

Alayne nodded coolly to the guards at the door to Manaforge Duro. She did not recognize this pair but that was hardly surprising any longer. King Sunstrider had begun rotating among the forges more frequently now as he sent his select elites to Hellfire Peninsula for their “anointing” before they returned to his hidden base in Azeroth, preparing for the strike against Quel’Thalas. “Lord Theron is loyal to Sunstrider,” she reminded herself mentally. “There will be no need to fight in Quel’Thalas. No one there knows anything,” she thought bitterly, remembering her own shock at learning what Kael’Thas planned. “We will simply walk into the city, take back Mu’ru, and then head on to the Isle of Quel’Danas.” Visions of a long-forgotten dream floated before her eyes; fire engulfing her homeland and demonic laughter ringing across a shattered sky. Her eyes flitted to the banner she’d had made when King Sunstrider had announced her engagement. Vangri had been impressed by it, vowing to make it his personal emblem once they were wed. “Which will be the day after ‘never,’” she snorted to herself. A broken sun on a field of dark blue – it reminded her of the dream and of the price of her failure.

“You will not fail,” Mordenai reassured her. “You’ll succeed beyond anyone’s wildest aspirations. Truly, I’ve never known a mortal like you.”

“When you have nothing to gain, you have nothing to lose,” she sighed softly. “I want you to escape as soon as you can. Once he takes you through to Azeroth, you are to return to your kindred. This isn’t your fight.”

“Anything that involves the Legion is my fight. I’ll admit, it’s been hard having to stay here and not destroy every demon in sight. But, I’ll stay with you and stand behind you until the bitter end.”

“Enough.”

“My Lady certainly has gotten in the habit of command since her betrothal,” he sniffed before he went silent. Alayne fumed and writhed internally, wishing she could burst into tears but knowing it would do no good. Vangri had left her alone after she’d made it clear she wanted to focus all of her energy on restoring the Sunwell. She was grateful for that though it meant she wound up spending more of her time in his company than she wanted. She pushed open the door to her office, intending to at least have a few moments to herself before she refocused the forge crystals based on the new frequency Telonicus had suggested. She was startled to see her ‘fiancé’ seated at her desk, his boots propped up on the table. “What do you think...”

“Ssh,” he said, gesturing her to silence. “I came here to warn you to be careful. Our scouts have noticed activity in the domes recently. Voren’tal may be planning to stage a raid. He’s attempted it in the past though, since we have been able to divert energy away from production and into shielding our vessel, it’s not really a concern for those of us who stay in Tempest Keep. Still, you’re here too often to suit me...”

“My Lord, I have work to be ab...”

“...to suit me,” he continued as if uninterrupted, “and I want you to be careful.” Standing up, he began to walk over to her to embrace her before he left. As he crossed the small room, he hunched over, shivering and sweating. Dry heaves wracked him and Alayne gagged at the stench. With infinite pity, she knelt beside him, trying to ignore the smell, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. Helping him to sit back on his heels when he finished, even taking a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiping his chin and mouth, she watched him evenly. Since his “anointing,” if he went many days without a “recharge,” he would suffer as she had just seen. She hoped he would go today. Not just so he would be away from her – she truly hated to see him suffering – to see anyone suffering – almost as much as she hated what he fed upon.

“I will be,” she promised, making him grin sadly when he recalled what he had asked of her. “If I don’t know them personally, I won’t trust them an inch. Now go,” she said

pleasantly but firmly. “I need to consult my notes and then get to work. King Sunstrider believes we may be ready to return home within the week. If Voren’tal is planning anything, he’d have to be fairly quick about it to prevent us from attaining our goals.”

“You are a marvel,” Vangri grinned. “No wonder my uncle is so taken with you. Still, if only you were a little older...”

“If only you would stop bringing that up,” she chided. “I’m old enough. I feel older than I am,” she sighed. “And yes, I’m getting enough sleep.”

“I still can’t believe I’m marrying a child,” he grumbled good-naturedly. Alayne groaned and shoved him out the door.

“You won’t be marrying me at all. I’ll make certain of that,” she whispered after she’d slammed the door behind him. Dusting her hands, she sat at her desk, straightened the papers Vangri had knocked askew, and buried her head in her hands. “Ger’alin,” she prayed, “Light be with him through the long years ahead. Let him live out his life in peace. Even if he spends the next seven centuries cursing my name, let him be happy with someone else.” Parting her fingers and seeing the blank parchments on her desk, she considered leaving a letter explaining everything. The attack on Shattrath. Spiking the food so that the Disorder of Azeroth was unconscious. Getting the Aldorites and Scryers to march on Shadowmoon. Siding with Kael’Thas. Helping to summon the Legion. She was shocked to find her hand holding a quill and scrawling broken explanations, heart-felt apologies, and entreaties to understand why she’d done as she had. With an effort, she forced herself to stop and took the ink-covered pages in her hand. “Anger will help them heal. Rage will give them strength. I don’t want a single tear shed over what I’ve done,” she told herself firmly. “Let them think the worst; it’s better than knowing that I did this all cold-bloodedly and with plenty of forethought.” Holding them over a candle, she watched as her pleadings vanished in ash and smoke. Dusting her hands once more, she strode to the door, pulled it open, and began the ascent to the crystals at the top of the forge. “The shield will hold now and we will be returning home soon,” she said, repeating the words of her king. “I’m going home...to my final home... One day we will meet again and you will know. You will understand. I’m sorry from the bottom of my heart, Zerith, Dar’ja, Callie, Ger’alin... but I had no choice. He’ll die without the Sunwell. And I can’t face life without him. I just hope his outrage gives him the strength to face the years without me.”

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Thalodien tried not to grimace as the girl-child walked past him. Long weeks of service at B’naar and Coruu had not prepared him for the rigorous schedule “Lady Dawnrunner” demanded of her underlings. That the warlock drove herself twice as hard as she drove the others was only a slight redressing of the balance. “How the naaru could have been blind to her evil is beyond me,” he thought to himself. “When her head decorates the entryway to our tier as a warning to all who would turncoat, I will ask A’dal why he didn’t intervene. And I *won’t* take his shimmers about freedom as a gift of the Light for an answer.” Beside the spymaster, Har’lon shifted wearily. The priest was unaccustomed to such heavy armor.

“Night shift dismissed,” Vangri Sunfury ordered coldly as he walked through the forge. “Your relief has arrived.” Thalodien and Har’lon joined the others in falling out to make their way to the barracks assigned them in the Mechanar. The pair kept together inconspicuously, making jokes along with the others about how much they were looking forward to their “anointing” in a few days.

“I hear you can make a woman scream all night in that state,” one of the rougher soldiers said slyly. Rubbing his palms together in anticipation, he launched into a lurid description of exactly how he was going to use his new powers.

“Kael’s a fool to let a vain, hot-blooded skirt-chaser like him in his army, let alone in the elite guard force,” Thalodien muttered to Har’lon under his breath.

“Kael’s a fool in many ways,” the priest agreed, his lips green at the thought of that “anointing.” “You realize that is Lightbinder’s sister, do you not? Alayne?”

“I do. It is taking every ounce of restraint I have not to cut her down and take her head back to Shattrath as an offering,” Thalodien growled softly. “To think someone barely old enough to be out without a chaperone is leading a manaforge. And helping to destroy the world. I always thought children were supposed to be innocent.”

“Innocence is lost early in times of war,” Har’lon sighed. “Most of our ‘children’ are orphans. Raised among humans or as fosterlings. Then, they’ve been pushed ahead, encouraged to marry almost as soon as they are capable of becoming parents.” Both men grimaced at that, recalling the scraps they’d overheard the children joking about concerning ‘marrying and helping to replenish our race.’ “Of all the things Kael has done, encouraging children to have children has to be one of the worst.”

“At least they keep it amongst themselves,” Thalodien shivered. “I’m glad we defected before he thought of arranging marriages between any of us and those little girls. The thought of someone as old as Vangri even being engaged to a woman young enough to be his daughter makes me sick.”

“Aye,” Har’lon agreed breathlessly. “We’re degenerating into humans. It’s disgusting.”

“Are you two going to stand there and whisper all day or are you going to join the rest of the squad for some hot slop and hard sleep?” one of the other soldiers asked. Thalodien blinked, realizing the man was talking to them. All of the others had departed, taking their winged mounts up to the floating structure housing their barracks. Thalodien thought to himself for a moment before he recalled the other man’s name.

“We’re coming, Ben’lir,” he sighed. “Asleep on our feet over here. That Dawnrunner really lives up to her name sometimes.”

“She does,” Ben’lir nodded. “She’s not going to survive the restoration at this rate,” he added quietly. “It’s almost as if she’s trying to kill herself. I wonder how long Ra’lin there will survive if she manages to pull that off,” he sighed, pointing to the phoenix Alayne had been given. “I worked as a handler before,” he explained, seeing Har’lon’s inquisitive look. “Once they get attached to a rider, they’ll pine after him – or her, in this case – if that rider goes missing. They can live hundreds of years but let one of them get a good case of depression and his fire will go out before it ever should have.”

“We’re hardly privy to the Lady Dawnrunner’s plans,” Thalodien said dryly. “If she pushes herself hard, that’s all to the good. It means we’ll attain our goals just that much sooner.”

“Yes, yes,” Ben’lir murmured, looking around to see if anyone close by could hear, “but, is it really worth it? A child like her...she’s a rare kind. To use her so brutally, to let her exhaust herself...is even restoring our birthright worth the sacrifice of one of our rare gifts of the Light? I used to think I’d do anything to get back at the Scourge for taking my family from me but...she puts me in mind of my cousin’s youngest girl. She should be tending her father’s garden and dreaming about the day she’ll be allowed to attend the first feast held in her honor. Not running a manaforge like a demon-driven maniac. Never mind,” he added quickly, “I trust that King Sunstrider feels the same regret I do. It is not his fault that the Light abandoned us and forces us to cannibalize our young just to survive! Once the Sunwell is restored and the Scourge and destroyed, we will be able to make it up to all of them! All of

the children whose innocent we had to take away in these dark days. We'll give it back to them and gift them with a world where they'll never have to worry about survival again! Our king has foreseen this; we will triumph and we will rise from the ashes more glorious than before." Hopping into the saddle, Ben'lir squared his shoulders as if trying to force himself to believe what he had just said. His mein indicated he did not want to speak or hear another word as he dug his heels into the gryphon's sides and spurred it to wing.

"He's wavering," Thalodien said calmly, surpressing the triumph rising within him. "Another few days, he'll defect for sure. I'm going to keep my eye on him. He's been my most promising aspect since I came to this Light-forsaken wasteland. And, he's got a point. Once we've put the threat of the Legion in the past, we'll undo all the madness that Kael has begun amongst our children. First with this "marriage" business. They should be allowed their youth unfettered with the responsibilities of family and child-rearing. They should and must be allowed their innocence once more." Climbing aboard the back of his own mount, Thalodien whispered his respectful request to the creature, thanking it when it took flight. Har'lon was only a moment behind the spymaster, lost in thought.

"I wish it were possible," he said finally to himself. "However, for all the changes that have been wrought, for all the insanities that have swept through our people and our young, I have come to see that their loss of innocence has been the worst. For, once it is lost, innocence, ignorance, and the ability to lose oneself in the happy dreams of youth...that can never be regained."

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Har'lon lay on the thin pallet allocated him in his dimly lit quarters. With his hands tucked behind his head, he stared up at the ceiling, wishing he could find some sleep but seeing the twisted perversions of his people after their so-called "anointing" whenever he closed his eyes. "And I've got to be back at that forge in three hours to take orders from a girl young enough to be my granddaughter," he grunted. Rubbing a hand over his face, he sat up and let his arms dangle over his knees. "Light help me with this. I don't see how Thalodien does it; hiding his true feelings so well, fitting in with the others here, planting the noxious seeds of rebellion in their hearts and watching them bloom ever-so-slowly. Grant me patience and wisdom to see the grander scheme..."

