

Zerith sat, his legs hanging over the edge of the now empty pool. His arm still hurt, ghost pains, they told him. He'd suffered a great trauma. The bone had been snapped completely, his arm bending where it had no right to bend. Sitting at the edge of the pool, he stared down into it, numb.

"The ceremony of remembrance will start in a few hours," Dar'ja said cautiously. He nodded absently, staring down. How could something so beautiful have held something so malevolent?

"Callie says that...she said that Liadrin told me to tell you there was good news. They...found something...her and the Aldor...from where M'uru..."

Zerith turned to look at her, his face expressionless, blank, as if he had lost the ability to understand Thalassian. He met his wife's eyes as if he had never seen her before in his life. Dar'ja bit back tears; he'd acted like this before, back when Alayne had... "Killing yourself wouldn't bring either of them back," she whispered. "Had you been conscious, the four of us going together wouldn't have done any good."

"If I had gone through with them, at least I'd be at peace."

"How can you say that?!"

"What would you give to have your parents back, Dar'ja?"

"I'd give anything," she answered calmly. "You know that."

"The Light gave me Valara back. And now, she's gone again. It was hard enough losing her the first time. It was all I could do to make it through the funeral when she died. She was the closest thing I had to a soul-mate. In some ways, she and I were closer than you and I. We were so much the same person but so different. She was the only sister I could truly relate to. I loved the others but Valara was... And then the Light gave her back to me. Alayne was everything Valara had been to me and more. I would daydream, sometimes, about the children she and Ger'alín would have had and how they would have been like the children Valara would have had. Dammit!" he swore, pounding a fist into his knee so hard his leg jumped. "If the Light was just going to take her away again – not once, but twice! – why did the Light send her to me in the first place? And why did she turn on us? What was her game? I knew there, at the end, that she had set something in motion in hopes of gaining something greater than I can imagine. What was it? And why? Why? WHY?"

"That question has an answer once you are prepared to hear it, young brother," an unfamiliar voice said calmly. "Are you not coming to remember her? To say good-bye and wish her spirit well on its journey?"

Zerith turned around to face the speaker. A draenei priest, robed in vestments denoting him as one of the highest clerics of their peculiar order, stood in the doorway. Compassion shone in his wise eyes. Liadrin stood next to him, the same emotion pouring from her face. Zerith turned back, muttering sourly, and stared at the pool again. Dar'ja stroked his hair, wishing there were something she could do to snap him out of his bitter melancholy. The priest walked over to them both and sat down next to Zerith, staring down into the pool. Dar'ja looked up at him and turned her head, unable to believe what she saw out of the corner of her eye.

The surviving members of the Shattered Sun Offensive, along with most of the prisoners they had taken during the battle, not to mention what seemed to be the entire population of sin'dorei in Quel'Thalas, milled down the back of the room and the corridor. With the mind-twisting magic gone, the outer hallways were more spacious and the artificial walls blocking off the Sunwell from the outer paths had been removed. Hundreds stood around, not whispering, not babbling, in complete silence. Callie stood at the front, Tau're's arm around her shoulders, chewing her lip worriedly. "If you will not come to the ceremony of remembrance, then it will come to you," the strange draenei said calmly. "No need to

move, young brother,” he added. “Come, come all of you. Gather around. See the hidden treasure of our friends, the sin’dorei.”

Dar’ja thought it odd that a draenei would refer to the blood elves as ‘friends.’ She watched as those gathered in the hall and the pathways around the Sunwell walked in, crowding around the pool, those in front sitting so that those in back could see over them. Only a small space remained around the draenei speaker, Liadrin, and the sorrowing sin’dorei couple. Callie knelt behind Zerith, placing a hand on his shoulder. Tau’re knelt beside her and behind Dar’ja, watching the woman carefully. At length, the draenei stood up and turned to take in the gathering.

