

An insistent tapping awoke Alayne from her night's sleep. Momentarily confused, she wondered who could be seeking her this early in the morning. Memory rushed in suddenly and she jerked out of bed, almost falling flat on her face as she tangled her feet in the bedding. Taking a moment to compose herself and ensure that all of her parts were still attached and not entangled with the sheets, she opened the door a crack. Zerith stood waiting for her in the hallway, his hand raised to rap her door again.

"Good morning," he smiled.

"Good morning," Alayne returned, her voice still thick with sleep.

"I see that I caught you a bit early. I received word that we are to see the Lady Sylvanas this morning, late. I just wanted to see if you would like to have some breakfast and take a tour of Undercity with me to pass the time," Zerith said sheepishly.

"That sounds like a good idea," Alayne said, a yawn creaking her jaws. "Just give me a few minutes to get dressed."

"I'll meet you in the common room with a bowl of porridge."

Alayne smiled sleepily and closed the door. Stretching from her toes to her fingertips, she shook off sleep and quickly dressed herself in her best robes. Glancing at her journal, she tucked it away neatly with the rest of her belongings and checked to see that her inkwell was securely sealed with wax before placing it in the bag as well. She then strode across the room to the wash stand and mirror across from her bed. Pouring the lukewarm water into the basin, Alayne quickly rinsed her mouth and laved her face. Returning to her bag, she took out her ivory comb and began brushing out her hair.

She stopped for a moment, catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Startled, she realized her own parents would have a hard time recognizing her now. Her once fair skin had taken on a distinctive reddish tint, making her a "blood elf" in more than just name. Her blue eyes had changed color, now glowing a faint greenish-blue color. Her hair was all that remained the same; straight, trimmed to half-way between her jaw and shoulders, and honey-colored, like her mother's had been. With a sigh, Alayne patted her hair into place, smoothed her dark robes over her hips, and left the room, satisfied that she looked acceptable.

"Over here," Zerith called out to her from across the common room. He sat at a round table finishing a bowl of porridge with a muffin. Another bowl sat to his left. On his right sat a female Forsaken who glanced up at Alayne as she approached. "This is Callie, Alayne."

"Good morning," Alayne said, extending her hand to the once-human woman.

"Greetings," Callie returned, her voice harsh.

"Callie was just telling me that we should head over to the Sepulcher in Silverpine if our duties permit," Zerith explained. "It seems that the denizens of Dalaran are making a nuisance of themselves down there."

"Indeed," Callie affirmed in her rough voice, "they cause no end of problems with their constant incursions on our land. If anyone could help drive them off, they'd be richly rewarded."

The conversation drifted while Alayne finished her breakfast. By the time she was through, she and Zerith were up to date on the goings-on of the inhabitants of Dalaran and of Arugal, a rogue member of the Kirin Tor.

"We will be more than happy to help out," Alayne said, standing and stepping away from the table, "but for now, we have an audience with the Lady Sylvanas to prepare for."

"I know," Callie said, "and if you'd like to have a guided tour of our city while you wait, I'd be happy to take you."

"That would be most appreciated," Alayne replied. "Zerith and I had a difficult time figuring out the lay of the land."

"I can imagine," the undead laughed, "Undercity takes getting used to. Many of us who live here still get lost from time to time." Callie stood up and Zerith followed her. The three left the inn, Callie leading the way.

"First of all," she said, her raspy voice taking on a lilt, "welcome to Undercity. Built beneath the ruins of the capitol of Lordaeron, Undercity is home to those of us who call ourselves 'Forsaken.' The Dark Lady, Sylvanas Windrunner, is our leader. Now, down there," she said, gesturing to a structure that thrust up from the center of the area, "is the bank. This here is the inn. If you'll just follow me down this walkway, I'll take you around the outer ring where most of our city's business is transacted." The trio descended the dark stone walkway and left the central area, entering a foreboding, closed-in corridor. "This," Callie said, gesturing around her, "leads to the outer ring. The outer ring is divided into four quarters: the Apothecarium, the Royal Quarter, the Rogue's Quarter, and the War Quarter. Your audience with Lady Sylvanas will take place in her official chambers in the Royal Quarter. If you want to impress her, you should consider joining the Royal Apothecary Society. While their primary mission is to develop a way to counter the Lich King's plague, they also study many other things related to herbalism and alchemy."

"That sounds interesting," Zerith said. "I rely on the Light for its healing powers, but sometimes using it is overkill. My mother and sister were both known for their knowledge of herbal remedies."

"Then you should definitely look into the Society," Callie said enthusiastically. "Come on, I'll take you to the Apothecarium first. We'll just go through the outer ring from there and then I'll show you the sights top-side."

