

Ger'alın's head hung nearly to his stomach as he trudged slowly out of Tempest Keep. It was all he could do to lift his leaden feet and place one foot in front of the other. Callie patted him on the back sympathetically and Zerith, still shaken from the fight with Kael'Thas, murmured useless words of condolence. Even Thalodien tried to lift the fighter out of his funk. But their efforts were to no avail. Ger'alın's heart felt heavy in his chest as he slunk along the path back to Area 52.

"We'll find her," Callie promised. "It's probably best that she wasn't in Tempest Keep. She might have gotten hurt in the fighting had she been."

"Where is she? Where would the rest of them be?" Ger'alın asked bleakly. "I can't believe...all this way...all of that...for nothing?"

Zerith gave a start. His friend's last words echoed far too closely what he had heard in that strange dream they had shared. "We'll find her. I don't know where Kael's forces may have hidden themselves, but, we'll find them. Maybe now that Kael is dead, they'll be more amendable to surrendering. At least we have put an end to his plot to summon the Legion into our world," Zerith said, trying to sound relieved but still stunned that it was over. "At least we've done that much."

"The Legion take Quel'Thalas!" Ger'alın snarled. "Let it all burn and let the Scourge overrun the gates but just let us find her and keep her safe! Let my dreams give me some comfort instead of constant torment!"

"Don't speak so rashly, young man," Thalodien snapped. "The Legion has suffered a setback with the loss of Kael'Thas but there are ever fools willing to do their bidding and bring destruction down on all. Who knows but that these dreams you keep gibbering about are a warning that your wife has gotten mixed in with such as those and may be working, whether she knows it or not, towards the very end you just proclaimed: the Legion taking Quel'Thalas?"

"Where are we going now?" Ger'alın asked, changing the subject.

"We should return to Shattrath with news of Kael's demise," Thalodien replied. Zerith nodded in agreement. "A'dal will be most pleased to hear that the Legion is no longer our most immediate threat."

"Indeed," Zerith said softly, still unable to get his mind around the idea. "And, perhaps he will had advice for us on how we can locate and reach out to our wayward brethren."

"You do realize that, for all your fine words, they will still all stand trial and likely be executed for their part in this insanity?"

"I will not stand idly by while..." Ger'alın growled.

"Those who deserve death will receive it if the Light so wills," Zerith cut in quickly, forestalling a fight. "Those who merit mercy will receive that. No, hear me, Thalodien. Stop staring down your nose at me just because I'm young enough to be your son and *listen*. You, too, Ger'alın. Many of those among our brothers following Kael do deserve to be put to death for their crimes. However, many of them do not. Unless you have the wisdom to tell me which belong to each group, we will err on the side of mercy and imprison them. Can you tell me, before the Light and your own soul, that you have such wisdom, Thalodien? That Voren'thal has it? A'dal? I confess freely that I do *not* possess that knowledge. Therefore, I will only kill those who force my hand."

"Where do they find you?" Thalodien said with a mirthless grin. "Tell me, young man, are so many your age as thoughtful and clear-headed as you are?"

"You'd be surprised," Ger'alın said quietly. "Us 'children' who have seen war and death, seen or heard our parents slaughtered by the Scourge, buried them, buried our brothers and sisters who succumbed to their addictions, watched friends and new family fall into the ranks of the Wretched...well, your 'children' might just surprise you with how old we can feel," he sighed wearily. "You two continue whatever discussion you feel you must have. I'm

going on to Shattrath and sleep. Light send me no dreams this night,” he prayed frantically as he strode away. “Otherwise, I may never sleep again.”

“I would offer to find him a keg of ale and let him get roaring drunk,” Callie muttered as she watched him slump away. “However, the last time I did that, it caused no end of trouble. At least Ta’sia is far away,” she grinned. “Though, really, that isn’t funny anymore. Zerith, when we finally find Alayne, I am going to torment her with pranks for the rest of her life.”

“Just leave Dar’ja and I out of it and we’ll be more than happy to help you,” Zerith grinned. “Now, come on. We’ve got a long journey back to Shattrath and I want to have a long talk with my new friend Thalodien here,” he said, clapping the man on the shoulder, “about where he thinks the elves from Tempest Keep may be hiding and how they could be approached without starting a civil war.”

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“I must not give in to despair,” Ger’alin reminded himself as he rode along the cobblestone pathways through Zangarmarsh. In the four days since the battle of Tempest Keep, it had been all he could do to remain calm and even-tempered. The day before, when they had found a set of Alayne’s robes and a wood-carving he’d made for her during her illness, Ger’alin had thought his heart would break from the strain of not being with her. “I do no good to myself or to her if I curl up in a ball and sulk. I have to find her. I have to! Oh, Light, Alayne, why do you do this? Why did I ever force you away? No, stop,” he told himself firmly. “You know what you did and you know what you must do to make it right. No more gibbering over it. You can weep in thankfulness and remorse when she’s back in your arms again. Not before!”

“How much longer do you think it will be before he explodes?” Zerith asked Callie in an undertone. Everyone had been giving the fighter wide berth since leaving Tempest Keep. Callie shrugged helplessly.

“Six months ago, I’d have said he would already be curled up under his blankets refusing to get up. That he’s riding and sitting up fairly straight when he’s in this bad a mood has me surprised. Pleasantly surprised. Maybe he is getting a better handle on those black moods of his.”

“Let that be what it is,” Zerith prayed. “I don’t know if I can deal with the disappointment of him reverting to his earlier illness right now. Bad enough that we have no sign of Alayne. But to also have no clue where they might be hiding now... Light, I just hope the naaru have answers.”

Zerith felt the muscles in his shoulders relaxing as the peaceful golden city of Light came into view over the hill. A smile began stretching his lips and it was all he could do to keep from urging El’a to a trot. Crossing the bridges into the city, he felt a sensation he’d once thought he’d only feel returning to the house Mir’el had given them in Silvermoon. He felt as if he had come home. Seeing Dar’ja tear away from Jez’ral and come running up the bridge to him made Zerith realize why he felt that way. Home was where ever his family was. As soon as Alayne was found, he truly would be home once more.

“We heard there was a battle,” Dar’ja said breathlessly as she tried to untangle herself from his stirrup. In running to greet her husband, she had tried to leap onto El’a’s back. She’d succeeded only in getting hung up in the hawkstrider’s saddle and nearly pulling Zerith off his mount. “That you fought Kael. Did you find her? Is she safe? Why is Ger’alin so glum? She wasn’t...killed, was she?”

“There was a battle,” he said, responding to her first point. “And yes, Kael is dead. May the Light forgive him his madness and show him the error of his ways. We never saw

Alayne. We did manage to find a few of her personal effects left over in a room that Thalodien says was one of the officer's quarters but nothing more. I think she's probably with the elves who evacuated from..."

"She's got to be fine," Dar'ja said, eyeing Ger'alın's back. "Light, it will kill him if she's not. How has he been handling it?"

"Better than I would have, truth be told," Zerith sighed.

"I want to go home," Jez'ral said plainatively when the priest dismounted, disentangled his wife from his arms, and began walking towards the structure where A'dal lived. "We're hearing the strangest rumors, Zerith, about something going on in Silvermoon. I want to get back there. Mir'el might be..."

"Mir'el will be fine. Alayne will be fine. Everyone will be fine. Everything's over!" he replied, exasperated. "Kael's dead, his soul has gone to its final judgement before the Light of the universe and the Legion will not find a replacement for him quickly. We've been granted a reprieve, Jez'ral. Let's not search out further trouble until it searches out us."

"But...the rumors...the pilgrims say that two days ago..."

"Don't listen to rumors. Listen to the truth. It's over. We've won."

"A bitter victory it is, though," Ger'alın said pitifully. "We still have no idea where my wife is or where the rest of the elves who followed Kael'Thas are hiding."

"We'll go look up by Kazzak's throne," Zerith suggested. "Or over in the mountains of Nagrand where you saw those servants of the Legion. Perhaps Kael saw the attack coming once the shield was down and decided to try to regroup with his allies elsewhere. Thalodien thinks it's possible – even likely – that we'll find them among the orcs or demons of Outland."

"I'm not certain I want to go back to Kazzak's throne," Jez'ral said, his face pale and lips green. "It wasn't pleasant the first time."

"Steel yourself for it, man. We're going to find her and then we're all going to retire some place nice and sunny," Zerith said cheerfully. "And we're going to stuff her mattress full of itchweed and forbid her from leaving the house without one of us tied to her ankle. I'm sure Ger'alın will be happy to volunteer for that."

"Ger'alın doesn't feel like joking around," the paladin sighed heavily. "Ger'alın just wants to sleep. Come wake me in a few hours, Zerith, and make me eat. Light, she...where is she?" he asked, rubbing a thumb along the carving he'd found. "I need to find her. I won't rest until she's at my side again. Light save me from dodging my fate and save her from trying to confront it."

"You're truly convinced you should have died in the Black Temple?" Jez'ral asked curiously. Ger'alın nodded numbly. "You're a bigger fool than I ever thought, young man," Jez'ral snapped, seemingly filled with his former vinegar. "Mir'el thought he should have died several times. Each time, it took me years to convince him he was being an idiot. The first time was when he and I escaped from Zul'Aman," Jez'ral sighed, remembering his frantic flight from the troll stronghold with his best friend's limp body draped over his shoulder. "He didn't speak for a month after that. It scared the life out of me and Miris. She couldn't even get him to laugh when she accidentally-on-purpose set Tal'ar's hair on fire. Oh, what a time that was," he grinned, remembering the day Mir'el had seen a way out of his arranged marriage. "The next time was when he passed out after seeing Archimonde begin ascending the World Tree. It was almost a decade before he accepted that I was right; he did not have the power to single-handedly slay that monster. His passing out was a normal reaction to seeing a demonic general a hundred times larger and millions of times wiser and more powerful than anything Mir'el had forced out of the Nether. He may lecture me until the sun grows cold about my attempt to control Magtheridon," Jez'ral winced, both dreading and savoring the yelling he would face when Mir'el learned of that particular piece of stupidity,

“but he’ll lecture you doubly so for making the same mistake he’s made himself twice. Our lives, regardless of what the naaru believe – regardless of what you devotees of the Light may hold to – are not scripted out! I have heard more nonsense about fate, destiny, and accepting one’s given path this month than I care to hear for the rest of my days. It’s garbage, Ger’alin Sunrage, son of the Sunrage clan of Windrunner Village. Nothing is decided; nothing is predestined. We are here to do what best we can and then we stand account for ourselves in the great hereafter. Therefore, you were not fated to die at Illidan’s hands in the Black Temple. Alayne is not fated to die from messing with the Vials. She may very well get herself killed if she’s not found before...”

“She joined with Kael’s forces,” Ger’alin interrupted. “She took the Vials to them. She, apparently, from what Ben’lir has told me, single-handedly increased production in his manaforges by an unbelievable amount. She...”

“She was my best student,” Jez’ral said proudly. “Of course she could go up there and shake things up, get them working faster and more efficiently. She tested for Mastery of Demonology a full two decades before she should have. Alayne, like her mother, has a mind like a steel trap and just absorbs knowledge like a sponge. But she’s not fated to die. Frankly, young as she is, inexperienced as she is, ignorant as she is, I’d give her almost even odds on using those Vials and surviving intact. But why would she join with Kael?” he asked, suddenly seeming to realize what Ger’alin had said. “She...did she really betray us?” he demanded, almost as heartsick as he had been the day he thought Miris had betrayed Mir’el.

“We don’t know why she did as she has done,” Zerith explained gently. “I’m sure she had her reasons, though. Perhaps she...no, I can’t even speculate as to why she would have joined Kael’s side. The important thing to know is that he’s dead now. The war is over. Now we just have to find my sister and then find a home.”

“That house in Nagrand is almost finished,” Jez’ral said absently. “Garrosh sent a messenger over yesterday saying that all Ger’alin needed to do was paint the interior. Apparently, orcs have no idea which colors go best with the curtains Alayne had picked out.”

“That’s not orcs. That’s just men in general,” Dar’ja grinned. “So, there’s another reason to go up to Kazzak’s throne. We need to get Alayne to finish the interior decorating. We’re going to find her, Ger’alin. Now that the war is over, we’ll find her and I’m sure that Shattrath will show her mercy. It’s always easy to be generous once your opponent has been soundly beaten.”

“I have to find her,” Ger’alin said desperately. “Something tells me that until she’s found, this isn’t over. Not by a longshot. I’m going to go try to find some rest – and maybe some answers – while I can. Wake me in a few hours. Zerith, you make the report to A’dal. I don’t think I could right now if I wanted to.”

“Oh no you don’t,” Zerith growled irritably. “Yes, you can go take a nap. But after we have reported to A’dal. I’m not going to make you speak, Ger’alin, but you are not going to deny yourself your proper part in this victory so you can sulk over not finding Alayne. I’m just as upset – albeit, in a very different manner – as you are about that. But hiding away and pining will do nothing but set you back in a black depression again and who knows that you’ll find the strength to crawl out of that hole another time?”

Ger’alin stared at his friend, his look somewhat wry and weighing. Gesturing, he motioned for the priest to take the lead. “All right, my Queen,” he said, trying to lighten his voice and failing. “We’ll do this your way for now. But when my wife is back safe where she belongs, the first person to pelt her with itchweed had better be me.”

“We’ll have the ointment ready and a good excuse for us to be at least twenty miles away,” Zerith grinned. “Now, come on. The battle is over. Let us begin the celebration here and now. It will only be that much brighter once my little sister has been found.”

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The bustle and noise in the building housing the brilliant white naaru jarred Ger'alin. Kael'Thas was dead. Alayne was still missing. Whether Zerith wanted to believe it or not, the elven people still stood poised on the edge of a civil war unless Kael's followers surrendered peacefully and could be spared their lives. And yet, despite all of these things that the Blood Knight felt should have made the world tremble; should have made it stand still; people still came to and fro on errands. Priests still consulted with the naaru on matters of faith and healing. Children still frolicked about. Khadgar still stood sentinel next to A'dal, working with the naaru to keep playing the Aldor and Scryers off each other while running the vast city of refuge. It all seemed so out-of-place to Ger'alin. Nothing had changed. Yet everything had changed.

"Mister Ger'alin!" Sar'la cried out, waving enthusiastically. "Did you win the war? Did you find Miss Alayne?"

"I need to talk to A'dal now, Sar'la," Ger'alin said kindly. "I'll tell you all about it later. But no, we haven't found Miss Alayne. She's probably fine; we just didn't find her this time."

"Can I stay and hear you talk to A'dal?" Sar'la asked. "I like it when he talks to people. He has a pretty voice. It's like bells."

"Sar'la, this is not business you need to hear. You wouldn't understand it anyhow. Besides, I want to tell you all about it myself. You're not going to be so mean as not to let me?" he asked, remembering how his mother used to guilt trip him into quitting badgering her for stories. Just as it had with him, the ploy worked with the little girl who suddenly was all reassurances that she would only hear about the battle from her big fighter friend. She promised, quite vehemently, to run back to Lower City on the moment and to keep her ears plugged solidly so no one but Ger'alin could tell her about the battle that had won the war.

"You'll make a great father one day," Zerith observed. Ger'alin blushed from his toes to his hairline. "Not for at least another fifty years, though, I hope."

"You and me both," Ger'alin said breathlessly. "Though...no, that's not any of your concern, is it? She would have told you if she wanted you to know. She'd skin me and use my hide for a rug if I let that slip."

"What? She'd better not be...no wonder you're so frantic!"

"What? No!" he shouted. "No, she is not! But...gah! She thinks in three years or so she'll...you know...for the first time...oh, don't make me talk about it," he growled. "Light knows I could have done without that bit of information myself. Don't we have a report to give?" he asked, clearing his throat. Zerith took pity on the embarrassed man recalling his own mortification when his father had explained the facts-of-life to him.

"Yes, we do. Might as well get this over with," Zerith sighed. "Then you can go crawl into bed and blush beneath the covers," he grinned. "It's not that bad. You'll just have to be careful for a while, I suppose."

"Shut up."

"A'dal," Zerith said loudly, his voice carrying throughout the crowded building. "We bring good tidings from Tempest Keep. The vessel which was stolen from your people is now yours to reclaim. The elves dwelling within it have fled. That brings me to my next point: Kael'Thas Sunstrider – he who would ally with the Burning Legion and summon our destroyers into our world – has been killed. Not even a week gone my fellows and I, along with Thalodien and many of the Scryers stationed in the Netherstorm, infiltrated the manaforges, brought the shield protecting Tempest Keep down, and stormed the vessel. We found it strangely empty, coming across only Kael'Thas and a few of his most devoted followers. They gave battle and we returned the favor, killing all of them in the process. Had

any survived or surrendered, we would have brought them to you for you to pronounce the Light's justice upon them."

Zerith felt the naaru's excitement tickle across his mind as A'dal relayed the information to his fellows. Then, using his vast mental powers, the naaru called for silence across all of Shattrath. "The threat of the Legion has been repulsed," A'dal announced joyously. "The Disorder of Azeroth, led by Zerith Lightbinder and Ger'alın Sunrage, along with the Scryers under the command of Voren'thal's appointed spymaster, Thalodien, have defeated Kael'Thas Sunstrider! The time to strike out at the remaining supporters of the Burning Legion is at hand! Warriors of Shattrath, defenders of life and Light, take up your arms and let my battle song empower you!"

Ger'alın sensed his depression lifting and his soul lightening as the naaru's mystical song coursed through his veins, heating his blood while calming and uplifting his soul. Expressions of wonder painted the faces of all around the Blood Knight and the gentle yet forceful melodies emanating from the being of Light made the entire city seem to reverberate, hum, and sing with power.

Just as the song reached its zenith, dark clouds gathered over the city. Ger'alın reached for his sword before he recalled that weapons did no good against weather. "Hell of a time for a rainstorm," he thought to himself.

Suddenly, flames appeared in the building around A'dal. Ger'alın gasped and jumped back away from the ethereal fires. Surprisingly, he felt no heat and the fires themselves gave off no light. Instead, they seemed to deepen the shadows and drink in the light, dimming the brightly-lit building. The hair on the back of Ger'alın's neck stood up as the image of Kael'Thas appeared hovering in the air in the midst of the fire. The elven ruler's face carried a mocking sneer. His eyes shone with hard contempt as he stared down his regal nose at the naaru hovering just below his apparition's waist.

"Your monkeys failed to finish the job, naaru!" Kael'Thas jeered. "Beaten but alive... The same mistake was not made when we took command of your vessel. And all for what? Trinkets? The ship? You are too late. The preparations have already begun. Soon the master will make his return. There is nothing that you can do to stop me! You have served me in your own right, naaru – albeit unwittingly. I suggest you lay down your arms and succumb to the might of Kil'jaeden!" he laughed, his laughter ringing throughout the city, haunting in its hysteria. "The world will burn!"

The ethereal flames flashed, becoming real. Ger'alın threw himself to the floor, feeling their searing heat wash over him. Throughout the building – throughout the city – people cried out in pain and shock as the fel fires burned through clothing and flesh.

"Be at peace," A'dal sang softly. The fires died away as a gentle, cooling wind blew down from the mountains of Nagrand. "It seems that the war has not ended; the battle has only begun. Be healed by the Light and take up arms against the Legion, my brothers and sisters in battle!"

"But he was dead!" Ger'alın exclaimed, confused. "I killed him. My sword pierced his heart! Light, we entombed him, sealing him in his chamber! He died!"

"The Burning Legion has access to many powers contrary to the order of existence," A'dal murmured gently. "Recall the tainted Scourge that wracked your homeland?"

"He's an undead?" Zerith sputtered. "Light of heaven!"

"Things are not always as they seem, young priest, young warrior. Take up your weapons and hold to your faith. They will guide you through the darkest corridor and into the Light of creation itself," A'dal whispered cryptically, for the pair's ears alone. Ger'alın and Zerith exchanged confused glances.

"Dark corridor?" Ger'alın shuddered. "Light, let it be a coincidence!"

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Liadrin sighed and rolled over in her bed, wondering what it was that had woken her from sound slumber. The rain pelting her window might have been the cause only she knew she slept more soundly when it rained. “It drowns out the sounds of combat that ring in my ears so often of late,” she sighed to herself. Sitting up on her bed, she swung her legs over the side, slid her feet into slippers, and propped her elbows on her knees. Rubbing her eyes, she ran a hand through her red-brown hair and tried to block out the memories that haunted her every night.

Every night, as the Lady Liadrin, leader of the Blood Knights, first initiate into the methods of wresting power from the creature M’uru; every night, she had the same dream. She could recall the fall of Quel’Thalas and the desperate defensive that ended with the Sunwell’s destruction. She could recall how, after the battle, the Light had abandoned her, refusing to grant her pleas for healing for her companions. She could recall, even now, the tears that had streamed down her face as she sought the Light, begging to know why she could no longer feel the comforting glow that had come with her service to the divine.

“Be at ease, Liadrin. The Light has forsaken our people. I would call us the ‘Forsaken’ to remind all of that but that name is too ill-omened,” Kael’Thas had told her when she went to her prince with her concerns. “Long have you served my house well. For that service, I offer you a gift too long denied you. Recently, we came across a new stronghold for our people in the promised paradise of Outland. Guarding our new haven was this strange nexus of pure holy energy. Those who are sensitive to it claim that the creature calls itself ‘M’uru’ and say that it is part of a race of ‘naaru.’ I know little of such matters. However, though I possess little talent for holy matters, even I can sense the pure energies flowing from this...thing,” he’d said, sounding confused as to what to call the naaru. “I want you to return to Silvermoon with it. Select the most adept Magisters to aid you in studying it. Perhaps this creature offers a new source for our people to feed from now that the Light has so cruelly abandoned us to our addiction,” he’d concluded bitterly.

Liadrin, faithful to her prince’s orders, had brought the creature back to Silvermoon. Imprisoning it beneath the Blood Knight’s stronghold, she and several Magisters had spent months studying the conflux of energies, learning how to tap into them, how to wrest them to serve their wishes. One of the happiest days she could recall since the Sunwell’s destruction had been the day she’d felt the pure, clean, holy energy of the Light being bent to her will. As the Light had abandoned her, leaving her to slavery to her kind’s addiction, so she now enslaved the Light, forcing it to serve those it had forsaken.

“Surely that’s not what woke me from a sound sleep,” she muttered to herself. “I stopped feeling guilty about forcing that creature to serve us long ago. If it were really as powerful as it claims, it could blast us to the boundaries of the universe. No, it’s just as blind as we were when we served the Light. One day, it will understand and it will aid us, twisting the Light to serve those who deserve it!”

“M’uru understands many things,” a soft voice whispered, making Liadrin leap from her bed and reach for her sword. “He is wise. But soon, he will be gone.”

“That thing can’t die,” Liadrin snorted. “And its energy constantly replenishes what we draw. The more we draw, the more and the swifter the regeneration. Truly, it is a miraculous thing and a great gift from our ruler to his people.”

“You’ve learned your lessons well,” the stranger said calmly. “Too well. What one has been given, one can lose. One will lose, in this case.”

“Who are you to sneak into my chamber at night?” the leader of the Blood Knights demanded irritably, looking about for the speaker. There, in a dark corner of the room, stood a

figure swathed in thick robes, a cowl pulled low over its face. Wide sleeves hid the hands and Liadrin squinted, trying to tell if it were male or female.

“I have come only to tell you this. The Light did not abandon you. The pain of the Scourge obscured your faith.”

“Who are you to tell me what I felt?!”

“Your fear choked the prayers in your throat.”

“Who are you?”

“It was always there. It remains there. Venture to Shattrath and learn the ways of the naaru. Study under A’dal. Bring our people out of the shadow and into the Light. Soon they will have need of your guidance, your strength, your wisdom, and your compassion, Lady Liadrin. Seek out A’dal.”

“Who or what is this ‘A’dal?’ Who are you? What in the name of the Titans is going on?” she demanded as the alarm gongs began ringing throughout the city. Striding over to the dark corner, she reached for the shadowy being, her hand stretching out to rip the cowl back and reveal the face hidden beneath.

“Lady Liadrin! My Lady Liadrin! We’re under attack!” she heard Champion Vranesh scream from within the keep. “My Lady, it is...oh Light preserve us! It’s blood-drinkers! And they...is that...no! That cannot be! My lord, why...” she heard him gasp. Darting for the door, she picked up her shield and, careless of the fact that she stood in a linen gown and thin slippers, raced out to meet their attackers.

The figure in the shadowy corner faded away, borne off by the same wings of magic that had made it manifest. “Go to Shattrath,” the creature whispered to the empty room. “You won’t want to be in Quel’Thalas when the end finally comes. Light give me strength to finish my task,” the being prayed. “And, should I fail, let her bring the Light back where my darkness has fallen. Dar’ja always spoke so highly of Lady Liadrin. If anyone is stubborn enough to bring our people out of evil, it’s her.”

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Liadrin sat, numb and dumb, staring at the empty chamber. Where once the naaru M’uru had hung in the air, his energies siphoned off by powerful Magisters who taught the method to any wishing to learn, now only empty space greeted her gaze. “He’s gone.”

“Why would our prince attack us? Had he wanted to see the creature, we would have allowed him in here without any protest. He gave it to us, did he not? Is he not pleased with our order, Lady Liadrin?”

“I...I do not know,” she said, still in shock. “He bade me lead the Blood Knights and bade me transform them into a force to be feared in the four corners of Azeroth. He had me send the best out to him in our promised paradise, saying that in Outland, they could complete their training. Did he mean ‘drink demon blood’ by that?” she shuddered, seeing the engorged and swollen faces of some of her former students float in her mind’s eye. “How could our prince...”

“Perhaps it was the only way, Solanar,” Astalor sighed. “We did feed off fel energies ourselves to stave off the madness, did we not?”

“Feeding off of impure energies is one thing,” Liadrin shivered. “To drink demon blood is something else entirely! Is that what we have sunk to? Instead of enslaving and destroying demons, now we ally with them? Or did you not see that...thing with him? He greeted it as an old friend!”

“Apparently, it saved his life,” Solanar said evenly. “You heard him say that if that demoness had not used her magic, he would still be lying in state in Tempest Keep.”

“And, for that, what? He gives a demon the very salvation of our people?” Liadrin demanded angrily. “He takes away our very source of powers and hands it over to the Legion? To the ones responsible for creating the Scourge that destroyed our birthright? Has our prince gone mad?”