“We have come here today to remember those who gave their lives in the fight against the Burning Legion. Many have fallen over the centuries, their blood purchasing for us the freedom under the Light we enjoy. Yet, with each generation, the battle is fought anew. For, as long as there are mortals who possess freedom, the Legion must be fought. No,” he said, raising his finger and turning a full circle so that his gaze seemed to take in the entire crowd, “it is not just those who turn away from the Light and vow service to the Legion who cause this to come about. It is the very nature of Light and life itself to allow this choice to be made. For, without shadow, we could not see light. Without sorrow, we would not cherish joy. Many blame the sin’dorei for this recent battle. They are wrong. This battle would have come to this world regardless of what Kael’Thas Sunstrider did. Had he remained pure, all that would have changed is the location of this very battle and the names on the list of the lost. No, Fandral,” the speaker said, glaring and pointing at a tall, haughty night elf, “I speak the truth. Your own priestess, Tyrande, knows it so for I have said the same things to her. You will not lecture your cousins this day as I know you wish for, if you would give that lecture, you must give it to me as well. For my own people brought the very Legion into existence. And my own people will continue to pour out their blood to stop it.”

Zerith glanced up at that, faintly interested. He was more than tired of hearing how the sin’dorei’s ‘reckless pursuit of power’ had brought this disaster to pass. If he had to hear it again, he thought he might commit murder. How could anyone continue to throw that tired accusation at him after his own beloved adopted sister had...

The tears came then. Rolling out of his eyes like waterfalls, they came. Sobs wracked him, hunching him over until his head was between his knees. His feet kicked, drumming against the sides of the basin as his shoulders shook. He could feel Callie’s arms wrapped around his waist, squeezing him while the Forsaken buried her face in his back and wept with him. Dar’ja had one arm over the undead woman’s back and the other around Zerith’s neck, her own face hidden in his hair. The three sat thus, weeping in shared sorrow. Zerith wished he could reach up and comfort the two women but he was too caught up in his own mourning to be able to lighten theirs.

The draenei continued, kneeling where he had once sat and placing a gentle hand on the young man’s head. “Long ago, my brother – not by blood, but by oath – turned against me. Seduced by false promises from one called Sargeris, Kil’jaeden was twisted from a noble, caring, loving man into a hideous creature of evil. Not a day passes that I do not pray for him as I prayed for Archimonde. As I pray for all my brethren who were seduced to evil by the promise of power and glory. I know the pain you must suffer, young man. The question of ‘why’ she would turn against all that you both loved. That question has an answer, as did mine. The answers are not the same, though. You must seek them out for yourself. I cannot tell you the whole; I do not know it. But, this I can say. What the elves did here,” he said, raising his voice to be heard clearly even by those in the back of the crowd, “they did to bring about the very thing the Light has promised since time immemorial. Though the avenues they walked were dark and the paths that led them here brought them all through destruction, they aimed at one goal: redemption.”

Zerith's head shot up and, hiccoughing, he stared at the strange speaker. He scrubbed at his eyes with his sleeves, blinking and shuddering as he tried to master his weeping. The draenei smiled down at him. "I came here today to give a victory speech. So, I shall give it. Mortal heroes, your victory here today was foretold long ago. My brother's anguished cry of defeat will echo across the universe, bringing renewed hope to all those who still stand against the Burning Crusade. As the Legion's final defeat draws ever-nearer, stand proud in the knowledge that you have saved worlds without number from the flame. Just as this day marks an ending," he said softly, smiling sadly at the young sin'dorei priest, "so too does it herald a new beginning. The creature Entropius, whom you were forced to destroy, was once the noble naaru, M'uru. In life, M'uru channeled vast energies of Light and hope. For a time, a misguided few sought to steal those energies," he trailed off, gesturing to Liadrin. Zerith's face flushed. How dare this man...

Liadrin cut him off. Standing proudly yet humbly, she confessed, "Our arrogance was unpardonable. We damned one of the noblest beings of all. We may never atone for this sin," she finished, glancing significantly back at the arrogant night elf the draenei had called Fandral.