As the three wandered through Undercity, Alayne fought to hide her distaste and disgust at the sights, sounds, and smells. A foul odor of decay hung in the air, dispelled only by the occasional drafts of cold air that found their way through the ruins above down to the city below. There was a canal of noxious green water, brackish and stagnant, that ran through the city. The buildings were nothing to stare at; mostly cobbled together out of ruins or built to resemble something that wouldn't look out of place amongst the Scourge. Cold dampness made the city an unpleasant place to be out in the open. Alayne glanced around, wishing they could hasten on to the top-side of the city to be away from this depressing gloom. Something of her feelings must have been plain on her face because Callie and Zerith stopped their conversation suddenly when the woman rounded on Alayne, saying, "None of us can help it, elf."

Alayne blinked, taken aback. "It's nothing to do with you; it's this place," she tried to explain.

"Yes, I know. Do you think you're the first one to come here and feel the way you do about us and our home? Believe me, those of us who were unfortunate enough to be struck down by the plague would love nothing more than to rebuild our city and homeland with its former glory and light. But that's not possible. Arthas destroyed any hope of that when he led this kingdom into destruction. The few of us who have managed to break away from his control have our hands full trying to hold his minions at bay while scratching out a bare existence in this ruined land. In a way, the gloom you're feeling is just a small part of the gloom and despair all of us natives of Lordaeron feel whenever we wake up to our unnatural existence!"

Alayne's face heated with humiliation. "I meant nothing against you or any of the Forsaken," she said, "and I apologize for any offense I've given."

Callie shrugged, dismissively accepting Alayne's apology. The three continued their tour through the other three quarters of the city, Alayne doing her best to look interested in the surroundings. Soon, they returned to the central part of the city, heading towards the elevators that would take them to the top-side.

“This sarcophagus is all that remains of the late King Terenas,” Callie said as the three entered the room from the elevators. “No one knows who found his remains or how. Just one day people came in here and saw this sarcophagus and that inscription.”

The inscription read: *“Here lies King Terenas Menethil II -- Last True King of Lordaeron.*

*Great were his deeds -- long was his reign -- unthinkable was his death.*

*‘May the Father lie blameless for the deeds of the son. May the bloodied crown stay lost and forgotten.’”*

Alayne and Zerith knelt and bowed their heads at the foot of the sarcophagus. Neither could remember King Terenas, but both had had to live with the destruction wrought by his son. After a few moments of silent prayer for the poor man’s soul, the two rose, dusted their knees, and glanced around at Callie.

The young woman stood in the doorway. She had not moved from her spot since pointing out the tomb to them. The expression on her face was one of deep sorrow and loss. “Forgive me,” she whispered, “but this is never easy for me. I remember the King in his latter days. I remember the day he was murdered there,” she pointed to another doorway, “on the steps of his very throne. It was the last day I lived. The next day, I awoke as one of the Lich King’s minions; completely subservient to his will. The tainted grain, you see. The King was a good man; a good father. My parents named me in honor of the princess Calia.” Taking a deep breath, Callie turned her back on the room, “It’s not easy for any of us who lived here. Most of us pass through this room as quickly as we can. Our lives are over; our mortality gone. But the past leaves wounds all its own.” Without another word, she strode back to the elevator. Alayne and Zerith hurried after her. The trip back down was made in absolute silence; any offers of comfort the two sin’dorei made were brushed aside.

“Head to the Royal Quarter,” Callie said. “It should be time for you to have your audience with the Dark Lady soon. I’ll meet you back at the inn afterwards.”

The two elves descended to the outer ring and, following the signs and their memory, found their way to the Royal Quarter. Glancing at each other just outside the long corridor leading to the Lady Sylvanas’s chambers, they gathered their courage and strode down the hall. Moments later, they stood in the dark, chill chamber that was the Dark Lady’s official chamber.

“What business do you have here?” one of the many banshee courtiers asked.

“We bring word from Lord Lor’themar, Regent Lord of Quel’Thalas, concerning Dar’khan,” Zerith said smoothly, trying to hide his nervousness. Alayne quickly produced the sealed letter from her pocket.

“Very well,” the banshee said, a faint sighing echo of her words chasing after them, “I remember you. The Dark Lady will be with you shortly. Wait there,” she said, indicating a place near the stairs leading up to the dais where Sylvanas and the other Forsaken officials stood. Alayne quickly checked herself, smoothing out tiny wrinkles on her robe. Satisfied, she then grabbed Zerith by his shoulders, smoothing his long red hair back behind his shoulders and straightening his robes. Zerith smiled tolerantly, “Am I decent yet, mother?” he whispered. Alayne grinned back at him and deliberately pulled her hands down to her sides, keeping them from fidgeting by an effort of sheer will. Moments later, one of the banshee attendants atop the dais floated over to the top of the steps and motioned for Alayne and Zerith to ascend and present their business.

“My lady,” Alayne began, bending down on one knee, her head bowed. Zerith followed suit, making his obeisance. “We bring word from the Ghostlands concerning Dar’khan, the traitor. Lord Lor’themar explains the situation in this letter to you,” she

continued, lifting the letter up for the Lady Sylvanas to take. The Banshee Queen plucked the letter from Alayne's hands, broke the seal, and began reading. Motioning for the two to rise, Sylvanas smiled; a cold smile that did not reach her lifeless, unfeeling eyes.