A soft tapping at his door pulled Har'lon from his prayers. Composing his face and reaching over to rumble the sheets so it would look as if he had just woken, he grumbled, "Come in!" The door creaked open to admit the very child he'd been thinking of. Lightbinder's adopted sister looked pale, drawn, and tired. Pity warred with disgust in his heart as she quickly and quietly closed the door behind her. "Yes, my Lady?" he asked, feigning respect.

"None of that from you," she said softly. "I know you are not loyal to Sunstrider."

"If I were disloyal, I'd be scampering for scraps from the traitor Voren'thal's table, my Lady," he said smoothly. Alayne gave him a wry, amused look and shook her head.

"Very well, then. Prove yourself to me."

"How?"

"A small thing." Reaching in her pocket, she withdrew three vials of water. Har'lon's eyes widened in shock. What was a girl her age doing carrying those about like baubles? "I want you to bless these in the name of the Light or Mu'ru. Whatever power you follow, as long as it is not fel, ask it to consecrate these vials."

"Why?"

"Because your king requires this service of you," she snapped. "He would have asked you himself only he does not wish to draw unwanted attention. Now, can you do as I have

asked or must I find another amongst you rabble that seems to possess the requisite intelligence and faith to perform what should be a task of no import?" Har'lon bristled at her tone and words. Striding over to her, he snatched the vials out of her hand. "It must be a specific blessing," she continued. "One that would allow those with evil hearts to handle the Vials but would...punish them most severely at my command." The priest quirked an eyebrow at her, intrigued by the request. "Our king has his reasons. Not all of our allies can be trusted. Do this so that we may protect ourselves from the demonic tendency to deception."

"As you wish, my Lady," he said formally. Setting the Vials on his bed, he knelt before it, wishing he were back in Shattrath and at the Aldorite's sacred temple. Ishanah would have permitted him access for something like this. Clearing his mind, he sought the Light and besought its will. Long moments passed in silence as he made his complicated request. Feeling a warm, soothing glow well within his heart and soul, he smiled, knowing that the Light had granted his wishes. "The Light has shone upon us this hour," he said calmly. "May its brilliance lead us to victory."

"May the eternal sun guide us," she whispered, taking back the Vials. "Speak of this to no one. Not even our king. He asked me to approach you because you seemed to possess the required...discretion for such a task. Remember this: the fewer who know and the less a thing is discussed, the better. Now, return to your rest. You will be expected to report to your station in just over an hour." Har'lon's eyes widened; had he spent that much time in prayer? Alayne let herself out as he sank to the bed, his mind racing with her last words.

"Has Kael seen the folly of his ways? Is he preparing to turn on the Legion? Do those closest to him know of his plans? Why has he not informed all of us? Why continue to aggravate the conflict with Shattrath if he's actually playing the Legion for fools? And why risk that at all? Something strange is going on here and I just wish I could risk forcing that girl to tell me what."

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"Ah, my dear Lady Dawnrunner," Kael'Thas said warmly when Alayne entered his private quarters. "You look tired, child. You should rest more. You will do your king no good if you exhaust yourself before the time comes for you to aid in restoring our birthright," he chided gently.

"I will rest more, my Lord," she said swiftly. "I thank you most deeply for the use of the Vials this day. I have been able to refocus the matrices on all of the forges. The shields will now be completely operational at all hours. The small excess bleed Telonicus predicted has been diverted back into production. I have set up a standing illusion to cause anyone who does not know to think the production units are the only units the forges are powering. Therefore, unless all of the forges were attacked at once and completely shut down..."

"Yes, I know," he smiled. "Only if all four power down within moments of each other will the shield around our vessel be diminished. It is a brilliant plan. One worthy of the Sunfury name."

"I will do my best to earn your regard," she bowed.

"You have earned it many times over," he said, waving away her reverence. "You continually surprise me. I hope, once this is all over and we have resumed our rightful place in the world, you will be able to lend your considerable talents to the destruction of the Scourge. Perhaps you should reconsider your stance on receiving the Master's touch?"

"I will reconsider it as you request, my Lord," she replied, "but after the Sunwell is restored. Please grant your humble servant this one request: to feel the warmth of the Sunwell as she did when she was a toddler."

“Of course, of course,” he laughed. “I will not press you about it further. I understand your concerns. I share them in some ways. That we are addicted to the arcane is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing in that we learn to live within its ecstasy and weave it to our wills. A curse in that, without it, we waste away. But soon, that curse will end. You have done more than your part to help end it and I will speak with the Master myself. I will ensure that you are gifted as you deserve and desire.”

“That I have earned your exalted regard is the only gift I desire, my liege,” she said formally. “I beg your leave to withdraw, Majesty. I would like to return to my duties for a while before turning in for the night.”

“You have my leave, child,” he said pleasantly. “However, I wish for you and the heads of Duro’s shifts to report to me on the bridge tomorrow just after breakfast. We are going to begin transporting your forces to our staging grounds back in Azeroth.”

“Yes, my lord,” she said, bowing humbly and spreading her skirts. “I look forward to the day when our land shines in eternal spring once more.”

“So do we all, child,” Kael’Thas said sadly, distantly. “So do we all. You may leave, now. Return to your duties and rest with your king’s blessing,” he said softly, lost in thought. “Soon the Sunwell will shine once again.”

Alayne did not hear his last words as she swept out into the hallway. “We’re leaving soon?” Mordenai asked softly through the link.

“Yes,” she sent back simply.

“I’m really going to miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

“Is there...any message you’d like me to pass on?”

“No. Their anger will help them heal. Just as I asked Akama, so I ask you: say nothing. Carry this to your grave. Tell no one; not even your future mate. Not even your little whelpings. I...I wish I would live long enough to see them hatched.”

“You probably wouldn’t at any rate,” he sighed sadly. “Now I know why so few of my kind befriend you mortals,” he sniffed. “I’m really not looking forward to this at all. I don’t care anymore if it would help your people. Why you?”

“Because I’m the only one who I will ask to pay the price. Now, enough of this. Good-bye, Mordenai.”

“It’s Mordenaku,” was the last thing Alayne heard through the link before she tore the scale from the scar over her heart.

“I have work to be about,” she reminded herself firmly. “The Sunwell will shine once again and soon. I...I will miss you all. May its rays send my love but the Sunwell must shine once more!”

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The next morning when Alayne led her workers onto the bridge of Tempest Keep, she was calm and composed. A sleepless night spent in prayer had helped her to undo the last ties binding her to the world. She was even able to face Mordenai – Mordenaku – with his blazing, angry eyes and his lashing tail, calmly, coolly. “You would not want to feel that through the link, my friend,” she thought fondly as she listened with half a mind to her king’s speech.

“You have been chosen for a very special mission,” Kael’Thas declaimed grandly, his eyes sparkling with eagerness and anticipation. “You are the final wave of fighters and magi to be sent to your brethren awaiting you at our staging grounds in Azeroth. You are among the most elite of my forces which is why your deployment has been held back so long. However, the appointed day has, at long last arrived! With the hard work and dedication of Lady

Dawnrunner, among many others, we are finally ready to return to our homeland and wrest back our rightful glory! The first phase of our plan is to take control of the Isle of Quel'Danas. Your commanders will explain your exact parts in that operation once you arrive at our staging area. From there, we will march on Quel'Thalas where our people will greet us with open arms! You will be heroes, the brave, selfless warriors who restored the Sunwell and helped to bring our deliverer into the world! Now, my loyal comrades, go forth to victory! These dark times are passing! Soon, the eternal sun will shine upon us forevermore!"

Thunderous applause broke out from among the normally disciplined ranks. Alayne felt her own heart trying to soar with hope. Relentlessly, she squashed it. She knew what insanity her king plotted and she knew that she had helped him closer to his mad goals. "That will be taken care of soon enough," she reminded herself firmly. For a moment, she waited, expecting some sardonic remark from Mordenai. When she remembered that she'd severed that link, she sighed wistfully. While her followers cheered their king, the Magisters on the bridge began the incantation for the spell that would see them all to where they were supposed to go. Alayne listened carefully to the words, noting that they were a mix of fel magic and pure arcane. Nodding to herself, she let the little remaining talent within her sense the opening of the portal between worlds. She studied it carefully as those among her ranks began marching through the shimmering gateway. Memorizing every detail she could, she nodded, bowed deeply to her monarch, and, with the last few stragglers, walked through.

A whirl of magical energy surrounded her, bathing her in its glow as her parents had bathed her with their love as a child. When she completed the step, she felt cold and forlorn. "Thus does Ger'alın suffer," she reminded herself. "I will stop that. I will end his torment and my own. I just wish...I wish I could see him one last time..."

"My Lady Dawnrunner," one of the Magisters said stiffly, still uncertain about addressing someone so young – albeit extremely accomplished – as an equal. She stifled a grin, remembering how Jez'ral had talked down to her for all of her talents and all of her skill until she'd proven herself to him by passing her Master's Trials decades before she should have. Only among Kael's followers had she gotten a glimpse of just how advanced she was for one of her age. "My Lady Dawnrunner, if you please? Erasmus Brightblaze would like to speak with you and your troops before giving you your personal orders."

"Very well," she nodded coolly. Falling in after him, she ignored the stares and the shouts of congratulations and certain victory now that the Prodigy was among them. Keeping her eyes on the Magister's back, she tried not to feel a pang of regret that she would never don the mantle he bore so confidently. "That's behind me, now. Only darkness lies before me. Light help me, I said I wouldn't do this again," she thought to herself as she felt tears welling in her eyes. "I'm going home! To my final home at last!"

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Ger'alın's eyes widened in shock as they stepped over the border into the Netherstorm. Dar'ja began giggling incoherently and even Zerith seemed taken aback at the sensations pouring through him. The priest shook his head as if to clear it and saw the Blood Knight licking his lips nervously as if wondering if he dared take another step. "Problems, Ger'alın?" Zerith asked hoarsely.

Ger'alın nodded, "I don't know if I can do this. I don't have a choice, do I?" he muttered to himself. "I...if I break, Zerith..."

"I'll be more help this time," Zerith promised. Ger'alın shook his head but couldn't find the words to explain what he wanted. Forcing himself to ignore the desire to drink in the arcane energy surrounding him, Ger'alın steeled himself for the long struggle ahead.

“I have to find her,” he told himself over and over again. “I have to keep her safe. Whatever she’s done, where ever she is, whoever she’s sided with, I have to find her and join her! Damn this addiction! What is so funny, Dar’ja?”

“I’m flying!” she laughed, throwing her arms out wide and nearly hitting her husband in the face. “This feels wonderful!”

“Dar’ja, get a hold of yourself,” Zerith said worriedly, wanting less than anything to have to deal with another sickening sin’dorei. Glancing around, he saw that the other elves seemed to be following Ger’alin’s example and firming their resolve to fight against their desire to drink in the very air around them. As he worked to calm his wife, Zerith began to understand just how Ger’alin could have been driven as far as he had. To know that such joy existed and feel that it was willfully being denied you? “Dar’ja?”

“I feel as if I have had far too much to drink,” she said giddily, fighting to control her surging emotions. “It’s as if I can’t get hold of myself. I want to dance and sing for joy at the sheer thrill coursing through me. I can’t ignore it, Zerith! I can’t shake it off!” Panic began to war with exhilaration as the woman fought to calm her unsteady emotions. Zerith’s heart began to race as he sensed her reaching out and pulling energies into herself.

Ger’alin put a halt to it. Grabbing the woman by her arm, he dragged her back across the bridge. Once over the border and far enough away from the effects of the Nether on the land, Dar’ja collapsed shakily, her stomach emptying itself. Ger’alin watched her with pity in his eyes, wishing there were something he could do to help the woman control herself. “I’m afraid it’s back to Shattrath for you,” he sighed. “You don’t want to risk it out there. Believe me, I’ve lived through that hell already. I’ll live that torment every day of my life. Don’t do it if you don’t have to,” he said softly.