“You are speaking treason, Liadrin,” Astalor muttered. “Myself, though, I have to say that, like you, I’m beginning to wonder. Has our prince gone mad? He attacked his own city! Why? We would have given him a grand entry any time he cared to return. Our people would have willingly died for him! Why kill them so senselessly? Why take their blood by force when they would have spilled it at his mere request?”

“Astalor, Solanar, go and see to healing those who survived,” Liadrin sighed. Standing up, she dusted her hands on her nightgown, surprised to see streaks of blood and soot staining the once-pure white linen. “Lord Theron will want to hear my report and then...then...I have a journey to undertake and answers I must find.”

“Where are you going, my Lady?” Solanar asked politely.

“To the promised land,” she muttered. “I leave the Blood Knights in your charge while I am gone, Solanar. See to their training as best you can. Perhaps in Outland, I can find a source of power that our prince won’t be able to wrest away from us so easily. At the very least, I can find out what is going on. No doubt Lor’thermar will want to know as much as well.”

“Light see you safe on your journey, sister,” Astalor breathed. “For now, let us keep all of this to ourselves. What will you report?”

“That our prince and his...felblood followers,” she grimaced, “attacked without warning and abducted M’uru. That we did not lift blade or spell to defend ourselves until well after several of our students and adepts lay dead on the carpet. And that...that I’m going to learn more about M’uru. I know enough about him,” she sighed. “It’s his kind I must study.”

“They are...impressive,” Astalor whispered into her ear. “But do not let their piety sway you. Remember, the Light abandoned us to our deaths! It has only been by taking back what it denied us that we have survived.”

“I will keep that in mind, Astalor,” she said evenly. “For now, I need a bath, a change of clothes, and a peace of mind I don’t think I’ll ever find again.”

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Kael’Thas rubbed the crystal embedded in his chest irritably. The skin around it itched fiercely and he could feel the pull against his lungs whenever he drew breath. A heat he couldn’t remember feeling in life emanated from him and no amount of cool water could soothe the feeling that he was standing too near a fire. Behind and above him, the being known as naaru chimed away sorrowfully. Had the elf king a soul still, he might have been moved by the creature’s mournful peals.

Walking purposefully up the corridor was a figure he thought he recognized. A cowl framed her face and her gaze was abstracted, lost in thought as she was. “Ah, yes,” he whispered to himself. “The Lady Dawnrunner. My dear Alayne,” he said aloud, making her jump in fright. “How go the final preparations?”

“They go quite well, my King,” she said breathlessly. Her expression was one of fear mixed with disgust. Kael’Thas sighed. He knew that he looked the worse for his experiences but there was little he could do about that now. Soon, he would be restored to his former glory and beauty along with the rest of his people and his homeland. Until then, he would bear the scars and the ghastly fel crystal that kept him alive proudly. “I believe we can begin using the Vials soon.”

“They have not told you?” Kael’Thas smiled. Alayne flinched; his toothy grin looked far too much like a death mask. “The Vials will be useful, yes, but the true power of the Sunwell remains. It has been hidden away, kept safe from those like Dar’khan who would seek to use it for their own selfish ends instead of to the glory and restoration of our people. Come with me, my dear. I will complete your education.”

Alayne fell in step just a pace behind Kael’Thas, wondering what he was talking about. She’d been wary of him ever since his miraculous recovery. Before, he had merely seemed fel and fey. Now, he reminded her almost of the Scourge she’d fought against and alongside what seemed a lifetime ago. “Light,” she prayed silently, “do not let his fate be mine. Let me pass peacefully to the next stage of existence. Do not let that demoness bring me back like she did with him. I beg of you to spare me that fate.”

“The Sunwell’s essence was not destroyed when the Sunwell itself was. Instead, it was hidden away, disguised from those who might twist it to their own service. Indeed, it was a rather cunning plot – no one, save myself and my closest compatriots know where it may be found. Now that the time has come to begin releasing its essence back into the well itself, you will learn the secret known to precious few. In there,” he gestured to a doorway leading just off the side of the room where the Sunwell’s remnants were protected from the elements and the invaders. Alayne pushed open the door and gasped. Surrounded and shielded by eredar sorcerers was a young human woman. She could have been one of Alayne’s agetates for her youth but a world-weariness about her eyes put her age far older than that of any living *sin’dorei*. “Meet Anveena,” Kael’Thas grinned. “She looks real, does she not? A convincing disguise for the pure essence of the Sunwell.”

“A disguise I may once have been, Prince Sunstrider,” the human said calmly, “yet you have given me life! I beg of you, let me go. I have friends; I have a family now. Let me go. I don’t want to die...”

“Hush,” the elven king said coldly. “You are nothing. You are not a human; you are our people’s birthright and only hope. You will help me restore them and help me summon our savior. Alayne,” he said, turning back to the young *sin’dorei* warlock who had served him so well and faithfully, “I can only entrust you with this great task. None of the others have the talent or the dedication to do it. You must attune yourself with Anveena and let the Sunwell’s essence flow through your body and soul and back into the golden pool outside. As it could take days – weeks, even – for you to discover the frequency required for a successful effort, I would have you start immediately. The eredar will guard you and keep you safe from all disturbances. I will have Vangri move your belongings to this chamber. Unfortunately, you will have to share it with the others,” he sighed. “The circumstances demand it. Should you need the Vials to aid you, simply send word and I will have them sent to you.”

“As you wish it, my Lord, so shall your servant humbly obey,” Alayne said softly, spreading her skirts. Sitting on a purple cushion near the wall, she tucked her legs beneath her and began attempting to create the resonance between herself and the human that would unlock the power of the Sunwell. From her childhood, she could easily recall the vibrations of the well itself. Once she had opened the mystical pathway of power, she could channel it into the pool where, with the help of the Magisters following Kael, its power would be unleashed, reigniting the Sunwell. A simple plan; much simpler than the one she had developed on her own. “Much neater, as well,” she murmured to herself.

“A true wonder,” Kael’Thas thought smugly. “The Master will be most pleased with one such as her on our side. I wonder, though, if Baron Darkweaver will be joining us. He has not responded to my invitations. Ah well. Mir’el was ever a strange and reserved one; she takes after him strongly with her modesty and her refusal to accept elevation.” Nodding to himself, he turned to leave the room. “Guard her with your lives or the Master will erase your

very existence,” he said warningly to the eredar. “He will be most displeased if his arrival is delayed by even a minute.”

The eredar watched the elven king stroll off, shaking their heads knowingly. Kael’Thas was a true fool. Once this child of his had reignited the mystical font of power, Kil’jaeden would consume it. After that, he would consume the world that had so frequently thwarted the might of the Burning Legion.

“At long last,” one of the eredar hissed in his native tongue, “these creatures will serve us and scream for a merciful death.”

“Our time is at hand. Azeroth and the riches the Dark Master’s kind left laying about will be ours! And then the universe will answer only to the might of Kil’jaeden!” his fellow replied, smiling darkly.

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“But I saw him die! We saw his dead body! There is no way he could have survived a sword through the heart, Zerith!”

“Ger’alin, will you stop telling me what I already know.”

“But he died! No one comes back from beyond! That only happens in stories!”

“Exhibit one to disprove that,” Zerith sighed, pointing at Callie. The Forsaken shrugged uncomfortably.

“But even if he did come back from the dead, wouldn’t he be a mindless... no offense, Callie!”

“None taken,” she sighed.

“Wouldn’t he be a mindless minion of the Legion?”

“What’s to say he isn’t?” Zerith asked rhetorically. “Light, you’ve heard the rumors coming from the lips of the latest pilgrims through the Dark Portal.”

“Very well. For the sake of argument, I’ll grant that he either somehow miraculously survived a fatal wound and managed to convincingly play dead for several days or he found a cure for dying. Still, why would he attack his own city? That doesn’t make any sense!”

“We need to return there at once,” Jez’ral interjected. “If there was a battle, people could be hurt.”

“I’m sure Mir’el is fine,” Ger’alin said absently. “But why would he attack his own city, Zerith?”

“I give up,” the priest groaned, throwing his hands into the air. “I don’t know the answer to that one. None of the pilgrims know either. All I know is that everything says he’s in Quel’Thalas now and that’s where we should be headed. Instead, we’re sitting on our hands, out here, in Outland, trying to keep the Aldor and Scryer from each others throats! Light of heaven preserve me but I thought that older heads were supposed to be cooler and wiser!”

“Sometimes they’re just more stubborn,” Voren’tal said softly, making Zerith jump. “My own followers won’t even listen to me anymore. The Aldor are angry; they believe we let Kael escape.”

“He. Was. Dead!” Ger’alin screamed, clawing his hair. “Who in their right minds guards a dead man?”

“They know that as well as I do, Sunrage,” Voren’tal sighed. “They don’t want to believe it. They need someone to blame. Truth be told, were the shoe on the other foot, I don’t think we sin’dorei would do any differently.”

“We didn’t let him escape,” Ger’alin grouched. “We killed him. He was dead. And even if he did somehow survive death – death! – why would he attack his own city. Until we ventured out here and learned the truth, we ourselves revered Kael as our savior and as the

one who would lead us back to our rightful places in the world. All he would have to do is stride up to the gates of Silvermoon and all of the red carpeting in the city would be rolled out for him! Why would he attack? Why?”

“No one knows,” Zerith said softly. “Not that it matters. He’s attacked our homeland. Perhaps...perhaps we can return now and give aid where needed. Certainly many would have been injured or killed in such a battle. More killed than injured, I fear,” the priest said in a whisper. Voren’tal looked at him shrewdly. “They wouldn’t fight back against their king, their hero, their savior. They would have been like lambs led to the slaughter. Damn him! Why?”

Ger’alin, frustrated and unable to express his ire, slammed his fist into the wall. The room’s shaking made everyone jump in fright. Callie blinked and stared at the fighter, giving a startled yelp when one of the magical snowglobes tottered off the shelf it sat on and crashed to the floor, spilling water and dust all over the carpet. “WHY? And is she safe?” Ger’alin yelled, leaning his forehead against the wall and ramming his fist against it until his knuckles were mere strips of meat.

“Calm down, Gerry. Calm down,” Callie said soothingly. “Surely she’s run away from him by now. I mean, she’d never go along with attacking her homeland. She may even be on her way back out here to us as we speak.”

“First the Scourge,” Ger’alin snarled. “Then Dar’khan. Now our dead king? Every time we rebuild and recover, another attack comes! What’s the point anymore? Argh,” he growled, shaking his bloody fist. “I’m going to go vent my frustrations working the blade until I can think more clearly. I’m no good to anyone like this. But why?” he demanded. “Voren’tal, you followed him for years. You know Kael better than any of us. We were all too young and too common to be worth his notice. Why would he ever attack his homeland?”

“I cannot say,” Voren’tal said slowly. “It makes no sense to me. He would be welcomed in like a conquering hero. Perhaps...perhaps he showed up with his new ‘allies’ and it became clear even to the most fanatically loyal sin’dorei that he’s binding our people to the Legion. Or, perhaps he wanted something that our people would not part with even for their king. I do not know, Ger’alin. I wish to the Light that I did.”

“The next time, I’ll let this heal on its own,” Zerith warned as he grabbed the man’s hand. “I’ve told you before not to do this.”

“I know, Father Zerith,” Ger’alin said, trying to make light of the situation and failing. “But, I just can’t help but feel so frustrated hearing this and not knowing...”

“I understand. I would have done the same,” Zerith said calmly as he worked his healing magic. “Go work your sword with Tau’re until you’re too tired to do anything other than collapse. At the very least, you won’t notice how worried you are when you’re unconscious. And, if I hear anything, even a far-fetched rumor, I’ll come find you,” the priest promised.

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“You lost focus there at the end, my friend,” Tau’re said gravely as he held out a hand to help Ger’alin back to his feet.

“I wouldn’t know why,” Ger’alin snorted. “My dead prince is alive again; my wife is Light knows where; my homeland has been attacked by my dead-but-alive-and-well prince and I don’t even know what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“I didn’t say you had no reason to be distracted,” Tau’re grinned. “I just mentioned that you were. Do you want go to another round? This is the most I’ve won against you in ages.”

“One more round and then I believe I shall try to find some sleep,” Ger’alin agreed. Squaring himself and bringing his shield around to the ready, he waited for the tauren to make the first move. Tau’re waited him out, counting on the sin’dorei’s customary impatience to start the duel. Ger’alin settled himself, refusing to be drawn out, pouring all his energies into waiting on the other man to make the first move. After several minutes of circling each other and feinting, Tau’re shook his shaggy head and bore in, his twin blades smashing down against Ger’alin’s shield. Letting the force of the blow help him dance out from under it, Ger’alin cut in low, smacking the bull-man square on the knee, making him hop on one hoof while he tried to regain his balance. Shoving in with his shield, Ger’alin kept Tau’re off-balance, forcing him to dance around in circles while the sin’dorei danced in with quick, irritating jabs and slashes that did little damage but did provide a distraction. *Your own words have inspired this line of attack, old cow*, Ger’alin smiled to himself, losing himself utterly in the joy of skilled combat.

Tau’re nodded to himself, seeing his friend finally begin to relax and enjoy the test of strength and skill. Letting Ger’alin over-commit himself to a sweeping attack on the flank, Tau’re whirled to the side, his friend’s sword whistling through the empty air where the tauren had been. Slapping the flat of his blade hard against the fighter’s backside, Tau’re barked a laugh at the outraged expression on the sin’dorei’s face. “You won’t be sitting comfortably for a day or two now!” the tauren guffawed. “Ouch!” he said, feeling as if a hammer had slammed into the crown of his head.

“Ach, your skull is too thick for even the Light to crack!” Ger’alin giggled, setting himself back for another flanking attack.

“Actually, the Light can crack even a tauren’s skull if you’re forceful enough, Ger’alin. The Light can do many things. It can even make one invulnerable, if the Blood Knight has the force of will to make it so,” a woman’s familiar voice said in a lecturing tone. A shield of divine power sprang up around Tau’re, preventing the sin’dorei from landing a single blow. Behind the shield, Tau’re threw his head back and laughed, dancing in victory.

“No fair using divine powers to interfere in an honorable duel, my Lady Liadrin,” Ger’alin said politely, bowing to the Matriarch of his order.

“You did it first, my young sword-master,” Liadrin grinned. “Is this truly Shattrath?”

“It is. Be welcome to the City of Light, Lady Liadrin. Do you bring news from Quel’Thalas?”

“I do,” she said tersely. “I must speak with the naaru called A’dal. I was...directed to him by a most unusual visitor. It’s enough to make me believe the stories of the prophet steering Proudmoore and Thrall into the battle of Mount Hyjal,” she sighed.

“Why have you come seeking A’dal?” Ger’alin asked cautiously, peering to see if the divinely-powered shield around Tau’re had been lifted. He dreaded the thought of facing off against the head of his order but if she gave the wrong answer; if she had come on behalf of Kael’Thas to enslave yet another naaru, he would be forced to defend his adopted city and his adopted mentor.

“I was bidden to seek him out and to learn the ways of the naaru. Now that M’uru has been taken from us, we have little access to our power, Ger’alin. Our order will crumble without the naaru’s aid. I have...come to see many things about our prince. You must have heard by now that he attacked Silvermoon.”

“I had heard that,” Ger’alin said evenly, sheathing his sword and settling his shield on his back before crossing his arms over his chest. “Why would he do that?”

“He came to the gates of the city and the guards at first did not recognize him. He was...worn. His skin was pale and sickly and he had some sort of crystal sticking out of his chest. From what little I did see of him, he looked as if he had survived a thrust through the chest though everything I know tells me such is nearly impossible. He demanded entry into

the city in the name of House Sunstrider. The guards fell back, contrite at having blocked his entry. Then...then demons came with him! Not safely enslaved demons such as our warlocks keep around in order to learn how to best battle the Legion. These demons roamed about freely, killing any who displeased them. The guards did not know what to do; their vows bade them defend Silvermoon and its citizens yet they felt compelled to obey their prince. Ma'iv came out of the cathedral about that point and saw what was happening. He asked Kael why our prince allowed demons to have the run of Silvermoon. When Kael announced he had formed a new alliance and that soon we would be numbered among the might of the Legion...the city went mad. Beloved as our leader is, no one of our people will willingly serve the creators of the Scourge! They began fighting the demonic entities with Kael, believing that perhaps our prince was under a spell or being threatened and that, should the demons be destroyed, he would abandon that madness."

"He won't," Ger'alín sighed. "So, he is alive."

"Indeed, though, Light's truth and honor, you would think he hadn't survived whatever blow it was that lodged that crystal in his chest. He looks like a walking corpse! I'm shocked that the scent of decay doesn't cling to him. At any rate," she sighed, returning to her tale, "I slept through most of this. By the time I was awake and in battle, Kael and his felblood elves had already fought into our sanctum and seized M'uru! They nearly killed the Magisters set to siphon energy off the creature and, when some of our bewildered adepts asked why Kael was taking the very source of our power and hope away from us, he laughed! He said that he had given us the creature; he could take it away and that M'uru would aid in restoring the Sunwell and summoning the Master. By the time we could gather anything resembling a strike force, Kael and his felbloods were already on their way to the Isle of Quel'Danas. Lord Lor'thermar sent ships to begin besieging them the next morning but, without help, we're in for a long fight. The Sunwell isle is fertile. Even with the remnants of the Scourge there, there still remains plenty of food for an army to live on, if they care to assign anyone to farming the land a bit."

"Did you notice anyone in particular with him?" Ger'alín asked, feeling both hopeful and terrified at the same time.

"No. I saw only a handful of felbloods before they made good their escape from the sanctum with M'uru. Now, tell me of this A'dal," she ordered.

"A'dal is a very wise and very powerful being," Ger'alín answered. "He can answer many of your questions. However, he serves the Light above all. He is...compassionate and just. I believe that, if you ask his mercy, he will allow you safe passage into and out of Shattrath. Still, my Lady, you were instrumental in imprisoning and torturing one of his brethren. A'dal has hinted that M'uru was playing a part in a scheme we know little about but still, the point remains. This city is divided into two opposing factions..."

"Enemies?"

"No," Ger'alín shook his head, "more like...contestants. The Aldor are the draenei who survived the destruction of Draenor and continued to serve the Light. The Scryers are our own people. Led by Voren'thal..."

"Voren'thal is here?"

"Yes. He leads the Scryers. The Aldor and Scryers both seek to serve the naaru and both uphold the peace of Shattrath but...there is much mistrust between the former enemies. As we speak, the Aldor seek the blame the Scryers and the Disorder of Azeroth for allowing Kael to escape. He was dead, though!" Ger'alín muttered defensively. "I was certain of that the minute I ran him through."

"You killed prince Sunstrider?" Liadrian gasped, surprised. Ger'alín shrugged and nodded uncertainly. "Truly, you are a sword-master. Now, my young student, take me to Voren'thal. After I have spoken at length with him and learned more about the goings-on in

Outland, I will address myself to A'dal. Also," she muttered ruefully, "I need some time to think on what to say. How do you apologize for abduction, imprisonment, and torture?"

"Well, start with 'I'm terribly sorry,' and see how it goes from there?"

"You're incorrigible, you young whelp," Liadrin grinned. "No wonder you drove Dar'ja up the wall. Is she here as well?"

"She is and she will be happy to see you," Ger'alın nodded. "Follow me, my Lady."

Ger'alın and Liadrin strode off towards the Scryer's tier, leaving Tau're behind the divinely-crafted shield. The tauren sighed and sat down, waiting for the thing to dissipate. "You're distracted, Ger'alın," he muttered softly to the man's retreating back, "but then, you have a lot on your mind of late."

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"A'dal says he will see you tomorrow morning, bright and early, Liadrin," Voren'thal said as he stumped into the room where the woman sat. She had been offered refreshment and had refused it until Voren'thal and Thalodien had told her the entire story behind the formation of the Scryers, the attack on Tempest Keep, and Kael's mad plan to ally with the Burning Legion.

"If you ask me, which you are," Voren'thal had muttered when Liadrin wondered aloud why Kael would ally with the creators of the Scourge, "it's got a lot to do with Arthas. The Legion lost control of the Lich King; the Legion wants him and the Scourge brought to heel almost as much as the rest of us. Kael would do anything to strike back at Arthas; his hate is that strong. Then, there's the undeniable pull of power. Pure arcane power. We feed on it; with it, we thrive. Without, we wither. No doubt that plays its part in his madness as well."

"Why do the naaru, if they are so powerful, sit here doing nothing?"

"They aren't exactly doing 'nothing,'" Voren'thal said defensively. "There is more to this life than fighting, Liadrin. Surely you can remember that! The naaru provide haven, succor, and aid for the downtrodden in this city. Taking care of mortals taxes them heavily. Besides, as A'dal and the others have pointed out, this fight is largely of our own making. They are not our creators or our parents. It is not their job to clean up our messes. They have lent us much aid and have done much to help us find new allies – even if the Aldor are a bunch of stubborn fools! – but we cannot and should not demand they fight our battles for us."

"What of naaru justice?" she asked softly, dreading the day to come.

"Naaru justice is ever tempered with mercy and the hope of redemption. I saw you come in with young Ger'alın," he said, pausing to give her the chance to reply. Liadrin made no move to finish the thought. "Ger'alın has learned much of the ways of the naaru. He's the only man under the age of one hundred who has ever stood Thalodien down," Voren'thal laughed. "Speak with your young student if you wish to learn more of the ways of the naaru. Ger'alın has taken their lessons very much to heart. Especially since his restoration."

"Restoration?"

"That is his story to tell," Voren'thal said simply. "I will leave it to him to explain if he wills."

"Where could I find him? I'm sure my young student will relish the chance to be the teacher for once."

"If he's not out trying to exhaust himself facing off against that giant cow he's befriended, he'll either be smashing a wall in while talking with Zerith Lightbinder or he'll be yammering in his sleep. His room is the third on the left one floor up," Voren'thal added, seeing the question in her eyes. "I'm sure he won't mind if you wake him. Though, his Forsaken friend is probably standing sentinel over the door if he's asleep."

“What of Dar’ja Lightbinder?”

“She’s here. I think she was going to serve in the temple in Lower City this evening. Zerith would be with her if he’s not with Ger’alin. She could also explain much to you though, to be completely honest, Ger’alin has been the better student of the two. But then, he’s had cause.”

“When first I accepted Sunrage as a recruit, I had little hope for him,” Liadrin admitted ruefully. “Mostly, I had hoped to use him as a weapons’ trainer for my Knights. He was quite skilled, though young. Only after he had ventured out into the world and joined that Disorder of Azeroth did he ever express any interest in the more studious aspects of being a Blood Knight. And, even then, his obsession at the time was healing, not combat or judgement. He never struck me as the contemplative kind, even after he set himself to mastering healing. Dar’ja was always the more dedicated of the pair when it came to true study of the Light. But now you tell me that one of my worst students has outstripped one of my best?”

“When Ger’alin puts his mind to something, he can do anything he decides to do,” Voren’tal retorted. “He’s so much like his great-grandfather in that regard that it’s eerie. Vash’na could have made a mountain move if he’d decided to do so. Ger’alin could probably do the same if he had to. Though, with his youthful impatience, he is more likely to try moving the mountain himself.”

“It seems that I have made many mistakes and misjudgements,” Liadrin sighed. “I will speak with Sunrage on the moment. Tell me, old man, do I ever remind you of any of my ancestors?”

“There are times you favor your grandmother so strongly that I almost put her name to you,” Voren’tal grinned. “Now there was a woman that the Light flowed through. And, my dear, it will flow through you again. Speak with Ger’alin and Dar’ja. Speak with any of my followers. The naaru can grant you access to the Light again. It hasn’t abandoned us as we thought, young Liadrin. We’ve merely...lost the ability to see the Light for the shadow blinding us.”

The Matriarch of the Blood Knights shivered at Voren’tal’s statement and stared at him shrewdly. For his part, the leader of the Scryer’s met her measuring gaze blandly, wondering what had prompted her study. “If you put on a monk’s hood and called yourself a prophet, I might ask you to unravel my dreams,” she muttered, wondering if he had been the one directing her to this path.

“If I hear any more about dreams,” Voren’tal growled, thinking of all of the nightmares he’d had and all of the strange dreams he’d heard his followers, especially Zerith and Ger’alin, muttering over, “I believe I shall scream.”

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The sky was crazed. Ger’alin shivered, wondering if he had lost his mind. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the sun looked as if half of it had been torn away. It glowed an angry, sullen reddish-orange as if reluctant to give off less than its normal glorious light. The firmament was likewise shattered; the sky streaked with purples, blacks, and oranges that laid across striated blues and whites. Sniffing the wind, Ger’alin gagged at the heavy odor of fel and arcane magic that coated the very air.

“What is this place? What is going on here?”

The scene shifted, going in reverse. Ger’alin could see the changes that had brought about such a schizophrenic landscape. Rocky soil became gently rolling plains and what had appeared to be haphazard rock formations dotting the crazed and broken desert erected themselves into majestic buildings. “The Isle of Quel’Danas,” he muttered to himself, recognizing the place. “But what happened?”

Walking along the now normal stone-laid pathways that led to the Magister's Terrace, Ger'alín could see demonic entities roaming about at will, mixing and mingling with both felblood and normal sin'dorei. A line of withered elves stood pumping bellows, gathering ore out of carts, and being beaten by their taskmasters. For a moment, Ger'alín thought they might be Wretched. A closer look showed them to be normal sin'dorei suffering from mistreatment and malnutrition. "You could have thrown your lot in with the Legion!" a demonic slavedriver taunted them as he cracked his whip. "Instead, you mewling servants of the Light will serve truly!"

Ger'alín nearly swallowed his tongue in shock when he saw Dar'ja among the slaves. She looked haggard, worn, and old. "When is this?" he wondered. "What is going on? How did this happen?"

You are seeing what will come to pass if you do not stop the one you love, a voice rang in his mind. You are the only one who can stop her though it may mean her death. Are you prepared to face that, warrior of the Light?

"No!" he argued, "it can't be true! Light, I can't kill my own wife. She's as dear to me as my own life. Dearer! You can't ask this of me!"

It is not we who ask it of you, the voice said sadly, calmly. She has chosen a narrow path. It can lead to destruction or it can lead to the restoration of your people and their kingdom. Either way could mean her death. Yet only you can stop this from coming to pass. She has said in her heart "I know that blood will be the price; let it be the blood of my own heart." She has prepared herself for the sacrifice. Would you stop her if life meant death? Would you aid her if death meant life?