"Then fortunate it is, that I have reclaimed the noble naaru's spark from where it fell! Where faith dwells, hope is never lost, young blood elf," he said, a sparkle in his eye as he regarded both Liadrin and the young sin'dorei couple crouched at the edge of the pool. A crystal, dark but glowing brightly, appeared in a flash of light over the center of the pool. It sparkled in the early afternoon sunlight, glinting almost happily. "Gaze now, mortals - upon the heart of M'uru! Unblemished. Bathed by the light of Creation - just as it was at the Dawn. In time, the light and hope held within - will rebirth more than this mere fount of power... Mayhap, they will rebirth the soul of a nation."

The crystal began to change, sprinkling down into the golden pool until, with a sudden flash of warm, golden light, the entire pool began to shine once more. Zerith sighed, feeling love, forgiveness, hope, and tranquility wash over him. It annoyed him even while it salvaged his soul. His sister Valara had died for lack of this feeling. Alayne had sold her soul to regain it. Ger'alain had followed her into damnation for it. And now, just like that, this strange draenei gave them what they had paid for in blood and loss. "Salvation, young one. It waits for us all," the draenei said softly, for Zerith's ears alone. While the rest of the crowd was busy staring in awe at the newly reignited Sunwell, the strange draenei made his way through them, leaving them to their wonder.

Zerith watched him go, wishing he could at least place a name to the strange man. He'd seemed to almost offer the priest a true brotherhood of loss and sorrow when he'd spoken of Kil'jaeden. "We will meet again," he heard the man's voice in his mind. "You will return to the City of Light. Take word of today to your brothers on Draenor. Take word of today to A'dal. Tell him Velen will return soon."

~\*~\*~\*~

Mir'el stood in the kitchen, his hair pulled back and his hands covered in flour. The children would be up soon and he intended to have breakfast ready for them when they sat down. He'd already ruined one batch of pancakes. He didn't want to spoil another. Giving the batter a good stirring, he glanced over and happened to see the syrup. Tears welled in his eyes as he recalled how Jez'ral used to freeze that very syrup in molds and give the results to Alayne when she was teething. "Oh, how could this have happened?" he sighed, setting the mix down and letting his dusty hands grip the counter for support. "She was such a sweet child. I thought there'd be no risk in teaching her. She'd lost her mother and father and the

magic. She'd lost so much. When Jez'ral brought her back here, I wanted to replace all of that and let her be a child again. How could it all have gone so wrong?"

"Don't ask questions that have no answer," Zerith said softly. "They'll drive you insane."

"I didn't hear you come in, Zerith," Mir'el said quickly, wiping his cheeks with his flour-coated hands. The priest smiled, tight-lipped, and nodded, his own eyes shining with unshed tears. "Breakfast will be ready in a bit. Have a seat."

"It's strange being back here," the young man said as he settled at the long table. "Have you moved back in here?"

"Not entirely. I just got tired of my apartments in Murder Row being so empty. I took the liberty of doing a little house-sitting for you while you were gone."

"Speaking of which, how much rent do I owe you?"

"None."

"Oh please, you..."

"Zerith, my father left me with enough wealth to last me a lifetime even if I never lifted a finger to support myself. You need not add to that. I'd rather you kept your money and used it to spoil your own children rotten when they arrive."

"Must we have this discussion every time the bill comes due?"

"It seems so."

"I don't know that I'll ever have children," Zerith said suddenly. "I know I've got the better part of a century to think it over but..."

"Don't make decisions based on grief," Mir'el counseled. "Too many times I made that mistake and only Jez'ral and Miris could snap me out of it. Once, I almost killed myself – and Jez'ral – in Zul-Lightforsaken-Aman because I made a decision in grief. Another time, I almost killed my own father with my own hands. Right now, I'd love nothing more than to brew up a concoction that would possibly...speed up certain processes..." he said, lifting his eyebrows and glancing at the kitchen door, "so that you could drown me in a bevy of little ones that I could spoil rotten. But, I won't do it. It wouldn't be right and it's not the right time. And now is not the time for you to make any kind of life-altering decisions. Trust me, Zerith. I know you must hate hearing it but I am your senior by quite a margin. The pain will pass. It will take forever and, until you die, part of it will live in your soul. But, the day will come when you can remember her without..."