“I...you’ll look after Zerith?” she asked. “Make certain he sleeps some? He hasn’t been doing that much since she ran off.”

“I’ll look after him. He is my brother after all,” Ger’alin replied gently. “Light, Dar’ja, I don’t want to go in there either but I have to. Do something for me?” he asked. Dar’ja nodded slowly. The man had never sought her advice or asked her for much of anything in the time they’d known each other. “Pray for me. Pray to the Light that I’ll find the strength I need to endure this and, if not, the wisdom to get myself out of there and the mercy to forgive myself for my failures. I seem to have a hard time with that last bit especially,” he said bitterly, fighting to keep himself from starting the familiar round of self-recriminations that would throw him into one of his “sulking funks” as Callie termed them.

“I will,” she whispered. Zerith had, by now, made it over to the pair. “I’m going back to Shattrath,” she informed him. “I’d be more of a hinderance than a help out there the way I am. I can’t do it. Don’t ask it of me,” she pleaded.

“I won’t. I wouldn’t,” he said, his eyes wide with shock. “Do you want me to return to Shattrath with you, Dar’ja?” he asked, torn between two warring duties. He should accompany his wife and stay with her. He also needed to find his sister. He could not leave her alone to continue her mad service to Kael’Thas and neither could he risk the forces of Shattrath finding her first and killing her without so much as a trial and a chance for her to explain her insane actions. Deep in his heart, he knew she must have a reason for doing what she had done. She must!

“No,” she said finally. “If you want to see me back to Shattrath, that’s one thing. But you would not need to stay there.”

“Of course I’ll see you back to Shattrath,” he said, hating the relief clear in his tone. When he saw Alayne next, he thought he would wring her neck for forcing him into this position. “Ger’alin, take command of the Disorder of Azeroth until I return. You know where to rendez-vous with the Scryers, correct?”

“Yes, at the goblin town called Area 52. What a strange name,” he mused. “Go on, go on,” he gestured, waiting for Zerith to help Dar’ja to her feet. As the two began the trek back to where they had penned in the mounts, he wondered if accepting command when he was about to have to use all of his energy just to stay sane had been the best idea. “Why do I always seem to bite off more than I can chew? And will I always have to fight against these black moods?” he growled to himself, feeling the beginnings of the dark spiral. “Light be with me. Just let me find my wife and all will be right again!” he prayed. Striding up to the front of the line, feeling every eye on his back, he turned around and cleared his throat. “Zerith will be returning shortly. For now, we will continue on. Follow me.”

He felt a moment’s panic when the members of the Disorder of Azeroth glanced askance at each other. He’d not been put in a command position over them since before the assault on the Black Temple. All of them, save Callie, had wondered if the sin’dorei had lost his mind and wondered now if following him would lead them off a unseen precipice. Finally, Tau’re sighed and shook his shaggy head. “Are we going to stand here all day like a herd of cud-chewers or are we going to get a move on?” the tauren asked loudly. “Lead on, commander, and we will follow.”

Ger’alin nodded and smiled gratefully at his friend. Faking a confidence he did not feel, the Blood Knight led his forces – his friends – into the Netherstorm and into the trial of his life. “Light be with me,” he prayed feverently as he forced himself to ignore the effects of the Nether. “Just stay with me until I find my wife.”

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“We wondered if you’d be showing up,” Thalodien growled as he watched the Disorder of Azeroth trickle in to Area 52. “Took you long enough. I thought you were supposed to be here yesterday. Giving your friend time to make certain that shield was impenetrable?”

“We came as soon as we could,” Ger’alin replied evenly. “What are you doing here? From what little I heard, you were supposed to be sticking close to one of those manaforges.”

“There’s been a change in plans. We suspect Kael is up to something. He’s begun pulling all of his forces back, bit by bit, to Tempest Keep. A massive shield surrounds the vessel now, powered in part by the manaforges. To get in there and put a stop to him, we’ll have to shut all of the forges down.”

“Very well,” Ger’alin agreed. “Show me the layout of the areas around the forges and the interiors and I’ll get to work on a plan for you.”

“We’ve got a plan already,” Thalodien snapped. “What we need is bodies to execute it. Sin’dorei, preferably, as our own can get closest to the forges wearing robes we’ve managed to steal from Kael’s followers. Still, anyone with brains will do.”

Ger’alin gave the man a weighing look, wondering if he would be able to get away with smashing his fist through the Scryer spy-master’s face. Something about the man rubbed him wrong anyway and the added stress of trying to ignore the ecstasy around him was pushing the Blood Knight close to his limit. “Why aren’t you still among Kael’s followers?” he asked at last, knowing he was pushing the envelope but not caring. “Weren’t you supposed to be keeping an eye on this ‘Lady Dawnrunner?’”

“Your so-called wife, you mean,” Thalodien snorted. “She’s well-guarded, day or night. Kael’s no fool – that child prodigy is a high value target. If we can capture or kill her, it would hit a lot of his forces hard. She’s respected, admired, and well-loved by those around her. Not to mention she’s been betrothed to Kael’s nephew, Vangri Sunfury.” Ger’alin’s eyes nearly popped out of his head in shock and he felt as if all of the air had been squeezed from his lungs. Black flecks floated in his vision and his heart began to pound wildly as Thalodien

continued. "They're to be married once the Sunwell is restored. He's one of the felbloods now, swollen beyond belief with demonic energy and his own native arrogance. Still, I suppose she's a vain little climber, just like her mother was. She's forgotten you already, I'll wager. So, put your mind on how you're going to execute my plan."

"What is your plan?" Ger'alain asked breathlessly, his stomach churning. She couldn't be going to marry someone else. She was already married to him! She'd sworn under the Light to hold true to him. As Thalodien elaborated on his plan, he continued to add barbs under Ger'alain's skin, constantly recalling to him the faithless and fickle nature of women, especially women warlocks. By the time he finished, Ger'alain didn't know whether he wanted to scream, weep, strangle Thalodien, or run after Alayne, begging her to tell him what Thalodien said was not true. The paladin stalked out of the inn and signaled for everyone to gather around him. "Sin'dorei," he said, addressing himself first to his own people, "you're going to don disguises and prepare to infiltrate the manaforges tomorrow evening. Apparently, most of the 'elite' forces are being pulled back to Tempest Keep so we'll stand a better chance of bluffing our way past the guards when there are less people familiar with the others to point us out. The rest of you are to wait in groups around the forges. I will assign you each to a group and show you where you are to position yourselves. If you see a signal flare fire out of the forge, that's your cue to rush in. The plan is fairly simple. We will coordinate our attacks so they occur around the same time. That will keep the forges from being able to reinforce each other. The Scryers will be stationed near Tempest Keep to try to keep any messengers requesting back-up from reaching Kael's base. Each forge has a crystalline control panel. Normally, you'd need an access key to unlock it. Thalodien's plan was to try to find them but I've suggested that we just concentrate on wrecking the machinery. There is a risk that the energies the forges are channeling will grow unstable. Be prepared to run for the hills if that happens." The Disorder of Azeroth nodded, accepting their orders. Ger'alain quickly divided them down into groups and, taking each group inside the inn, showed them where they were to hide until they saw the signal to commence attack. Thalodien watched the Blood Knight pass out his orders with a bemused smile. The young man might make something of himself one day. Too bad he seemed smitten by that treacherous Dawnrunner.

Once everyone knew where they were supposed to be and when, Ger'alain bowed, saluted the spymaster, and concentrated on not punching the smug grin off the older man's face as he backed out of the inn. Taking his camping supplies from Callie, he wished they hadn't left their mounts pastured back with the ogres. "Where are you going?" the Forsaken asked.

"To be just a little closer to her," he replied, hefting his satchel over his shoulder. "I'm taking Manaforge Duro. I'll camp near there tonight. With luck, maybe I'll see her and be able to talk to her."

"If she's gone over to Kael, though..."

"Callie, even if she's sworn her allegiance to Sargeras himself, I love her. And, I need to tell her I'm sorry for what I did. Who knows but *that* was what pushed her over the edge? Maybe in seeking safety from me, she fled to the one place she thinks I'll never follow her."

"Gerry, you can't blame yourself for everything. You did wrong, of course, to harm her but you were ill. You had reasons...insane reasons, but reasons nonetheless," she allowed judiciously. Ger'alain snorted. "You take too much on yourself. She does too. You're both too pig-headed for your own good, you know that."

"If I can win her back with words and spirit her away, I will. If the time comes and I'm not there, you'll know that I found her. Whether it means we've run off or she has taken the price of my sins out of my hide...well, that's her choice. All I know, Callie, is that I have to follow her. I have to...and I want to, where ever her path may lead." Not giving the undead

woman a chance to say another word, Ger'alın began striding away to the north and east, his feet firmly on the path to Manaforge Duro.

"Light go with you," she whispered as she watched him lope off. "Light be with you both."

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Ger'alın watched the guards change shift from his vantage point in a cleft of large, jutting rocks. He wondered if Alayne might pass by soon. The few snatches of conversation he'd heard mentioned that she had been working like a fiend the past few days, barely stopping to rest unless she fell asleep at her desk. He longed to find a way into the manaforge. Even if she were not there, he wanted to be where she had been, to breathe in her intangible presence now that he felt so close to reuniting with her. Over and over again in his mind, he rehearsed what he wanted to say to her when, at long last, he had the chance to apologize and explain.

"Alayne," he breathed, every breath a prayer, "you can come back now. Whatever it is you felt you had to do, you don't have to anymore. I'm sorry I pushed you to this end. I'm sorry I wasn't the man you needed me to be. Just come out and come back," he whispered.

"You know the Lady Dawnrunner?" a skeptical voice asked from behind him. Ger'alın leapt to his feet with a start, spinning around and reaching for his sword. "One move more and you're dead," the man said evenly, his blade pointed at Ger'alın's throat. The Blood Knight gulped and held up his hands in surrender. Perhaps being captured would put him that much closer to finding his wife. "Do you know her?"

"Who?"

"The Lady Dawnrunner! You were just babbling her given name."

"Alayne?"

"Yes!"

"What would it mean to you if I knew her?"

"How about your life?" the other man growled. "I've left you alive this long because I've been watching you for an hour now. You've made no move to attack the forge and you don't seem to be observing much. You act like a man watching for someone. Who and why?"

"I'm watching for Alayne..."

"The Lady Dawnrunner!" the man hissed angrily.

"...Right," Ger'alın said slowly, "the Lady Dawnrunner. I'm hoping to catch a glimpse of her and get a chance to speak with her."

"Why? Do you mean her harm?"

"If I did, I would hardly admit it to you, now would I?" Ger'alın asked sarcastically. "But no, I mean her no harm. I would die before I harmed her again."

"Again?"

"Are you going to kill me or take me prisoner?"

"I'm the one asking the questions here," the other man growled. "Again?"

"I don't want to discuss it with anyone other than her. She should hear it from me first. I owe her that much."

"What do you mean by 'again?'"

"Why do you care?"

The other man sighed and stared down Ger'alın. The Blood Knight met his gaze openly, curiosity and a bit of boredom plain on his face. Finally, the guard sighed again and grunted, lowering his sword. "I can still shout for the others and have you killed before you draw breath, stranger. Now, why are you out here? If you were one of Voren'thal's followers,

you'd be scouting the forge more thoroughly and from a better vantage point. All you've done since I noticed you is sit here and watch the main entrance."

"My business here is my own," Ger'alin said testily. "I am looking for the Lady Dawnrunner because I wish to speak with her."

"Why?"

"What business is it of yours?"

"Are you planning to try to take her away from here? Before her anointing?"

"Anointing?"

"Before she becomes a felblood as so many of the others have!"

"A felblood...they're drinking demon blood?" Ger'alin asked, aghast. He felt his stomach clench at the thought of Alayne doing something so vile. Surely, no matter what, she would avoid such a thing at all costs. Was that why he'd been having these premonitions? Would Kael attempt to force her to do so only to see her be executed for her refusal?