"What are you yammering about? Speak plainly!" he shouted, looking about for the speaker but knowing the words came not to his ears but to his soul. "I distrust mysteries."

The scene shifted yet again, becoming one horrifyingly familiar to Ger'alín. A room with a golden pool on the floor spread out in front of him. But, instead of seeing Alayne standing before it, he heard voices from a room off to the side. Walking over, hoping he would not be seen, he peeked in, startled to see Alayne sitting on a cushion, staring at a human woman. The set of his wife's shoulders spoke of utter concentration and focus and the way she held her jaws tightly shut told the tale of her frustration. The human woman just gazed at her sadly, sighing and occasionally lifting a hand to wipe a tear from her eye. "Can't you just...pretend that you can't figure it out? I don't want to die," the woman pleaded softly, her voice pitched low so that the eredar standing guard over the pair couldn't hear. "I can help you. I have the power."

"Silence, Anveena," Alayne said firmly. "You will thank me for this one day. You are going to return to your true form and fulfill your true destiny. As my King has ordered me, so shall I obey. His whim is the law of my existence, now," she muttered, unable to hide a trace of bitterness from her voice. "It will all be over soon."

"What will be over, Alayne? Sweetheart, please, tell me! Look at me!" Ger'alín screamed, standing in front of her and waving his arms wildly. Alayne stared right through him. "What are you doing? Why? Why don't you just come back to us? I've been healed; I will never hurt you again! Alayne, please, whatever it is..."

His wife's face lit up as brightly as the noonday sun and, for a moment, her eyes fell on Ger'alín's face. He could feel his pulse racing with joy as he reached out for her. His stomach crashed to his feet when he realized she was not seeing him at all. She was staring up at the ceiling in rapture. "I've done it," she moaned, shivering in delight. The human, Anveena, moaned in despair. "You there," Alayne said preemptorily to the demonic guards. "Go and tell my lord king that it is done. I will need a day's rest and then I can instruct the others in the pattern to follow. Our Master will be here shortly so you had best get your forces into shape to give him the welcome befitting a god of his might."

“You can’t be going to summon Kil’jaeden, Alayne Sunrage!” Ger’alin said, stunned beyond belief. Tears of sorrow and disappointment flowed down his cheeks and sobs erupted from his throat. “Why? Why would you turn away from us and to the Legion? Did I push you this far? Please, someone tell me what is going on here,” he pleaded, reaching out to the unseen and unseeable voice from before. “Why would she do this? Was she found out by Kael and tortured, turned to his service against her will?”

She has made her choice, the voice said softly. She will live or die with it. She will summon Kil’jaeden and, if you are not there, he will destroy the world.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” Ger’alin sobbed. “I don’t want to be a hero. Light, I just want to be with my wife. I just want this all to be a bad dream. Why? Why her and why me? Why would she turn to this? What set her on this path?”

Do not ask questions you are not prepared to hear the answers to, the voice said cryptically. You know what set her down the path. And, warrior of the Light and child of the sun, you alone know how she may be stopped.

“No, I don’t,” he denied. “The woman I love would never summon Kil’jaeden. If she has turned down this path...she’s become someone I don’t know and that...that hurts worse than the torture from the Vials. This can’t be real,” he told himself. “This is all just a...”

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“Bad dream?” Liadrin asked when Ger’alin shot bolt upright in his bed. The man was drenched in sweat and he’d been crying and crying out in his sleep for the last several minutes. The Matriarch of the Blood Knights had wondered if she dared try to wake him.

“I may never sleep again,” Ger’alin said breathlessly, clutching his chest as if to calm his heart with his bare hands. “Light but I’m tired of those dreams.”

“I have come to ask you for further instruction in the ways of the naaru,” Liadrin said, her tone brisk and businesslike. “Frankly, we need a source of power, Ger’alin, and I am beginning to see that, as Voren’tal has said, service to the naaru is our people’s only hope. Still, I want to hear it from you; what manner of creatures are the naaru?”

“My lady, now is not the time for this,” he said, still panting. “I can scarcely think for the fear strangling me.”

“Worried about that young woman you used to follow around? Alayne, I think she was called.”

“Of course I’m worried about her. She’s with Kael’s forces Light knows where.”

“That would be the Isle of Quel’Danas,” Liadrin sighed. “Did she choose to remain loyal to her prince while you chose to follow a different path?”

“No,” Ger’alin said sadly. “We both chose to stand against Kael. Only...I fell prey to the power of the Vials of water from the Well of Eternity. My addiction rose up within me as it never had before and I...I...I nearly killed Alayne for jealousy and anger over her inability to help me sate my lust for power. She ran off after that, taking the Vials with her. She may have run to Kael or she may have been discovered by him; I still don’t know what to think or believe. And now...”

“Ger’alin, no offense, but for a man your age and with your charm and looks, you should just get over her if she betrayed you and find another.”

“She’s my wife,” he said simply. “There is no ‘getting over her and finding another.’ I want her back at my side so I can beg her forgiveness for what I did. If there were any justice, I would have been...but the naaru showed mercy on me even when I did not merit it. And because of that mercy, I may have a chance...,” he said, brightening. “The Isle of Quel’Danas, you said?”

“You cannot simply sail up to the Sunwell Isle, Ger’alin,” Liadrin said with mock exasperation. “Now, I have come to hear you speak. Every second person I talk with says your name with near-reverence. You’ve become well-known and well-respected in a short time. Tell me, what have you learned out here with the naaru that could aid our people and our cause?”

“Nothing I have learned can aid anyone unless they wish to undertake the learning and understanding on their own,” Ger’alin muttered. “Unless they are willing to come to true faith in the Light and begin to step away from the path laid for them, then my ‘lessons’ won’t help at all.”

“I have believed for long years that the Light abandoned us to eternal shadow,” Liadrin sighed. “And yet now, you tell me that you, you Ger’alin, a sword-slinger who barely merited the title of ‘Blood Knight’ until recently, you have faith?”

“The Light has always been there, my Lady. Even before I acknowledged it, it led my steps. I can begin to see that now. The Light in all its infinite and inaffable mercy has been with me since the day I was born. That’s another reason I want to find Alayne,” he added. “She needs to learn that as I have come to see. Perhaps it would help turn her off the path of fel magic she feels compelled to follow.”

“You believe she could be redeemed?”

“I believe anyone can be redeemed if they are willing to be,” he sighed. “Especially after my own redemption. Before, I had known in my head that a person could walk out of the shadow and into the Light. But after wallowing in the shade myself, after being as low as I could have been and letting myself twist into a mockery of the man my father and mother raised me to be, after that, I understood in my heart that anyone, even Kil’jaeden himself, can be redeemed if only they seek it.”

“And the naaru showed you this?”

“A’dal lit the way on the path I will strive to follow for the rest of my days,” Ger’alin nodded. “If you seek redemption, Liadrin, if you ask sincerely, I believe you will find it and the Light’s blessing as the rest of us have.”

“You have given me much to think on, young Sunrage,” she said softly. “I’ll leave you to your rest. The Light send you pleasant dreams and restful slumber until the sun shines upon your face again,” she added sincerely, using the formal Thalassian blessing parents would bestow upon their children. Ger’alin sighed and nodded in acceptance, laying back down and closing his eyes. As much as he prayed the Light would send no dreams, he would not offend his teacher by amending her first true prayer in years.

Liadrin waited until Ger’alin seemed to be returning to sleep before ducking out of the room. Motioning for one of the Scryer attendants to come to her, she inquired as to where she might find privacy and rest for the night. Minutes later, she was installed in one of the servant’s quarters; the rest of the rooms being occupied by the Disorder of Azeroth’s fighters. She bade her attendant good night in the same manner she had Ger’alin, ignoring the surprised lifting of his eyebrows. Closing the door behind him, she walked slowly over to the window, her feet dragging. She chewed the tip of her finger as she had when she was a little girl dreading a punishment waiting for her in the next room. With an irritated sigh, she forced both her hands to her sides, strode quickly to the window, and flung it open. The moonlight streamed into the room, bathing it in a silver glow. Kneeling awkwardly, she pulled the chair out from under a nearby desk and propped her elbows on the seat. Burying her face in her hands, she opened herself, reaching out to a source she had long since believed denied to her. For a moment, she felt the familiar nothing as she sought the Light she had once devoted her life to. Tears of frustration and sadness began to fill her closed eyes and she could feel a sob working its way up her throat. Then, just as she was about to give up and resign herself to the eternal loss, she felt a gentle thrill that became a warming glow. “Ger’alin is right,” she sighed

once her prayers had finished and the path had become clearer to her. “Anyone can be redeemed. Even me.”

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“I can’t believe Lady Liadrin is here,” Dar’ja said excitedly.

“I know,” Ger’alin echoed. “You’ve only said that...how many times has it been now, Zerith?”

“I stopped counting after eighteen.”

“You two are terrible.”

“At least she’s not squealing when she says it like she did the first half-dozen times,” Ger’alin continued, ignoring the angry woman. “Oh, Lady Liadrin is here!” he mimicked in a high pitched falsetto. “I should go and kiss up to her a little more! Hey, ouch!” he grimaced when Dar’ja slapped him in the back of his head.

“You’re especially terrible,” she muttered.

“You’re too easy to get riled up,” Ger’alin sighed. “All I have to do is point out the way you act about Liadrin and your dander is up. Don’t make it so easy, Dar’ja. A man likes to work a little for his entertainment.”

Dar’ja stared at Ger’alin, uncertain of how to take that. For his part, her fellow Blood Knight met her gaze blandly, looking almost bored. After a few minutes of her staring at him in consternation and him returning her gaze with a deadpan look of his own, Zerith burst out laughing, setting Ger’alin off into great gales of humor. “I’m glad someone got that joke. Explain it to me?”

“It’d take too long,” Ger’alin muttered. “Alayne would get it. She’d laugh fit to bust.”

“I think I’m happier not knowing, then.”

“Oh Light. Nothing like that. Zerith, a little help?”

“Remember that time you made me stay in a tree because you liked seeing Alayne laughing at us?” the priest replied to Ger’alin, his eyes sparking with vengeful amusement.

“Yes.”

“I’m returning the favor now.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Liadrin grinned to herself and watched the trio twit each other. The three reminded her of herself and some of her own friends at that age. Only, the weary look in their eyes spoke of an age they would be long years in attaining physically. Her heart went out to them even as she reminded herself that she had been one of the very elders pushing for the children to grow up so quickly. “Had I not abandoned my faith, perhaps...but this happened as it must have,” she told herself. “All my choices have pointed to today. Good morning,” she said loudly enough for the three to hear her. Dar’ja leapt to her feet and Ger’alin and Zerith rolled their eyes good-naturedly. “Sit, sit. Don’t let me interrupt your breakfast. The Light of the eternal sun shine on you all and light your paths through all your days.”

“And on you, my Lady,” Dar’ja said so swiftly Liadrin needed a moment to put together the response. “Would you join us?”

“I have already broken my fast with Voren’thal. I was hoping to ask you to accompany me when I meet with A’dal.”

“Of course we’ll come!” Dar’ja squealed. “Come on you two, let’s go!”

“Dar’ja,” Ger’alin sighed. “Perhaps it has escaped your attention but your husband and I both have half a plate of breakfast to finish off and you’ve barely touched your eggs and bacon.”

“I’m finished!” she announced. “Hurry up and let’s go!”

“Sit down,” Zerith said firmly, “and eat. Or I’ll do to you out here in front of the Light and everyone what Ger’alin did to Alayne back in Tarren Mill when she was making herself sick worrying over me. I can do it, sweetheart,” he grinned toothily.

Dar’ja sat down so quickly she nearly toppled over her chair. Blushing furiously, she began shoveling food into her mouth so quickly she nearly choked. Liadrin smiled and looked away. She wished that she didn’t have this affect on so many of her students but it could not be helped. Perhaps one day Dar’ja would come to see, as it seemed the other two had, that she was flesh and bone like everyone else.

“Don’t scrape the plate, sweetheart,” Zerith teased. “I’m sure there’s more in the kitchen. Light, you’re putting Ger’alin to shame.”

Dar’ja shot her husband a look that would have frozen magma. He grinned and shook his head, increasing the pace of his own eating. Ger’alin laughed and pushed his plate away still half-full. “I suppose we had best get on with it before the Lady Lightbinder swallows her fork.”

Dar’ja leapt up and smiled at Ger’alin gratefully. Liadrin rose slowly and straightened her clothes, wanting to appear just so before the leader of the naaru. She had weighed carefully over what she would say and how she would react. She knew that possibly the very destiny of her people hinged on making the right impression and she prayed that Ger’alin and the others had gone far down that path already. “Light be with me,” she sought silently, reveling in the glow that surrounded her heart, “and give me the wisdom and guidance to do what is right and necessary.” Settled on her path, she nodded and spoke, “Lead the way.”

Ger’alin and Dar’ja walked ahead of her, the woman nearly dancing with impatience while the man was more placid and at ease. As they took the elevator down to the Terrace of Light and made their way into the large structure in the center, Liadrin became aware of angry glances and mutterings from draenei and those allied with them. “Foul murderess,” she heard a dwarf whisper angrily. “Why the naaru tolerate the likes of those elves is beyond me.”

“Garithos had it right,” a human growled. Liadrin flinched. She had been among those imprisoned wrongfully with Kael’Thas.

“Perhaps had Garithos heard our prince out,” she said softly, her voice light but hard as the steel blade she wore at her hip, “we would not be walking down this path. Your people abandoned us to face the very evil you created with your Cult of Damnation and your prince’s obsession with eradicating the Scourge at any cost. If you say we cannot hold that against you, how dare you hold it against us when our prince treads down the very path Arthas once walked?”

That seemed to both silence and anger the ones speaking against the sin’dorei. Gesturing for Dar’ja and Ger’alin to fall in behind her, Liadrin strode confidently and majestically up to the foot of the glowing white naaru. Next to him stood an angry-looking draenei general, dressed out in full battle gear as if he expected to fight off an army any moment now.

“Why do you suffer the presence of this despicable Lady Liadrin?” he demanded angrily to A’dal. “She and her followers distort the Light and make a mockery of all we stand for!”

Ger’alin glared at the draenei commander. He’d sat often enough under the man’s teachings that the Aldor general should know better than to level that accusation at anyone within Ger’alin’s hearing. Waves of calming energy washed over the gathering as A’dal addressed the general.

“Patience, general,” the naaru said, his ringing chimes bringing tears to Liadrin’s eyes. “The Light embraces all who enter Shattrath in good faith.”

Liadrin cleared her throat and mentally went over what she wanted to say. She could sense the naaru’s patient attention upon her and spoke to that, “Thank you for allowing me to

speaking, A'dal. I know many of your allies despise me and my knights for our treatment of M'uru. When he was given to us by 'Prince' Kael'thas, we believed his power would help lead our people into a new age. I've come to realize our path was a false one. We were betrayed by the man we called our prince. In his lust for power, he sent the felblood to attack us, and spirit M'uru away to the Sunwell."

"Both our peoples suffered greatly at the hands of Kael'thas and his agents, Lady Liadrin. Your people were not the authors of their own fate, but they will die if they do not change. M'uru accepted his role long ago, knowing full well what would happen to him. Will you accept your own?"

Liadrin blinked, shocked. She glanced over her shoulder at Ger'alín who nodded. "I... I don't understand. You -- and M'uru -- knew all along that this would occur?" *How could you let this happen? To what purpose? Has the Light been trying to reach us all along?* she wondered to herself.

A'dal answered her question, chiming gently, "It wasn't I who foretold it, but Velen of the draenei:

*Silvery moon, washed in blood,
Led astray into the night, armed with the sword of broken Light.
Broken, then betrayed by one, standing there bestride the sun.
At darkest hour, redemption comes, in knightly lady sworn to blood."*

"I see it clearly now," Liadrin panted, overcome. Kneeling before A'dal, she glanced up at the being, feeling a pride in her submission she had not felt in many years. "I renounce my loyalties to House Sunstrider and its false prince. I pledge the blades of my Blood Knights to the defeat of Kil'jaeden and the restoration of Silvermoon. We will fight beside you, A'dal."

The draenei general stared at her, stunned. "We cannot have such as these fighting in our forces!" he protested. "She swears her loyalty to us now but can she and the other elves be trusted to keep it? They let Kael'Thas escape!"

"He was dead," Dar'ja growled, having heard the story frequently enough from Zerith and Ger'alín.

"A convenient excuse," the draenei snorted.

"Tiras'alan," A'dal began.

"Enough!" Ger'alín said quietly but in a tone that cut through the entire chamber. He stared at the floor, his jaws clenched angrily and his ears ringing. "I have had enough. He was dead. Believe it or not as you will. But I will go myself and fight him again. I will kill him, again. And this time, I will bring his head back as proof. For I have seen what will happen if we continue to engage in these petty rivalries. The sun will give broken light from a shattered sky. Our peoples, all of them, will be enslaved or killed by the Legion. Not even the Scourge will escape Kil'jaeden's anger. Our homelands, both here on broken Draenor and in lush Azeroth, will be ravaged. My wife will die; her brother will die, and all our dreams and ambitions will come to naught. I will say plainly that should Alayne pass out of this life, the very sun of my existence will be extinguished. But... I will fight Kael'Thas again whether any go with me or not. So, General Tiras'alan," he growled, "stay here in Shattrath with your armies. Stay here and stare suspiciously at the Scryers and at every sin'dorei who crosses your path. For my part, I will be returning to the Isle of Quel'Danas to put an end to this madness and to rescue my wife." Without waiting for an answer from the others, Ger'alín turned on his heel and stormed out of the building. Dar'ja followed only a second behind him and soon the entire building, save for the naaru, Liadrin, and Tiras'alan, stood empty, the others having chosen to follow the young sin'dorei warrior.

"Do you begin to see?" A'dal asked the draenei leader.

"I begin to see that this will require more in the way of logistics than I had originally thought," Tiras'alan sighed. "I do not trust you fully, Liadrin, but I will give you a chance to

earn that trust. Come with me. I will have a request sent to Voren'thal and his military leaders to meet us in the temple on the Aldor tier. We have much planning to do and little time in which to do it. A'dal, could you persuade young Sunrage and his friends to remain a short time?"

"I will ask him," A'dal promised happily. "I am sure he will agree to this. You see, as he does, that the time for the Aldor and the Scryers has passed."

"I...I do," Tiras'alan admitted, the admission dragged out of him. "But will the others? Even hearing myself say it is incredible. I think I may awaken tomorrow to find this all a strange dream."

"I leave it to you to convince them," the naaru said gravely. "Remember his words. 'For I have seen what will happen if we continue to engage in these petty rivalries. The sun will give broken light from a shattered sky.' Do they not echo the words of some of the more spiritually attuned amongst the Aldor?"

"They do. That they do."

"Beneath a shattered sky..." A'dal mused as Tiras'alan walked off to arrange the meetings. "And a broken sun..."

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Ger'alın shoved whetstones and oiling rags into his saddlebags and stopped to study the fruits of his efforts. His armor was neatly stowed away and his shield was ready for him to sling it on his back. He'd packed enough hardtack to last him a month without foraging and he had enough linen cloth rolled to make bandages for all but the most mortal hurts. His rucksack was filled with balms and salves. He was as ready as he ever would be. "Light give me strength," he prayed. "Just let me find Alayne and find a way to put an end to Kael for all time. Certainly with him dead, the others will come to their senses. But, I thought he was dead," he whined to the Light. "Don't let him return a second time."

"You ready, Gerry?" Callie asked, gently pushing open the door to his room. He turned and nodded.

"I should have known you'd come along," he smiled.

"Everyone's coming," she told him, grinning at his surprised look. "The entire Disorder of Azeroth and most of the Scryers. I don't know about the Aldor. There's been some kind of activity going on over there. Voren'thal went up to their tier a little bit ago as well."

"It doesn't matter," Ger'alın told himself as well as the Forsaken. "We're going our own way and we're going to put an end to this, once and for all."

"That we are," she agreed happily. "I can't wait until this is all over."

"That reminds me," he muttered, turning back and jogging to the desk. Pulling out a stoppered vial, he tossed it into his rucksack. Callie lifted her eyebrows in askance. "For the bruising Alayne's going to get from us hugging her or spanking her within an inch of her life. Not to mention a good cure-all for all the tricks you'll no doubt have up your sleeve. Try to avoid the oakenshield, though. I didn't like my skin turning purple from it and I doubt she'd take it half as well as I did." The Forsaken wagged her head as Ger'alın settled the sack over his shoulder, slung his shield on his back, and tossed his bulging saddlebags over a shoulder. The pair loped out of the building, making a bee-line for the stables. Just as Ger'alın tossed the saddlebags over the stable door and began preparing Lucky for saddling, a harried messenger jogged in.

"Ger'alın Sunrage?" the messenger called out to the entire stable.

"That's me," Ger'alın said, the currying brush on his hand.

"Voren'thal requests that you come to the temple on the Aldor tier immediately."

“Voren’tal can go sheer sheep.”

“Tiras’alan also would like to speak with you there.”

“He can card the wool. I’m bound for Quel’Danas.”

“But...”

“Come on, Ger’alin,” he heard Zerith say. “At the very least, you can tell them yourself. They want to see me too.”

“What would this be about?” the Blood Knight asked the priest as he tossed the currying comb to Callie. She muttered that he would owe her for this but set to work preparing his horse for him.

“I have no idea,” Zerith admitted when they were away from the others.

The pair walked on to the Aldor tier in silence, meeting the level gazes of the draenei guards with the level gazes of their own. Marching into the temple, they were stunned to see Liadrin, Voren’tal, and several of the leaders among the military wing of the Scryers seated around a table with their Aldor peers. The gathering seemed cordial enough with the Aldor courtesously asking the two newcomers if they wanted any of the fresh fruits and spiced wine set on the table. Zerith shook his head and Ger’alin, taking his cue from the priest, declined politely as well. “We are on our way back to the real battle,” Zerith said curtly, cutting through the pleasantries. “Make this quick.”

“Very well,” Voren’tal said, sounding amused. “I’m glad you’re all packed and ready to go. We will be marshaling our own forces soon and sending them to Quel’Danas. We would be interested in knowing if you would care to join your group to ours.”

“Voren’tal, we’ve been allied with the Scryers and we’ve even aided the Aldor but no, we are not going to choose sides,” Ger’alin muttered.

“The Aldor and the Scryers are no more,” Tiras’alan said. The two young sin’dorei blinked and stared at him.

“He speaks the truth,” Ishanah laughed. “It may take time for all of our followers to see it that way, but we have come to see the truth. Young Ger’alin, you spoke rightly when you said we can no longer afford time to waste on our petty disputes. Whatever happened in Tempest Keep, we can no longer bicker over it and point fingers. We must deal with it now. Perhaps, when Kael lies dead once more and the threat of the Legion is removed for once and for all, we will have time to apportion blame. Until then, we are uniting our forces under one banner. From this day forward, we will be known as the Shattered Sun Offensive. It would be our greatest honor if you and Zerith would consent to help lead our followers in this new endeavor.”

“So quickly?” Zerith asked skeptically. “I’ll consent to this but will your forces agree to be led by us?”

“Considering that your group has almost single-handedly defeated Vashj, Illidan, and Kael’Thas, yes. Our followers will accept your leadership once your deeds are recalled to them,” Voren’tal nodded. “Even old fogies like Thalodien who still believe, in their heart of hearts, that you shouldn’t be out of Silvermoon without a chaperone.”

“The Aldor will follow where you lead,” Ishanah promised. “After all, it has been your courage, your vision, and your wisdom that have led us down the path we must walk.”

“I accept,” Ger’alin said softly, “but with one condition. My wife...”

“If she is found, she will be taken captive,” Tiras’alan agreed. “She will not be killed on the spot unless there is no other way to subdue her. I have passed those orders on to my troops. No sin’dorei following Kael’Thas is to be killed if it can be avoided.”

“In deference to the lesson you have taught so many,” Liadrin said, clearly amused, “all will be given a chance for redemption.”

Ger’alin blushed furiously in embarrassment as he nodded, bowed at the waist, and walked out of the conference room. Zerith stayed behind, watching his friend with new eyes.

“Let us speak of your forces,” Zerith said once Ger’alin had closed the door behind him. “And let us speak of the layout of the island. I have only been there a few times and I do not know what may have changed since...”

Going over maps and wishing Ger’alin had opted to remain, Zerith and the others began making plans for how to establish a beach head operation and expand their holdings. Through it all, Zerith prayed silently that this would all be over soon. He was tired of being forced to be a hero.

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“The Shattered Sun Offensive,” Callie muttered, liking the sound of the words. Tau’re nodded absently.

“You’ll want to keep your back foot planted more solidly,” the tauren said to the former Aldor warrior. “Be ready to spin from a magical assault. Kael’s elves mix swords and sorcery quite effectively.”

“Captian Ger’alin has been drilling us on that,” the draenei grinned, setting himself as directed.

“Then Captian Ger’alin would have your head for forgetting what he’s tried to teach you,” Tau’re replied, his tone devoid of any trace of humor. “Remember, your goal is much more difficult than merely killing the enemy. Your goal is to subdue and defeat. Continue your drill. The best and the worst will face off against me in a half-hour.”

“They’ll be ready in a few days at most,” Callie observed.

“They should be ready now,” Tau’re sighed. “Grognak?”

“The shamans seem to be picking up on the trick of imbuing other’s weapons with natural power,” the shaman reported as Tau’re passed by his station. “Still, getting them to understand how to interrupt offensive spells is difficult. Most are more accustomed to healing or calling upon the elements.”

“They’ll learn. Even nature must go on the offensive against the unnatural,” the warrior commented. Grognak nodded and returned to his command. “I don’t even want to talk to the magi,” Tau’re sighed.

“Nishi and Zerith say that the magi are the most prepared of all. The warlocks have been instructing them in the methods of fel magic. Apparently, there are methods to turn fel magic back on its casters. You don’t want to see it, though. To make a long story short; be glad that Dar’ja and Zerith have been on hand to heal the warlocks. Otherwise, we’d be trying to figure out how to make them grow new skins.”

Tau’re grimaced. He’d seen the mages drilling enough to know that the scent of burnt flesh would hang thick where they were. They’d taken to drilling near Tuurem instead of in Shattrath, the results of their practices often too horrific for any but the strongest stomachs to take. “How often does Dar’ja lose her lunch?” he wondered aloud.

“Zerith has given up getting her to eat anything other than a light supper. She just brings it back up,” Callie shivered. “I should get back to my own group. Ger’alin took over for me so I could help you make the rounds but I don’t think the Blood Knight has ever grasped the concept of really dirty fighting.”