"It is done then," the Dark Lady said, her voice hissing and mournful at the same time. "The foul traitor got what he deserved," she read further, her eyebrows rising as if she were impressed, "You did this yourself? An impressive feat that proves that your race remains worthy. I see that Lor'themar has additional news that will greatly improve his relations with Thrall," she concluded, motioning for an attendant. "I haven't lost any love for my homeland or its people, as you know. I've fought tooth and nail for Silvermoon to be allowed a place beside Undercity and Orgrimmar at the negotiating table. This should silence any opposition. Take this letter to Thrall in Orgrimmar. As leader of the Horde he will have the final say on accepting your race's pledge." The attendant returned, bearing a sigil ring, wax, and a candle. The Lady Sylvanas used the candle to drip melting wax onto the letter. She then pressed her sigil into the cooling wax. "There," she said, handing the letter back to Alayne, "I've added my own seal to the letter as a personal endorsement. Go northwest of the city and board the zeppelin bound for Durotar at the tower."

"All of Silvermoon and the sin'dorei thank you for your kind endorsement and support, Lady Sylvanas," Alayne said, curtsying deeply. Behind her Zerith bowed from the waist while surreptitiously reaching into his pocket and removing the pendant that he and Alayne had found.

"One more moment of your time, my Lady," he said apologetically, stepping forward as Alayne stepped back. Lifting his hand, he presented the pendant to the leader of the Forsaken. The Banshee Queen's eyes widened with shock as she looked at his offering.

"What's that you have there? That necklace looks somehow familiar. Give it here!" she demanded, ripping the pendant out of Zerith's hand. "It can't be! After all this time, I thought it was lost forever," she said, her voice full of wonder. For long moments, the former Ranger-General of Silvermoon stood staring at the pendant in her hand, her gaze unfocused. With a shudder, she came back to herself, glaring at Alayne and Zerith who, in fear of that dread gaze, took an involuntary step backwards. "You thought this would amuse me? Do you think I long for a time before I was the queen of the Forsaken? Like you, it means nothing to me, and Alleria Windrunner is a long dead memory!" she cried out, throwing the pendant to the ground and turning her back on the two elves. "You may now remove yourselves from my presence," she said coldly. Shooting each other horrified looks, Alayne and Zerith bowed their way out of the Lady's presence. As they reached the bottom step, they could hear her haunting voice singing out the warning cry of their people: "Shindu sin'dorei, shindu fallah na."

After the two had left the chamber, Sylvanas reached down and gently picked up the necklace, tears filling her eyes as she cradled it in her hands.

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"That could have gone better," Zerith muttered once he and Alayne emerged from the Royal Quarter. "I would have thought she'd have been happier about regaining a keepsake from better days."

"You said it yourself, Zerith," Alayne sighed, "the Lady is much changed."

"I did say that, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. Now, let's get back to the inn and just put this little incident behind us."

"That sounds like a good idea," he agreed quickly. The two hurried back to the inn where Callie was waiting for them.

“How did your audience with the Dark Lady go?” she asked, looking curiously at their twin expressions of mortification.

“It could have gone better,” the two said in unison.

Callie winced in sympathy. “I forgot to mention that our Queen has a bit of a temper. So, I suppose that Silverpine is looking pretty tempting about now?” the Forsaken said hopefully.

“That sounds like a good idea,” the two sin’dorei said, speaking again in unison.

Laughing, the trio made their way back up to the top of the city and took the road down to Silverpine Forest.

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The forest was eerily silent as the three made their way down the road. Alayne and Zerith glanced around, looking for sign of birds or other small creatures. There seemed to be none. “This may be a forest,” Alayne thought to herself, “but it’s not a forest at all like what I know of them.” Her reverie was broken by Callie.

“We’ve established a base here in Silverpine that we call the Sepulcher. We should probably head there to see what the latest news in the region is.”

“Lead on,” Zerith said, his unease at the unnatural stillness of the forest stiffening his speech. Callie nodded, seeming to understand, and continued down the road. The three soon crossed a covered bridge which Callie mentioned meant they were close to the Sepulcher.

“What in the Light is that?” Zerith said, jumping back in fright. Alayne and Callie glanced over to where he was staring. When Alayne saw what had given her adopted brother pause, she nearly bolted.

“That,” Callie said, her cynicism showing clearly in her raspy voice, “is the fruit of one Arugal, member of the Kirin Tor.”

“Whatever it is, it looks like something only a twisted mind would dream of,” Alayne muttered. Zerith nodded his agreement.

“‘Twisted,’” Callie said, seeming to taste the word, “you could call that bastard ‘twisted.’ His ‘creations’ plague the forest, mauling and killing those unlucky enough to attract their attention. They do generally stay away from the road, though. The patrols from Undercity do what they can to drive those creatures off. In case you’re wondering, we call them ‘sons of Arugal.’”