"That's just it!" Zerith exploded, pounding his fists on the table. "Why did she do this? Why did she turn to the Legion? And then why did she turn against them at the end? What was going through her mind?"

"A wise man once advised me not to ask questions that don't have answers. Perhaps you should heed that as well."

The men stood in silence for a moment until Mir'el turned back and finished mixing the batter. Pouring it off into the pans he had ready, he sighed and, gesturing with the spatula, decided to change the subject. "What happened to Jez'ral? Why wasn't he here?"

"He was...hurt. Several weeks ago, now. We attacked Magtheridon in order to break the blood-curse on several of the orcish clans in Outland. Illidan had tainted them with demon blood again. I don't know exactly what it was he did, but I think he was trying to control Magtheridon and keep him docile while we killed the demon."

"That sounds like Jez'ral," Mir'el sighed. "He'd berate me up one side and down the other for pulling anything like that and yet he'll ignore my expertise in this area and do the very thing I've warned him not to attempt under any circumstances. What was the result?"

"He lost his memory. It has been returning, though. That's actually what touched off this whole mess. Apparently, he had a Vial of water from the Well of Eternity. Yeah," Zerith

laughed when Mir'el dropped the spatula, "I was surprised too. We were off in Nagrand when it started. Riots and accusations. The naaru took charge of it, giving it to Voren'thal to guard."

"That was a wise decision. I love Jez'ral but he's nowhere near ready to handle something that powerful. Neither am I."

"At any rate, everything after that has led us to where we are now. And I don't mind saying that I'd give anything to go back and change things. We should never have gone against Illidan Stormrage!" Zerith growled, slamming his fists into the table. "Alayne and Ger'alín would still be alive, would be sitting here laughing, if we hadn't! If only I had listened to her! She'd still be alive!" he sobbed. Slamming his face onto the table, he covered his head with his arms and wept. "This is my fault!"

"Now, now," Mir'el said, shaken. These children had gone up against Illidan Stormrage? And survived? "I'm sure that you did whatever you felt you had to do. I'm sure that there were good reasons for the choices you made. And, I'm certain that, had you it to do all over again, you'd do no differently. You can't blame yourself for not foreseeing the future, Zerith. If you could foretell it, you would go mad. And, perhaps had you done things differently, she would only have died sooner or more horrifically."

"To be pulled into the Twisting Nether isn't bad enough?" he sobbed. "When I let myself think about what her last moments must have been like..."

"Her last moments were spent with her friend..."

"...husband..."

"...she was married?" the warlock asked, a sad but shining expression of happiness on his face. "I'm glad. She spent her last moments with him, Zerith. If you have to go, there's no better way to go than with the one you love most there by your side. I believe that can cancel out just about any kind of terror the universe can throw at you. Now, here," he said, thrusting a dishrag at the priest. "Wipe your face. Let's go wake the others up and have breakfast. I want you to tell me about Outland and this Shattrath. I intend to go with you when you return there."

"I'm not planning on going back," Zerith grumbled. "I don't think I could stand it."

"That's odd," Mir'el said, looking surprised. "A messenger came by earlier, while you still slept, and said that you were expected in Shattrath within the week. He also left this note for you." Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a sealed envelope and handed it to the priest. Zerith broke the seal, not recognizing it, and sucked in a breath as he read the spidery writing.