“He might surprise you,” Tau’re chuckled. “I’m surprised that my voice ever came back down to its normal register after our first brawl.”

“Light, that’s worse,” Callie giggled. “I’d better get back there before he incapacitates my group entirely. It will only be a few more days, you think?” she asked.

“Only a few more, I hope,” he agreed. “I don’t know how he finds the energy.”

“When it comes to Alayne, he could probably pick up a mountain and carry it around the world.”

“May the ancestors watch over her. I wish she were back here,” Tau’re sighed. “I don’t like seeing him so tense.”

“I don’t like it, either. You know, Tau’re, the thing I regret the most is how all of us acted towards her after Illidan died. I mean, yes, she hurt all of the Forsaken with the necromancy she used. She offended everyone. But she was out of her mind with rage. Every last one of us knows how she gets when someone she loves is hurt. But we still let ourselves turn away from her when she needed us the most. When she needed her friends to support her, to talk to her, to help her take care of Ger’alin and help her find a way to cure him, we left her alone. We left her to try to help Ger’alin on her own. No wonder she slipped off as she did without a word. She probably believed none of us would help her if she asked. I still just don’t understand how she could have possibly wound up serving Kael’Thas. She hates the Legion worse than she hates the Scourge.”

“I don’t know,” Tau’re sighed. “I don’t know the lady as well as you and Ger’alin.”

“I don’t think anyone knows her as well as Gerry. Maybe Zerith but in a different manner.”

“Why do you call him ‘Gerry?’”

“Because that’s what he was called among humans. ‘Ger’alin’ is a bit of a mouthful. Alayne would probably have been called Lana or Laine. Elven names come clumsily to human lips. Besides, it drives him batty when I do it. I think no one has called him that since he lived in an orphanage. It’s just my way of letting him know I think of him as a brother. A little brother. I am probably five years older than him.”

Tau’re nodded absently as his strides took them to the object of their discussion. Ger’alin had doffed his shirt and tied his waist-length hair atop his head. Circling with one of the Forsaken, he explained various holds that could be used against elves, offering himself up as an example. The tauren watched in amazement as the fighter let himself be pinned several times, barking at his students about the proper way to prevent a sin’dorei from regaining his feet. “And I’m a whelp compared to most of the ones you’ll be facing!” he roared as an orc tried to find the proper pressure point to render the man unconscious. “They’ll be struggling and fighting you the whole time. Either you learn this now or...”

“I think I got it,” the orc muttered as he gently let his instructor slip to the ground. “He’s out cold.”

“Kick him in the knee,” Callie said flatly. “He could be faking.”

“He’s not.”

“Do not disobey my orders,” the rogue said, her irritation plain. “Kick the side of his knee and see if he’s really out cold.”

The orc lifted back his leg to do as ordered and, just as he began to throw it forward, Ger’alin’s hand shot out and grabbed his other ankle. Jerking hard, the elf pulled the orc to the ground and was on top of him, deft hands finding the pressure points quickly and rendering the student unconscious. Standing up, he knelt quickly by the fallen man’s legs, reaching out and pinching the nerve that ran just under the knee joint. “And that is how you make absolutely certain your opponent is out of the fight,” he concluded. “Any questions? No? Pair off. Your squadron leader will want to see that I haven’t been wasting your time.”

“You’ve done well, Gerry,” Callie whispered to him as she watched her troops face off. “They were good before now. Kael’s forces will be no match for the Shattered Sun Offensive.”

“Light, I hate that name,” the sin’dorei grimaced. “It’s a name of ill omen.”

“What makes you say that?” she asked curiously. “Guard up, Rok’ah! Don’t let Suuani fake you out like that. A child of five could see that one coming.”

“Because it is,” Ger’alin insisted. “I hope Tiras’alan lets us get on with it, soon. I’m still not clear on just how we’re supposed to establish a beachfront when he’s done nothing but worry over how we’re going to take the Terrace. That’s putting the cart before the horse.”

“Zerith’s already worked out how to establish the beachfront and he’s put the magi on it as their top priority,” Callie reminded him. “And you’re the one who won’t go watch those practices. Not that I blame you,” she added quickly.

“I’ve heard his plan. It’s madness,” Ger’alin grumped. “Ingenious but madness. Whoever heard of forcing a beach head by taking control of a bunch of golems?”

“It’s the best option,” Callie said, defending the priest. “Less bloodshed all around. It allows us to conserve our forces for the breakout. What else would you have us do? Fight tooth and nail to establish a holding and keep it?”

“I just can’t stand staying here doing nothing but drilling all damned day!” he exploded. “I should be there already. She and I should be away together somewhere safe, somewhere far from everyone! I don’t sleep anymore, Callie. I can’t sleep without her curled up next to me, her head on my chest, purring like Sar’la’s kitten! And when exhaustion does finally drag me under, even my most pleasant dreams are a nightmare when I wake up without her there!”

“Someone sounds impatient,” Callie said blankly.

“Someone has a good grasp of the obvious,” he retorted. “I’m going to go force myself to watch the magi. Maybe then I’ll feel like we’re going somewhere soon.”

Callie watched him go, wondering if he really would watch the magi. Those drilling sessions were not for the faint of heart or the tender of stomach. “If it comes to getting Alayne, he’d probably force himself to watch an innocent woman being tortured,” she sighed to herself. Turning, she started to head back towards her troops when she found herself falling face-first onto the ground.

“Sorry,” Sar’la said, blushing crimson. Callie scrambled to her feet and helped the girl back up. “You should look down sometimes,” the orphan grinned.

“I have a lot on my mind, Sar’la,” the rogue muttered, trying to be kind to the girl but unable to find the patience Ger’alin had for putting up with the child.

“I need you to help me get to the Aldor temple, please,” Sar’la asked hesitantly. “You will be leaving soon and there’s something I want to give to Mister Ger’alin. But I need the Aldor to help me make it perfect.”

“Everyone is very busy right now,” Callie said, wincing when she saw the child’s face crumple. “I suppose I can take you up there right now. But, don’t get upset if they don’t have time to help you right away. Even Mister Ger’alin has had to make appointments to see the Aldorites the last few days.”

“Oh, I won’t bother them or take a lot of time,” Sar’la babbled happily as she bent to cradle a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms. “It’s mostly just...no, I want it to be a surprise for him,” she finished resolutely. “Come on,” she grinned as she jogged, carrying her burden awkwardly, “I know, you’re busy. But thanks!”

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Grand Anchorite Almonen stood near the elevator that led down to the Terrace of Light. From his vantage point, he could see the drilling taking place below. He saw Captian Sunrage storm off, pulling a shirt over his head as he strode across the bridge and out of the city. Wondering idly if such inaction was what was eating away at the sin’dorei, he continued to watch the practicing below, knowing that soon the time would come to address the recruits of the Shattered Sun Offensive and imbue them with their sacred purpose.

“Now, we shouldn’t take much of their time,” he heard a gravelly voice cautioning someone. “They are very busy.”

“I know, Miss Callie,” he heard a child’s elven tones reply. “I promise, this won’t take but a minute. I just need to find a priest and ask him for a little favor.”

“Why do a child and a Forsaken seek a priest?” the Grand Anchorite asked curiously, stepping out of the shadows. The little girl fell to her knees and bowed her head in fear and reverence. The Forsaken looked embarrassed. “She has a favor to ask and she won’t tell me what it is,” the once-living woman said abashedly.

“I promise, Father,” the girl said quickly, “it won’t take but a minute. And I’ve been very good lately. I’ve prayed and been nice and shared my toys and even helped out the littler kids. Matron even says I’ve been a good example. Please do me this little favor and I’ll never ask for anything again.”

“I can hardly refuse such a sincere request,” the draenei said gravely, forcing his lips not to quirk in an amused smile. He studied the girl, trying to recall her name. He’d taught catechism at the orphanage often enough to have some familiarity with the children. “Now, Sar’la, what is it you need a priest for?”

“I want you to ask the Light to bless this,” she said, unwrapping the cloth bundle she’d been carrying in her arms. A beautiful blue mace, the weapon of a warrior dedicated to serving the cause of peace instead of the blade of war, lay within. “It belonged to my papa,” she explained. “It’s the only thing I have of him and my mama. Matron said that the man who brought me to the orphanage gave that to her and told her to tell me it belonged to a fine warrior who fought to protect his daughter and wife from evil,” she said, the adult phrases coming uneasily to her childish lips. “I want my friend Mister Ger’alin to have it and to use it to protect all of us again. I know he likes his sword but I want him to have this as well. So, if you could please ask the Light to make it a good hammer and maybe make it so he’ll like it, I’d be very happy.”

“Ger’alin would love it,” Callie said quickly, amazed at the quality of the weapon the little girl wanted to give away. “But it’s your father’s, Sar’la. If you give it to Ger’alin, it might get messed up if he uses it to fight demons.”

“Oh, that won’t happen,” Sar’la said proudly. “I hope it’s okay,” she squirmed, sneaking a peek at the Anchorite, “but last night I asked the Light to make certain that this hammer would always be in good shape and not get banged up from smashing demons. My dad smashed a lot of demons with this! I just know he did! And Mister Ger’alin can smash them now and when I get bigger, maybe he and Miss Alayne will teach me how to smash them. But I want him to have this special hammer. And I want the Light to make sure that he doesn’t get hurt while he carries it and that he can bring Miss Alayne back here and we can all be friends,” she said quickly, tears coming to her eyes. “Please, Father, would you do this for me? I’ll be good for the rest of my life, I promise!”

Kneeling down, the Grand Anchorite, formerly of the Aldor and currently of the Shattered Sun Offensive, set his hands upon the weapon. He could feel the care that had gone into crafting such a mace. Even without magical or holy aid, it was a weapon worthy of respect. Praying silently to the Light, he besought it to grant the child’s wishes in as far as it wished. By the time he finished, the sun was beginning to set and the little girl had sat down, her back against one of the pillars, dozing. The Forsaken had returned to her duties. Looking down, he saw that the mace glowed faintly with holy power. “Sar’la,” he whispered, rousing the orphan from her slumber. She blinked and stared at him. “It is done. Take this fine weapon to your friend and ask him to wield it in the name of the Light and with the blessings of the naaru.” Wrapping it back up carefully in the blanket, he helped the orphan pick it up and escorted her down to the Scryer’s tier.

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“Tomorrow’s the day,” Ger’alin said happily to himself as he tried to settle down from the good news. He’d needed good news after watching the magi drill. Jemuya had given up trying to find a way to salvage her necklace once they’d finally managed to separate it from the skin of her neck. The Blood Knight had seen many gruesome sights in his battles but he never thought he’d see anything like what the magic users were doing to each other in hopes of mastering the art of countering fel spells. He tried not to think about what the possible backlash could be if those measures had to be used against – or even just in close proximity to – Alayne. “Light guard her and keep her safe. If only she knew we were coming. If only we knew why she was there.”

As the time to face her on the Isle of Quel’Danas drew near, Ger’alin felt a nervous tingling he had not experienced since the day he stood outside the door of her bedroom, fully intent on telling her how he felt before Ta’sia could make things worse. Coupled with it was a dread of actually seeing her again, knowing that he could not very well demand Zerith remain away from the very action he was so instrumental in bringing about. “If he dies...I don’t want to think about what it would mean to go the rest of my life without Zerith behind me. I can’t even imagine what would happen if she were taken away from me. The last time was bad enough; I could only dream about what might have been. But now...,” he sighed. “now I know what I’d be losing and I can’t take that. Light, if she has to depart this life,” he prayed silently, “let me follow soon after.”

Gently folding one of his linen undershirts and recalling how Alayne preferred to roll them tightly when packing, he grinned, both longing and dreading their reunion. A tap on the door pulled him from his reverie. Opening it, he saw Almonen, the Aldor’s Grand Anchorite, standing with a hand on Sar’la’s shoulder. The orphan carried a burdensome cloth-wrapped bundle which she clung to tightly. The Blood Knight hoped the child had not dreamed up some argument to try to persuade him to take her along. She had asked several times already and each time had been upset when he explained that a battlefield was no place for a girl her age. “I just wanted to give this to you,” she said quickly before he could ask why she was there. “It belonged to my papa. I want you to have it now. The Anchorite said a prayer over it so it will be really good for you to use now,” she finished in a rush.

Bending down on one knee, he took the proffered bundle. Unwrapping it, his eyes widened in shock when he beheld a masterwork mace, the weapon of one of the higher ranking fighters in the old quel’dorei army. “I can’t accept this,” he breathed. “It’s too valuable. It was your father’s. You should keep it for the day you can wield it in honor of his memory, Sar’la.”

“But I want you to have it. I’m sure my papa would, too. You’re going to fight demons. He fought demons and skeletons. I bet he smashed a lot of them with that hammer. I want you to smash them, too, and then come back here so we can be friends. I know you like your sword and it’s a really nice sword,” she said, being forced to stop and gasp for air. “But I got the Anchorite to ask the Light to especially bless this hammer.”

Ger’alin glanced back to his bed and the sword laying on it. It had been a gift from his commander back in Theramore, a memento of his first promotion. The elf had been all of seventeen when he’d won it for outstanding courage in the face of ogre assaults against the guard towers. His shift had been besieged for three days before he’d rallied them to fight the ogres off. He’d carried it everywhere with him, intending only to replace it when the day came that he found his father’s blade. Though he’d searched high and low through the ruins of Windrunner Village and had even tried to track down any survivors from his father’s battalion, Ger’alin had been unable to find the antique quel’dorei sword. He thought of how

much it would mean for him to have his father's blade on his hip and couldn't imagine ever parting with it once regained. Did the girl have no idea what she was giving away?

"He would want you to have it," she repeated adamantly. "And I do, too. If you have it, you'll be safe and you can bring it back and teach me how to use it one day. But you can keep it for always. I'd just want to learn how to use it so I could get one for myself. I don't think my papa would want me using his. It's like you said, he probably wouldn't want me fighting anyway. If I used his hammer, he'd know it was me and he'd be upset. But, if you use it, he'll know it's not me and he'll be happy that someone is smashing demons and skeletons and monsters."

"I can't take something that belonged to your father," he said softly. "One day, this will mean more to you than you can know right now. I can't just take it because you don't understand that."

Sar'la sniffled and tried to hold back a sob of disappointment. Staring at the ground, she dug her toe into the carpet, trying to figure out a way to convince him to take the hammer. "What if I just let you borrow it?"

"Sar'la..."

"No, just borrow it for a while. It's been prayed over and all so it's a good hammer. You use it and let it protect you and then, when you get done, you can bring it back to me and teach me how to use it."

"I thought you just said your father would be upset if you used it," he teased, a twinkle in his eye.

"Well..." she said, dragging the word out, "maybe you'll teach me how to use it but I'll pray and make sure my papa knows it's just so I know how to use it for fun. Like those play fights you and Mister Tau're have. Those look fun. You always laugh and call him a silly old cow."

"Sar'la, I can't..."

"Please," she begged, tears in her eyes. "It would mean so much to me. It would mean that you would come back. Please take it and please come back!" she sobbed. "And bring Miss Alayne too. I don't want any more people going off to fight and maybe not coming back like my mama and papa."

"Sar'la," he began.

"Please!"

"Here," he said, clapping his sword to his chest. Digging into his saddlebags, he pulled out a square of linen cloth intended for bandages. Kneeling down, he held it to her face.

"Blow your nose," he smiled gently. She snorted into the makeshift hankerchief, her face blotchy and red. "If I take that hammer, I want you to have my sword. It's my favorite sword," he said. "I want you to hold on to it for me. When I get back, I'll teach you how to use it and show you how to use your father's hammer. And I will be coming back, Sar'la. Miss Alayne and I will be coming back."

He prayed that he would be able to keep that promise as the little girl squealed and clapped her hands in delight. Flinging her arms around his neck, she babbled how happy she was that he had accepted her gift and how good she would be until they were back. After swearing she would say a million prayers a day, he managed to disentangle himself from her embrace, wipe her face off, and send her back to the orphanage in the care of the Grand Anchorite.

Alayne sighed and struggled to remain awake. For days she had been sequestered with Anveena, leaving only to pass waste. The eredar honor guards struck her as being prison-keepers and she was the imprisoned.

“Please,” Anveena whispered.

“Just be quiet,” Alayne sighed. For days she had tried everything she knew to attune herself with the Sunwell’s hidden power. Several times she had felt a tickling tingle telling her she was close. Still, every time she redoubled her efforts, she felt farther and farther from her goal.

Just as she was about to give up for the day – or was it night? – she felt a thrill run through her body. Power almost forgotten, power that tormented her dreams, ran through her. Her green eyes widened in pleasurable shock as she felt the flow growing stronger. “Yes,” she sighed, her lips parted. “Yes, I have done it.”

Anveena began weeping. Wrapped up in the warmth of a sun she had almost forgotten, Alayne ached to comfort the woman. To let her know the truth. But the eredar standing guard over her made that impossible. “I must retire to the Halls of Theory,” she said loftily. “Inform my Lord that once the shield is in place, we may begin. I covet, however, the journals of Dath’Remar which speak of the original portal.”

“They will be brought to you,” one of the sorcerers said, his demonic voice clashing against the almost-holy power Alayne felt.

“No need,” she said quickly, rising to her feet. “I want to see the sun of the old world just once more. Soon the sun of the Master will shine forth. It will be... nice to have a memory of this world’s imperfections with which to compare and contrast the wonders Kil’jaeden will bring to this plane. Keep the woman safe,” she instructed. One of the sorcerers departed with her, his steps taking him away from her to find Kael’Thas. Alayne herself strode out of the structure housing the remains of the Sunwell. Leaning against a pillar, she basked in the warmth of the sun. Tears came to her eyes as she realized this would be the last time she would see its light or feel its warmth on her face.

“Alayne?” a familiar voice asked in disbelief. “They said you were here but...”

“Mir’el?”

“Ssh!” he said, gesturing quickly. “Come, sit, speak with your old teacher,” he added, his unease and distaste around freely roaming demons clear on his face. “Let us go to the beach. The air is sweeter there.”

“Mir’el, what are you doing here?” she demanded flatly, refusing to be budged.

“I... I heard what our prince did. I’ve heard what he has planned. You must come away with me, Alayne,” he whispered. “I had no idea what was going on when I gave my consent for you to marry into House Sunstrider. Your mother and father will come back from beyond and kill me if I don’t get you out of here.”

“I am staying.”

“Child, no,” he said, grabbing her by the arm and trying to pull her away with him. “Lor’thermar has a force ready to sweep this isle. I do not want you to get caught up in it. Whatever loyalties you have to our prince, Alayne, set them aside. He’s gone mad. Whether it was his thirst for power, his longing for the Sunwell, or his hatred of Arthas, he’s gone mad. You would never serve the Legion. I know this. I taught you the fel arts myself. Now, come with me while there is still time.”

“Is this man bothering you?” Vangri asked, striding over to Alayne and Mir’el. “Ah. Baron Darkweaver. I shall be proud to join your lineage to my own.”

“The honor is all mine,” Mir’el gasped, aghast that the contorted features of the once-handsome blood elf. “I beg your indulgence to have dinner with my ward one last time before she leaves my care for yours. Come along, Alayne.”

“Arrest him,” she said coldly, her eyes narrowing. “He’s come from Silvermoon to disrupt the summoning of the Master. Put him in with the other fools who will face their due when the mighty Kil’jaeden claims this world for his own!”

“Alayne!” Mir’el cried as Vangri grabbed his arms, forcing them behind his back. The warlock was no match for the demonically gifted fighter. Alayne watched, forcing herself to adopt a look of satisfaction, as Vangri dragged Mir’el away to the cells beneath the Terrace. “Did you do this to Jez’ral as well, Alayne? How could you? Your mother would...” she heard Mir’el’s anguished pleas echo through the cavernous building. Closing her eyes again, she leaned once more against the pillar, letting the cool stone soothe her burning face as she mastered her weeping.

“Baron Darkweaver will not stand in our way,” Vangri said, sounding satisfied when he returned. “What did he say to you? You went white as snow for a moment.”

“Prepare for an attack. Theron obviously does not know who rules the sin’dorei,” she said icily. “I will be in the Halls of Theory and then in the heart of the Sunwell. We must make haste or all will be lost.”

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Zerith breathed deeply, inhaling the tangy salt air of the sea. The breeze that blew them northward from Quel’Thalas stirred his hair and cooled him, helping him remain calm before the storm to come. “So?” he asked Ger’alin, trying to keep the man from pacing a hole in the deck.

“So what?”

“What do you think about Lord Lor’thermar’s statement? That all who disavow House Sunstrider have nothing to fear.”

“It means we could go home again.”

“What about that house in Nagrand? It should be just about finished by now.”

“I...we’ll worry about that when the time comes, I suppose,” he sighed. “It is fairly remote for being so close to Shattrath. And, Garrosh did say that if she stayed away from Garadar, he’d keep his forces away from there. Perhaps...but I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“She might be safer in Silvermoon.”

“She might be safer on the White Lady,” he retorted. “The closer I get to her, the more afraid I grow. What’s happened to her? Why did she do this? My dreams say...”

“If I hear another word about someone’s dreams of ill-omen,” Zerith groaned.

“Well what else am I supposed to think? They’re so vivid. So real. They chase me into my waking hours.”

“They’re dreams. The more I think about it, the more ridiculous it all seems to me. I would never hurt Alayne. She’d never hurt me. Remember when she came back to us? She couldn’t hurt us then. She protected us with her own body. She and I are bonded by that,” he said, smiling sadly and rubbing a hand over the center of his chest. “Both of us shot through the chest. Both of us alive in spite of it.”

Ger’alin nodded absently, not really hearing anything the priest had said. “How long do you think it will take?” he asked.

“A few hours should be telling,” Zerith replied. “The magi are in the boat just ahead of us. The illusion should hold just long enough for them to disembark on the beachfront and mingle to begin sabotaging the golems. By sundown, we should be ready for the first wave to press in.”

“Let us pray that it holds as long as it can,” Ger’alin sighed. “We should have put more fighters in that group.”

“More fighters would mean less spell-disrupters to sabotage the golems.”

“You’re right, as always.”

“We’ll get to her soon.”

“Today can’t be soon enough.”

“Hold yourself back, Ger’alin. We can’t just rush in there the minute we set foot on the sand. You were in enough of the tactical meetings to know that.”

“It’s begun,” the Blood Knight said, a thrill entering his voice. The boat ahead of them docked at the harbor and lowered its gangplank. Ger’alin winced as dozens of Wretched seemed to spill out of it, bowing and cringing for their ‘masters.’ They hastened about the orders they were given by the Sunfury, careful to maintain the illusion by stopping to siphon energies from the fel crystals floating around the structures. This often earned them a lash across their backs and shouts to return to their business. Further out at sea, Ger’alin and the others waited until they could see only a handful of their fellows still along the docks, sweeping and unloading supplies from their ship. The rest had streamed through the island and would be watching for opportunities to sabotage the arcane golems patrolling along the beach and the roads. Ger’alin schooled himself to patience, waiting, praying that the time would come soon and would not be too late. Every time he glanced at the priest, he shivered, hoping the foul dreams would not come true.

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“Lor’thermar plans to attack us?” Kael’Thas asked, grinning smugly. “He always did get above himself. I had thought Rommath would keep him in line. Perhaps I misjudged both of them. A pity,” he sighed. “An infinite pity.”

“We must hurry,” Alayne said urgently. “I have read over the history of the first attempt to summon Sargeris into our world. I believe I see what went wrong and how to prevent it. However, we must not...”

“...be disrupted,” Kael’Thas nodded. “You will not be. I will guard your summoning with my very life. Go now. I have sent runners to gather in the others who are to help you. Do this quickly, Lady Dawnrunner. The Master must be in our world no later than moonrise.”

Alayne knew that sunset was but a few hours off. The daystar had already sunk half its height from its noonday peak. She nodded and began to jog off. She peeled off to her quarters briefly, laying her hands on her journal and muttering words of magic. Nodding in satisfaction; he would understand and would know, at least – she owed him that much – she reached into a hidden pocket in her robes. There. The letter she had pinned just scant days ago. It would pay off another debt. One she had not realized she would owe so soon. Jogging back down the corridor, she glanced to make certain no one was watching before letting herself in to the prison cells. Striding past the holding pens containing Wretched who had proven less than reliable, she sought the solitary cells. She questioned a guard, learning the location of her target and had him follow her, unlocking the door. Stepping in, she motioned that she wanted privacy. “He is my guardian. I owe him the chance to explain himself.”

A miserable Mir’el sat, his hands bound behind his back and his legs cuffed to the bed. He glanced over at her sadly, his eyes filled with tears of defeat and sorrow. “That your mother’s child would do this,” he sobbed. “What has become of you?”

“Silence!” she said harshly, forcing herself not to melt and comfort him. He would know soon enough. She’d heard enough from Jez’ral to know that Mir’el would need whatever solace he could find in the long days to come. “Why have you betrayed our king?” she demanded as she strode over to stand before him. Reaching into her pocket, she fingered the sealed note and largely ignored his expected reply. Glancing back to the door, assuring herself that the guard was not peeking in through the barred square, she pulled the note out and shoved it between the mattress and bed platform. “You are a traitor to our rightful ruler.

You will soon learn the folly of opposing the Legion. This world will burn, Mir'el. But the fire will bring forth the Light," she grinned, wishing she could give him more than an oblique hint of what to expect. He sighed and lowered his face, sobbing brokenly. Turning around, she strode out of the cell, hoping he would read the note she'd left instead of ripping it to pieces once he was freed.

"My dear wife-to-be," Vangri grinned when she left the detention area. She blinked and tried to hold herself together. She was so close to her goal. Nothing could disturb her now! Banishing the handsome face that flooded her inward eye, trying not to let her fingers remember the feel of his brown silken hair when she'd combed it, and shoving away the memories of the nights she'd spent as his wife, never dreaming she'd ever be so happy, she tried to steel herself by recounting how he would hate her for the rest of his days. "Alayne, what's the matter? You look ill."

"Soon I will be beyond these weaknesses," she laughed, her laughter sounding hollow to her own ears. "I look forward to what is to come so strongly, my lord Vangri, that being recalled to reality startles me of late."

"I look forward to it, too," he grinned ferally. "I have come to escort you back to the chamber. Do me the honor of permitting it, my dear."