Cautiously, on the lookout for any more sons of Arugal, the three continued on to the Sepulcher. They soon arrived and walked over to a Forsaken man who stood in the midst of the graveyard. Zerith and Alayne walked between the graves, stepping carefully so they would not walk across any of them. Respect for the restful dead was ingrained deeply in both sin’dorei. Callie seemed somewhat amused at their efforts; she stomped across the graves with callous indifference to what their inhabitants might think.

“Greetings, Dalar,” she said, hailing her fellow Forsaken. “What word on the goings-on from Dalaran and Shadowfang Keep?”

“Ah, good afternoon, Callie. Word is the same,” he rasped. “The mages of Dalaran continue to make nuisances of themselves. No doubt they are assisting that fool Arugal in whatever madness he’s cooking up now.”

“Hm,” Callie sighed. “Well, then, since no one else seems to be doing it, I guess that my new friends and I will investigate the mages and Arugal for you. They are still confined to the south near the border with Hillsbrad, correct? Mostly in Ambermill and Pyrewood Village?”

“The Deathguards have brought no word of a change in their dispositions,” Dalar hissed. “But I sense that they are planning something. There’s a feeling in the air.”

“Then we’ll just have to go stop them, won’t we?” Zerith said with a smile. Callie and Dalar rounded on him; Callie trying to stifle a laugh and Dalar looking annoyed.

“Yes, you will go have to stop them, priest,” he spat. “Try not to break a nail while getting about it.”

Flushing with anger, Zerith stormed back down the road, heading south. Callie and Alayne shrugged at each other, shot annoyed glances at Dalar, and hurried to catch up with Zerith.

“He’s really in a foul mood now, isn’t he?” Callie asked as they jogged. Zerith’s long strides kept him ahead of the two girls with the distance growing.

“No, he’s barreling down the road in anger because it’s fun,” Alayne said mockingly, a grin and a wink taking the sting out of her words. “It’s not just Dalar; the Dark Lady was rather short with us. Zerith must be taking it pretty hard. He did find her necklace, after all.”

“Necklace?”

“Yes, a necklace that the Lady’s sister, Alleria, had given her years ago. Zerith found it while we were clearing the Scourge out of Windrunner Village.”

“Ah.”

Zerith stopped suddenly, whipping around. The two girls almost ran into him.

“I guess I should let you catch up to me if you’re going to talk about me,” he muttered, annoyed.

“Zerith,” Alayne sighed, reaching up and gently cupping his face in her hands. “Calm down. Yes, it’s been a rotten afternoon so far. Still, we can make that Dalar eat his words when we interfere with whatever plans the mages of Dalaran have in store for this land.”

“Alayne’s right,” Callie said enthusiastically, hoping to cheer Zerith, “we will make him eat his words. Not only about the mages of Dalaran, but about Arugal as well. If you two were able to take down Dar’khan, then this will be nothing at all.”

“We didn’t take down Dar’khan alone, though,” Zerith muttered to himself. “We had help.”

“We still have help. Let us send a messenger to Ger’alin asking him to bring some of our veterans from Deatholme here.”

“I have a feeling I’ll say this a lot,” Zerith laughed, “but that sounds...”

“...like a good idea?” Alayne finished for him, her eyes twinkling.

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“Is this everyone?” Zerith asked, glancing over the two dozen Forsaken and sin’dorei who had answered his call. The group was gathered near the border of Tirisfal and Silverpine. In the distance, Forsaken guards and attendants could be seen constructing a giant Wickerman while others looked on.

“This is everyone,” Ger’alin responded, speaking for the group. “What is our assignment?”

“Much like in the Ghostlands, a rogue malingerer is causing problems for the inhabitants of Silverpine,” Alayne began. “However, another group is also making a nuisance of itself; a group some of us were once aligned with: the mages of Dalaran. Since we have enough people, we plan to take on both groups simultaneously. We will split our forces in half. The first half, led by myself and Callie,” she indicated the Forsaken woman, “will storm Ambermill and disrupt whatever plans the mages have there. This group will consist largely of magic users since we’ll need to investigate arcane activities.”

“The second group, consisting of everyone else,” Zerith laughed, “will accompany me to the town of Pyrewood. There we’ll rout out the humans who are aiding this fellow, Arugal. Once both towns have been dealt with, our forces will reassemble on the road outside of

Pyrewood and then we will launch our final attack against Shadowfang Keep and Argual, the Keep's master."

The gatherers nodded; the plan was understood.

"Very well," Alayne said, "we will assign you a group and then make our way south to the villages near the Hillsbrad border. We will begin our assault at sundown."

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The day was failing as the two groups split up, each heading to its own objective. Zerith and Alayne embraced, wishing each other luck, and followed their groups on.

"He'll be well," Callie whispered to Alayne as the two led their group towards Ambermill. "Zerith is a gifted leader and tactician."

"He is," Alayne agreed with a sigh, "but he's all I have in this world."