"Aye, stranger, that they are," the man said sadly. "That is why...I cannot turn my back on my king but I cannot and will not hand my soul to the Legion! They are useful allies for now but let us retake our glory ourselves!"

"She's going to...demon...oh Light no..."

"She seemed to be somewhat...hesitant to be anointed. Her husband-to-be already has been," Ger'alin blanched and clenched his fists at the mention of another man in her life, "I see," the guard nodded to himself. "That's a relief. I don't think she's suited to be Vangri's wife either," he whispered conspiratorially. "I don't think he has the first clue what a treasure our king has entrusted him with. Vangri was a good man but since the Scourge overran our lands and we fled to Outland, he's become...harder. Colder. More arrogant than ever. He doesn't value people the way he used to. I kept hoping some of her would rub off on him but, if anything, it's been the reverse. She's valued herself less and less, using herself harder and harder, pushing herself more and more, since her betrothal was announced."

"Where is she?" Ger'alin demanded harshly. "And where is this Vangri?"

"She...the last I heard," the guard sighed, sounding as if the words were being dragged out of him, "she had been recalled to Tempest Keep... Wait, where are you going? You can't just waltz up there and demand to see her! They'll never let you in! They won't even let the rest of us in anymore. We're only permitted to return to our barracks in the Arcatraz of late."

Ger'alin halted. He had been striding off purposefully towards the distant hovering vessel. "I must see her!"

"If I could help you get her away from here, I would," the guard sighed. "She...she's been a wonder ever since she arrived. There's something about her that...well, Tempest Keep is on high alert. She herself designed the shielding that protects it while they continue on with whatever it is they are doing there. We grunts aren't privy to such information," he said airily, rolling his eyes. "Not any longer, at least. Our king has become...less...open to his people the closer he draws to the Master."

"Kael will destroy the world," Ger'alin said flatly. "And his plotting will be the death of Alayne! Please, help me get her out of there. She's my wife," he added. The other man looked up in shock. "We were married not even a month ago."

"No wonder she's been so...glum and withdrawn of late. I...I should arrest you," he said slowly.

"Then do it."

"I...return to your friends. I cannot help you. Just go! The next time we meet..."

"...will be the last," Ger'alin finished for him as he turned and began to jog away.

Once he reached the turn back to Area 52, he glanced over his shoulder. The guard still stood there, watching him go, his arms crossed over his chest, his sword at his hip, a thoughtful

expression on his face. Ger'alín picked up the pace, torn with joy that he may be reunited with Alayne soon and sorrow that he may have to fight a man who seemed decent enough... save that he had thrown in his lot with Kael'Thas and the Burning Legion.

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Zerith sighed and shook his head. He couldn't keep his mind clear and focus on his prayers. Thoughts of his wife, of his sister, and worries about Ger'alín filled his mind. Irritated, he slammed the window shut, strode to his bed, and knelt as he had when he was a child. "Light help me seek after you," he whispered, folding his hands beneath his chin. "Oh what is it now?" he groaned when someone began banging on his door frantically. "Can't a man even pray in peace around here?" he spat as he flung the door open. Ger'alín staggered in, his fist landing on Zerith's shoulder, the opening of the door catching him by surprise.

"Tempest Keep," the Blood Knight said excitedly.

"What about it?"

"She's in Tempest Keep."

"And how do you propose we get there? Ask Kael very politely to let us in?"

"That's right," Ger'alín muttered. "You weren't here to hear Thalodien's plan. How is Dar'ja?"

"She was fine once she got out of this blasted Netherstorm. A few day's preparation and she thinks she may could hold herself together long enough to be of help out here."

"No," Ger'alín said baldly. "She shouldn't risk it."

"I told her that myself as well," Zerith sighed. "She said she wouldn't come unless we sent word for her or she heard we needed help. She's taken to studying in the Library with the Magisters. She does want to be of some use in some manner. If she can't be here in Netherstorm, perhaps she can learn more about demons in order to help others learn how to deal with our prince's new allies."

"Speaking of which, you need to be ready to head over to Manaforge Ara tomorrow afternoon. You'll be one of the sin'dorei attempting to infiltrate the manaforge and shut it down. I'll show you the schematics Thalodien gave us in a bit," he said, "but, for now, just know that Alayne is safe and sound in Tempest Keep. We should be able to get to her tomorrow night. I'm praying that, once the shield goes down, Kael's forces pull back and try to negotiate. I do not want you to take place in anything that actually happens at Tempest Keep," he said mildly.

"I would never harm my sister, Ger'alín. I'm getting rather annoyed at your insistence in believing I would. But fine," he said, throwing his hands up in the air. "I'll stay back if that's what it will take to satisfy you. Just try not to do anything 'rash.' Only your *wife* can outdo *you* when it comes to making a hasty decision without much forethought," he teased.

"I'm going to get her out of there. I'm going to make certain she's safe. Even if that means she stays away from me forever after, I'm going to make certain of it," Ger'alín vowed grimly.

"You can't hold on to that for the rest of your life," Zerith said softly. "I... I've been needing to say this for a while now. I want to apologize for what I said to you that day. About being glad. I wasn't. I was just so...so..."

"I know," Ger'alín muttered, not looking at the priest. "Had I been in your shoes, I'd have felt and said the same. And, I'm trying to let go but..."

"You'll have to try harder. Whatever it is my dear sister has gotten up to, neither one of us helped a bit that day. You've been blaming yourself and I've been trying to figure out how to go back and undo it. We can't. We have to accept that we were wrong not to listen to

her, that we were wrong to go up against Illidan as brashly as we did. Had we heeded her advice, we wouldn't be where we all are right now."

"Zerith..."

"No, listen. She warned us almost from the moment we set foot in Shadowmoon Valley that we should be spending our energy on Kael and not Illidan. Even A'dal told us that Illidan was just a distraction. If we hadn't rushed in to the Black Temple we..."

"...wouldn't have the Dragonmaw orcs as allies, or the Mag'har..."

"Look around!" Zerith snarled, exasperated. He ran his hands through his hair, tugging at the ends hanging from his shoulders, a sure sign of his frustration. "We don't have any orcish allies save for those who have been with the Disorder of Azeroth almost from the beginning! We lost the Mag'har and the Dragonmaw over the Black Temple. We lost them *because* of it! Because you were injured and Alayne went berserk and called upon the dead to attack Illidan!"

"You're right. She was right," Ger'alín said, his voice small and still. "We don't have many allies left, do we? It's just us against our prince and the Legion now and we're trying to pull Alayne out of it and keep her safe. We can't even call on Garrosh or Mor'ghor to hide her away."

Zerith started to nod and lifted his hand to place it on the other man's shoulder. Ger'alín's head hung and tears were welling in his eyes. He was so close and yet still so far from his goal. "It's like I used to tell her, Ger'alín. We sin'dorei only have each other."

"I wouldn't say that, priest," a deep voice grunted from the door. Zerith looked up, surprised to see it still open. "We've come to offer our aid," Garrosh said.

"I thought you..."

"Akama told us that if we did not put an end to Kael and his madness, we might as well go ahead and slit our throats now and have done with it," Mor'ghor cut in. "And, he's right. Besides, it will give us a chance to put an end to that death knight," he spat. "Once she's gone, brother-to-my-brother," he said to Ger'alín, "your mind will be freed of her spell. Believe me. I have studied the shadow arts. You do not love her..."

Ger'alín turned away angrily, striding over to the window. Flinging it open, he gripped the sill tightly, not noticing when pieces of wood and plaster broke off in his hands. Zerith glared at the orc chieftains, folded his arms over his chest, and wondered if shouting at them would be the best idea. "She is my wife," Ger'alín said softly, his voice like silk sliding across the cold steel of a bared blade.

"She has betray..."

"She is my wife. I will know from her lips why, exactly, she has done what she has done. Deny me that chance and you are no brother of mine," he continued in the same deceptively mild tone. The orc chieftains glanced askance at each other and at Zerith. The priest shrugged as if to say "what do you expect me to do about it?"

"But she has given aid to those who serve the Legion," Garrosh explained.

"And if she has done so out of fear for her life? If she was captured trying to use the Vials to find a way to reverse my previous transformation? It was a disease that afflicts all elves, Garrosh," he snarled, his back still to the room. The three men stared, startled and frightened when the windowsill and most of the wall beneath it tore away in Ger'alín's grasp. "A disease that she must have feared would consume and kill me. I believe she ran off seeking answers and a cure. I believe she must have been captured by Kael's forces and tortured, forced to serve him. I believe that and I will continue to believe it until I hear the words spoken by her tongue, passing her lips, that tell me otherwise," he finished, flinging the ruined plaster down onto the floor.

"I...see..." Garrosh said, eyeing the sin'dorei warily. "Do all of your kind have such power when riled?"

“Alayne and I are rare exceptions,” Ger’alin said flatly, dusting his hands.

“I will give orders that she is to be captured alive and brought to you,” Garrosh replied. Mor’ghor nodded his head in agreement. “If she has turned against us all, though; if she has turned to the Legion of her own free will...”

“You will kill her,” Ger’alin finished for him, “and then you’ll deal the mercy stroke against my own neck, brother. You’ll owe me that much.”

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Zerith watched Ger’alin the next afternoon as the groups finished donning their disguises and left to attempt their infiltration. The Blood Knight looked odd without his sword strapped to his waist and wearing robes better suited for his wife in style. Still, he did have a dignified bearing, an air of command about him that had only grown stronger since his miraculous recovery. The priest nodded to himself. Ger’alin was a man he could easily find himself following were he not so often thrust into a position of leadership himself. “This will go more smoothly than the last time,” Ger’alin said in a carrying tone, smiling at Bara’la. The woman nodded grimly at him, her expression one of fear and loathing barely under control. “It *will* go more smoothly,” he said confidently. “This time, we will crush them between us when the time comes. Show no mercy, sin’dorei, for Kael’s forces would show you none in return,” he said, forcing himself not to think about the man he’d encountered the night before.

“At last, the lad says something worth listening to,” Thalodien cheered loudly, earning him stares of derision and disgust from the Disorder of Azeroth. Many of them, even the sin’dorei old enough to be considered adults by the old ways, were tired of the constant put-downs and reminders of their relative youth.

Ger’alin glared daggers at the other man. “Still, they are our people. If any of them surrender and drop their weapons, spare them. They can be held until we’re certain they’ve seen the error of their ways. No,” he said loudly, cutting Thalodien off, “we will give them the same chance at redeeming themselves as we have given the Dragonmaw orcs. The same chance the naaru gave you and Voren’tal. The same chance I have been given. I will not take mercy away from those who actively seek it. However, those who wish to continue the fight can have a foot of steel through their ribs.”

“You just want to spare your so-called wife,” Thalodien muttered softly enough that only those around him could hear. Unfortunately for the sin’dorei spymaster, Tau’re was one of that number.

“You and I will have a long chat when this is done, child of blood,” the tauren said quietly. “A long chat you may need your priest friend to help you recover from. Oh, don’t start rolling your eyes at me, little one. I have nieces who could twist you in a knot nine ways from Winter Veil. My younger brother has carried on the family name since I was too busy fighting to see to it,” he grinned menacingly.

Thalodien stared at the tauren, shocked. Glancing back over at the young priest and Blood Knight, he wondered just how two children could command respect from a veteran. Tau’re watched the sin’dorei turn that thought over in his mind, hiding the smile that would have given his lie away. “It was the least I could do,” he thought silently, watching Ger’alin. “Youth and fire can light the way where wisdom and experience have burnt out.”

“Let’s go,” Ger’alin said, gesturing for the others to depart. “This will go better. That, I vow.”

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Ben'lir stood uneasily at his post. Things had been quiet of late. Too quiet. He'd heard no word from those who had been recalled to Tempest Keep. Perhaps the last waves had been sent back to Azeroth. "But why am I still here?" he wondered to himself. "Does my king know of my doubts concerning our new allies? I am loyal. Aren't I?"