Alayne made herself smile up at him and looped her arm through his. Letting him propel her onward, she sucked in a breath of shocked surprise when she saw that the corridor leading up to the Sunwell was lined by the guards who had manned Manaforge Duro under her command. Several were missing, of course. Largely those Kael considered unproven or untrustworthy. She'd heard rumors that they had been killed by the same group who had killed Kael'Thas. She prayed that some remained alive. They had not been bad people; merely...confused and misguided. "Let the naaru deal with them with mercy," she prayed silently as she smiled, tight-lipped, at the honor guard standing alongside the red runner leading to the final door she would ever pass through. Tears of joy and sorrow filled her eyes as she squared her shoulders, gave Vangri her leave to remain until the watch was done, and strode regally to her destiny.

The long hallway seemed far too short as she pushed open the door to the Sunwell's chamber. Inside, the men and women chosen to aid her in this task glanced up expectantly. Smiles of eager anticipation shone on their faces. Hidden in the shadows of the room were the eredar guards. Alayne ignored them and focused her attention on the human woman laying in a quivering heap of tears on the golden floor of the Sunwell itself. "Let us begin," she said. "The hour is at hand."

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Lost in the rush of magical energy flowing through, over, and around her, Alayne tried to keep her mind clear and focused on what she was to do. This already difficult task was made more complex by the fact that she had to deceive a master of deception while doing it. Sweat trickled down her face and she could hear her heart thundering in her ears. Her whole body felt slick and oily. The very residue of arcane and fel energies seemed to stick to her sweat-slicked skin. In the corner, the eredar sorcerers watched avidly as the elves channeled the pure essence of the Sunwell from Anveena who now hovered over the remnants of her former home, shielded from all stray energies. The golden pool pulsated with power. Alayne shivered and nodded to herself. Soon it would be time to begin laying the groundwork for the portal.

The moment came sooner than she expected. As the Sunwell began to spark back to life, shockwaves of pure, soul-refreshing energies emanated from the room. Alayne winced even as she savored the sensation long thought lost to them. Those waves would interfere with

almost every spell being cast outside of the room. The arcane golems might even break down again. Putting the concerns out of her mind, she stared down into the pool and, drawing upon the abilities of the Magisters gathered with her, began weaving together the delicate, intricate threads that would create the portal for Kil'jaeden to enter Azeroth.

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“So far so good,” Ger'alın said, bouncing on his toes as he watched the gathering on the beach through the looking glass he'd been given. “They should signal the golems to begin attacking shortly. That's our cue to move in.”

“We know that, Gerry,” Callie said, amused. “We were only in the same meetings.”

Ger'alın snorted and said nothing. He continued to watch the beachfront operations. Thus far, the disguised Wretched had been able to manipulate close to two dozen golems. That would have to be enough. The Sunfury would be so busy fighting their own constructs off that the Disorder of Azeroth should be able to slip in and render most of them incapacitated before anyone knew what was going on.

Seconds before he felt it, he saw something wash over the island. The golems began sparking, whirling, running, and pummeling the nearest target. “Did they already... Light, what was that?” he sighed heavily. “If I didn't know better, I would swear it felt like...”

“Move in!” Zerith shouted. “The magic's been disrupted. We're under attack!”

Sure enough, whatever it was that had washed over the island, disrupting the golems, had also interfered with the illusion that let the Shattered Sun forces pass for Wretched. The Sunfury elves were quick to try to apprehend and round up their infiltrators. Little did they know that seven boats more awaited their chance to land and disgorge their passengers upon the sands. Still, the golems running amuck created enough chaos for the Shattered Sun evade their would-be captors for the moment.

As soon as the ship he was on ran aground, nearly capsizing, Ger'alın leapt from the bow, landing lightly on his feet in the shallow water. Wading as quickly as his armor would allow him, he met his attackers with his shield and his mace, laying about, careful to disarm and disable where possible and regretting each death he was forced to inflict. “Light be with their mad, misguided souls,” he prayed. Long moments passed as he scanned the area, seeking an enemy who had not been subdued either by the Shattered Sun or the insane golems. His eyes widened in shock when he realized that the sun was sinking into the ocean. How long had they been fighting?

“I believe we've established a front,” Thalodien said blankly, breathing heavily. “It looks like most of the Sunfury not subdued have fled the field. Let's take this opportunity to catch our breaths, count our losses, and prepare to press on. Who knows what stands between us and that?” he asked, pointing towards the grand Magister's Terrace in the distance. The late evening sun glinted off the gilded spires and bloodred stonework, casting an eerily evil light on the building. Ger'alın shuddered as he realized that the white marble looked as bloodstained as the beach before him.

“Let's rest quickly,” the Blood Knight muttered in response to Thalodien's suggestion. “We shouldn't waste a moment.” Suiting words to action, he began hurrying about, laying hands on the wounded who needed it and keeping a constant watch among the captured elves for his wife. “Light, be with us all through the coming night,” was his constant prayer. “Alayne...”

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Mir'el rubbed his wrists against the shackles binding them behind his back and wondered what was in that paper Alayne had shoved beneath the mattress. Tears welled in his eyes whenever he thought of the way she'd looked at him. Miris's face twisted into something he couldn't bear to think about. He'd loved Miris like a sister – and Alayne like the daughter he'd never had and never would have – but he couldn't love a person who served the very Legion he'd spent his life learning to undo. Still, what had she shoved beneath the mattress? “Probably something for the guards,” he muttered sullenly as he worked at the cuffs. “Damn mage-bonded restraints!”

A wave of energy passed through him, trilling his soul like a piping flute. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and his ears quirked forward as his eyes widened in shock. “Light, what is going on?” He tugged at the cuffs again, feeling them begin to give way. That surprised him; cuffs against magi were generally all but impossible to remove without the key. Jerking his wrists apart as hard and as fast as the restraints would allow him, he managed to crack one enough to force his wrist out of it. Pulling his arms in front of him, he whistled through his teeth. “Hopefully someone can heal that,” he sighed, watching as his freed wrist swelled like a balloon and turned an ugly purple. Settling it carefully against his chest, he reached down with the other hand to tug the papers the girl had shoved there free. He stared at them for a long moment, wondering if he really wanted to read them before the noise in the hallway caught his attention.

“The beach has been taken,” he heard one of his captors say breathlessly. “We must redouble our defenses of the Terrace. Herd the prisoners into the largest holding cell you can find; we cannot spare men to guard them.”

Mir'el stuffed the folded papers into the inner pocket of his robe and sat with his arms in his lap as he gently, and with much wincing, worked the broken cuff back around his swollen wrist. He let his sleeve fall over it, hoping that the guards would be too rushed to pay much mind as long as he acted as if he were still cuffed. His ruse seemed to work as he let the guard hustle him out of his solitary cell and into a much larger one. Mir'el's eyes widened as he took in the sight of the many Wretched and maddened elves locked in there. Only a few, it seemed, were true prisoners. “What in the world?” he wondered aloud.

“The results of that damnable ‘anointing,’” one of the shivering Wretched said. “Our lord has gone mad! No power is worth this!” he shrieked. Mir'el shuddered, biting back screams when his broken wrist brushed against his hip. “What are you in for? Decide that maybe Kil'jaeden wasn't our savior after all?”

“I've opposed the Legion since I was old enough to know right from wrong,” Mir'el said softly. “I followed the fel path only to learn to fight the demon fire with fire. I have instructed others with that goal in mind. My greatest failure is that...,” he sighed, pressing the note Alayne had left him, “one of my students has chosen to throw her lot in with the Legion. She's why I'm here.”

“You're Mir'el Darkweaver,” the Wretched said, surprised. “You don't recognize me, do you, my old teacher? Sam'vah Sunsblade.”

“Sam'vah? You barely lasted two days before you decided you were better off under the tutelage of Lady Liadrin,” Mir'el said breathlessly. “What led you down...”

“I was one of the first pilgrims into Outland,” the man said bitterly. “It was just before Voren'thal the Wise saw the truth that I only now understand. I swore fealty everlasting to Sunstrider on the bridge of Tempest Keep. I was assigned a position to guard one of his manaforges. I kept my oath. I gave my best service. And my king has repaid me richly, has he not? Damn him and damn that Lady Dawnrunner for not keeping me from the anointing! If she knew this would be the result, why didn't she work harder to keep us from submitting to it once we had the Terrace? Ach,” he said, turning a pale green from the effort the anger cost him, “I wouldn't have listened. Maybe if Ben'lir had... but he was left behind. Kael'Thas

realized not all of his guards would submit to the Legion. Better to keep those with reservations behind in Outland; to not let them see that they were right! How I wish I had been one of them!”

“Ben’lir stayed with Kael?” Mir’el said, stunned. “I heard he had sworn to destroy the Scourge...”

“Ben’lir was one of the first to turn against Voren’tal. For the longest time, he believed that only by allying with the Legion could we destroy the Scourge. But, then, the Lady Dawnrunner came and he began to change his mind. Seeing that girl work herself so hard and seeing Kael’Thas let her drive herself so murderously... but damn her! She probably stands in the Sunwell even as we speak, pulling doom down on us all!”

“What is the Lady Dawnrunner to Kael’Thas?”

“One of his most valuable assests. She was your student, was she not?” Mir’el nodded sadly. “She learned her lessons well. She’s almost single-handedly responsible for us being here so soon. We hadn’t expected to make our move for another half-year. Kael was going to send feelers out to the capitol, to make certain of his reception. But then this Dawnrunner showed up and the next thing we know, we’re stepping through a portal, being anointed, and preparing to summon the Deceiver.”

Sam’vah was seized by heaves before Mir’el could reply. The warlock knelt down and held the man by the shoulders, keeping him steady while he sicked up. When he finished, Mir’el laid him gently on the floor and wiped the sweat from his face with his good hand and sleeve. “How could we have been so blind?”

Standing up and walking over to tend to another suffering sin’dorei, Mir’el pondered that question himself. Meanwhile, the letter from Alayne crinkled in his pocket.

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Jez’ral sat watching Sar’la play. The late evening sun filtered through the clouds and trees above Shattrath, casting gentle shadows and cooling shades across the city. The two tiers and Lower City were ghost towns with all of the soldiers off in Quel’Thalas. The warlock sighed and tried not to feel utterly useless. After all, he still could not cast more than the most basic spells. The more advanced techniques of nether weaving were slow in returning to his shattered memory.

“What’s the matter, Mister Jez’ral?” Sar’la asked, pausing in her play.

“Nothing, nothing,” he said quickly, pasting a smile on his tired face. “I just was noticing how quiet it is.”

“I know,” she said, grinning broadly. “Usually it’s so loud out here with all of the shop people yelling that their stuff is the best. And then there’s those orcs over there,” she said, pointing to where the orcish couple renown for their skill in leather-craft sat. “They like to yell at that little old lady who parks her cart near them every day. She’s not been coming out with her apples lately since no one’s around to buy them. I miss that.”

“Would you like an apple? I could take you out to the orchard to get one.”

“It wouldn’t be the same,” she said gaily. “It’s more fun when it comes from that old lady who makes the orcs so mad. Hey, do you want to try to teach me to use this?” she asked, pointing to the sword she had been dragging around everywhere.

“I wouldn’t know how,” he admitted. “Besides, isn’t Mister Ger’alin going to teach you that when he comes back?”

“Yeah, but I was thinking that it would be cool to learn how to use it a little and surprise him. Do you think he’s okay?”

“He’s fine,” Jez’ral said, trying to be reassuring. The girl seemed to accept that and returned to her play. Jez’ral listened with half a mind while she prattled on about how they

were actually now in one of the naarus' magic flying ships and were discovering new worlds. His mind was focused on a man he could scarcely recall beyond knowing that most of his life had been bound up with him. The warlock prayed that he was safe; that he would stay out of battle. Enough of his memories had returned to let him recall the last time Mir'el tried to fight a powerful demon lord. "Let him stay far away from the Legion. He almost died last time; and, in a way, it was worse that he hadn't for years after. Especially when he learned that Tal'ar had been lost and no one knew where Miris and Alayne were."

"Who are you praying for?" the girl asked, her eyes round and luminous.

"A friend of mine back home," he admitted.

"What's his name? I'll pray for him too. I say my prayers every night before bed and ask the Light to watch after Mister Ger'alın and Miss Alayne so that they'll come back here and we can all go on adventures together when I get good with this sword."

"His name is Mir'el."

"And he's your best friend?"

"Something like that."

"I'm sure he'll be okay," she said, patting his hand. "Now, you and I are going to go off and..."

Jez'ral listened to her prattle on, smiling to himself and praying that everyone would be 'okay.'

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"What the devil are you doing just standing there?" Thalodien shouted down to the Shattered Sun forces led by Ger'alın. "They should have penetrated the Sunwell Terrace by now," he muttered to Zerith. The priest rolled his eyes at the older man. While Thalodien had become more tolerable in the last few days, he was still quick to get on the younger sin'dorei's nerves.

Ger'alın shouted something back up that, from the look on his face, made Zerith think it was probably for the best that the distance and noise had distorted it to incomprehensibility. The Blood Knight made a coarse gesture at Thalodien before turning his back deliberately on the man and gesturing to the fighters around him to continue their efforts. "What is he doing?" Thalodien wondered again.

Walking down to where the fighters and magi were standing near the entrance to the ramp leading into the Sunwell Terrace, Zerith saw that they were battering against an invisible wall. "It's shielded," Ger'alın muttered sourly. "Why we didn't foresee this and plan for it is beyond me. I don't know how we're going to get past it."

Zerith rapped his knuckles lightly against the shield. A slight hum of energy coursed through him, widening his eyes in shock. Ger'alın snorted mirthlessly, "Much more force and you'd have been on your rear," the paladin observed. "It knocked me down the first time when I ran smack into it."

"What's going on here?" Thalodien asked, stomping up to the pair. "Is there some kind of cease-fire agreement?"

"No," Ger'alın said with elaborate patience, "there's a shield here. Think you can break through it, Thalodien?"

"Why didn't we for...oh, nevermind," the man sighed. "I assume you have the magi working to unravel it."

"There are two focal points sustaining it," Nishi announced, presenting the results of the scrying Ger'alın had set him to. "One is inside there," he continued, pointing further into the Magister's Terrace, into the rooms Ger'alın and the others had not pressed beyond.

“Whether it’s a simple focal point or someone channeling it is up for debate. But, if we want to get it down, we’ve got to retrace our steps a bit and leave off for now.”

“We can’t back down,” Ger’alin protested. “If we move away from here, they may very well drop it and overrun us all!”

“Frankly,” the mage observed, “I think they will hold it up as long as they can. Think about it a moment; whatever they’re doing in there, they do not want any disruptions. I’ve been sensing a growing wave of energy throughout the isle. That shield is not a diversionary tactic; whoever is behind it doesn’t want anyone going in or out. Not until they’re ready.”

“I want a squadron to remain here,” Ger’alin ordered, his voice carrying over the babble of many whispered conversations. “Callie, Tau’re, Nishi, Jemuya, Grogna, you’re with me. Zerith, you and Dar’ja remain here. If any demonic entities come out, you take care of them.”

“And if it’s demons holding the focal point?” Zerith asked.

“I can take care of them. I married a warlock, didn’t I?” he grinned recklessly. “Come on, we’ve got a shield to break down.”

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“What are they doing?” Ger’alin whispered as he pointed into the room. Two groups of Wretched stood channeling into fel crystals while a felblood elf watched over them.

“Probably holding up that shield,” Callie muttered dryly.

“What’s the plan?” Nishi asked when the rogue and paladin returned to the group.

“There are two groups of six Wretched in there,” Ger’alin outlined quickly, “and some felblood elf. They’re all channeling into fel crystals – the Wretched, that is. I think if we just run in and hit hard and fast, we should be able to kill or disable most of them before they can react.”

“That sounds like a plan to me,” Grogna grinned.

Ger’alin nodded and, seeing that the others were as prepared as they could be for such a matter, began trotting back the way he had come. Careful to keep his steps as light as he could, he satisfied himself that the Wretched had not noticed their observers. Raising his arm and then dropping it quickly, he signaled the attack.

“Protect the shield at all costs!” the felblood elf screamed. “Quickly, aid your brothers and you will be rewarded!”

One pack of Wretched ceased their channeling and turned on the group of infiltrators. The other group continued to focus their attentions on the crystal as if their very lives depending on it. The six sickly elves were little match for the healthier sin’dorei, Forsaken, and tauren. Within moments, they were down, most dead, a couple merely knocked out, and the Shattered Sun soldiers continued on, working to disrupt the magic of the Wretched who had ignored them. Meanwhile, the felblood elf was racing towards the group, his blade out. Ger’alin brought his shield around to catch the blow while he whirled the hammer Sar’la had given him, catching the felblood elf in the knee. He felt and heard the bone crunch beneath his blow and let his guard down, expecting to see his enemy on the ground and in agony.

“I am a god!” the elf shouted, pulling energy into his body from the glowing green crystals around the room. The elf swelled where he stood, his complexion growing a nearly purple-red and the veins of his forehead standing out, engorged with blood, sickly green vines in a forest of putrid red growth. Ger’alin and the others gaped, the paladin gagging at the polluting and permeating demonic essence that flowed into the man. Dashing in, his shield held in front of him and his hammer behind him, he knocked the felblood off his feet, his shield catching the man in the side and his hammer flying around, the momentum carrying it, smashing into his stomach. The felblood crumpled in half, folding over the blow, spewing the

contents of his stomach from the force. Callie dashed in a heartbeat behind her friend, leaping lightly over him to land at the felblood's head. Kneeling down, she smashed her fist into his face, wincing at both the pain and the gore that covered it. The felblood gurgled, the sounds disgusting to hear, as he drowned in his own life-essence. Ger'alın reached over quickly, with a hand that shook, and grabbed one of Callie's daggers from her belt. Slitting his enemy's throat, he let his shoulders sag with a mix of disappointment and exhaustion.

In the meantime, the other three had focused their attention on the demon crystals. Ger'alın shivered whenever one was blasted apart by the arcane talents of the two magi or the assistance of nature the shaman could call upon. "I think that should help a trifle with the shield," Jemuya said when the last fel crystal lay in pieces on the floor. "We've done all we can, Ger'alın. Let's go back and see if we can crack it now."

The paladin started to nod but a sound from further up the corridor caught his attention. Motioning the others to silence, he tiptoed to the edge of the room and looked down the long, dark corridor leading into the abandoned Master's Tier. Or rather, not abandoned to judge by the presence of two sin'dorei guards running at him, blades out and searching for blood.

"Light, let that shield come down," Ger'alın prayed as he set himself to meet the attack. "Alayne..."

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"Alayne," Mir'el sighed sadly as he glanced back up the corridor. The pair of guards left to watch over the prisoners had abandoned their posts, muttering something about sensing an attack incoming. "Let her be safe. Light, let this all be a bad dream. Don't let my best student, the child of the woman I loved like a sister, don't let that little girl actually be a servant of those who would destroy everything. I can't believe it of her. I just can't."

"What are you muttering about?" Sam'vah asked wearily. "Some incantation to get us all out of here?"

"I don't want to hear another word out of you unless it's an incantation to zip us straight back to Quel'Thalas where we belong," Jez'ral had muttered to him that day so long ago. The circumstances and Sam'vah's words had brought that old memory to light for a brief moment. Mir'el sighed and wished all he was looking forward to was being slow-roasted by a tribe of cannibalistic trolls. "No, Sam'vah, there is no incantation to get us out of here. We're in the hands of the Legion. Only a miracle of the Light could help us now."

The prisoners overheard his final words and a susurrating sigh swept across the cell. Many indeed closed their eyes, folded their hands, and began making their peace with the force of all creation. Elven ears twitched and quirked as the sound of steel ringing against steel, of curses, of pain-filled screams cut off by the final silence of death echoed down the haunted hallways. Mir'el heard footsteps and voices saying "this way, they came from in here. There might be more of them." Closing his eyes, he regretted that there would probably be nothing left of him for his oldest friend, his closest companion to bury. He regretted that he'd sent Jez'ral off for a short journey and now would never see him again. With his eyes closed, he prayed that the journey through the darkness of death would be swift and painless.

"Why does everyone have their eyes closed?" he heard a familiar voice laugh. "Is it nap time?"

"Callie!" he said cheerfully, opening his eyes to see Alayne's friends standing in front of the cell. A cloud of suspicion washed over his features, darkening the light in his eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"We're here to stop the Legion from being summoned," Ger'alın answered flatly. "How did you wind up in this situation?"

“I came to try to rescue Alayne. When I heard that the ‘Lady Dawnrunner’ was with the forces here, I felt that I owed it to Miris and Tal’ar to get their daughter out of this mess. It’s partly my fault for consenting to her marriage into House Sunstrider. If I had known then...”

“I want to discuss that with you at length one day,” Ger’alin growled angrily. “For now, let’s get all of you out of here. Any magi are welcome to join our efforts to pull down the shield that’s sprung up around the Sunwell Terrace. All the rest, including you suffering souls,” he said sympathetically, knowing what they were enduring, “are free to depart as long as you do not lift a hand against the Shattered Sun.”

“He certainly has changed,” Mir’el muttered to Callie as he watched Ger’alin gather up the sickly Wretched and begin trying to minister to them. The warlock winced when Callie grabbed his sore arm and began trying to drag him away, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the Blood Knight.

“He’s been through a lot. Falling prey to an addiction you never really understood in others, turning on the woman you love more than your own life, and then having her run off to join a man who’s plotting to summon the Legion into your homeland, not to mention winding up being looked up to as a role model of the naaru’s teachings tend to change a person.”

“Another one of your friends ran off to join Kael’Thas?”

“No, idiot. Alayne. His wife,” Callie said, emphasizing the last word. “They were married by Zerith in Shattrath not even two months ago.”

“She never said a word to me about...but she’s going to marry into House Sunstrider...”

“She couldn’t tell you because, when it happened, we didn’t know if we’d ever be able to set foot inside Silvermoon again. There was no way to get a message to you. Then, the next thing we know, she’s having to look after Jez’ral while Ger’alin redeems the Mag’har orcs and the Dragonmaw, not to mention all that happened when we went against Illidan...it’s a long story, Mir’el.”

“Jez’ral? What happened to him? Tell me, please!”

“He’s fine,” she said quickly. “Just a little...confused right now. He’s been getting better by the day, though. Sar’la, a little orphan girl in Shattrath, keeps him company now that we’re back here. Don’t worry; you’ll be back with him as soon as this is all over.”

“Light, am I going to lose everyone because of my own cowardice?” Mir’el sighed, his shoulders slumping. Callie stared at him quizzically. “I didn’t want to go to Outland with Jez’ral because I was afraid of encountering demons stronger than what I can control easily. I sent Alayne with him hoping that having her there would...temper his impetuous nature. Now you’re telling me something has happened to Jez’ral, Alayne got married and then now has run off to serve the Legion...the last two ties to my past are hanging by a thread. If I lose them, I’ll die just like poor Miris did. Light, part of me wants to. What’s the use fighting the Legion when they’re so powerful and so close to achieving what they’ve sought for millennia?”

“With that attitude, you will die and you will lose everyone,” Callie said coldly. “I’m sorry, Mir’el, but it’s true. Now, you can come with us and try to help us save Alayne and put a stop to this madness. Or, you can stay here feeling sorry for yourself. Right now, I don’t have time to coddle you.”

The warlock watched, agog, as the unliving human stalked off. He jumped in fright when Ger’alin placed a firm hand on his shoulder and, staring out of eyes that spoke of sympathy and distance, said, “You’re cradling your arm like it’s hurt. I can spare a bit to fix that.”

Mir'el extended his broken wrist to Ger'alín and gasped in shock as the healing energies flowed through his arm. "So, you married Alayne?" the warlock asked.

"I married her. I love her. I've loved her for a long, long time. I'll follow her where ever she goes, Mir'el, just as Jez'ral has followed you around all his life. I honestly wouldn't know what else to do with myself. Now, come on. I'll need your help carrying some of these poor souls up to be taken back to Shattrath for healing. I didn't heal your arm just so you could stare at me like a fool."

As Mir'el moved to help the other man lift the sickly, the note from Alayne crinkled in his pocket. He resolved to find a moment to read it as soon as he could. Perhaps she would explain this marriage to him and why she hadn't objected to marrying into House Sunstrider.

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"It's thinned a good bit," Nishi announced. "I think we can probably break it apart now. It's just a matter of hitting on the right frequency."

"Get started," Zerith nodded. "The sooner we can get in there and put an end to this, the better. Ah, Ger'alín. Callie told me you'd found Mir'el. See if he'll come over here and help us a bit. Any help would be welcomed."

"Are you sure that's wise, Zerith?" Callie whispered in a hushed aside. "I know Jez'ral's never been open-mouthed around you but I've spoken with him enough to know that Mir'el freaks out in battle. It almost got them both killed in the Battle of Mount Hyjal. Jez'ral said that Mir'el took one look at Archimonde and fainted. He had to drag him off the field before the demons could swarm them and trample him underhoof."

"Callie, Alayne always spoke of Mir'el being a genius. If she's behind this shield, he's our best bet of knowing how to counter it. Besides, from what I can tell of Jez'ral, he's a good bit like his student. Overprotective to a fault, sometimes. Ah, Mir'el, it is good to see you again, my wonderful landlord."

"I wish I could say it was a pleasant time to visit with you," the warlock said softly. "But I suspect you need me to do something."

"If you could assist our magi in bringing down that shield..."

"The one keeping all of those demons from attacking us?"

"Yes."

"I'll try," Mir'el said with simple dignity. "I'm not much good in a fight but I'll try. I mean, it's not as if the world depends on it, is it?"

"Your sarcasm is duly noted," Zerith laughed. "Where's Ger'alín?"

"Catching his breath. He healed a few dozen people down in the cells."

"I'll go see how he's holding up," Zerith said, striding off and leaving the warlock to mingle with the magi under Nishi's command. The magic users conferred with each other, each explaining his own theory about the shield. Several noted similarities between it and the one that had guarded Tempest Keep in Outland. Mir'el stood silently during the discourse, tucking away the information and letting the pieces of the puzzle fall randomly in his mind.

"I want you to set up a standing arcane wave while I cross it with a fel magic current," the warlock said once the conversation wound down. "The synergies will cause an explosion along several frequencies. One of the shockwaves should crack the shield enough for the rest of us to slip through and bring down."

"But if we don't do it just right," Jemuya protested, "we're all going to be less than useless!"

"Then we'd better do it just right," Mir'el noted dryly. "Begin when ready."