"Oh," Callie said, a seeming understanding dawning on her face.

"No, it's not like that," Alayne explained hastily. "We adopted each other; he's my brother."

"Ah. Well, let's focus on our objective, then. It seems that one of my people is coming to report something to us," she said, pointing to an undead mage who had hiked up his robes and was running towards the two women.

"Some of us scouted ahead and came upon a camp just outside of Ambermill," the mage reported, his dull voice heated with excitement. "There was a crate there; Ambermill has obviously been receiving a significant amount of reinforcement and supplies from Hillsbrad. Anyway, we found this," he pulled a mysterious looking pendant from his pocket with a flourish. "Davril, who was a low-ranking member of the Kirin Tor before the Plague struck him, recognized it as an artifact used by the more powerful members of the Kirin Tor to channel their energies."

"Indeed, it is a powerful artifact," Davril said. Alayne and Callie jumped; they had not heard him approach. "And, if the mages of Dalaran are sending items like this here, it means that something rather large is in the offing. And, though it may sound presumptuous, I believe I know what it is."

"And it would be?" Alayne asked, folding her arms and trapping her hands at her sides to keep from snatching the pendant away from the scout. The arcane power emanating from it called to her soul.

"Ambermill lies in the midst of a long dormant ley energy node. The Kirin Tor never bothered to try to revive it before because they had all of the energy they needed at Dalaran. However, with the loss of their fair city, the mages seek more energy. Thus, it is likely that they are planning to revive the node here and tap into it to enhance their power in preparation for launching a strike north. This is no doubt some part of an Alliance plot to take back Lordaeron."

"We must alert the Dark Lady immediately!" Callie hissed.

"Indeed, we should," Davril agreed smoothly, "but wouldn't it be better to strike first, foil their plans, and then present her with the deed already done? From what I understand, the Lady is in a foul mood lately."

Alayne flushed and then cleared her throat. "Yes, let us continue on with our plans. In the course of our assault, we'll look for more evidence to bolster your speculation, Davril. With that in hand, we'll present it to the Dark Lady and hope that it lightens her humor. Recall the scouts," she ordered. Within minutes, the scouting pairs had rejoined the main group. Alayne quickly brought them up to speed, presenting Davril's theories to them. Most of the mages in the group nodded in agreement; it was likely that the former member of the Kirin Tor was right.

“Let us continue with our assault, then,” Alayne said, wrapping up her briefing. “As you kill the intruders, search their bodies for pendants like the one Davril showed you. Taking them away will decrease our enemy’s power and, who knows but that a use for them can be found to aid our cause? The Dark Lady will surely reward those who hand her such a gift,” Alayne finished with a meaningful glance.

The group fanned out, calling upon their talents and making quick work of the few guards patrolling the stone pathways outside of Ambermill. As night had fallen, most of the denizens of the village were asleep. The screams from the guards and the sounds of battle roused them to wakefulness, however, and Alayne and Callie were soon in the thick of the fighting, Alayne supplementing Callie’s swift dagger strokes with her own shadowy magic. The sin’dorei helped the Forsaken mages by draining the Dalaranians of their magical energies, preventing them from casting or dispelling any magical attacks launched against them. Before the twin moons reached their height in the inky night sky, Alayne and Callie called a halt to the assault, giving their group a chance to catch their breath, heal their wounds, and investigate the corpses of their enemies.

“You were right,” Alayne said to Davril, “that makes fifteen pendants like the one the young man...”

“Rinon,” Davril supplied the name of the scout who had brought the first pendant, “he’s my nephew,” the Forsaken explained.

“Fifteen pendants like the one that Rinon found,” Alayne finished. “They were trying to revive the dormant ley node.”

“They still are,” Davril said. He pointed to a large building behind a gate. “We’ve cleared the first part of the village and have probably cost them some vital power, but it looks like, if anything, they’ve stepped up efforts to revive the node. I can sense their spell-casting. Someone powerful is channeling in that building.”

“How are we for an all-out assault against the main building?” Alayne asked Callie, who had been circulating amongst their forces, taking stock of their injuries and ability to continue the fight.

“I think we’ve probably culled out most of their fighters,” Callie replied. “So, there are probably very few guards protecting the group in there. We’ll have to deal mostly with whoever is channeling in that building. On one hand, if they have to turn away from their casting to fight us, then we’ll at least be delaying them some, maybe making them rethink this whole idea.”

“Should we send word to Zerith and his forces requesting assistance?”

“No. I think we can do it ourselves. And, if we fail, we should be able to pull out in an orderly fashion and regroup with the others for another try.”

“Then let’s proceed,” Alayne said with finality. The others gathered themselves together, shook off their weariness, and as one, the group moved on the building. Storming through the narrow doorways, they soon reached the main room where several mages stood guarding a man. The man was channeling energies so strong that even Alayne could sense them. Drawing upon her anger and jealousy at being unable to wield the arcane, Alayne and her followers quickly overcame the arcane-wielding guardians and focused their attentions on the lone man left standing. He was soon overcome. The group then settled down on their haunches, taking what rest they could while Alayne, Callie, and Davril searched through the corpse’s belongings.