"At least we don't have to fight," one of the other guards muttered softly, but not softly enough that the others couldn't hear him.

"Afraid?" Ben'lir asked quietly.

"No," the other man muttered sourly. "I just don't like fighting our own."

"Neither do I," Ben'lir replied. "None of us do. But they've forced the fight. If they hadn't abandoned us, maybe we wouldn't be in this position. Maybe if they'd stayed, our king wouldn't have..."

"Wouldn't have what?" the other guard demanded, narrowing his eyes.

"Nothing," Ben'lir said quickly. "I just...sometimes wonder about the wisdom of letting demons roam about free. But, if our king says he has them under control, then he does. It is just my ignorance that keeps me from seeing it."

"Demons," the other guard snarled. "I hate that we're allied with them. But I would sell my soul to Sargeras himself to destroy the Scourge. They took everything from me! My wife, my children...those foul undead slaughtered them all while I was at the front. I would do anything to rid the world of that filth."

"So would the rest of us," Ben'lir said quietly, recalling scrambling through the ruins of his own home village, searching desperately for sign of his sister and her husband. They'd been eagerly expecting their first child; he'd been looking forward to being an uncle. But no sign of them had been found in the smoking, fetid rubble of Suncrown Village.

"I wonder who that is," the other man said, gesturing to a trio of sin'dorei, one dressed in the robes of a forge commander's assistant. The other pair flanking him wore armor much like Ben'lir's own. "Probably more reinforcements from B'naar come to check on us and hold our hands," he spat.

"I...Who goes there?" he demanded loudly, recognizing the man he'd spoken to of the Lady Dawnrunner.

"We have come to check on the alignment of the focal crystal," Ger'aline said quickly. "The Magisters at Coruu noticed a fluctuation in the field and sent us to check on it."

"I see," Ben'lir said slowly. "I will escort you to the stabilization chamber. You may leave the others here."

Ger'aline paled, knowing he had been found out. He berated himself for not being more careful, for not scouting out the entrances before striding up to the forge. It was just his luck to run into the one guard who, for whatever reason, had let him go once. He felt naked as he followed the guard into the forge. Without his sword and armor, he felt as helpless as a babe in swaddling clothes. Following the other man into one of the rooms off the side passages, he wondered if he would be able to wrestle his blade away before it slid through his stomach.

"What are you doing here?" Ben'lir demanded. "The Lady Dawnrunner has not darkened the doors of the forge in several days now."

"You seem like a man of rare conscience," Ger'aline said, eyeing the sword hilt. The man made no move to loose his blade. Instead, he crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the Blood Knight. "You seem like a man who would rather do good than serve ill."

"Spare me, whelp," he sighed. "I've considered running, deserting like Voren'thal did. I can't abandon my sworn oath to my king. I won't. My name and my word is all I have left in this world. If I give them up, I'll have nothing."

"And if your king has abandoned you?" Ger'aline pressed.

"If pretty words were all it would take to sway me, I'd have defected already. Now, why are you here?"

“I told you, I’m looking for my wife. If this is the closest I can get to her, I’ll be content with that. Now, were I you, I’d take off early. Light blind me, I don’t want to do this so don’t force me. Just get everyone out of here and head for the hills.”

“You’re going to attack the forges,” Ben’lir said slowly, understanding dawning across his face. Ger’alin winced as the other man tensed, preparing to shout and alert his comrades. With a quick motion, Ger’alin grabbed the man’s throat with one hand, slammed his other hand over his mouth, and held tight, searching for the pressure point that would render his opponent helpless. Ben’lir grappled with the younger man, grunting and trying to bite his hand, trying to force him to pull it away so he could shout for help. His frustration at trusting the traitor for his connection to the Lady Dawnrunner fed his struggles. Finally, he wrenched away, opening his mouth and drawing in air to call for aid.

When the other man slipped from his fingers, Ger’alin leapt forward, pinning him to the ground and working an arm around his neck. Within moments, the other man was out cold and Ger’alin knelt beside him, hands splayed, catching his breath. Wiping sweat from his forehead and taking a moment to straighten his robes and hair, hiding signs of the brawl, he dragged the guard’s limp body to a corner of the room and looked around. Glancing around as he straightened again, he smiled. This was Alayne’s office. He could practically taste her presence in the room. Without closing his eyes, he could see her sitting behind the massive wooden desk, one hand holding her hair out of her eyes as she read over some report. He could see her standing up and pacing around the desk as she worked out a problem, stopping and smiling with delight when the solution came to her and then hurrying back to her seat to scribble it down as if afraid she would lose sight of it after a few seconds. Breathing deeply, Ger’alin imagined that he could catch a faint trace of the scented soap she favored. Sitting down in the chair, he imagined for a moment that he could feel her near him.

Just as he settled in, the door flew open, a wide-eyed guard panting as it bounced back to smack his open palm. Ger’alin hastily grabbed up some of the papers stacked on the desk, pretending to have been going over them. Cocking an eyebrow at the guard, he adopted his most annoyed expression he could recall his wife wearing when he interrupted her studies. “Yes?” he asked acidly.

“Excuse me, sir,” the guard said breathlessly. “I was looking for Sergeant Ben’lir. I thought I saw him come in here with you.”

“He looked tired,” Ger’alin said quickly and arrogantly, “I sent him back to the Arcatraz to get some rest. He’s no use to anyone asleep on his feet. Why, a pack of spies could waltz right past him and he’d be too tired to notice.”

“Uh, of course, sir. Perhaps you could help us with the situation that’s developing then?”

“Perhaps I can,” Ger’alin agreed, rising from the desk and straightening his robes. He hated the things; he felt as if he were wearing a woman’s dress. “What seems to be the matter?”

“One of the maintenance crew bumped the matrix crystal and knocked it out of alignment,” the guard explained quickly. “The shield has thinned and vortices are opening. We’re afraid of a repeat of what happened at Ultris,” he shuddered. Ger’alin wondered what had happened at Ultris that had the other man paling and looking as if he might be ill. The Blood Knight wished he’d been able to force himself to talk with Thalodien more; then he might know what would have one of Kael’s followers nearly ready to soil himself at just a word. Following the guard into the main chamber, Ger’alin stopped, his jaw dropping in shock, as he took in the sight.

Where earlier had been an orderly array of equipment, crystals, and a gentle hum of arcane energy flowing through conduits was now a scene of chaos. Workers ran from one side of the forge to the other, twisting dials, throwing switches, and casting spells to try to stabilize

the energies leaping from the forge's main power channel. Arcane golems stood in piles of smoking rubble or ran amuck where stray bolts had struck them, overloading their delicate machinery. A lone golem had gone completely berserk, slamming its metallic fists against a control panel, its head spinning wildly. Hovering above the madness were several small portals. Pitch-black, they looked like the yawning mouths of some unspeakable monster. Magi directed most of their energy at them, trying to disperse them back into the Nether before anything could gain entry through them. Ger'alın saw that even some of his spies worked alongside Kael's forces to try to keep the portals from spawning creatures the likes of which only twisted minds could imagine.

"Can you help us?" the guard asked, pointing to the main console. Stray bolts of energy danced across it; it looked as if someone had tried to smash it. Ger'alın shook his head and sighed. Striding self-importantly over to one of his spies, he asked for a brief recount of what had happened.

"We didn't have the chance to so much as look at the main console," his fellow whispered while he focused on trying to bind the rampaging golem. Ger'alın began looking about for something he could use as a weapon. He didn't trust himself to use magic – not here in the Netherstorm – not anywhere, if he could help it! But he could use his muscles to subdue the thing. "From what I could sense, this forge was on the verge of destabilizing anyway. I say we make good our escape and let this place implode. It's going to, anyway."

"No," Ger'alın said firmly. "We cannot just leave them to die."

"They'd kill us anyway."

"I want you to begin evacuating the forge," Ger'alın said, speaking right over the man. "Get them out of here. Surround them discretely, if possible, and capture them. You should be able to separate them from their weapons easily enough before you give yourself away. Just do it!" he ordered harshly.

"What are we to do, sir?" the guard asked Ger'alın as the Blood Knight began striding purposefully around the forge.

"Give me your sword," he replied evenly.

"My sword?"

"Just do it! I need something to focus my energies on."

The guard reluctantly unsheathed his blade and, turning the hilt around, handed it to Ger'alın. The Blood Knight hefted it, letting it whirl through his hands a few times to get the feel for the blade's balance before nodding to himself. "Now, I want you to gather up everyone working here and get out of this forge. I don't believe there's anything that can be done to save it and I want everyone out of harm's reach. Don't argue with me, just go!"

"The Lady Dawnrunner would never respect us if we abandoned our posts," the guard muttered sullenly. "She certainly wouldn't..."

"The Lady Dawnrunner isn't here, man! She's back in Tempest Keep!"

"We should send word to her, then. She managed to beat back the Nether creatures once. She could do it again."

"We don't have time for that," Ger'alın snapped. "Now, quit disobeying my direct orders and get yourself and your people out of here!"

"Lady Dawnrunner wouldn't flee..." the guard said sulkily as he hurried about Ger'alın's orders.

"Lady Dawnrunner sometimes has too much courage and too little self-preservation for her own good," Ger'alın mumbled. Motioning for a few of the more skilled magi who had infiltrated with him to remain behind, he waited until the forge workers were almost all out before explaining his plan. "Do whatever it is you have to do to keep those holes from getting big enough to let anything through."

“Easier said than done, Ger’alin. Jez’ral is so much better at this than I am,” one of the mages sighed.

“Just do it, Nishi. Focus everything you have on that. I’m going to smash the machinery. Hopefully that will just bring the whole thing to a stand-still...”

“...or it could blow us all to the next life...”

“Certainly beats standing here waiting for something from the great beyond to come lop off our heads,” Ger’alin grinned. “Focus your energies. I’ll do what little I can to help out.”

Ger’alin watched as Nishi and the other three mages began focusing their concentration. Studying the rifts, he saw that their growth had halted. Still, they did not shrink. With a sigh and a quick prayer, Ger’alin closed his eyes and reached out, adding his own miniscule channeling abilities to that of the group. He jerked back from the arcane circle seconds after joining, feeling a swell of pure evil begin to emanate from one of the rifts. Hefting his sword, he ran over to the console and began hammering away at it with all of his might while the other four concentrated on containing the Nether creatures who sought entry into Outland. “Jemuya, watch it!” Nishi shouted to one of his comrades. Ger’alin turned from his destructive task to see a huge voidwalker forcing the rifts wider, forcing them to merge at their borders, as it pushed its way into the world from beyond.

“I wish Alayne were here!” he roared as he ran to engage the creature. The four mages had collapsed on the ground, clutching their heads, in agony from the exertion of trying to hold the powerful demon back. “For the Light and Quel’Thalas!” Ger’alin shouted.

“For the Light and Quel’Thalas!” a familiar voice agreed as another man ran to join in combat. “Call the others back, Ger’alin. We can’t do this alone.”

“Can we do it together?” he asked warily as he and Ben’lir hacked away at the creature.

“Yes! Let us set aside our differences for this battle and then we’ll decide whether or not to fight over our loyalties,” the man growled. “Watch it!”

“I have been in combat before,” Ger’alin muttered as he dodged one of the creature’s massive fists. “Everyone, back in!” he hollered, his words echoing back and forth in the cavernous manaforge. Within moments that stretched like hours, all of the others were back in the forge. Knights loyal to Kael surrounded the creature, hacking away at the nethery being with their swords. The one who had loaned his blade to Ger’alin slammed the creature with his shield. Spells of ice, fire, shadow, and Light flew from the fingers of friend and foe alike, exploding into the demon with a vengeance. Ger’alin reached out to the Light and hurled its condemnation upon the perversion of existence, feeling a joy that began to surpass that he had experienced under Illidan’s ministrations. Before he was aware of it, the creature imploded, the shockwave throwing the fighters across the forge. Ger’alin slid across the cold ground, his head thudding against a wall, dazed. Long moments he lay on his back, gathering himself to stand, wondering if another battle was about to begin.