The warlock centered himself, trying to find the quiet, calm sense of confidence his father had spoken of so hopelessly, never believing Mir'el could do it. The fears that had

swept over his mind years ago at the Battle of Mount Hyjal reared their heads, flogging him, berating him for risking all of these innocent youths when he knew damned good and well he couldn't pull this off. The harder he tried to banish his uncertainties, the more uncertain he grew. "You can do it, Mir'el," he heard a woman's voice whisper in his ear. The same woman who had stood beside him when he decided to tell his father he was not going to marry her. "You can do it, old man," he heard Jez'ral teasing him. "You don't have a choice," he told himself, recalling a little girl who used to toddle about his shop, curious about everything she came across.

Laying his currents across those the magi had erected, he felt a moment's panic when the shield resisted, seeming to absorb the energy of the attack. Forcing more power through the wave, he stood stunned when the shield's magic began to unravel. The demons and elves standing on the other side growled and shouted in outrage as it collapsed. Their shocked anger did not keep them still for long.

"You did it!" Callie shouted triumphantly to the group of magic users as she hurried in behind Ger'alín to confront the attackers. "This will all be over soon because of you!"

Mir'el nodded and took a deep breath, wondering why he was drenched in sweat and shaking like a leaf in high wind.

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Lost in the ecstasy of merging her energies with those of the Magisters, Alayne tried to focus on the task at hand. All she really wanted to do was curl up on the floor and weep for the joy coursing through her body. Instead, she forced herself to redouble her concentration as she prepared to open the rift.

Near the doorway, Alayne's rightful king and ruler, Kael'Thas Sunstrider, watched as the rift began to form. His arms were crossed over his chest and he strove to keep his face impassive. Still, he could not hide the glimmer of amazement and admiration that glinted in his eyes. That a mere child could be so powerful still had him agog in wonder from time to time. Now he watched as she casually, almost carelessly, laid down the magic that connected the heart of their ruined heritage to the Twisting Nether.

A blackness deeper than jet tried to soak up the golden light of the Sunwell. Kael'Thas stood upright, his heart pounding with anticipation, as he heard twisted, triumphant laughter ringing through the void. A massive, meaty green fist shot out of the well and Kael'Thas knew a moment's bitter disappointment. Alayne wavered, staggered by the force of the demon's presence, fighting alongside the Magisters to widen and stabilize the rift while a demonic entity forced itself through. Alayne's spirit felt stretched to the breaking point as the creature continued to push itself through the constricting canal of magic that birthed it into her world.

"You have done well," the pit lord chortled as his torso pulled free. Kael'Thas bowed deeply, more deeply than he would have to royalty from a long-standing ally. "The Master is following after. He has sent me in advance of his glorious appearance on this plane. Have your summoners continue as they are. The Legion is eager to claim this world once and for all."

"General Brutallus," Kael'Thas said by way of greeting. "Please, allow me to escort you to the front lines. There you can see for yourself the ingenuity my people bring to the Legion. For, unlike the thoughtless Aszhara, we have planned to be discovered and we have set up a means to hold our enemies away while we complete what our ancestors could not."

The pit lord snorted but sounded pleased nonetheless. Wrenching one massive clawed foot free, he shook the floor when he stomped down on the ground. The Magisters struggling to hold the portal for him swayed on their feet as the room rocked violently. The tremors did

not cease until the demon had both feet and his tail free. Kael'Thas tried to hide his anger at the demon's insensitivity towards his summoners. The Lady Dawnrunner had collapsed, her hands splayed to keep her from pitching face-first into the golden pool. The others were no better off, most laying on their sides, panting from the strain the demon had placed on them. Walking over to Alayne, her king knelt beside her and put gentle hands on her shoulders. "You are doing well, my dear," he whispered. "When this is all over, you will rest on the finest feather mattress, covered in the softest silk sheets while servants devote themselves to satisfying your every whim until you've recovered. After that, I imagine Vangri will keep you occupied."

Alayne shuddered in revulsion at the thought of how Vangri would want to keep her occupied. Ger'alín's face flooded her vision for a moment, hale, hearty and strong as he had been before his illness. She wished desperately she could see him one final time before... Forcing the thought out of her mind, she pushed herself up on unsteady legs. Drawing deeply on the spiritual link connecting her to the Magisters, she focused on the rift. Stabilizing it, she began forcing it wider in anticipation of her final act. Kael'Thas's breath came quickly as he tried to push down the thrill of anticipation tingling through him. Turning his back on the casters, confident that they would achieve the victory he craved, he motioned for Brutallus to walk in front of him. "As you will see, my general, our shield is impreg..."

Alayne recoiled as she felt the shield she and the others had established splinter apart. Kael'Thas drew a quick gasp, feeling it tenfold; he had been the one channeling to maintain it to give the Magisters more energy to concentrate on the Sunwell. "Eredar!" Alayne snapped, never taking her eyes from the pitch pool swelling in the golden fount before her. The three eredar sorcerers who had been her guards before now stood, irritation plain on their faces at the tone coming from a woman whose entire life had been but a moment compared to theirs. "The Vials," she ordered coldly. "Seal off this room!"

The eredar pulled the Vials from the ancient Azerothian Well of Eternity out and, tapping into the energies hidden within them, wove a shield around the room. Alayne nodded in satisfaction and returned to her own work. In the very back of her mind, she was glad that this had happened. She hadn't planned on it happening for another several hours and she'd feared that she would have had to sabotage the shield herself. Now all of the holy energy she could call upon was in place and waiting to aid her in her final act.

Kael'Thas, delighted to see the respect and deference accorded to one of his favorite subjects, turned back to Brutallus. The pit lord wore a mask of complete displeasure and distaste. "Impregnable, eh?" he grunted, his putrid breath making Kael'Thas gag.

"It nearly was," the elven king retorted, careful to keep his tone light. "Perhaps had you come through sooner..."

"Come," Brutallus grunted. "Let us see these enemies of yours. My own on this plane will make short work of them. You can count on that!"

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"How many demons have we killed?" Dar'ja shouted over the din of battle.

"By my count, around fifty," Callie shouted back. "And probably twenty of those golems and three dozen elves, give or take ten."

"Are we making any progress?" the sin'dorei woman groaned hopelessly. "How many more can there be?"

"As many more as there are," Ger'alín answered loudly, never taking his attention from the doomguard he was hammering down. "We're making progress. Staying alive is progress. What I'd like to know is where those reinforcements are!"

“Thalodien might have gone senile on his trip back to the holding area,” Zerith muttered beneath his breath. The attack had gone well thus far, save for the fact that the Shattered Sun forces were still stranded on the ramp, their enemies swarming down from above them. They had managed to gain only half of the spiraling walkway that led up to the entrance to the Sunwell’s sacred shrine. The stench of blood, sweat, and demon seemed to have soaked into the grey stone. The priest wondered idly if it would ever wash clean.

“This isn’t going to work,” Ger’alin growled impatiently. “Form ranks and prepare to press as hard as we can! We can’t hold any longer!”

Zerith sighed and wondered at the wisdom of the order. Still, now was not the time to argue tactics with the impatient Blood Knight. Ger’alin had been in favor of charging in the moment the shield fell. Only Mir’el’s fainting had held them back. Now the warlock stood in the midst of the chaos, using his skill in fel magic to turn the demons against each other, enslaving several and sending others back to the Nether from whence they had been birthed. Zerith felt a thrill of awe at the man’s abilities. He’d thought his adopted sister was good; Mir’el put her and Jez’ral to shame with the casual ease with which he handled demons. Still, the look of controlled terror and distaste that painted the man’s face and mouth made it clear that he would rather have been anywhere – the Twisting Nether excepted – than where he was right now. Zerith waded through the fighting to stand beside Alayne’s teacher, doing what little he could to instill confidence in the man. The priest had realized early on why Callie insisted Jez’ral would not want Mir’el involved in a battle. For all his skill, the warlock seemed torn by self-doubt. He was more surprised than anyone else when one of his spells succeeded.

“Are you ready for what lies ahead?” Zerith asked softly, his eyes scanning the battle and letting him direct his healing energies where they were most needed. Ger’alin shouted a hasty thanks for the shield Zerith threw up around the man just before the doomguard could cut off his leg with a mighty blow.

“No,” Mir’el whispered, his voice tight with strain. He licked his lips nervously and worked on keeping his attention settled on the three demons he had bound to his will. One of them broke away from the battle to aid Ger’alin in his fight. “But then, I don’t really have a choice, do I? If I don’t face it, we’re all dead.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Zerith admitted. “But the Light will be with us. The Light will favor us. No matter what comes, ultimately, the Light will prevail.”

“That’s a comforting thought,” Mir’el said distractedly. “Still, I can’t face Miris and Tal’ar without being able to say I did all I could to rescue their little girl.”

“And I can’t face Valara without being able to say I did everything I could to help the one the Light sent to me for losing her,” Zerith added with a grin. “Just concentrate on that, on rescuing Alayne. It will give you the courage to face what you fear the most.”

“Young man, I don’t even want to think about what I fear facing the most,” the warlock muttered testily as he ordered his demon to follow after Ger’alin when the man began charging up the ramp. “Where are those reinforcements Thalodien ran after?” Mir’el groaned between gritted teeth. “Are you children expected to face the Legion alone? Have we not asked enough of you in asking you to give up your youth, marry, and bear the next generation early to replace the parents you lost?”

An explosion of flame far up the ramp was Mir’el’s answer. Both he and Zerith glanced up, laughing to see dragonhawk riders raining down fire-tipped arrows upon the elves and demons further up the ramp. Thalodien waved at the priest from his perch in the sky and quickly returned to his deadly archery. Keeping the area just in front of the door under a constant bombardment, the aerial Shattered Sun forces helped the attackers on the ground divide their enemies and press them back up the ramp, forcing some over the balcony and down to their deaths on the rocky ground below.

“Took you long enough!” Mir’el shouted up to Thalodien as he began releasing control of the demons he’d enslaved. The ramp was largely cleared now, those not dead being trampled underfoot by the Shattered Sun. Ger’alin, Dar’ja, and the other Blood Knights who had sworn to the naaru quickly dispatched the demons and did their best to prevent their own fallen and the incapacitated among the Sunfury from being completely trodden underfoot.

“Land a few of those things, would you?” Ger’alin called out over his shoulder. “We’ve got another ten or so prisoners for you to fly back, courtesy of Shattered Sun Skymasters.”

“As you command,” Thalodien said, just a hint of sarcasm in his voice. Ger’alin and several others, including Callie and Tau’re, stood in the doorway, kneeling, letting the archers and magi stand guard over them. The Sunfury elves inside the entrance chamber looked cowed, many of them kept glancing over their shoulders as if checking to see that their escape route was still clear. Ger’alin grinned, an ugly grin, elated at the first sign of fear in his enemies. Perhaps they were near their goal at long last. Perhaps, just beyond that room his wife waited for him to pull her out of whatever mess she was in. Just as the Shattered Sun forces loaded up the last of the wounded, Ger’alin’s grin slid from his face. The entire building trembled as if rocked by a small earthquake. He could hear the vibrations of a deep, powerful voice from somewhere further within. Glancing at those next to him, he looked to see if anyone could understand the vague, distorted speech. Tau’re and Callie both shook their heads in answer to his silent question. Straining his own ears, Ger’alin tried to hear whatever it was that made those inhuman noises.

“I don’t know what’s causing that racket or what’s making the whole building shake,” Callie whispered grimly, “but it’s probably not good for us.”

“Are we clear?” Ger’alin asked, not daring to take his eyes from the scene before him. The elves still seemed terrified. Anything that kept them scared was fine by the Blood Knight.

“Clear,” Zerith called out from far in the back row.

“For the Light and Quel’Thalas!” Ger’alin shouted, shoving off with his feet and keeping a pace ahead of the next closest fighter. Reaching back with his hammer, he smashed against the wall of Sunfury elves blocking him from his goal. The archers and magi who had been standing behind him moved into the room, careful to keep back near the wall as they let loose their spells and arrows against the servants of the Legion. Long moments passed in silence save for the sounds of steel ringing against steel or spells whistling through the air. Ger’alin kept one eye trained on the distant door at all times as he hacked his way through, eager to be the first to pass beyond this room into what he hoped would be the final destination. So wrapped up in his eager anticipation was the paladin that he scarcely noticed the tremors from earlier growing stronger, then stopping suddenly. When the last elf was down and the healers were surging forward to care for the wounded on both sides, Ger’alin jogged to the door and threw it open. The sight awaiting him squeezed the air from his lungs.

“Well, well,” a sickly, cadaverous Kael’Thas laughed lightly. Just behind the dead elven king stood a pit lord that made Magtheridon look like a puppy. Arrayed behind the demonic leader were lines of doomguards, fel guards, and infernals. “I must say, I’m glad to see *you* again.” Kael’Thas rubbed the green crystal sticking out of his chest. Ger’alin winced, feeling his stomach churn. “I’d like to repay you for the kindness you showed me at our last meeting, my murderer. Seize him, Brutallus,” Kael’Thas ordered, pointing to Ger’alin. “I’m quite certain that, between our Master and the Lady Dawnrunner, this young man will learn the error of his ways.”

“Light of heaven,” Ger’alin breathed as he steadied himself for the coming onslaught. “The Legion will fall!” he screamed as he ran headlong into battle.

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Kael'Thas watched avidly from his safe vantage next to Brutallus as the demons swept down on the treacherous children led astray by Voren'thal and the other timid, squeamish elders. A thousand pities that they had persisted in their rebellion, unlike the Lady Dawnrunner. He had hoped, deep down, that word of her elevation would spread among the ranks of the rebellion, convincing them of the truth of his oath to take them back should they see the true light of salvation offered only by the Burning Legion. Glancing down at the bright green crystal planted in his chest, he pushed away the small voice that asked him if this was truly a salvation he'd sought. "Once the Master is here, Arthas will be destroyed at long last. The humans will pay for the indignities they foisted upon us. And my people will shine forth like the sun once again!" he reminded himself firmly. From the first days when Illidan's insanity had been made manifest – the fool actually refused to believe Kael'Thas when he told the mongrel half-demon that he had not won the fight for Icecrown! – Kael'Thas had known that only by seeking out and allying with a greater power would his people ever have a hope of survival.

Now, he watched, both excited and strangely detached, as his own younglings fought against the waves of demons Brutallus sent out. The large room, once a library, was littered with the foul remains of demons. Here and there, the body of a sin'dorei, a Forsaken, even the bestial tauren, lay prone, their battle ended forever. Tears streamed down the face of the man who had murdered him. Kael both recoiled and rejoiced at the naked pain painting his killer's face. "For the Light and Quel'Thalas!" the young man shouted hoarsely. "Zerith?" he asked hopefully. A priest kneeling next to the body of a female Forsaken shrugged helplessly. "Out cold. I can't get her up," Kael'Thas could hear the man whisper. "Callie, don't do like this, please."

"Get her out of here!"

The priest nodded and gestured towards a black-haired young woman. The woman walked over sadly and, bending down, picked up the body and began dragging it out of the room. Kael'Thas couldn't tell if the Forsaken were dead or merely knocked out; it was so difficult to tell the difference with those whose lives had ended. His killer seemed to redouble his efforts, wielding the powers wrenched from the subservient naaru deftly. Demons howled in pain against the onslaught. The man was skilled, Kael'Thas had to admit that.

"Enough of this!" Brutallus grumped when nearly half of his own forces had been expended. Half of his own had bought him the lives of only a tenth of his enemies. The pit lord was infuriated at the astonishing ease with which his demonic legions fell. The elven king had been stunned himself to see how skillfully the so-called Shattered Sun Offensive wove together arcane, holy, and fel energies. Little was able to penetrate their attacking defense. Still, their hard-fought effort had come at a high price. Kael'Thas knew that he could throw every demon and elf in the Terrace at them and lose ninety-nine percent of his forces; the reserves of the Legion were vast, as countless as the stars. His attackers could not afford the losses they would take to break past this room. Already, demonic couriers had been sent to the Sunwell Sanctum to request that, while the Lady Dawnrunner worked on widening and solidifying the rift that would bring their savior into the world, she also allow more of his emissaries through.

Enraged at the wily cunning of his enemies, desperate not to be the cause of the latest failure to destroy this annoying flyspeck world, Brutallus waded into combat himself, his massive bulk making the room sway, spilling books from the shelves. He sought out the one elf who seemed to have done the most destruction to his mighty forces. A young elven male with light brown hair and angry green eyes. He hid, like a coward, behind a golden shield, its facing designed to look like an open-faced helm. In his right hand, the man held a hammer that seemed to pulsate with holy power. Brutallus had seen the results of blows from it on his

followers. Lifting his enormous double-bladed staff, he prepared to try to cut the man's arm off, to render that holy hammer *hors de combat* before taking the man himself out of the fight permanently. That the elven king wanted this one captured alive mattered little to the pit lord of the Burning Legion. He'd already wasted more than enough of his own trying to assuage that small favor. Kael'Thas would learn, in mere hours, just what his own standing, and that of his foolish mortal followers, was in the eyes of the Master of the Burning Legion.

The young man stood, braced, waiting for the blow to come. Brutallus could see the stark terror painting the man's features no matter how he tried to mask it. The pit lord grinned in spite of himself; such puny, pathetic creatures to pit themselves against the might of those chosen by the Dark Titan himself. Hefting his massive double-bladed staff over his head, Brutallus brought it whirling down to crash against the elf's shield. Pain shot through Brutallus's fist as the man smashed that blessed hammer down against the demon's unholy knuckles. The fear fled from the man's face and he grinned nastily up at his enemy.

"I will crush you!" he roared angrily, shifting his massive weight from clawed foot to clawed foot.

"We'll see about that!" Ger'alın roared back as he ducked and rolled out of the way of Brutallus's slashing attack. The pit lord chuckled as he waited for this blood elf to steady himself. Perhaps a bit of sport before he slaughtered the fool would not be amiss. It had been aeons before any mortal creature had been able to trade even the first blows with the pit lord.

Ger'alın, seeing that the pit lord was standing guard, waiting for him to make the next move, feinted, causing the demon to turn a few feet. Continuing with this tactic, Ger'alın slowly placed himself squarely between Brutallus and the leagues of demons waiting in the back of the room. It was foolhardy tactic, one that could easily have him crushed between the pit lord and his fellows. Still, he prayed that Brutallus would not use Ger'alın's own tactic against him. "Die, demon scum!" he yelled as he charged in, his shield up and his hammer back. The paladin winced and nearly drove his teeth through each other at the pain that rang through his left arm. He wanted nothing more than to let the shield drop, especially after having taken two direct blows with it. Still, for his life, for his hope of seeing Alayne once he managed to get past this unholy horror, he held it up, letting Brutallus rain blows down on it until he thought his arm would come clear out of his shoulder socket and fall to the floor. Still, he forced himself to hold his shield up, to keep it up when he felt certain the bones in his arms were about to be ground to powder from the force of the hits he was taking. Just as he felt that he could take no more, he reached down deep inside himself and, finding a last reservoir of strength, met the blow with his own, pushing the demon's fist up slightly, causing him to turn just a hair and opening a gap between his armor plating and the sensitive skin of his underbelly. Quicker than thought, Ger'alın threw his shield arm up and slammed in with his hammer, striking the demon in one of the most vulnerable areas possible. The demon shrieked in pain, wobbling back and forth on his feet, waving his arms as he screamed out his agony. Reaching out to the Light, Ger'alın hurled his hammer again, driving it deeper into the soft skin of the demon's abdomen, pushing in with the force of life and the Light against a creature of death and Shadow.

As he continued to lash out at his attacker, exchanging his earlier defense for a full-on offense, Ger'alın grinned to see spells of all kinds flying to land on the demon's back. Brutallus shivered under the force facing him, his movements slowing as his energy was drained, diverted from attacking to surviving the dozens of stinging bites his lesser enemies rained down on him. The demon seemed to be gathering himself for one final assault. Ger'alın, knowing he couldn't take any more abuse, dropped his shield, grabbed hold of the demon's breastplate, and climbed up, scrambling, his sore arm threatening to let him fall each second. The effort to clutch and pull himself over the demon's plate, to get his hammer level with its throat, made tears stream with the sweat coursing down his face. Still, he dug in,

hanging on for dear life as he smashed his hammer into the demon's throat. The Blood Knight threw himself clear, almost losing his hammer in the process, barely in time.

Brutallus lurched, his eyes widening in shock as his clawed hands clutched involuntarily at his shattered windpipe. Sickening gurgling noises leaked from the demon's mouth and he swayed, collapsing on his side, making the whole building shudder violently. "Gaah," he gurgled, the sound wet and nearly incomprehensible, "well done. Now...this gets...interesting..."

Not waiting to see if his foe was truly dead, Ger'alın grasped for his shield with his bruised and battered arm. Whirling his hammer in his right hand, he rushed to meet the demons left in the back of the room while Kael'Thas, stricken, fled, dreading to report to his Master the loss of one of the Legion's finest generals.

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Mir'el watched as Ger'alın battled the hulking pit lord, too terrified to do anything other than stare in stupefied horror as the demon hammered down on the young man's shield. "How can he stand that?" the warlock wondered, the inconsequential thought keeping the direness of the situation from overwhelming him completely. He watched on in awe as, when it seemed that the paladin would have no strength left to bear the onslaught, he switched from defense to offense and began pounding away at the twisted being, calling on the power of his faith to act as both shield and weapon against the blasphemy before him.

Before Mir'el realized what was happening, the pit lord was swaying unsteadily and then falling to the floor. Ger'alın appeared in front of the corpse of his enemy, ready to fight the demons who were beginning to cross the open space seeking revenge for their fallen leader.

"Oh no, you don't," Mir'el muttered angrily before he had time to think about what he was doing. The words flew from his tongue and the power coursed from his body, slamming into the slimy soul of a doom guard and forcing it into the warlock's command. Finishing the binding faster than he had ever bound a non-summoned demon before, Mir'el ordered it to whirl around and watched in glee as it began slashing away at another doom guard, clipping the creature's wings and arms before his fellow had a chance to realize that one of his own had been turned. Recalling the steady strokes and controlled power Ger'alın had used with his own hands in combat, Mir'el turned his demon from his normally chaotic hacking and slashing towards a more finely tuned style of fighting. He tried to keep the doom guard at Ger'alın's back, acting as a rear guard for the paladin, freeing the man up to wade into the thickest part of the fighting and smash the un-natural creations with the holy power that sang through his soul as magic sang through Mir'el's.

By the time the Shattered Sun forces had fought through the demons, Kael'Thas had fled. The room stank, the air thick with the putrid air of demon corpses. Ger'alın glanced back around, surprised to see Mir'el standing next to the body of Brutallus and grinning down at it. The paladin winced when the warlock plucked his knife from his belt pouch and began gathering samples. He'd seen Alayne do that often enough to know that it was necessary in order to learn more on how to control and destroy the foul things. Still, he didn't like watching it.

Walking over to the door Kael'Thas had ducked out during the fighting, Ger'alın cast one last glance back over the room. Seeing no sign of Dar'ja and praying that no news was good news, the paladin hurried on, eager to be the first one to find his wife and spirit her out of there, leaving no one the wiser.

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“This place is impossible,” Zerith growled as he and the others tried to pick their way back down the twisted corridor. “I refuse to believe such a place can exist. Was it always like this?” he demanded of Mir’el.

Thalodien, fresh from the rear lines with news of the wounded, opened his mouth to answer. Mir’el forestalled him with raised eyebrows and a look that reminded the other man that Darkweaver had been born to a higher station than he ever would achieve on his own. Zerith made note of the reaction; it could come in useful to have a minor noble on his side when dealing with elders who refused to acknowledge the changed reality their race faced. “No, Zerith, it was not always like this. It was never like this. It should not be like this now. That it is so twisted, with so many dead ends, with so many impossible turns, tells me that either someone doesn’t want us to penetrate very far or...”

“Or?”

“Or a certain Someone is drawing very close. My father told me that the mightiest of demons could and would unravel reality on the worlds they were approaching. The fear, the chaos, the confusion works to their benefit and our detriment. All we can do is try to navigate these passages as best we can, maintain our sanity, and pray for the best.”

“We’ve got to hurry!” Zerith yelled, hiking his robes up and preparing to run down the hallway towards the door that kept moving just out of reach.

“Wait!” Mir’el said, grabbing the man’s arm before he could take more than a half-step on his run. “You’ve got to stay calm, Zerith. You can’t let yourself get any more confused than you must be. Come on, man, did Alayne pass nothing on to you? Fear and chaos are weapons in the Legion’s hands. If you give in to them, you’ll die as I almost did during the Battle of Mount Hyjal and even during this battle today. I know it’s hard,” Mir’el admitted openly, “it’s hard for me as well. But we must hold on and remain calm.”

“I’d feel better if we could just find Ger’alin,” Zerith sighed. “He couldn’t have had more than two minute’s head start on us and we can’t find him!”

“Don’t panic.”

“I’m not panicking!” Zerith insisted, his voice going up an octave. Drawing a deep, shuddering breath, he tried to still the racing of his heart. “I’m just worried. Ger’alin’s been insistant than I remain in the rear lines. I agreed to abide by those terms. How can I keep my promise, though, if I don’t know where he is? *Not that I would ever harm Alayne*,” he thought to himself. “*Still, I did promise.*”

“We’ll find him,” Mir’el said confidently, hiding the knowledge that Ger’alin could very well have walked off into the vast void of the Nether. They themselves could be wandering through it themselves. The way unreality seemed to mix with reality made Mir’el want to gibber and weep. He’d only seen anything like it once and that had been years ago, near Dalaran, as Archimonde entered the world. His mind still shrank from the nightmarishly twisted trees, the jagged, floating rocks, and the inverted ground that had marked the area of the summoning.

As the group, clustered in close, walked on down the corridors, each turn and pathway taking them deeper into a crazed mind’s night terrors, Zerith prayed that this had been done intentionally. That this was some part of Kael’s plot to keep them from him. He didn’t want to think about the other possibility. They’d worked so hard, they’d come so far, so fast, to see it all end with the Legion stepping into Quel’Thalas.

Turning around a hairpin corner, Zerith grinned, seeing Ger’alin kneeling in a doorway, his back to the approaching group. The grin vanished when he saw that the other man’s shoulders were slumped and shaking as if he were weeping. Breaking away from the others, Zerith ran up to Ger’alin, squatting down next to him and placing a hand on his shoulder. “Alayne?” he asked.

“No,” Ger’alin said softly through his tears. Pointing into the room, he gestured at a black, floating creature that, had it been shining, Zerith would have thought was a naaru. “M’uru,” Ger’alin sighed. “Something has happened to him.”