“Hmph,” Davril snorted, “this was Ataeric. I remember him vaguely. He had a rare talent for detecting energy nodes. No wonder he was assigned here. We’ll take his staff with us,” he said, picking up the dead man’s staff. “I sense many energies trapped within it. This will be of benefit to our cause.”

“Don’t get too far ahead of yourself,” Alayne sighed, knuckling her back. “We still have to put an end to Arugal. Come, let’s go see how Zerith’s forces are faring.”

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Zerith paused for a moment’s silent prayer to the Light, praying that Alayne would be safe in the coming battle. He disliked being parted from her, especially when she was headed into danger. With a sigh, he forced himself back to the present, telling himself that Alayne would be fine.

“Your orders?” Ger’alin asked.

“Let’s hang back a bit. Send a few scouts up to see how many guards are stationed at the gates. It’s sundown, so most there should only be a few.”

“Very good. You and you,” Ger’alin said, pointing to a couple of rogues who had accompanied him in the strike against Deatholme, “sneak up and report back to us how many guards are at the main gates and if there are any patrols through the town.” The pair nodded and left, moving silently in the shadows. Zerith smiled to himself; if he was having difficulty watching them, then the town guards, who didn’t know what to look for, would fare even worse.

“And now we wait,” Zerith sighed, motioning for the rest of the group to settle back until the scouts returned. “If they’re not back within a half hour or so, we’ll know that our cover is blown and will retreat to wait until Alayne and Callie return.”

“Waiting. The most important and most common job of a soldier,” Ger’alin quoted.

“Who said that?” Zerith asked idly.

“One of my commanders. He should know; his ‘waiting’ still has him stationed at Silvermoon.”

The two men shared a chuckle, then settled down, their nerves frayed with impatience already. Just before Zerith was about to call a retreat, the two scouts returned.

“There are two guards at the main gate and a single guard patrolling from the main gate to the back of the town. The guards seem to be expecting something, though.”

“They didn’t spot you?”

“No. We never got close enough for them to see us. We just watched from afar, counting the minutes out quietly for the patrol.”

“Well then,” Zerith sighed, “let’s assume the worst anyway and proceed with caution. Advance,” he ordered the rest of the group. The party moved quickly and quietly through the late dusk. Once the town was within bowshot, Zerith signaled for the archers to prepare to fire. Then, waiting several moments for the next patrol to reach the main gate and turn back, Zerith gave the signal for the archers to loose. The two guards went down quickly, arrows protruding from their chests. The archers’ shots had been true; the pair were dead before they hit the ground.

“Now!” Zerith hissed in a carrying whisper. His forces ran through the gate, engaging any townspeople they saw and drawing others out of their homes into the streets. The guards swarmed down upon the gathering, blades drawn. The battle was begun.

Zerith hung back in the thick of his group, calling upon the Light to heal his comrades and protect them from the attacks of the guards and townspeople. The tide was turning against the humans of Pyrewood when, suddenly, the few survivors stopped fighting the undead and elves and began writhing. Zerith’s eyes opened wide in shock and horror as the humans transformed into monsters, very much like the son of Arugal he and the others had seen earlier that day.

“What curse is on these people?” Ger’alin shouted, taking a step back from the guard he had been fighting. There was no time for anyone to answer before the townspeople shook

themselves free of the last tendrils of confusion wrought by their transformation and pressed the attack again, using teeth and claw instead of weapons.

“Fight on!” Zerith shouted, raising his staff and calling upon the Light to smite these cursed humans. Seeing his example, his forces rallied, shaking off their shock, and soon overcame the remnants of the town guard.

“What in the Light was that?” one of the Forsaken fighters asked, his voice still shaking with disbelief as he prodded one of the monster’s corpses with his foot.

“I don’t know,” Zerith said wearily, “but perhaps we’ll find some answers in the Keep,” he pointed up the hill to the foreboding structure overlooking the town. “For now, let’s comb through this village for clues or for anything that might be of use to us. In a few days, the humans in Hillsbrad will know what happened here and will be coming back, looking for revenge.”

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“Zerith?” Alayne called out as she and Callie led their forces into the town. She saw signs of the carnage that had taken place; smears of blood staining the streets where corpses had been dragged outside the town to be burned. “Zerith?” she asked again, looking at one of the sin’dorei archers who had been with Zerith’s group. The archer pointed to the town hall and Alayne’s heart returned to her chest from where it had jumped in her throat. With a shuddering sigh of relief, she nodded to Callie who took over while Alayne went to find Zerith.

“Fall out,” Alayne heard Callie order the group, “see what aid our fellows need. Then rest and wait for further orders.”

Alayne didn’t hear the rest as her steps quickened, carrying her swiftly to the town hall. Once inside the main room, she ran over and nearly tackled Zerith with a wild embrace.