When he managed to pull himself to his feet, he was surprised to see the elves with Ben’lir setting their weapons down and holding their hands up. His own followers quickly surrounded them, kicking the weapons out of their reach for safety and eyeing the elves loyal to Kael warily. “The Lady Dawnrunner would be most upset if we killed her husband,” Ben’lir said loudly, drawing gasps of surprise from those with him. They had thought the gesture one meant to cement their loyalty to Kael, by showing they would surrender even to strangers if he demanded it. Only Ben’lir had known the truth. Seeing the ones he thought traitors reach out to the Light showed him just how far into shadow they had fallen. “I once swore an oath to serve the Light and the Alliance, many years ago, when first the orcs came into our world and shattered it with their war-mongering. Through countless battles, I followed our king, never questioning his decisions or his wisdom. But now...now prince

Kael'Thas has joined us with the Legion. Now I remember my first oaths and remember what it was to serve a just cause instead of a desperate one. Strike me down if you must; if you feel your oaths to the Sunstrider out-weigh your oaths to do what is right.”

Several of Ben'lir's comrades balled their fists and began striking the man, screaming that he was a traitor, that he had handed them to Voren'thal. Ben'lir made no move to defend himself, accepting the blows as if they were only his due. Ger'alín gaped, watching, dumbstruck, for several minutes before he waded into the melee, laying about him with the flat of his borrowed blade, knocking most of the fighters out. Those who had chosen not to pummel Ben'lir still eyed him warily, suspiciously. Ger'alín sighed. “At any rate, you are all going to return to Area 52 with us. Come along peacefully and I swear no harm will come to you. That's more than I could expect were the situations reversed. And, someone heal them,” he muttered, gesturing to those he'd knocked out as well as to the bruised and battered Ben'lir. “I've a feeling Thalodien will want to speak with you,” he said to the man who had surrendered peacefully.

“Thalodien will probably want my hide for a rug,” Ben'lir grinned ruefully. “I should have known he and the other with him were spies. He tried several times to turn me against King Sunstrider.”

“Kael.”

“No. Though he may be turning to evil out of desperation, though he may be leading us all to the path of destruction, though he may be doomed, he is still our rightful king and leader and worthy of our respect, however misguided he may be.”

Ger'alín sighed and nodded. There was no use arguing with the man; if he wanted to believe Kael'Thas merely misguided, let him. The truth would come out eventually. “It always does,” Ger'alín muttered to himself. “Even when it hurts like the devil.”

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Thalodien barely managed to hide his shock when Ger'alín led his group back to Area 52. Gathered inside a ring of members of the Disorder of Azeroth were the forge workers. A slump-shouldered Ben'lir walked at their fore, smiling sadly when he spotted the spymaster. “I should have known you weren't loyal,” he called out cheerfully.

“I am loyal. Loyal to the Light above all,” Thalodien said, doing his best to ignore Ger'alín. “I don't see the infamous Lady Dawnrunner among this number. Did you let her escape?”

“I never laid eyes on her,” Ger'alín said defensively.

“Sure,” Thalodien snorted.

“Lady Dawnrunner was recalled to Tempest Keep some days ago. She's not been back to the forge since. I think she may have been sent back to Azeroth for the rebirth of the Sunwell,” Ben'lir said airily. His fellow prisoners eyed him stonily. “She is one of the most adept magi I have ever been privileged to work alongside. She may be young enough to be my daughter, but she is one of the best alive. She could easily pass for a Magister were she older. In raw talent alone, at least, though Telonicus and King Sunstrider did take it upon themselves to expand upon her spotty education.” Thalodien's eyes widened in shock. He'd known that Alayne was respected. Still, he'd always believed it had been more because Kael was forced to scrape the bottom of the barrel than because the girl had any true skill. “She could channel a flow that would have most men insensible on the floor, moaning in mindless, gibbering ecstasy,” Ben'lir continued. “She pushes herself harder than anyone else. What she calls 'hard,' others would call 'murderous' or 'suicidal.' She's good, Thalodien. That shield she designed and put in place? You'll have a hell of a time bringing it down.”

“I think we’ve rather done that,” Thalodien grinned smugly. “Duro is offline, B’naar is in rubble, Coruu is burning as we speak. Only the group sent after Ara hasn’t reported back yet and they have quite a ways to come.”

“Please be well,” Ger’alin prayed. “Dar’ja and Alayne will both kill me if anything happens to you, Zerith.”

“Gather them in,” Thalodien said loudly, gesturing for the goblin mercenaries he’d hired as guards to surround the elves loyal to Kael. “I want you to see them back to Shattrath. Tell Voren’tal they are to be held and questioned before their executions.”

“They are our prisoners,” Ger’alin said flatly. “We took them, we decide their fate.”

“Preposterous!” Thalodien snorted. The Disorder of Azeroth, following Ger’alin’s lead, began to unsling their weapons, readying themselves for a brawl. Ger’alin began towering over the older man, tensing his muscles so tightly that the seams of his disguise began to give way under the strain. Fury painted the fighter’s face an ugly red. His aquamarine eyes, tinted more strongly green than they had been in days, blazed. The goblin mercenaries began standing down, knowing themselves outnumbered and not being paid well enough to deal with fighting off one of the three largest armies in Outland.

“I said they are our prisoners and we will decide their fate. Do you want us to decide *your* fate while we’re at it, Thalodien?” Ger’alin spat. “Because I’m in just the mood to do it!”

“And what is your decision then, O Wise Leader of the Disorder of Azeroth?”

“They will be escorted to Shattrath,” Ger’alin said, his breath coming in angry gasps between clenched teeth. “They will be imprisoned until the war is over. They may be questioned but they will not be put to the question. Neither will they be executed. The same will go for any prisoners we take. They will live to stand trial at the war’s end and answer for their crimes. A tribunal led by representatives from all the races fighting them as well as men and women dedicated to service to the Light will decide the price they must pay. If that price is their lives, so be it. But they *will* be given the chance to explain, repent, and redeem themselves. This I vow under the Light and by my oaths to my wife,” he finished, his voice barely loud enough to be heard even by those closest to him.

“And my fate?” Thalodien said blankly.

“Your fate?” Ger’alin blinked. “Oh, yes,” he chuckled. Lifting a meaty hand, he clapped it on Thalodien’s shoulder hard enough to stagger the older man. Pulling him in close, Ger’alin’s grin widened until it was all teeth. “Your fate will be for me to do to your arms what I did to the windowsill last night if you ever, ever disrespect me in front of my followers and my prisoners again. Do you think Voren’tal would stand for his commander to be dressed down like a child? I didn’t think so. So, from now on, you’re going to be as nice as you can be and I’ll let you off. Insinuate that I’m a traitor, speak out against my wife once more, or do anything that makes it look as if the Disorder of Azeroth is a pack of your *minions* instead of your *allies*...,” he trailed off, leaving the threat unspoken. “However, if you do apologize, I will forgive you. Unlike you,” he sighed, “I don’t hold grudges any longer.”

“Very well then,” Thalodien said sourly. “I won’t make you look a fool in front of your *followers*. However, if you think I’m going to take a *child* into my... I suggest you and your followers get some rest while you can. Once the shield is completely down, we’re going to march on Tempest Keep. For your sake, I hope your wife surrenders peacefully.”

“You leave her to me,” Ger’alin said harshly. “If I find her, all will be well. All *will* be well.”

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Zerith sighed and washed his face again. He could still feel the electricity dancing across his skin. Glancing into the mirror, he groaned and leaned over the basin. Pouring the entire vase of water over his head, he hoped that would get his hair to lay back flat again. Shaking the excess water out of his hair and trying not to berate himself more than he needed to over that foolish stunt, he reached for a towel, knowing he wouldn't be able to rest much with his hair dripping onto his robes.

"Come in!" he shouted when he heard a tapping at his door. Ger'alın ducked his head into the room, glancing around and looking surprised when he saw a soaking wet Zerith standing before the wash basin and mirror.

"What in the Light?"

"I was the only one who could or would get close to the console," Zerith explained, plucking at the burnt fabric and the holes in the chest of his robes. "The others had their hands full fighting the forge workers off. Then the forge master showed up and we had quite a predicament on our hands. I wound up just bashing the thing in with my hands. I tore the cover off and reached in, pulling out whatever I could. Sparks and lightning bolts arced all over the place. For a while after, I couldn't see anything except this bright flash of light that exploded in my face."

"You're lucky to be alive after that!" Ger'alın gasped.

"I'm lucky that Grognak was nearby to heal me. My arms were black to the shoulders from that stunt. Did you find her?"

"No," Ger'alın said slowly. "She was called back to Tempest Keep. She may even be back in our homeland already. Ben'lir, one of the guards we took prisoner, seems to think that Kael knows just how valuable she is. Thalodien has finally conceded that maybe, just maybe, someone her age could be that talented and dedicated. If he'll ever get over his view that anyone under the age of fifty is nothing more than a suckling babe, he might actually learn a lot about sin'dorei as opposed to the quel'dorei we used to be."

"He getting on your nerves, too?" Zerith grinned. "Har'lon was much more laid back even though he still honestly believes we shouldn't be out without guardians."

"Either he'll come around or he won't. I shouldn't let it bother me," Ger'alın sighed. "We're supposed to attack the Keep in a few hours," he started to say.

"I know. Thalodien said he wanted to hear back from his scouts that the shield was down before he sent us on. We've got about three hours to rest. I'm planning to use them," the priest said pointedly. "You should as well. Get some sleep."

"I can't," Ger'alın muttered. "Every time I close my eyes, I see..."

"Enough. I've heard enough about dreams to last me a life-time," Zerith sighed irritably. "Here, you take this blanket and pillow and just lay down here," he pointed to a space near the bed. "I'm going to take a nap myself. Maybe listening to me snore will chase those dreams off and let you get a little rest."

"Fair enough, Zerith," Ger'alın sighed, taking the offered pillow and blanket and tossing them on the floor. Laying down, he pulled the blanket up to his shoulder and closed his eyes, willing himself to see nothing but the darkness behind his eyelids.

The priest tiptoed over to the basin and squeezed the last of the water out of his hair. Stepping quietly back to the bed, he lay on his side, watching Ger'alın's chest rise and fall as the man drew in the deep, even breaths of sleep. Yawning, Zerith found himself breathing in time with the other man, his eyelids growing heavy as he drifted off, wondering just where his sister was and what she was doing.

Alayne stood, teetering on the edge of a cliff, a heavy weight pressing against her, threatening to push her over. With all her might, she struggled to hold it up, to keep the heavy burden held high. Sweat streamed down her face and her whole body shuddered with the effort. Zerith's heart began pounding in fear and concern. Racing to her, he tried to pull her away from the edge, tried to put his body between hers and certain death. She smiled sadly at him, shaking her head, as if to say that it was no use; that he could not help her. Still, he tried, creeping gingerly along the edge, trying to force her back to safety without crushing her between his body and the massive weight she was trying to support. Snaking his arms around her, he placed his hands against the weight, pushing with all of his might. Soon he was shaking, his heart pounding with the effort. Then, he felt more than heard her gasp. Glancing up, his vision blurry from strain, he saw Ger'alain appear before them. The Blood Knight's face was a mask of fear. He reached out to his wife, pleading with her to come to him. He didn't seem to see Zerith standing behind her, offering his support to his sister. "Go on," he whispered in her ear. "I'll hold this for you a little longer."

"No. It was...I...for nothing," she murmured sadly, letting her arms go slack with shock as she stared at Ger'alain. Zerith redoubled his efforts to keep the weight away from her, away from them. Without her straining to help him, it began to roll back, shoving them both over the edge. "For nothing," Alayne sighed sadly as the pair of them tumbled into oblivion.