“What is that thing?”

“The naaru that Kael sent to us. For a long time, he was held prisoner beneath our Sanctum,” Dar’ja explained, jogging up in time to hear Zerith’s question. “The Magisters drew his holy power off and taught us how to tap into it. Remember, I told you about it the first night we met. How I thought the priests were all doing the exact same thing.”

“That doesn’t look like any naaru I’ve seen before,” Zerith said tonelessly.

“He doesn’t look like his old self at all,” Ger’alin muttered hoarsely. “He was always darker than the others we’ve come to know, probably the result of the forcible draining. But now...now he’s completely changed! I just tried to speak with him, to let him know I was on his side and,” the paladin said, raising trembling hands to his face. Dar’ja recoiled, taking several steps back and licking her lips in fear. Mir’el walked up, wondering what was keeping the three in the doorway and why all of the rest of the troops seemed to hang back, as if sensing their leaders’ reluctance to press forward.

“What in the name of the nine hells is *that*?” the warlock blurted out. Ger’alin shot him a nasty look and sighed heavily.

“The naaru reverence all life,” Ger’alin said suddenly. “But that one...that one longs to kill. It now reverences death. I saw it...when I spoke with it...it just...there were three elves channeling into it, trying to control it and they just...a wave of dark energy and they were gone! I blinked and they were gone. We can’t go in there,” he groaned, “and we can’t go back. I’ve tried. I nearly lost my mind trying to get back. Everything began twisting and turning in on itself! What’s happening here! Why can’t I just find her and get out of here?”

“We...what happens when you speak with it? There must be some way to let him know we mean him no harm,” Zerith said, grasping for a possibility that would let them continue.

“I won’t do that again!” Ger’alin swore, his voice thick with anguish. “It was like what Callie...oh Light, Callie...it was like what she described happened to her when Alayne used necromancy at the Black Temple. I’ve never felt so...unclean, so violated, in all of my life. Not even when I woke up next to Ta’sia and realized what we had done! Not even when I realized what I had done to Alayne in my madness and my lust for the Vials! Not even when I heard my own mother’s dying screams and ran, ran faster than I thought possible, away from her!” he sobbed. “Never, never have I felt so...”

“It’s okay, Ger’alin,” Dar’ja said soothingly, kneeling down beside him and stroking his hair, letting him bury his face on her shoulder and sob. “It will be okay. I’ll go in there and...”

“No!” he howled. “If I won’t face it, I won’t let anyone else! Oh, we’re trapped! We can’t go forward and we can’t go back!”

Mir’el and Zerith exchanged helpless glances over the man’s head, wondering just what they were to do. Ger’alin was right; they could not go back and, if his gibbering was true, they could not go on. “Dammit,” Zerith swore beneath his breath, “what are we to do?”

Tau’re, watching impassively from the group several paces back, strode forward, his eyes set on the dark naaru. “That is?” he asked.

“M’uru. A tortured, twisted naaru,” Zerith said in an undertone, his attention divided between Ger’alin and the room ahead.

“I see,” the tauren murmured. “It is in pain? Rabid?”

“I suppose,” Zerith answered, unsure of the right description.

“Then we must put it down. I have seen my own hunting dogs, cherished companions, turn into slaving, snarling enemies, snapping their teeth at me even after I had fed them with

my own hands. They did not mean harm – they were suffering and that was the only way they had to communicate with me once the disease took their minds.”

“I agree but...”

“It is hard to put down a companion,” Tau’re interrupted, glancing down at Ger’alin. “I will do it for him.”

“Tau’re, no, wait!” Zerith shouted as the tauren entered the room. Tau’re unsheathed his two mighty blades and, with a graceful, dignified bow of his head, charged in, his horns down.

“Tau’re?” Ger’alin muttered thickly, looking up from Dar’ja’s shoulder. “No!” he shouted, leaping to his feet. “First Alayne, then Callie, not Tau’re too!” he shrieked, running in after his friend through many battles, his fear for the tauren drowning out his fear of the twisted naaru.

Zerith threw up a hand, holding the others back in the doorway as he watched the pair of fighters bull in, Ger’alin quickly overtaking Tau’re and placing himself square between the floating dark crystal and the fury-inspired bull-man. Zerith couldn’t tell what they were yelling at each other but, when Ger’alin turned back, holding his shield up to deflect any blows that might fall from in front of him, the agony on his face at the thought of losing yet another loved one made Tau’re shrug and step back reluctantly. Perking his ears forward and straining to hear over the harsh vacuum that seemed to whirl within the room, Zerith listened as Ger’alin pleaded with the naaru he had once abused.

“M’uru, please,” Ger’alin said, his shield still up and his hammer still at the ready. “We mean you no harm. Let us pass. I know I am numbered amongst those who held you prisoner. I know that I am one of those who drew your life away for his own selfish ends. But, A’dal, your brother, told me that you chose the path you’ve walked of your own free will. In hope of giving some of us a way to be redeemed, to be cleansed, to be brought back to the faith we so willfully abandoned. You’ve succeeded, my friend. Even now, Liadrin, she who led us in our torture of you, she has pledged to serve the Light and learn from the naaru. You’ve done what you set out to do. Please, let us pass. Once the danger threatening all life is gone, I will see to it personally that you are reunited with your brethren and that my people, who so thoughtlessly and selfishly took what you offered so thoughtfully and selflessly, work to restore you to full health.”

For a moment it seemed as if the naaru could understand and was considering the offer. He hung, an air of uncertainty emanating from him. Ger’alin ventured to lower his shield a tick, a slow smile beginning to blossom across his ravaged face.

Seconds later, Ger’alin was picking himself up off the ground, wondering just how he had landed flat on his back almost all the way across the room. Tau’re lay behind him, staring up at the ceiling, blinking and wiggling his fingers and hooves as if uncertain how to use them. The others who had remained crowded outside were peeking through the doorway. Ger’alin saw the horror painting Zerith’s face and sat up, looking in front of him. Dozens of void creatures, beings of pure shadow giving off waves of pure hatred of all that lived, were gliding slowly across the room. “Forgive me,” Ger’alin sighed as he pulled himself to his feet and, without another glance backwards, ran to the naaru. “Try to keep those things busy, would you, Tau’re?” he tossed over his shoulder as he leapt into the air, his blessed hammer flashing even in the thickness of the dark, striking sparks against the naaru’s crystalline structure when it connected.

M’uru shrieked, a sound that shattered the soul and made bones feel as if they were being pulverized. Ger’alin ground his teeth as he landed heavily on his feet, feeling as if he were going to explode from the torment of the demented naaru’s cry. The others who had been pouring into the room, their backs against the far wall, clutched their heads, clawing at their ears to block out the awful sound. Forcing himself to fight through it, Ger’alin spun and,

seeing the naaru wafting down towards him, prepared for the fight ahead. “Would that I could have redeemed you as you have me,” he whispered to M’uru as the naaru drew near. Jerking to the right, he swung, wincing when his hit connected and broke away part of the naaru’s spinning appendage. Pain washed over him once more as M’uru cried out but the Blood Knight forced himself to push through it, concentrating on hammering away at the creature who had given him so much.

In the back of the room, Zerith tried to focus on not biting through his tongue every time Ger’alin swung at M’uru. The creature’s blood-curdling shrieks were terrible to hear. The magi seemed torn between using their hands to cast or to cover their own ears. Zerith understood how they felt. It took every ounce of will power he had to focus his mind on the power of the Light, to let it flow through him, giving strength to Ger’alin’s strikes and placing a protective shield around Tau’re while the tauren hacked away at the void creatures. “Ignore the naaru!” Zerith ordered. “Take those things down now!”

The group shifted their spells away from the naaru and onto the demonic creatures of anti-life. Tau’re nodded in acknowledgement, continuing to hack away at them with blades that blurred into indistinction from the speed. When the last creature exploded, throwing its wispy arms up in surrender to the death it served, the group turned back to see Ger’alin on his knees, all of his strength centered on lifting his hammer to land yet another blow while M’uru wrecked havoc on his mind.

“No,” he whispered over and over again, his voice hoarse from the repetitive denials. “No.” Flashing in his mind with each attack was the totality of the torment M’uru had suffered, the sum of hatred for all that lived – especially Ger’alin. “Light help me,” the Blood Knight panted as he forced himself to strike again, chipping away at the naaru. “M’uru, don’t do this!”

“Bring it down,” Zerith ordered coldly.

Spells whistled through the air, exploding into the creature with the ferocity of rage and fear the group felt in the midst of the very denial of existence. As each magi landed a hit, they wavered, seeing what Ger’alin saw, feeling the enormity of guilt for it, knowing that this once-magnificent being had willingly given his life for them and here they were... “It’s not true!” Zerith shouted. “Don’t!” Following his own orders, Zerith smote the creature with the outraged purity of the Light, his spell illuminating the dark being, making it seem, for just a second, to once again belong among the servants of life and the Light.

M’uru snarled as the holy energy pervaded him, twisting and writhing in hatred of the power he had been born from. His body rippled, changing, flowing from crystal to some matter made purely of the rage of the void. He seemed to drink in the miniscule amount of light in the room, casting shadows in the darkness. Zerith cowered, his knees shaking and threatening to drop him on the ground, as the creature’s hatred centered on him. His hands gripped the sides of his head, trying to blot out the inchoate screams ringing across his very soul.

Ger’alin pulled himself up and renewed his frenzied attack on M’uru, desperate to bring the creature down before the priest died – or went mad – from the attack on his psyche. “No no no no no no no no no!” he screamed as he hammered away at the naaru, his mace a blur of Light and fury.

“Ger’alin, calm down,” Zerith said shakily, staring down at the man in horror. Ger’alin glanced up, his attack halted, to see his friend’s wide eyes gazing at him as if the priest had never seen him before. “He’s gone. You can stop.”

The Blood Knight looked down, seeing the shattered remains of the naaru littering the floor around him. He shuddered, his shield and mace dropping from nerveless hands that he lifted to cover his face as he wept. Dar’ja bit her lip, a lone tear trickling down her cheek as

she walked over to stare at the corpse of the one being who had offered them hope in their darkest hour.

“Come on,” Zerith urged, not wanting to risk remaining in one place in this crazed building too long. “We’ve got more battles ahead of us. Let’s go.”

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“We cannot let them pass,” Vangri said swiftly to the few soldiers remaining at hand. He’d been unable to reach the rest of their forces; the twisting corridors had made finding his way impossible. He only hoped that his enemies faced the same confusion and that it kept them away long enough. All they needed was another hour – two at most – and then it would be too late. When he’d last peeked in on the Magisters a quarter hour prior, Alayne had been struggling to hold the rift open. It had been wider than Vangri or Kael’Thas believed possible. Somehow, the black hole seemed to dwarf the golden pool containing it. Vangri glanced over at his king and kindred, shivering. Kael’Thas’s face bore a look of ecstasy as he waited for his savior. Vangri, seeing the end draw nigh, began to wonder if Kil’jaeden were truly going to keep his word to the sin’dorei servitors of the Legion.

“He’ll be here soon,” Kael’Thas said eagerly. Vangri wondered which ‘he’ his leader was referring to. “And we’ll offer up the lives of those who would oppose him to the great one.”

“Indeed we shall, my lord and my king,” Vangri said softly, his eyes keeping a constant scan of the end of the corridor. “Indeed we shall.”

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Alayne struggled to hang on to consciousness, drawing more and more deeply on her link to Anveena just to keep the rift stable. The pure essence of the ancient Sunwell thrilled through her, sustaining and buffering her through the exhaustion that threatened to drag her under. She could not stop now. She could not afford the price of failure. She was too close to her goal. Within a few hours at most, the Legion would be decapitated and the Sunwell would be restored. She was glad Kael and Vangri had taken her hint to stand guard at the door; gladder still to have a real reason to keep them out, to keep Kael from possibly stopping her should he realize at the last moment what her true plan was. Now none would know the truth. The shock and outrage at her betrayal would aid her friends in healing. The disbelief and defeat in loss would cow the Sunfury, making it easier for them to be folded back in to the rest of their people; or, failing that, imprisoned indefinitely.

Tugging gently at the magical barrier around the perimeter of the rift, she pulled it still wider, studying it with a critical eye. Nodding to herself – it seemed more than wide enough; thrice the distance across it had been when Brutallus forced his way clear, she set the beginning of the summoning spell in the heart of it. If she needed to widen it more to allow Kil’jaeden in far enough to believe he would succeed, she could.

“I can’t take this much longer,” one of the Magisters whispered wearily. “It is...too much...”

“Hold together, Tan’ra,” Alayne snapped. “Another few hours and it will all be over.”

“Let us do this quickly, my Lady,” another Magister said, watching as Alayne painstakingly laid down the threads of magic that would connect their world to where Kil’jaeden waited. She wove the magic with deliberateness and deftness, taking care to see that each strand fell exactly where it should.

“Better safe than sorry,” she muttered, her concentration focused on the task at hand. *Besides, she thought to herself, I don’t want to die any sooner than I must. Oh, how I wish I could see them all again just one last time...*

As the heart of the summoning spell took final shape, Alayne felt a powerful presence reach out from the other side and begin weaving its own magic into hers. Her heart began to race, pounding loudly in her ears as she realized that Kil’jaeden himself was taking a hand in his summoning. “Light,” she prayed silently, “why didn’t I think of this?”

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Ger’alin skidded to a halt, his feet nearly coming out from under him, when he saw Kael standing at the end of the hallway he’d just dashed into. The no-longer-dead elven king smirked at him. Waves of powerful fel energy washed down the corridor, making Ger’alin want to gag. “You’re too late!” Kael shouted triumphantly. “The Master will be here soon! The world will burn! The world will pay for what it’s done to us!”

“What it’s done to us?” Ger’alin shouted. “Are you mad?”

“Seize him!” Kael’Thas screamed to his soldiers. “Seize him and offer him to our savior as a sacrifice befitting one of his greatness and puissance!”

Ger’alin edged backwards, glancing out of the corner of his eye to see the rest of the Shattered Sun forces staggering to a halt just ahead of the bend that would lead them to where Ger’alin stood. The Blood Knight set himself, wondering just how long he could hold off a dozen highly trained royal sin’dorei guards, not to mention Kael’Thas Sunstrider himself. Licking his lips nervously, he lifted his shield and set his feet, preparing for an attack from all sides. He shook his head furtively when he saw Zerith start to lead the others closer. He didn’t want them in the fight just yet. Let Kael and the rest think the man was alone. Let them rush in, overconfident of victory. Let them get caught between a Blood Knight at the end of his patience, knowing, just knowing that his wife waited in the room at Kael’s back and a pack of fighters eager to get out of a twisted building from hell. He’d been nearly overcome when he’d first glanced around, seeing the dark corridor that had so haunted his dreams. From the door at the far end, he could see golden light streaming through the cracks. Still, something about the fel energies washing outward in greater and greater shock waves disturbed him. What was she really doing in there? His dreams told him she was trying to reignite the Sunwell. But was she truly summoning Kil’jaeden? To what purpose? How far had she been tortured, pressed into doing this thing?

“For the Light and Quel’Thalas!” Ger’alin roared, his battle cry defiant against the foul atmosphere pervading the hallway. Lifting his shield to meet the first attack, he swung wide, catching three fighters in the weak spot of their armor at the waist with the face of his hammer. Light energy arced off the felblood elves, making them scream and writhe in agony as they fell to the floor. No sooner were they down for the moment than several of their fellows took their place. Now Ger’alin nodded, giving Zerith the permission to charge in that the priest had been waiting for.

The forces of the Disorder of Azeroth under the banner of the Shattered Sun Offensive ran into the room, quickly overwhelming the felblood elf soldiers. When Ger’alin saw that the last few were being cut down by Tau’re, he rushed further into the room, blocking the sight of the corridor from his nightmares out, focusing on Kael’Thas. This time, the man would die and stay dead! Ger’alin’s advance was cut off by the younger felblood elf standing next to Kael’Thas. The man blocked his path and let loose a roar that made Ger’alin stop short.

“Protect Alayne Dawnrunner!” the man shouted. Ger’alin skidded to a halt, looking around anxiously for sign of his wife. “For the glory of House Sunstrider!”

“Alayne?” Ger’alin asked. Seeing the other man blink in confusion, he bored in, swinging hard with his hammer, “For Alayne!”

All of the others spread out across the back of the room, leaving the two men who claimed the same woman to fight it out. Even Kael stepped backwards, staring at his murderer in confusion. Why was the man screaming out the name of the woman who had brought the king the mighty gift he needed? With every blow that landed, the paladin shouted her name, calling out to her as if seeking to bring her to his side by the mere utterance of her name. Vangri’s gaze at his opponent was one of pure hatred. Was this the Ger’alin Alayne had muttered about in her sleep the few nights he’d stood guard over her rest?

For his part, Ger’alin hammered away at the man, desperate to break through his solid defense and through him as well. Alayne lay just beyond that door. He knew it. He could sense her presence, both soothing and flogging him to hurry. The waves of fel energy were coming faster, now, continually bathing the groups with their tainted power. Ger’alin fought on frantically, pressing Vangri back, grinning ferally as the felblood was forced to step back against the Blood Knight’s onslaught of assault. When Vangri’s back thudded against the wall, Ger’alin moved in, certain of the first kill that would pave the way to rejoining his wife. Lifting his mace, he brought it down, aiming for the weak spot in the armor between the ear and neck. He blinked when his hammer whistled through empty air and gasped when he felt a slicing along the back of his knee. Vangri, using the wall, had feinted to the side, his demonically-heightened speed letting him side step Ger’alin and cut across one of the paladin’s vulnerable spots. Ger’alin winced, his eyes going wide in shock, and planted his weight back on his good leg. He pivoted, careful to keep his injured leg from taking much of his weight while he focused on trying to bring Vangri down.

Vangri laughed, sounding darkly delighted to see his foe faced with such a dilemma. Letting his blade whirl through the air, he concentrated on trying to leave Ger’alin no choice but to step firmly on that injured leg. Sweat beaded on the Blood Knight’s forehead as his mind sorted quickly through the possibilities that might let him beat down his opponent. Finding none, he gritted his teeth and gingerly placed weight on the torn knee, praying it would hold long enough to last him through one final flurry of attack.

The felblood did not give the paladin time to gather himself, instead boring in relentlessly, cutting swiftly and decisively at Ger’alin’s flanks, at his arms, doing everything in his power to break through the Blood Knight’s defense and kill the murderer of his king and kindred.

“Vangri, I withdraw consent for you to marry my ward!” Mir’el shouted from across the room. “Never will a child under my care marry into a house dedicated to destruction!”

Vangri snarled and looked as if he might have been about to respond to Mir’el’s taunt. Even Kael’Thas’s jaw had dropped in shock. Ger’alin took full advantage of the distraction offered and slammed his mace into the side of Vangri’s head, putting the full weight of his body behind the blow and toppling over on top of his enemy. Vangri stared at him, a look of shock and sorrow twisting his engorged and swollen features. “Protect...Al...” he gasped, his nearly sightless eyes groping for his king.

Kael’Thas stared down at Vangri, his face white and pinched with fear and hatred. Glaring up from his kinsmen’s staring eyes to the soft, almost compassionate features of his killer, Kael’Thas felt anger, outrage, and pure hatred exploding through his skull. As the waves of fel energy changed from shockwaves washing out to a solid atmosphere of void energies, Kael’s anger increased. They were so close. It could not go wrong now!

Ger’alin’s eyes met the sparking gaze of his once-dead-now-living ruler calmly. The Blood Knight knew he had no hope of standing up to an enraged Kael’Thas. The last fight on the bridge of the hijacked naaru vessel had been a very close-run affair. Now, laying atop the

body of the other man, one of his legs nearly useless, Ger'alın wondered how he could have made it so close to his goal to die just outside the door of his dreams.

"Kael'Thas, how did you come to this sorry state?" Mir'el asked sadly, drawing the angry king's attention upon himself. "You were once the jewel of our people. I remember well the days when you stood among the top of the magocracy in Dalaran. I remember well the sunlit days of my youth when I could gaze up to you as a sunflower gazes up on the sun. What happened to you, Kael'Thas of House Sunstrider, illustrious descendent of Dath'Remar who led our people into their exile and their pride?"

While Mir'el held Kael's attention, beseeching his ruler and former idol to explain his course of action, Zerith began inching across the room, desperate to reach Ger'alın and heal him before the maddened undead elf could take out his anger on the wounded warrior.

"For far too long, our people accepted that exile my ancestor led them into," Kael'Thas spat angrily. "For far too long, we kept ourselves hidden away, allying with those filthy humans who betrayed us! Those despicable cowards whose prince broke our very heart! Even now, their filthy remains stain our pure land! I have led our people back to the path of glory. We will take our rightful place amongst the rulers of the universe and we will make those who sent us out of the magical glades which are ours by right of birth and blood pay. We will make those whose foul minion, Arthas, wreaked havoc on our land pay. At long last, we will become the very sun we have embraced!"

"How can one shine if one wraps oneself in the black of night?" Mir'el asked. "Turn back, Kael'Thas. Go in there where my young ward, the child of a woman who was like a sister to me, go in there where she stands doing your bidding and have her stop. Have her..."

"She came to me of her own will!" he shrieked angrily. "She brought with her two Vials of water from the Well which was lost to our people through our ancestors' cowardice and lack of skill! She swore oath to me! Right now, she finishes the spell that will bring our deliverance to this world! You shall not interfere!"

"Try to keep weight off that leg," Zerith said to Ger'alın as he wove healing magic from across the room. Ger'alın gaped at the priest and then bent his knee, feeling just a twinge of pain instead of burning agony when the muscles contracted. Shoving himself up, he dove for Kael'Thas just as the man began to cast a spell that called up an aura of flame around him.

"Augh!" Ger'alın shouted as the magic burned the flesh of his face. He could smell his hair burning and feel his armor heating uncomfortably. Lifting his hammer, he started to drive it into his erstwhile ruler's face when a feral grin from Kael stopped him. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw something he'd only ever heard tell of before now.

A bird of flame and magic hovered protectively over the elven king, its rainbow-spangled wings beating and sending waves of heat washing over Ger'alın. Kael'Thas did not seem to be affected at all by the mystical heat radiating from the legendary bird. Ger'alın threw himself off the man, rolling away to cooler safety. The phoenix regarded him evenly, hovering near Kael'Thas as if to shield the man with its magical body.

"Anar'alah before!" he roared as he pointed at Ger'alın, ordering the phoenix to attack. The paladin stared in shock, too awed momentarily to attack a creature of myth and magic.

"Ger'alın!" he heard Dar'ja shout, pulling him back to reality. Rolling again, spinning across the room on his shoulder, Ger'alın dodged the bird's swooping fiery attack, sprinting and weaving until he was brought face to face with the man he'd killed once before.

"There is still time to stop this madness, Kael'Thas," he said calmly, his face a mask of tranquility he did not feel. "Stand aside, let us go in there and stop the summoning. Stand aside and you can and will remain our king and greatest hero. Stand aside, let me through that door and all can be forgiven even where it may never be forgotten. But please, stand aside!"

With a flick of his wrist, Kael'Thas answered. The phoenix swooped down, intent on Ger'alın. A bolt of shadow struck the bird, making it scream out in high-pitched agony.

Ger'alín winced and covered his ears, seeing others – Kael included – do the same as the fel energy from Mir'el's attack wrought destruction on a creature of pure magic. The minutes of the bird's misery seemed to stretch into hours before it collapsed to the floor, nothing left of it but ashes and a small glowing gem. Kael recovered from his shock at his minion's death quickly, casting bolts of searing fire, very like the ones Ger'alín had seen Alayne use in Stromgarde so long ago. They struck the paladin, burning him to the bone. He ground his teeth together as he forced himself forward, praying he would live to at least take his killer king down with him.

A shield of holy magic sprang up around him, quelling the flames and soothing his flayed and irritated skin. Zerith heaved a sigh of relief; that had been far too close for comfort. His friend's hair still smoked from the earlier attack. Ger'alín danced in before his king could react and smashed his hammer into the demonic green crystal protruding through his chest. Drumming away at it while Kael'Thas stared down in sick shock at the blood oozing from his chest, from the very wound this very man had dealt him before, the elven king fell to his knees. "The world...shall burn..." he gasped as he fell on his face and lay still.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Ger'alín spat as he rubbed at his itching, burning skin.

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From his vantage in the heart of the Twisting Nether, Kil'jaeden grinned, waiting for the portal to grow steady. It was more than wide enough for him to force his way through now but he did not want to experience the birth pangs Brutallus had suffered through. The current leader of the Burning Crusade – a being hand-picked by the Dark Titan Sargeras himself – deserved more dignity than a mere underling. Through the golden glow, he could see the woman responsible for maintaining the spell that would allow him, at long last, entry into the flyspeck world that had given him and his fellows such trouble in the past.

Finally, this world, touched and blessed by those cursed Titans, would be no more. Finally, the power they had so foolishly vested in it would belong to those who knew how to wield it. The mortal races would be enslaved and then perfected, as had countless mortal races across the universe. The potent magic of creation would feed the leaders of the Legion for centuries before it was spent. Had he a heart, it would have been thudding in anticipation.

"Steady now, steady," he could hear the woman's low voice sing. It rang in his ears, irritating him beyond measure. Mortal voices had a tendency to do that to him. Forcing himself to calm, Kil'jaeden reminded himself that this woman would have her uses in the hours after his arrival. Still, it might be a true pity to kill her. He could sense a potency about her, a raw talent that, once properly cultivated, could be of use to him. Perhaps, if she proved herself further, he might let her live. He would have to consider it once he was on the other side of that portal. Yes, perhaps she would live...

Through the magical gateway connecting his realm to the world of Azeroth, Kil'jaeden could see the door behind the woman swining open. She turned, the magic maintaining the gateway growing weaker for a moment. The demon general snarled. It could not go wrong now! Weaving his own magic, he prepared to make his own way into the world...

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Ger'alín sat, shivering in a mixture of anticipation, fatigue, and washback from the healing magic Dar'ja had wrought on him. He tugged at his hair, now mostly singed to his elbows – shorter in some places – wondering what he was going to do with it now. He shook

his head, trying to scatter the stray thoughts but unable to focus. The way was clear, now. Alayne waited for him just beyond that door. She was his wife; why was he now more nervous than he had been on their bridal night? Standing up, bouncing on the balls of his feet, he strode over to the door, exchanging a significant glance with Zerith that warned the man to stay far back. Putting his hand to the knob, he twisted it and pushed...

