie growled. "We're trapped. We can't attack Kael while she's numbered among his forces and we can't hang back! What are we to do?"

"Ger'alin," Zerith managed to finally get out. "Need to talk to him." Callie nodded and helped the priest to his feet. "He should know... maybe... Light... she can't have... the Vials... the Legion... I don't believe it!" he shouted at last, drawing stares from across the camp. "Ger'alin will know something. I want to be the one to tell him. Just... leave me alone for a while," he said at last. "I can't think." Callie raised her hands in surrender and jogged off, crouching near the bonfire and watching the priest carefully. She was ready to run and rouse the entire camp at his command. The other Forsaken eyed Zerith warily as well. He looked as if someone had ripped his heart out of his chest. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to block out their stares and tried to stifle the words ringing in his ears. "In command of a Manaforge. Light, I should have stayed in bed with Dar'ja. Alayne...what are you doing?" he whispered as he forced himself to his feet and staggered to Ger'alin's tent. The man had a right to know that his wife had been found...even if it seemed she'd been found serving the enemy. "Especially if she's been found serving the enemy," Zerith muttered. "Oh Light, there has to be a reason! There has to be!"

~*~*~*~

"I'm coming for you, dearest," he called out to Alayne. She stood shrouded in the mists of the too-familiar dreamscape. On his pallet, Ger'alin squirmed and thrashed, knowing he was dreaming and powerless to do anything to change the course of the dream or to wake himself up until it had played itself out. "Don't," he begged. "Don't do this! This is different," he said, sounding surprised. The surroundings themselves were the same, blurred and indistinct. Only, instead of Alayne channeling, she walked slowly, with dignity, her shoulders square and her jaw set. As she continued her stately tread, elven attendants wearing tabards that proclaimed them servants of Kael'Thas appeared along the path, bowing deeply to her. She acknowledged their reverence with a bare nod of her head, continuing on towards a dark doorway outlined in golden light. Ger'alin ran after her, frustrated that no matter how fast his legs pumped, he could never close the distance between them. "Alayne? Please, turn around and look at me!"

The scene shifted and suddenly Ger'alin saw his wife standing at the edge of a vast chasm. Her heels hung over the edge of the cliff; a gust of wind would push her over into the

twisted nightmare-scape behind her. Chaos and destruction swirled behind her, demons flying about their native abode and cackling madly. “What... what is this?” he asked. Alayne seemed to see him for the first time, her eyes widening in shock. “Dearest, please, come back to me,” he pleaded. Her green eyes began to shimmer with unshed tears and a look of inexpressible sorrow filled her features. Ger’alin stretched out a hand for her to take, hoping to pull her back from the cliff. “Please, come away from there. Come back to us. Come back to me. Please,” he begged. “No!” he shrieked when, with a sigh, she leaned back, falling into the blackness. He ran to the edge of the cliff, staggering to a halt just short of falling over himself. Gazing down into the abyss, he saw nothing but the primordial darkness that had birthed the universe itself. “Alayne!”

“Only a fool tries to play the double agent against the might of the Legion!” he heard a deep devilish voice laugh. “See in her fate that which awaits all who refuse to flock to our banner!” The scene shifted again and Ger’alin saw a massive demon arising from a pool of pure golden light. Alayne lay on her side, motionless, before the pool, as the demon pulled himself out of it, his red-black wings flapping and his claws scratching and scorching the carpets around him. “Your world is mine!”

Ignoring the demon, Ger’alin ran to Alayne. “Light, please still be with me,” he prayed as he took her in his arms. The ghastly dent he’d hated seeing was not there but her eyes stared into the distance, seeing nothing. She looked as if the very life had been drained from her. Around the golden pool other sin’dorei fell likewise, drained as she was. Hearing a gut-wrenching scream of pain, Ger’alin looked up, surprised to see a human woman floating high above the pool. She shimmered and vanished in a flash of light and the demon pulled a leg out of the pool, planting it firmly on the ground. Ger’alin gaped at him, unable to move as the demon lifted an impossibly enormous fist to smash the paladin into the ground. Clutching his wife’s body to his chest, burying his face in her hair and his lips against her cheek, Ger’alin waited for the blow he would neither feel nor survive...