The next thing the priest knew, he was floating high above the ground, looking down on his lifeless body laying near where Ger'alain crouched, holding Alayne. His sister's dagger was buried in his chest and a look of confused pleading was frozen on his face as his death mask. Ger'alain was weeping brokenly, rocking Alayne as he wailed. Zerith could see the ugly wound that had been her death; looking to the mace still gripped in his dead hand, he could see the cause. "What...but I wouldn't...would I? Ger'alain, look out!" he screamed, seeing a massive black and red fist moving quickly to smash the man flat. "For the love of the Light, if we're dead, don't join us! Live!"

Ger'alain moved as if he had heard the priest, throwing himself to the side while still cradling his wife's body in his arms. Setting her gently to one side, taking a moment to smooth her hair and hide the awful dent in the back of her skull, Ger'alain unsheathed his sword, pulled his shield in front of him, and began to advance on the demonic entity rearing up from a pool of pure Light. Zerith couldn't hear the man's battlecry as he began to drift away, light and Light suffusing him while the priest still wondered just what had happened...

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Zerith sat bolt upright in the bed, clutching his chest, his breath coming in heaving gasps. On the floor, Ger'alain was curled up on his side, staring sightlessly ahead, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Not again," the Blood Knight muttered again and again. "Light, please," he begged, "please stop sending me these dreams. Are you trying to tell me that nothing can be done to save her?"

"Dream? A dream where Alayne and I die in a room with red carpeting and a pool of Light?" Zerith asked. Ger'alain nodded blankly. "Ger'alain, could you please keep your dreams to yourself?" he asked angrily as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I do not need your dreams crowding my own out. I rather like my silly dreams about chasing a kitten the size of a horse through a dwarven village. If I have another one of your dreams, I'm going to study alchemy and find a potion that will let me go the rest of my life without sleeping!"

"If you think just once was bad," the Blood Knight muttered sullenly. Rubbing a hand over his eyes, he rolled on his back and grimaced. "If you think once was bad, try having that dream every night since I've been healed!"

“I would never harm my sister. I would never raise a hand to hurt Alayne any more than I would have raised one to Valara. I could barely make myself punish Valara when she needed it as a toddler and I was set to watch her. I feel almost as strongly about Alayne as I did about my baby sister. I would not hurt her!”

“Something is going to make you.”

“‘Something’ can go to the Nether and rot for all of me,” Zerith swore. “I wouldn’t do it! I would never do that!”

“Now you see why I don’t want you to...”

“I see why you think that,” Zerith cut in abruptly. “But it was just a dream, Ger’alin. A dream. It doesn’t mean it’s a portent of what is to come. It’s not a prophecy. It’s a dream.”

“Then why did both of us just have it?”

“Light alone knows,” the priest admitted tiredly. “Maybe because we’re both thinking of her, both knowing that we could be fighting her again in a few hours. Maybe that’s why.”

“Maybe,” Ger’alin echoed numbly, sounding as if he did not believe it but were trying to force himself to entertain the notion. “Maybe. Speaking of which, I guess we should be...”

“Rise and shine, my young generals!” Thalodien said as he banged on the door loudly. “It’s time to put an end to Kael’s machinations once and for all!”

As the pair dragged themselves to their feet and began a hasty wash before they had to muster their forces, Zerith sighed. “When this is all over, I’m going to hit him over the head with my shoe.”

“If you can get to him before I put my fist through that smug, arrogant grin he wears, feel free to do so,” Ger’alin grinned. “Come on, now. We need to wash up and wake up. Battle. And...if you see her, Zerith...”

“If I see her, I’ll keep my distance,” the priest promised wearily. “Light alone knows why, though, because I would never, not in a million lifetimes...I would never hurt my sister.”

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Ger’alin’s heart pounded in his ears, shoving blood through his temples, neck, face, and chest as quickly as it could. His hands were cold and clammy and his legs felt watery. Gazing up at the crystalline structure floating high above the ground, his breath came in short gasps of excited anticipation and anxiety. Soon, he may be reunited with his wife. Soon, he may be cradling her corpse in his arms while he demanded to know why she had died. Soon, one way or another, it would come to a head. Beneath a shattered, broken sky, he stood praying that the end he feared would not come to pass.

“No turning back now,” Thalodien was saying as he paced nervously in front of Zerith and Ger’alin. The three men, plus Ben’lir, stood apart from their forces, studying the massive structure. “They’ll have seen us coming from miles away regardless of how we hid ourselves. You can see clear to Blade’s Edge from parts of Tempest Keep. Kael knows the shield is down; he’ll be ready for an attack.”

“Then we had best be ready to give him one,” Ger’alin said tonelessly. Light, *how many forces could be hidden in that thing?* he wondered to himself. *Can troops move from one structure to another easily? Surely a magician as powerful as Kael would have seen to that before spreading his followers across four floating vessels. If he hadn’t, Alayne certainly would have. She’s paid far too much attention to me not to see something **that** obvious.*

“Worried about your wife?” Thalodien asked solicitously. Far too solicitously for Ger’alin’s taste. The Blood Knight favored the spymaster with a look that would have peeled paint off a wall. “I have...requested that she be captured and imprisoned instead of killed outright,” the spymaster continued, paling as Ger’alin’s face grew darker. “Light, man, don’t

lose your temper at me before the fight starts. I'm just telling you; I've done all I can. Don't blame me if she gets caught in the crossfire."

"I won't," Ger'alın said tersely before returning to his study of the vessel. "What do you think, Zerith?"

"He's right. Kael has to know we're coming. He's probably got a good idea of what our numbers are and, for the sake of our lives, we'd best assume Alayne told him everything about the tactics we favor."

"So, do we go with an unorthodox – well, unorthodox for us – plan?" Ger'alın asked.

"No. We do what we would normally do and just try to do it much faster. We need to press them back as far and as fast as we can. Let's not give them time to rout us. Strike hard, strike fast, and don't let them up. I'm afraid it will mean we will be going for a kill with every strike, Ger'alın but..."

"Just stay back with the healers!" he growled.

"I will. And you make certain you don't get yourself hurt. She'll never forgive me if I let something happen to you."

"I'm not planning to let anything happen to me. Or to her. Or to you. Dar'ja would skin me and I'd help her salt my hide if anything happened to either of you. Just...if you see a room with..."

"...red carpeting and a pool of Light, don't go in. I think I can handle that," Zerith sighed. "I even left my mace behind in Area 52, Ger'alın. I will *not* harm my sister."

"Just...let's get on with it," Ger'alın sighed. "Beneath this broken sky with its shattered sun...let these dreams be done with, once and for all."

As Zerith and Ger'alın turned back to begin explaining the last changes to their attack plan to the Disorder of Azeroth, Thalodien watched them thoughtfully. "Shattered sun," he muttered, something about the words ringing a chord within him. "We will shatter Kael's sun and put an end to his madness. I just hope your child-wife doesn't cause too many problems and that you can be subdued when the time comes for her head to hang from the bridge for the traitor she is."

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"It's quiet," Ger'alın whispered as he and the others crept through the crystal palace. "It's too quiet. Where are all of the guards? The manaforges were more heavily guarded than this!"

"Let's just see how far we can get before we're attacked, shall we?" Callie muttered to him in an undertone. "Honestly, though, you're right. It's so...quiet. It's deader than a graveyard in here."

The group of two dozen or so pressed onward as quietly as they could. Their footfalls seemed to echo in the cavernous hallways. Ger'alın winced at every jingle of armor or clank of a weapon, certain that their enemy lay in wait for them just at the next bend. When the next bend revealed yet another empty corridor, Ger'alın's sense of apprehension increased. "Where is everyone?" he wondered aloud for the thirtieth time.

"I don't know," Callie whispered her customary answer. "I feel like..."

"...like we're back in that floating ziggurat?" Ger'alın asked. The rogue nodded. "So do I. Light knows I hope we'll run across her and she'll switch sides back to us as she did last time."

"What are you two whispering about?" Zerith muttered, striding up to the front of the group. "We've not seen sign of anyone since we snuck in here, Ger'alın. If I hear anything, I'll run right back to the healers in the rear guard. You can stop glaring at me now."

“Halt there!” someone shouted. Ger’alin heaved a sigh of relief; there was someone in the vessel after all. “Guards! Guards!” he shouted, calling for reinforcements.

“After him, quickly!” Ger’alin ordered. “Zerith, you...”

“...get back with the healers, I know!” the priest shouted over his shoulder as he jogged back to gather in his group.

The fighters quickly readied their weapons, archers drawing back their bows and firing on the lone guard who had spotted them. His body hit the ground with a sickly wet thud just as Ger’alin and Callie reached him. Kneeling down but keeping his sword and shield ready, Ger’alin glanced back up the corridor, watching, waiting for more enemies to come while he felt for a pulse on the man’s neck.

“He’s gone, Gerry,” Callie said quickly, eyeing the corpse. “He was dead before he hit the ground. However, his friends are very much alive and well,” she growled as a group of several dozen guards began pouring out of the doors ahead.

“Come on!” he hissed as he pushed himself back to his feet and ran to meet them. The familiar song of steel ringing against steel calmed the Blood Knight. The fear that he was being watched, that he was being led into a trap, vanished as he vented his anxiety in combat. Battering aside the shields of his misguided brothers, Ger’alin sought to take as many of Kael’s followers out of the fight as he could without killing them all. He’d given no special instructions to make attempts to spare those in the Keep; it was a task he’d set for himself. “As I was forgiven for something I despise myself for doing, so will you be given that chance should you ever awaken from the madness that has gripped you,” he promised to each fighter he managed to render unconscious. Those he was forced to kill received a quick prayer for their souls and the hope that they would find redemption on the other side of life’s veil.

“For the Lady Dawnrunner!” one man roared as he ran into the hallway. Ger’alin gave a start and began looking around frantically, searching for sign of his wife.

“Alayne?” he shouted. “Alayne?!”

“For the Lady Dawnrunner and House Sunstrider!” the man screamed as he hefted a gigantic sword. Ger’alin shuddered when the crowd parted, giving him a clear view of the shouting elf. The Blood Knight’s stomach threatened to empty itself then and there. The man bearing down on them all, a look of absolute hatred etched on his face, was clearly one of the felblood elves. His engorged, swollen features looked twisted and un-naturally large on a delicate frame. His eyes blazed with a perverse fire as he ran at his enemies. His long black hair flowed out behind him, streaming in his wake, making Ger’alin think of black stinger serpents who lay hidden beneath murky waters, waiting to bite an unwary swimmer.

“For Alayne Sunrage!” Ger’alin yelled at the top of his lungs as he ran to meet the attacker. The other man blinked, hesitating for just a moment before continuing to press his advance. That split second of hesitation was all Ger’alin needed. He reached the man, battering aside his ferocious attack, deflecting him away from the others with his shield while knocking his legs out from under him with his sword. The felblood leapt back to his feet faster than Ger’alin believed possible and whirled on the Blood Knight. A sickly grin of delight stretched his lips into a rictus grin. Ger’alin felt butterflies hammering the pit of his stomach with ticklishly leaden wings as he forced himself to fight the felblood. “Light cleanse away the demonic taint from this man,” he prayed as he fought. Whenever the Light’s energy would surge through Ger’alin, purging the other man of his ill-gotten powers, the other man would roar defiantly and reach out, pulling demonic energies into himself the way Ger’alin and the other sin’dorei sought out sustaining magical energies. As the duel wore on, the felblood began drawing in more and more energies, draining even the enslaved demons commanded by the few warlocks in the Disorder of Azeroth. Still, Ger’alin continued to pray, to call upon the Light to cleanse his opponent and deny him the strength and stamina needed to outlast the younger, more determined Blood Knight. The other fighters formed a ring

around them, watching for yet more guards to come spilling out of the rooms. For long moments, Ger'alín and his opponent fought before, at last, shivering with fatigue, the other fighter collapsed to the floor, transforming from felblood into Wretched in the blink of an eye. "Damn you," he hissed at Ger'alín. "Damn you! Vangri will have your head yet, young whelp!"