“I’m glad to see that you’re well too, Alayne,” he chuckled as he regained his balance. “What did you learn in Ambermill?”

Mockingly assuming a position of attention, Alayne began her debriefing, “We learned that the mages of Dalaran were attempting to revive a dormant ley energy node, probably in hopes of using it to bolster their powers preparatory to a strike against Lordaeron. We were able to put an end to that plan, however, and have already dispatched word to the Sepulcher requesting that Deathguards be stationed in Ambermill to prevent the humans from returning to try again. We were able to salvage several items that will be of great use to the Dark Lady...”

“...and will hopefully win us back into her good graces?” Zerith said with a twinkle in his eyes. “The news here is not nearly so good; the town was easily taken. I suspect that means that Arugal has kept the main force of his guards with him in the Keep. Taking the Keep will not be nearly as easy as the skirmishes this evening have been.”

“And how did the skirmish here go?”

“Well enough, though, what I’m learning about Arugal and this town has me about as frightened as I’ve ever been. The townspeople of Pyrewood were actually ‘worgen’ or wolf-men. They were not native to this world at all; Arugal summoned them here from Light-knows-where to help hold the Scourge at bay after the destruction of Dalaran. The townsfolk transformed into beasts right in front of our eyes, Alayne,” Zerith shuddered. “It is a sight I will never forget and would rather have never seen.”

Alayne stroked Zerith’s shoulder, comforting him, her concern plain on her face. “Here’s a map of the Keep,” he said, his eyes still haunted, “it’s a twisting nightmare of a castle, something only a warped mind would imagine, let alone inhabit. The Keep used to

belong to a Baron Silverlaine but there's no record of what happened to him or how Arugal came to control the Keep."

"Zerith," Alayne said, snapping him back to reality. "You need to rest. Let us all get a few hours of rest and then we'll storm the keep at dawn."

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Zerith tossed and turned on his bed roll, unable to sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see the humans transforming into monsters. He had thought the sight of the Scourge pillaging the Ghostlands and befouling the lands was the worst he had ever seen; this past evening had proven that to be the thinking of a lost innocent. Sighing, he turned on his side, willing himself to fall into the dark comfort of unconsciousness. No sooner did he close his eyes than they popped open again as a shadow fell across his vision.

"Trouble sleeping?" Alayne whispered, sitting down beside him.

"Yes," he sighed, starting to sit up. Alayne put a hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him back down.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked softly, her green eyes shining with concern.

"Not really," he said flatly. "I'd like to forget about it, not relive it."

"I see," Alayne murmured. Lifting her hand to his face, Alayne softly pulled his eyelids down. Grunting, Zerith tolerated her touch, closing his eyes and relaxing as she gently combed her fingers through his hair. The feel was soothing, taking him back to his childhood when his mother used to sit next to him, stroking his face and arm, helping to calm him after a nightmare. As Alayne began to hum a childhood lullaby, Zerith drifted off to sleep, the terrors of the past evening momentarily set aside.

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Alayne sat absolutely still for several minutes after she heard the deep, even breaths that indicated that Zerith slept. Dawn was still several hours off; she did not want to accidentally wake him with a careless sound or movement. A smile crossed her face as she watched her adopted brother sleep. He looked so much younger asleep; the lines on his forehead caused by worries and cares he bore were smoothed out, the firmness of his jaw-line and shoulders was relaxed. Smiling sleepily, Alayne stifled a yawn and began to think of catching a few hours of sleep herself. Just then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone in the doorway. Motioning to them to be silent and stay where they were, Alayne stood up, careful to not make a sound, and tiptoed over to the door. Once they were in the hallway, Alayne relaxed. The person who had come for her was Callie. After getting a good look at Callie's face, Alayne tensed up, all of her previous relaxation and peace of mind gone.

"What happened?" Alayne asked, squaring her shoulders for the blow.

"We've been spotted by the creatures in the Keep. A few of our scouts got cocky and let themselves be seen."

"Oh no," Alayne sighed. Callie shot her a look. "Well, then our options are to either run for dear life or to stand and fight."

"Yes; so which do we do?" Callie asked caustically.

"No need to get angry at me, Callie," Alayne said frostily. "We do neither. We take the fight to the Keep. The best defense is a strong offense. Send runners to the Sepulcher and Undercity requesting immediate reinforcement."

"Yes, sir," Callie said, her sarcasm melting into humor. "Are you going to wake Zerith?"

“No. Pick out a couple of men to stay here and guard him while he sleeps. The rest of us will storm the Keep as soon as we can get everyone rallied.”

With a glance back to the room where Zerith lay, sleeping peacefully, Alayne sighed and turned to face the battle ahead.

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Sunlight sparkling through the window woke Zerith. Bolting up from his blankets, he looked around, wondering if everyone else had also slept late. With a sigh, he stood up, straightened his robes about him, ran a quick hand through his sleep-tangled hair, and hurried out of the room. Two men sat in the hallway outside. They leapt to their feet when Zerith entered.