“Ger’alin, wake up,” he heard Zerith whisper softly, tiredly. Opening his eyes, Ger’alin shivered, recalling the dream. What did it portend? The proud Sunfury elves bending neck to a common-born woman? “Ger’alin, please, you need to hear this before it gets out around the camp.”

“She’s joined Kael’Thas,” the Blood Knight said suddenly, the pieces falling into place. “She’s gone over to the ones who would summon the Legion upon all of us.”

“How did you... who told you... will you stop doing that!” Zerith said, sounding strangled. “How can you be so calm? Alayne’s been serving Kael’Thas *knowing* that he is trying to summon Kil’jaeden into our homeland. How could she?”

“I don’t know,” Ger’alin said quietly, calmly. “All I know is I have to follow her.”

“Follow her? Into summoning the Legion? Are you mad?” Zerith growled. “No, I don’t care what dreams or omens you’ve had; we are not going to ally with Kael! I will never serve the Legion! We are going to get Alayne out of there and then... then I’m going to have answers from her if I have to pepper her hide hotter than a Midsummer ale!”

“You are going to stay here,” Ger’alin said quietly, firmly. “I will go to the Netherstorm and I will surrender myself to her. All I know, Zerith, is that I must follow her where ever her path may lead! And you should stay far, far away from her. Until I send for you.”

“Why? Right now, part of me wants nothing more than to never see her again. Serving Kael! Aiding the Legion! But she’s my sister; she’s Valara given back to me. I will have answers from her even if it kills me!”

“It very well might,” Ger’alin whispered. “What is the importance of Valara? You bring her up a lot when you talk about Alayne.”

“Don’t try to change the subject,” Zerith growled. “What do you mean it might kill me? What do you know?”

“I’ve seen you both kill each other when you meet next. Something will happen and you’re going to cave her skull in and she’s going to plant her dagger in your chest and you’ll both be dead. Then, likely, there will be some sort of civil war among our people that stems from you two killing each other. Now, why do you mention your sister Valara so much?”

“You’re mad. I would never kill Alayne! I want to know what is going on in her head but I want her to tell me; not me try to see with my own eyes!” he whispered, aghast. “And Valara was the baby. I remember riding her on my shoulder when I was barely fourteen. She and I were close – closer than I was to my other sisters. I could talk to her about anything and she could tell me anything. I used to amuse her by telling her stories from my studies and she could snap me out of my blackest moods with one of her made-up faerie tales. Alayne looks just like her and...she’s so much like Valara in so many ways that I know she was repayment for all the suffering I went through losing my family. So, I would never raise a hand to her in anger! I would never harm her! Pull her over my knee and tan her hide: yes! Kill her? Never!”

Ger’alin remained unconvinced. “I have seen it too many times. It is a warning from the Light that you should not follow after her. Perhaps you’ll be forced to kill her. Perhaps something will happen and she’ll be forced to hurt you to stop a greater wrong from happening. Maybe she’ll just get enraged and lose the ability to tell friend from foe and if you’re there, Zerith, you may not ever live to find out what you want to know. Just let me go alone. I’ll find her. I’ll bring her back. I’ll get the answers you need. And then, when it’s safe, I’ll send word to you where you can find us.”

“I can’t back out of my promise to go to the Netherstorm,” Zerith said dully, plucking at his boot idly, wearily. “I promised the Scryers we would meet them there and help them shut down the manaforges. We have to do that much, at least. We have to stop Kael from summoning the Legion!”

“Then do that,” Ger’alin growled, pushing himself up and beginning to dress again. “Do whatever you feel you must. But if you cause any harm to come to my wife, regardless of what she’s done, regardless of with whom she’s sided...Light, how can I be angry at you for possibly harming her when I, with my own two hands...” he groaned, collapsing back onto the ground. Heaving sobs wracked him as he wept, wondering if his actions had been what pushed Alayne into running to the Sunfury. Had she been so frightened by his illness and his madness that she’d sought protection from him among those who would destroy the world? Is that what he had forced her to?

“Ger’alin, calm down,” Zerith said worriedly. “I won’t harm her. I want to keep her safe as badly as you do. But she’s gone over to Kael...how can we keep her safe when she’s pitted herself against us in the middle of a war for our very survival?”

“I don’t know,” the paladin said shakily, drawing a shuddering breath as he tried to collect himself. “All I know is that I’m leaving for Netherstorm right now. I have to follow her, no matter where she goes.”