"That is neither here nor there," Ger'alín muttered blankly as he stared at the man in wonder. *Did I look that horrible? No wonder she was terrified of me!* "Someone tie up the survivors, quickly! We may be fighting their friends any second now."

The Disorder of Azeroth fell to work, hastily binding the arms, legs, and mouths of those elves still living. The dead, they set to the side. Perhaps when all was said and done, there would be time for funeral rites, Ger'alín thought to himself as he followed his own orders. "We'll pray for the dead later, Ger'alín," Zerith muttered as he hefted a particularly large felblood onto his stomach to bind his hands and feet together in the small of his back. "For now, let's get on with it. I don't like that we're not being attacked. It feels like we're walking into a trap."

Ger'alín nodded absently as he stood up and began to walk ahead of the others. It did feel as if it were a trap.

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"Hurry, hurry," Kael'Thas urged the last of his forces through the portals they had hastily opened. "Our plans must not be thwarted! We will regather and regroup at the Sunwell and, once it is ours again, we will take over all of Azeroth and Outland! Hurry!"

Soldiers and magi ran through the portal, not even taking the customary time to orient themselves before walking the corridors of magic. Peering through the hazy window into the sun-drenched realm, the lord of the sin'dorei could see his followers swaying unsteadily on their feet, some even sicking up from their hurried run along the paths of chaos. "This is but a minor set-back," he promised them as the last one ran through. "Our people will emerge, glorious and victorious, as the Master has promised us!"

"My king, you should step through now," Telonicus urged Kael'Thas. "We will be lost without your leadership."

"Fear not, Telonicus," Kael'Thas said brightly, "first, I am going to send Voren'thal's whelps running back to him with their tails tucked between their legs. For far too long I have stood patient, not acting, not responding to his rebellion aside from a few minor skirmishes. No doubt he thinks me weak, soft, complacent. That will never do. I will show him the error of his ways using the powers the Master has granted me."

"And I will stand at your side, my liege," Telonicus said. The few remaining sin'dorei echoed his sentiment. Kael'Thas smiled at them, his smile a mixture of sadness and delight. "Sanguinar, Thaladred, Capernian, Solarian, you have my eternal gratitude. Your service to House Sunstrider will never be forgotten. Long may your examples shine brightly, lighting the way for our people. Now, let us take care of those who would press their rightful king's mercy too far."

"As you will," Solarian grinned. A commotion at the door turned all of their heads.

"Just a little more!" a man was saying, his voice tight with strain as the heavy doors slowly pushed open.

"A trap," another man muttered, his soft whisper carrying across the suddenly silent room. "I knew this was a trap, Ger'alín."

"Greetings my loyal subjects," Kael'Thas sneered, his voice both regal and sarcastic. The sin'dorei who were pushing through the doors stopped and stared at him. He could see that most of them were mere children. Likely as not, they had never laid eyes on their ruler

before this moment. Pity and sorrow welled in the sin'dorei king's heart as he gazed out upon the rebellious children. Anger surged through his veins as he thought of how cruelly Voren'thal was using such young ones. Sending those barely out of adolescence to attack their rightful king? That was surely a sign that Voren'thal was more than merely misguided; he and the naaru would lead them down a path of sure death and destruction. "And greetings to the rest of you," he added, bowing majestically to his 'guests.' With a wave of his hand, he sent a gust of wind at them, scattering them across the back of the bridge. Whenever the rabble seemed to try to regroup, Kael blew their ranks apart, trying to separate out the elves from the rest of the ruffians. He would not kill his own children if he could avoid it. "Do what you can to get the younglings out of here," he whispered to his advisors as he prepared yet another powerful gust. This one sent most of the motley crew rolling back into the hallway. Focusing his energy on each elf in turn, Kael'Thas did his best to keep them from making it back through the doors, largely succeeding. Youthful sin'dorei faces glared at him as they struggled against winds that made them bend at the waist just to stay standing.

"You see?" he laughed as he cast more spells to keep the sin'dorei out of the ranks of the Horde fighters. "Energy. Power. My people are addicted to it. Our dependence was made manifest only after the Sunwell was destroyed. Welcome to the future," he grinned, making the motions that set the weapons he'd been given in motion. The eyes of orcs, bull-men, trolls, and even the shambling corpses of unliving, undying humans, widened in shock at the display of power. "A pity you are too late to stop it. No one – not even Voren'thal and his leash-holder, A'dal – can stop me! Selama ashal'anore," he whispered, casting out a final gust of air that slammed the heavy doors shut, separating the young sin'dorei from the veteran Horde fighters.

Ger'alín could hear the cries of pain and the song of battle through the massive doors. Jogging back a pace, he ran and slammed into the door with his shoulder, grunting in satisfaction when he felt it shiver. "Come on!" he roared, gesturing for the other strong men to help him force the door open. "We can't let them fight our 'lord and king' for us, can we?"

For long moments, the sin'dorei struggled to force the doors open, cheering whenever one shivered a few inches, groaning when it fell back firmly shut. Ger'alín pounded his fists against the door in frustration when he heard agonized screams. Tears came to his eyes as he redoubled his efforts to get inside the room.

"What's going on here?" Thalodien demanded as he and the Scryer fighters ran up. "I heard the alarm from outside that the bridge had been breached."

"We got in there but Kael forced us back and now we can't get the door open!" Ger'alín explained quickly.

"A likely tale. Is your wife in there?"

"No, she's not!" Ger'alín screamed, tears of anger and frustration streaking his cheeks. "And if she were in there fighting her friends, I'd still be trying to batter this door down and stop her just as I did the first time! Now, help us!"

"Stand back," Thalodien said leadenly. "Blast it down," he ordered his magi curtly. "Throw whatever you have at it."

"Do the same," Zerith ordered the magi among the sin'dorei ranks of the Disorder of Azeroth. "Bring it down."

Ger'alín stood tensed, on the balls of his feet, rocking while the magi worked to bring the doors down. Every time he heard another cry of pain from the bridge, he winced, urging the magic users to work faster, to strike harder. He wished he could aid them without getting in their way but held himself to the side, knowing that all he would do is get himself hurt. At long last, the doors shivered, splitting apart, allowing the sin'dorei youths and veterans to burst into the room. They were not a moment too soon.

Inside the bridge, facing down the fel, fey lord of the sin'dorei, Callie muttered a quick prayer to the Light as she dove under the guard of a hulking blood elf warrior. The man roared in fury and she grinned. Like most fighters, he was slow compared to her lightning speed. Her grin slid off her face when she found herself on the floor at the fighter's feet, her back still stinging from the shadow bolt that had slammed her to the ground. As she tried to push herself back up, she felt a boot on her spine, the weight just short of that needed to crush her rib-cage. Grunting, she tried to roll out from under the foot pinning her. "Ah well," she sighed, giving up the futile struggle. Around the room, members of the Disorder of Azeroth lay where they had fallen. Only a few dozen remained standing and they would not last much longer. "I had a good run. Dying wasn't so terrible the first time. It'll be easier this time; I have experience, after all."

Just as she closed her eyes, hoping she would be reunited with her parents and friends on the other side, she felt the room shiver and heard a loud explosion. An angry roar sailed past her and she felt the weight vanish from her back. Scrambling to her feet, she grinned, seeing Ger'alín pulling his sword out of the man's throat. "Thanks, Gerry!" she shouted as she rushed back into the fray.

"Yeah, no problem," he muttered, running after her and doing his best to help bring down the sin'dorei nobles who fought alongside Kael. Whatever reticence they had had earlier about fighting their own young had vanished. "For the Light and Quel'Thalas!" Ger'alín roared, rallying his forces to finish the fight.

"For the naaru and the Light!" Thalodien echoed with his own warcry.

"The naaru? The naaru?" Kael'Thas laughed. "They will never stand against the might of the Legion! And the Light?" he spat. "The Light has abandoned our people!"

"No, my lord," Ger'alín said coldly, his latest attack bringing him just in front of Kael'Thas. "Our people abandoned the Light. You can still turn back. You can still stop this madness. You don't have to..."

"Turn back?" Kael'Thas sneered. "I have not come this far to be turned back! The future I have planned will not be jeopardized! Now, you will taste *true* power!"

Ger'alín and the others barely had time to gape before Kael'Thas hovered high over them, dark energy surrounding him, shattering the crystal window behind him. All of the fighters struggled to stand their ground when the vacuum began pulling everything in the room towards the shattered window. Elves and trolls winced in pain as their ears popped from the sudden change in pressure. Casting glances left and right, Ger'alín shook his head, trying to clear the sudden ringing in his ears, praying he would be able to hear and be heard. Just as the sucking vortex let up, the entire force found themselves suspended in the air. "Having trouble staying grounded?" Kael laughed as he prepared to hurl a fiery bolt at his attackers.

Ger'alín's stomach lurched and his knees shook when he hit the ground. All around him, he could hear loud groans of pain as the Scryers and the Disorder of Azeroth fell back to earth. Kael stared at them in shock; clearly he had not let them drop. Risking a quick look behind him, Ger'alín could see Zerith, his eyes closed, praying with all of his might for the Light to aid and protect them against the magic of a madman. "Attack!" Ger'alín roared, "bring him down!" Doing his best to dodge the bolts of flame and shadow that flew from Kael's hands, Ger'alín scrambled about, wondering what to do next.

Uncertain as to whether the others had heard him, Ger'alín began looking about for anything he could hurl at his erstwhile ruler. Other fighters did the same while archers let loose with bows and guns and magi hurled spells that scorched the air, froze it, or made it sing with arcane power. Warlocks reached into the Nether and hurled its energy at Kael, fighting his shadow with shadow of their own. When Ger'alín's arms shook with the effort of flinging debris at Kael, the lord of the blood elves tumbled to the ground, still staring at his attackers in shock and outrage.

“For the Light!” Ger’alin screamed as he ran in before Kael had a chance to gather himself and call upon his powers once more. The leader of House Sunstrider stared at the paladin in stupefaction, his regally stunned gaze drifting downward to the sword buried in his chest. His finely woven and intricately sewn robes were hung in tatters from the spells that had forced him back to the floor.

“For... Quel... Thalas!” Kael gasped as he shuddered and fell limp. Ger’alin wrenched his blade out of his king’s chest, bending to clean the blood on the dead prince’s torn robes. Kneeling beside him, Ger’alin gently pulled his staring eyes closed and whispered a quick prayer for his fallen leader’s soul.

“Now to find the others,” Ger’alin said loudly, still unable to hear himself speak.

“What about him?” Thalodien asked in the same tone.

“Leave him. Let the dead rest; let’s go seek out the living,” Ger’alin ordered in a tone that brooked no argument. “Come on.”

As the fighters began to make their way out of the room, many cast glances over their shoulders, unable to believe they had just killed one of the most powerful mortals in Outland. Before he turned down his dark path, Kael’Thas had been a legend even among the other races. Seeing his corpse on the floor, blood draining from the mortal wound on his chest, they shivered, in fear and awe of their own strength. Ger’alin and Zerith were the last to leave the room. The priest was on the verge of tears. “Light, I can’t believe...I know he had turned to the Legion...I know he had to be stopped...but...we can never go home...we’re...”

“Home is where ever we are,” Ger’alin said softly, hoping the priest could hear him or could at least read his lips. “And...I can’t believe it either. It was one thing to talk about it, to know he had to be stopped. It’s another to actually be the ones who stopped him. Why us, Zerith? Why do we keep getting mixed up in these things?” he asked plantitively.

“The Light never gives us more than we can bear,” the priest responded numbly, as if by rote.

“Then it’s damned sad that we’re the only ones who seem to be able to bear this,” Ger’alin sighed. “Come on. Let’s search the rest of this vessel and find Alayne. Remember, you should...”

“...stay in the back, I know,” Zerith finished tonelessly. Ger’alin strode ahead of him, his steps sure and purposeful. The priest ventured a final gaze at his fallen leader before following after the Blood Knight.