“Why didn’t you wake me earlier?” the sin’dorei asked, exasperated. “We’ve probably missed our window of opportunity to launch a surprise attack. Now, let’s get moving!”

The two traded glances. “Sir, the attack began hours ago. Alayne and Callie led everyone else to the Keep just after midnight.”

Zerith almost fell on his face, doing a double-take. “What?” he asked, not certain he had heard correctly. As the pair explained the situation, Zerith’s fear and anger at himself grew.

“So they just rounded everyone up, asked you two to stay here and babysit me, and then waltzed off in the night to give Arugal a piece of their minds?” he yelled. “And you *let me sleep through it all*? Has everyone lost their Light-forsaken minds?” he fumed. “Come with me; we’re joining in the attack. If anything’s happened to Alayne, I’ll...I’ll...oh just come on!” Zerith said angrily as he stormed out of the house.

The town of Pyrewood was deserted, save for the three men. The only evidence of the previous night’s battle was the silence and a few shreds of cloth scattered about the town. The early morning dew had washed clean most of the blood staining the pavement stones on the streets and the bodies of the townspeople had all been taken outside the walls. A faint smell of smoke tinged the air, leftovers from the funeral pyres. Zerith noted the changes with only half a mind as he stalked down the street and out the gate, heading towards the Keep. His guards half-walked, half-trotted, to keep up with him. As the trio neared the Keep, the sound of steel clashing against steel could be heard singing through the air. The metallic song was often accompanied by the moans of the wounded and the dying. Fearful for his sister, Zerith began running through the halls of the keep, dodging past groups of sin’dorei and Forsaken who were finishing off worgen. With each step, his fear mounted to new heights when he did not see Alayne or Callie.

“Alayne? Callie?” he called out as he raced through a mostly deserted courtyard. Leaving the courtyard, he ran through a kitchen, several twisting halls, and a large room with rickety, wooden stairs and bridges strewn about it crazily. The bodies of many worgen and some kind of ghostly wolves littered the straw in this room. Near the top exit, some sin’dorei and Forsaken sat on their haunches, evidently catching their breath after a lengthy skirmish. Zerith ignored them, his legs pumping and his heart pounding as he ran past them, down a walkway, and up a tower. His oxygen-starved lungs forced him to stop before the first set of stairs leading up the tower, hunching him over as he took deep breaths, drawing life-giving air into his lungs. Behind him, he could hear the two guards running, trying to catch up. Zerith stayed where he was, allowing the pair to reach him. Just as he opened his mouth to tell them to follow, a blood-curdling scream of rage and despair rang through the air.

“Who dares interfere with the Sons of Arugal?”

The chill, hollow sound of a portcullis being raised followed the scream. Zerith began racing up the twisting stairways, his heart pounding faster than the sound of the clanking

chains he heard above where a gate was being opened. With terror speeding his steps, Zerith hurried up the tower, reaching the top-most room in time to see Alayne, Callie, and a few other fighters engage a human archmage, Arugal. Callie and a few of the fighters were mounting the stairs leading up to the human while Alayne and an undead mage remained below, channeling their spells. Alayne had summoned one of her demon slaves to help her, Zerith surmised quickly, noting that a Voidwalker had appeared behind the archmage. The human was obviously insane, standing his ground calmly as if he were not about to be attacked by several warriors, a demon, and a pair of magic users. Zerith moved to join Alayne and the mage but stopped when, with a flash of light, Arugal teleported himself from his platform away to the other side of the room.

“You, too, shall serve!” the human shrieked, casting a bolt of shadow at Alayne.

“No!” Zerith screamed, calling on the Light to protect her. A shield sprang up around the sin’dorei woman, absorbing the archmage’s attack. With a quick glance and a smile, Alayne spotted Zerith but then quickly returned her attention to the fight.

Zerith wasn’t sure how long it lasted, but, after what seemed to be hours, they finally managed to kill the insane archmage. After the battle was over, Zerith ran over to Alayne who wobbled unsteadily on her feet, exhaustion and her injuries trying to drag her into unconsciousness. Callie was not faring much better herself, but Zerith’s concern was focused on his adopted sister, the only family he had left.

“Are you crazy?” he shouted at Alayne, grabbing her by the shoulders to steady her as well as reassure himself that she was, indeed, alive. “What were you thinking, leaving me behind like that?”

“Good morning, Zerith,” Alayne said just before her knees buckled and her eyes rolled back in her head. Zerith caught her, preventing her from falling, and laid her gently on the ground. The outrage on his face made a stark contrast to the tenderness with which he quickly tended to Alayne’s wounds. Finishing with her and satisfied that she was resting, he turned with a sigh, glanced up at Callie, walked over to the Forsaken woman, and began healing her wounds.

“When she wakes up, I am going to wring her neck,” he muttered.

Callie snorted, trying to stifle a laugh.