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Alayne was drenched in sweat. The weight of her sodden robes dragged at her shoulders, threatening to pull her down to the floor in a heap. She glanced over at the eredar sorcerers, nodding when she saw the brightly glowing Vials in their hands. She spared a quick look at the shield that would, she hoped, contain the explosion. She could feel Kil'jaeden weaving his own magic, biding his time, preparing for his triumphal entry into her world. She prayed that the explosion would destroy him.

"Now Anveena," she whispered, licking her lips. Her mouth seemed to be the only part of her that was dry. With the dark portal yawning wide beneath her, Alayne began siphoning off as much of the Sunwell's avatar's energy as she could. She would have needed it to actually hold the portal at any rate. The use she had in mind for it, however, was much more appropriate. "My lord Kil'jaeden," she announced grandly, "be welcome into the world of Azeroth, a world ready for your glory and for your harvest."

She could sense a feeling of unease from the demon as he began to push his way into the gateway linking their diverse realities. Something about it made her want to look behind her; made her feel as if someone were staring at her back and willing her to turn and look at them. She shook her head, droplets of sweat flying about her, and tried to ignore the sensations threatening to overwhelm her. Just another few moments...

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Ger'alín gasped in shock when he heard what Alayne was saying. Welcoming Kil'jaeden? His glory? Harvest? Had she gone mad again? Had something pushed her to believe that the world must be destroyed? Had she succumbed to the fel energies upon which she based her magic with the Sunwell gone?

Even though he had known for weeks that she had joined with Kael'Thas, that she had worked alongside the man to ramp up production of the manaforges, and that she had become one of his most trusted, dependable underlings, Ger'alín had not really believed she could have turned so far. Now, seeing her wreathed in the golden glow of spell casting tinged with the shadow of damnable fel magic, he began to worry. Had she turned? Was she truly his enemy?

"No," he said, his voice breaking. "Alayne, you can't do this!"

Her head lifted and her ears twitched backwards. Something about the set of her shoulders told him she had heard him but could not place the voice. "Dearest, stop this!" he shouted. A shock ran through her body as she began to turn, ever so slowly.

"That's...impossible," she whispered to herself, wondering if she truly wanted to turn around and see what she feared lurked behind her. Her husband's wan and wasted face floated before her vision as she turned. Had his hunger driven him here, to the heart of their people's hope? "I...if you have any care for your life, leave!" she shouted, too fearful to turn her head and meet anyone's gaze. It couldn't be Ger'alín. It couldn't be. He was back in Shattrath, hopefully under lock and key, suspected of being part of a conspiracy to overthrow the Scryers and Aldor. His wardens would tend him carefully, though. She knew that much. No, it could not be him behind her. It just could not be.

“Alayne! Stop this now!” he cried. Involuntarily, she whirled around, her back to the portal and stared in stupefaction. Ger’alin *was* there. Hale and hearty as he had been before he’d set foot in the Black Temple. He stood before her and she winced, seeing that the skin of his face glowed from burns and that his hair was singed short. Still, he stood there, grinning toothily at her, his eyes drinking in the first sight he’d had of her the way a man crossing a desert would guzzle down water. She stood there, her jaw dropping and her shoulders slumping. His gaze changed from eager to worried.

“For nothing,” she thought to herself. “I...I betrayed everyone, I turned them against me, I set this in motion...and it was for nothing. I was wrong! He didn’t need my help to get well! I...Light help me, I’ve opened a gateway for the Legion and it’s been for naught! It wasn’t necessary!”

“Alayne, sweetheart, what...Zerith! No, get back!” Ger’alin shouted, his fears catching up with him.

Zerith had rushed forward hearing Ger’alin speaking to Alayne. He was just as shocked as her husband was to see her actually opening the way for the Legion with his own eyes. He could feel his heart starting to break and the tears stinging his eyes as he stared at her, silently pleading with her to explain. “Alayne,” he started to say, taking a step into the room. Ger’alin raised an arm to bar him and he stared at the man.

“You will not...,” Ger’alin started to say.

“The Master’s arrival will not be delayed! Return to your summoning, peasant!” one of the eredar sorcerers ordered preemptorily. Alayne looked at them dumbly, as if she no longer understood their speech. “Return to your station!” it roared. “Return or die!”

Alayne’s eyes began to spark in hard, brittle anger. This thing would dare order her like that? Was it not enough that she had painted herself to look like the ultimate traitor to all sides, that she had done her best to convince everyone she had loved to hate her? This thing... “No,” she said softly. “It is ended.” Lifting her hands, she began to weave the magic that would rip the heart out of the spell. The backlash alone would probably kill her. She no longer cared. All of her suffering had been in vain. Another agency had healed Ger’alin and she had probably ruined any chance she would ever have at making things right again with her decision to aid Kael in return for restoring what she had believed to be her people’s only hope.

“It is not!” the sorcerer shouted, lifting a hand and pointing at the nearest target behind her. Ger’alin stiffened, feeling the demon’s attempt to control his will wash through him. He resisted it, latching on to his hope in the Light and his love for the woman standing before him to keep from being swept away by the demon’s magic. The eredar recoiled, feeling his spell break down and selected a new target.

Zerith’s eyes widened as he felt his body being wrested away from his own control. Panicking, he stared at Ger’alin, wondering how the other man had resisted the spell. Focusing his mind on regaining control of his limbs, Zerith fought to re-establish control he should never have lost. Ger’alin wrapped his arms around the priest’s waist as if to keep him from taking another step into the room.

Meanwhile, in front of the golden pool that housed the greatest darkness in the universe, Alayne was screaming in agony as bands of dark energies wrapped around her, strangling the life out of her as her husband had once attempted to do. Ger’alin was torn; if he let go of Zerith, his worst nightmares might come true. If he didn’t let go of the man, Alayne might die right in front of his eyes despite everything he’d done to try to prevent it. Her pain-filled, ear-splitting shrieks were as terrible to hear as the trembling Zerith was experiencing as his unwilling body was being pulled out of Ger’alin’s grasp was to feel. Sweat trickled down the fighter’s face as he weighed the choices before him. Either way could lead to certain death. “Dammit, not now! Not when I was so close!” he groaned between gritted teeth.

“Argh!” he shouted as, with all of his strength, he threw Zerith back behind him and dashed into the room, hoping to be able to disrupt the sorcerers’ and spare his wife and one of his best friends.

Two of the sorcerers appeared to focus all of their attentions on Alayne while the last continued ordering the priest to step closer against his will. Zerith shivered and sweated as he fought futilely against the spell. Ger’alin screamed and gestured, enraged and terrified beyond the ability to speak, praying that the other fighters would understand what he wanted them to do. Tau’re seemed to catch on first, sprinting into the room and slashing at one of the eredar holding Alayne in his deadly magic.

The other elven Magisters, the ones who had been helping Alayne with her work with the portal, struggled to hold the rift steady. They looked to her for their cues in absence of another leader but she was caught up in the throes of the demon’s fatal weavings. With all of their might, they held it steady, knowing that to let it collapse would mean death for everyone nearby – perhaps everyone in Quel’Thalas.

One of the eredar sorcerers went down, his body making the room quake as it crashed down. Alayne’s shrieks grew less intense and took on more of a whimpering tone as Ger’alin looked around desperately for the other demon mage. Zerith was still struggling against the magic forcing him close to his sister but his hand, quivering, was reaching for the mace he had belted at his hip. Alayne’s eyes widened when she saw him coming and she groped for her dagger, hoping to slash at his arm and keep him from killing her. The two eredar remaining laughed, fending off the magic attacks and dancing deftly out of reach of the few fighters left standing.

Ger’alin positioned himself between Alayne and Zerith, the sorcerers and the siblings making a box around him. With a scream of rage and anguish, he reached out and, calling forth the power the naaru had taught him to access, drawing on the hatred he felt for those who would not only destroy life, but would destroy the one life more precious to him than anything else, he flung the holy power on the ground, grinning darkly when the floor of the room began to glow with the radiance of pure, holy power.

The demon casting his spell on Alayne dropped his magic and turned, seeking out the cause of his sudden distress. Ger’alin laughed, a laugh without mirth or hope, and gave the creature a gesture he’d once been spanked for asking his father about. His grin slid from his face when he realized that Zerith was still drawing near, his mace out and raised over his head. The Blood Knight pulled his shield over Alayne, praying that the others would bring the last demon down and break the spell before the mace broke her skull. The worry for his wife caused the power he had channeled into the spell consecrating the floor beneath the eredar’s hooves to weaken ever so slightly and, with a startled yelp, he leapt back to his feet when Alayne, once again wrapped in bands of fel magic, began screaming in his ear. Tears leaked down his face as he sought for a choice that would let him have what he wanted – his wife alive.

“Forgive me, old friend,” he whispered to Zerith as he reached down and, dropping his own mace, plucked Alayne’s dagger from her belt. The spell wracking her body with torment made his hand jerk when he touched her. How could she stand that agony and stay conscious?

“No no no no no no no no no!” she screamed, flinging her head from side to side, her sweat-soaked hair clinging to her face. “No!”

“I...would...never...,” Zerith was saying, his voice tight with strain as he fought not to let the hammer fall. Ger’alin turned the dagger in his hand and tightened his grip on the shield. He would let the priest hammer away at it as long as he could but Alayne couldn’t survive that spell much longer... The Blood Knight grunted as the mace met his shield, ringing soundly. His arm still hurt from the earlier fight with the pit lord. He tightened his

grip, shocked to realize that the more he bore down, the more the shield threatened to shatter or fall from his grasp.

“Don’t,” Alayne gasped. “Just...let...me...go.”

“Not on your life,” he grunted.

“Do it!” she ordered coldly through the pain. He planted his feet, ignoring her imperious command.

Alayne knew she didn’t have much time left. The fel magic was no doubt going to kill her. All she hoped was she could hang on long enough to... her eyes widened in shock. How could she have forgotten that? She hadn’t planned on using it until later but...

Ger’alin groaned as he felt the bone in his arm beginning to give way. All of the abuse he had put it through today was catching up with him. Zerith was grunting as well, feeling demonic strength flow through him and wishing there were a way he could master it and turn it against his aggressor. He heard Alayne whisper something that sounded like a prayer. “Light, punish those who would profane that which is holy,” he thought he heard her say through agonized moans of pain.

The two remaining eredar cried out in shock as the Vials they had been holding, the very Vials they had been using to add power to their spells, exploded in their hands. The sacred water stung them, scalding and searing the flesh of their hands, arms, and chests. The pair tried to fling the water away, dashing it from their skin with mangled hands. So distracted were they by the pain of the burning water that they momentarily let up on their spells. The bands of black magic wrapping around Alayne lessened in power, letting her go from full-throated screams to sobbing whimpers. Zerith could feel control of his limbs returning to him though he still could not move them to his sides. Ger’alin cautiously lowered his shield, the beginnings of a smile forming on his lips. The demon channeling dark energies around Alayne fell to the ground, a bitter death-curse on his lips. Alayne went limp with relief in her husband’s arms and, in his eagerness, he tossed his shield aside and clutched her to his chest, burying his face in her hair and murmuring incoherently.

Tau’re bored in on the last demon still standing, desperate to pull him down. Once this foul creature was dead, it would all be over, or so the tauren thought. Zerith watched the fight out of the corner of his eye, still unable to move by his own will. Ger’alin was lifting his head from Alayne’s hair, tears of joy and thankfulness shining on his face when the demon began to fall towards the ground, overcome.

From her nest in his arms, Alayne saw Zerith’s mace racing to meet Ger’alin’s head. Summoning a surge of strength, she sprang out of her husband’s embrace and took the blow square on her shoulder. She threw her arms around her brother as he bludgeoned her, shielding him from danger with her own body even as his weapon bounced off her collar bone with a sickening sound. She cried out as she felt the bones of her shoulder crunch together and her right arm go numb.

Ger’alin looked up in horror to see Zerith’s mace land on Alayne’s shoulder before it dropped from his hand. The tears of joy turned to tears of grief as he watched his wife crumble under the blow and watched as Zerith fell atop her, his arms around her and his own sobs choking his apologies. “But...but...I...I was here!” Ger’alin whispered. “I was here!”

“I’m so sorry,” Zerith said over and over again, not wanting to look up, afraid he had killed his sister.

“If you’re sorry, get off my damned arm,” Alayne growled against his chest. “I had this whole thing under control until you showed up. Leave me!”

“You can’t be serious,” Zerith said, horrified, as he pushed himself off her. Dar’ja ran over to see her sister-by-marriage and to comfort her husband. “You...in service to the Legion?”

The entire room went silent. Only the uttered incantations that held the rift open drifted through the air. “I don’t have time to explain,” she said.

“You’d better find it,” Zerith retorted.

“Not here and not now. Get out of here, Zerith. You too, Ger’alin. Pull everyone back. Return to Silvermoon. You should be safe there.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you,” Ger’alin said, pulling her into his lap, not noticing the flash of pain that crossed her features when he clasped her broken arm.

“I don’t have time!” she said quickly, trying to push herself up and find the strength and focus to complete the final phase of the spell. “Get out of here! I can give you an hour at most before it’s all over. Just go! I never wanted you to follow me here anyway!” she shouted, her back to them, her face to the floor, and a sob escaping her lips. “The shield is gone, I can’t contain the blast now. It will wash over the entire island. It will kill everything...including...”

“I am not so easily stopped, wretched mortal!” a deep voice shouted. It sent shivers through everyone in the room, so thick was it with malice and anger.

“Anveena, help me!” Alayne shouted, looking up to the woman shielded and floating high above the summoning space. Drawing on the attunement she shared with the woman who held the power of the Sunwell in her human form, Alayne tried to block the rift, to buy time for everyone to make good their escape. She groaned as she saw Kil’jaeden’s clawed fist reaching through the gateway and battering against the magical wall she’d thrown up to stop him. “Get out of here now!”

“Form a perimeter around the room,” Ger’alin ordered quickly. “Backs to the wall. If you’re a follower of the Light, say your prayers now. If you follow another power, reach out to it. Prepare for battle.”

“Get out of here!”

“Alayne, back to the wall,” he said firmly. “We all want answers and you can’t give them if you’re dead. For once in your life, obey me!”

“But...”

“Against the wall!”

Alayne hurried back, placing herself against the far wall. “Obey him as you would me,” she commanded the Magisters. “Do it or I’ll kill you myself.”

The Magisters glared at her and continued their work around the pool. Alayne clenched her teeth and nodded at Ger’alin. He grabbed them and propelled them across the room, positioning himself just beside where the mighty demonic fist would land when his wife dropped the wall blocking it. He relaxed a little, knowing that this would not be as it had been in his dreams. Still, looking up at the hand of one of the most powerful destructive forces in existence made his stomach clench and his bowels quiver.

Alayne released the magical block and drew deeply on the power of the Sunwell. Kil’jaeden’s hand landed mere inches from Ger’alin and his claws dug into the red carpeting, ripping the very stone of the floor as if it were paper, as he pulled himself through the portal. When his body was halfway through, Alayne summoned all of the power she had and snapped the gateway closed around him, trapping him half-in, half-out of the world he sought to conquer. The demon lord growled angrily, sweeping burning eyes across the room for the one who would dare to prevent his entrance into this world. His gaze fell on Alayne and he grinned, snorting to himself as he prepared to incinerate the foolish mortal where she stood.

“Attack!” Ger’alin screamed when Kil’jaeden seemed almost ready to let loose his spell. He slammed his mace against the demon’s midsection, grunting when the blessed steel hammer bounced off. Kil’jaeden laughed.

“Pathetic mortal.”

The demon focused his gaze on Ger’alin. The fighter fell to his knees, overawed by the demonic presence washing over him. Kil’jaeden laughed and raised his hands to his head,

summoning dark energy to blast the annoying pest to a cinder. Bringing the spell down with a flourish, he blinked and growled when Ger'alín still knelt there, a shield of holy power surrounding him. The hold the general of the Burning Legion had had over the paladin was broken; Ger'alín shot him a nasty grin and dove in, pounding away with his shield and hammer, doing anything he could to damage the foul being while dodging the spells and fists. Pressing in so close prevented Kil'jaeden from doing much to pull off the physical attacks; with the fear broken and desperation rising, spells flew from the edges of the room, hurled with a power and determination the casters had never before felt.

Ignoring the onslaught, knowing that if he could but instill fear and respect for his prowess in these peculiar mortals, he could easily overcome them and pull himself the rest of the way into their world, Kil'jaeden sought out the one who had trapped him. The one who had, admittedly, tricked him. She deserved death at his hands. It had been billenia since anyone had actually surprised him the way she had. He would kill her; he owed her that much.

Alayne trembled and shook as she leaned against the wall, her legs threatening to give out and drop her on the ground. Her eyes met with Kil'jaeden's and she sucked in a breath, preparing for a blast that would destroy her where she stood. Just as he began summoning the power to him, Ger'alín, seeing where the demon's gaze had fallen, began a flurry of attack to distract him. The Blood Knight actually succeeded in landing a blow on the Legion lord's unprotected side, making Kil'jaeden wince in pain and look down. The eredar let his wings unfurl behind him and began flapping them, stirring up mighty gusts of air and pushing the few fighters around him further away. Ger'alín bent at the waist and struggled to stay in close range, his burnt hair streaming out behind him wildly as he lifted his shield up and used it as a windbreak. The demon hefted a fist, raising it over Ger'alín, preparing to squash the man like a gnat.

Alayne drew deeply on the connection she shared with Anveena and hurled the full force of the Sunwell's power at Kil'jaeden. He roared in pain, his wings closing around him as if to shield him from the blast. Again and again, the warlock drank deeply of the ancient magic that was her people's birthright, sending bolts of it at the leader of the Legion while the others threw their own missiles and struck with bladed and blunt weapons.

Staggered by the onslaught, Kil'jaeden roared and ripped his wings apart with a snap, sending those who had been hammering away at them in hopes of ripping through the skin and making their way against the beast beneath flying across the room. Alayne strained, hoping she could simply trap the enraged eredar in a shell, forcing him to expend yet more energy to attack his attackers and give the others a chance to either run away or run for reinforcements. The battle had to end one way or another soon. She didn't think she – or anyone else, for that matter – had the strength to keep up the intense assault much longer.

The demon must have sensed her plan for he reached up and casually, with a power that astounded the warlock, blocked her access to the Sunwell's energies. "Feeble child!" he laughed, "did you think that I would not remember that power? That the millennia since your ancestors first failure would cause that to fade from my mind? Now you have nothing! See in this your doom!"

Mir'el stepped forward from where he had been cowering against the wall, too terrified to even cast the simplest of spells. When he had sensed the spell his former student and the daughter of his closest friends was attempting, he had stirred himself, forcing his legs to hold him and strode forward into the room. Part of him had prayed that she would be able to pull it off. It was a daring move – one only someone so young would have had the audacity to try – but it could have worked. Feeling the currents that told him the spell had not only been blocked, but that Alayne had been cut off from the one source of arcane power she had access to, forced him to act. Staring up at the demon the way he had stared up at its brother at Mount Hyjal, Mir'el felt his heart skip a beat. Taking hold of his fear firmly, refusing to let it

gain a hold on him, he raised his hands and, pulling the nether currents that swarmed around the demonic general into his own body, began the incantation he'd been stupefied to recall earlier. Kil'jaeden's attention was centered on Alayne; he did not notice the other warlock moving off to the side and beginning a spell that would put a severe crimp in his plans for the woman and her companions.

Once the demon felt Mir'el's spell settling against him and sapping his powers, draining the nether energy that was his life's blood away and turning it against him, fueling his destruction with his own existence, Kil'jaeden shifted his focus. He sought out the warlock who was turning his own power against him. When his gaze landed on Mir'el, the man sighed heavily, feeling his heart thundering against his ribcage. Kil'jaeden snarled and, using the same nether currents Mir'el wove, reached into the man's very essence, planning to rip it out and fill it with fel powers. Such a useful slave would confuse his enemies long enough for the eredar to kill a few of them and possibly break through the barrier that seemed to be wrapping itself more tightly around his midsection. "Prepare to die, little creature," he sneered in Eredun.

"I've met death in many guises," Mir'el replied calmly, almost merrily, "but, I must say, you're the ugliest. Did your mother drop you on your face when you were a baby? Or is that growth you call a nose normal for your kind? Just curious."

Kil'jaeden blinked. He'd been met with arrogance, with hatred, with awe, and with fear. Never before had the demon encountered...curious contempt? The warlock continued to weave his spells almost carelessly, as if they required no thought or effort. "You spin the nether well," Kil'jaeden admitted grudgingly. "But you are no match for Kil'jaeden the Deceiver!"

"I rather think I am," Mir'el said, feigning a recklessness he did not feel. "I nearly bested your brother, Archimonde, a while back. The druids got to him before I could, though. A pity, really. He was taken down by mere wispy spirits of trees and butterflies. I'd have thought that the master tactican of the Burning Legion would have been a trifle more difficult to kill than a mere locust swarm."

While the exchange was taking place between warlock and demon, Alayne struggled to regain access to the conduit she'd established between herself and Anveena. "Come on," she growled, clutching her broken shoulder with her good hand as she stared up towards the ceiling. "This must end soon! It must! What is he doing?" she wondered, seeing Mir'el begin striding up to Kil'jaeden. "This is madness." The demon and the warlock were conversing as if several dozen magi and fighters were not doing their best to destroy the one while he did his best to destroy them. "What is he doing?!"

"...yes, all he managed out of that deal was to set a few flowers on fire, I'm afraid. All that energy for nothing. The World Tree still stands, albeit a trifle sooty, and the mystical lake beneath it...ah...such delicious power there."

Kil'jaeden was snarling, great gasps of breath exploding through his nostrils as he continued to casually bat away attackers and ignore the sting of dozens of spells exploding around and on him. His wings were in tatters and his armor dented, offering scanty protection now. Mir'el smiled and, with a wave of his hand, attempted the banishing spell his father had drummed into him. It was a special spell, one his ancestors had devised for use against the more powerful demons left roaming their new homeland in the wake of the Well of Eternity's destruction. Only the Guardians of Tirisfal and the handful of elven leaders of the Kirin Tor knew of the spell's existence, let alone the incantation. From her vantage point behind him, Alayne watched in shock and awe as her teacher wove the spell, her respect for him soaring. For a moment, Kil'jaeden paled, feeling the spell weave into him and begin to force him back out of the plane he half-inhabited. Then, Mir'el misspoke. A single mispronounced syllable

caused the spell to begin to fall apart. Hastily, he tried to salvage it, but the more he strove to maintain it, the faster it fell apart.

Ger'alın saw Mir'el's shoulders slump in defeat and the man's eyes dull. Not understanding what had been passing between demon and warlock, he threw himself back into the attack, desperate to destroy the demon. Kil'jaeden's attacks came more furiously now, sending the attackers back to the wall. Each time he slammed into the ground, Ger'alın threw himself back to his feet and rushed in, managing to land another flurry of strikes before he was thrown back anew.

The magic users were dropping like flies from a mixture of exhaustion and pain as the demon deftly turned their spells against him, growing more and more confident even as he took greater wounds. He seemed to know that he could outlast his opponents and, worse to them, they seemed to be realizing the same. Through it all, Ger'alın refused to admit defeat. When his shield shattered from a crushing blow, he cast it aside, holding his mace in both hands and putting all of the force he could muster into each blow. Zerith began wading into the fray, laying about with his own mace until a blow from Kil'jaeden threw him back, knocking him unconscious when he landed on his arm, breaking the bone through the skin with a sickening crack. Dar'ja rushed in, slashing with her sword, seeking demonic blood for the blood leaking from her husband's shattered arm. Kil'jaeden roared when her holy-infused blade slashed at his arm, leaving several deep cuts. Soon she joined her husband, laying scant feet away from him, trying to gather her forces for one last strike.

"He's going to win," Alayne heard Anveena whisper through the magic-enhanced connection. "He's going to win and kill you all. I...I might have been glad of that for..."

"Yes," Alayne sighed. "He's going to win and we're all going to die. It's what we deserve, some of us," she thought bitterly. "I merit it above all for what I've done, not the least what I've done to you."

"I was your heritage and your treasure."

"You still are."

"I cannot forgive you for what you've done to me."

"I don't ask for forgiveness. I don't deserve it."

"So long as we understand each other," the Sunwell said mirthlessly. "I will give you what you deserve." Speaking where the others could hear, a human woman's voice rang through the room. "Should any of you see him, tell Kalec I'll miss him terribly."

Light suffused the room, blinding everyone with its pure intensity. Power surged through Alayne with a sweetness that nearly swept her away in its current. With flagging strength of will, the warlock mastered the torrents flooding through her and, not knowing if she directed the magic or it directed her, began hammering at the general of the Legion, forcing him to fall back through the portal she had opened. Inch by inch he sank, his slow disappearance putting heart back into the disheartened fighters. Renewing their struggle, they did their best to aid the mighty force that one who had been their own used to push back the very threat she had brought to bear.

At the last, Alayne stood at the edge of the golden pool, the pain in her arm forgotten as she let the Sunwell's stored-up energy push the demon back. "Kalec," she thought she heard Anveena gasp as the last of the primal power was spent. The rift was closing swiftly upon itself with Kil'jaeden firmly on the other side. Alayne heaved a sigh of relief, her mind drifting to how she would explain herself and what punishment she could devise for what she had done. Even death did not seem enough of a price for what she had wrought.

"Alayne, I..." Ger'alın started to say, standing next to her and gazing down into the shrinking black portal.

His wife's eyes widened and he nearly wept when he heard a roar and saw Kil'jaeden's hand struggling back through the rift, holding it open while it tried to close with

him on the other side. “Alayne no!” he shouted when he saw her gather herself and leap into the abyss, her scanty weight slamming into the demon’s chest, throwing him off-balance and pushing him back through the rift. Ger’alin saw the demon swipe at her, his claws leaving bleeding trails. “Dammit no!” he screamed, throwing himself in after her, his hammer raised high above his head as he sank into the Nether.

Mir’el was the first to make it to the pool. By the time he arrived, all that remained was the smooth, golden bottom of what had once been the greatest font of elven magic in history. Of the paladin and the warlock, not a trace remained.

“Miris, forgive me. I set her on this path,” Mir’el said softly, tears trailing down his face. “Tal’ar, she truly had your spirit.” Gazing back around the room, he decided to follow Jez’ral’s advice: care for the living now; weep for the dead later.