*Zerith,*

*We did not have much time to get to know each other when first we met in Shadowmoon Valley. You will remember me as Mordenai, a hunter. In truth, I am a member of the nether dragonflight. The sin'dorei hunter is merely a guise I wear to allow me to pass among mortals without causing a riot.*

*Not only am I a nether dragon, I'm the very nether dragon who attacked Shattrath with your sister. By the time you receive this message, I will be gone, having returned there to turn myself in for justice. However, I could not leave Quel'Thalas without letting you know that Alayne loved you with all of her heart. She did not serve Kael'Thas or the Legion out of any misplaced sense of loyalty, fear, or lust for power. She did it only to bring back the Sunwell so that her husband could be healed of his grievous illness. I know that you have no reason to believe me beyond wanting to, but I speak the truth. Akama of the Broken, leader of the Ashtongue Deathsworn, can vouch for my veracity. Alayne told him of her plans before she set them in motion. However, not all has come to pass as she desired. She did not want you – or anyone from Shattrath – to follow her. She did her best to put you off her trail using magic siphoned from the great manaforges. But still, you followed after her. I don't understand why myself. Her plan was to have all of you arrested and held in Shattrath until*

*after she could trick Kael'Thas into giving her access and power to reignite the Sunwell using the Vials of water from the Well of Eternity. She did have several contingency plans laid out in case the Legion actually made landfall. I suppose that she put one of them into play and it cost her her life.*

*Your sister was a woman of rare honor. You may be proud of her.*

*Mordenai*

*P.S. – While I do plan to return to Shattrath and turn myself in, I will be making a detour to Tempest Keep. Your sister kept a journal. I can only pray that she outlined her true thoughts and plans in them. I know that you must desire having her named cleared. Alayne actually wanted you to damn her, to hate her. She thought that anger would give you the strength to heal from her betrayal. However, knowing that she is gone now...were I her brother, I would want her name cleared and remembered in song.*

“I don’t know whether I want to dance for joy or scream in sorrow,” Zerith said flatly. “This is worse than thinking she had betrayed me – betrayed us.”

“What is it?” Mir’el asked.

“Hurry up with breakfast, would you?” Zerith said briskly. “I’ll go wake the others. We’re leaving for Outland in an hour.”

~\*~\*~\*~

Zerith gritted his teeth as they approached the Black Temple. Since passing beside Shattrath, Mir’el had been beside himself with wanting to go to that city and be reunited with Jez’ral. It took all of the priest’s patience to remind himself that had he been parted for Dar’ja for so long and had he just found out she’d been injured and ill, he would want nothing to stand in the way of his being at her side. Still, the warlock’s papable impatience irritated the priest. He already did not look forward to returning to the place where everything had begun to go wrong but he had to speak with Akama. He had to know what was going on and why the man had not told him.

Dismounting at the base of the steps leading up to the doors, Zerith sighed in relief. The Black Temple no longer deserved that appellation. Renovations must have started the day after Illidan died. The cloaked statues had been removed, replaced with statues of orc and draenei priests, shaman, and heroes. The priest paused before one statue that reminded him of the man who had spoken at the Sunwell. Glancing at the foot, he could see the name “Velen” carved into the stone.

Walking through the Temple, nodding politely but swiftly to those he passed, Zerith sought out Akama. He found the Broken in one of the gardens, up to his knobby knees in muck as he dug in the dirt, planting flowers. “I would like a word with you, Akama,” Zerith said coldly in a tone that brooked no argument. “Now.”

The Broken shoved the hand shovel he’d been digging with into the freshly turned earth and stood up. Dusting his dirty hands on the apron hanging from his neck, he gestured for the priest to walk ahead of him, indicating that Zerith should enter one of the empty studies off of the main hallway. Akama walked in behind him quickly and turned, blocking the others from entering. “Oh no,” Zerith growled. “They deserve to hear the truth too. I almost wish I could have Garrosh and Mor’ghor here as well. The more I think about what Mordenai told me, the more I want to have it out with all of you before I retire to some quiet, remote corner of the world where I never have to see another person again!”

Akama blinked and nodded. Stepping to the side, he let the other two sin'dorei and the grief-stricken Forsaken into the room. "What is it you would have me say to you?" the Broken asked in his gravelly voice.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"That Alayne was planning to run away and join Kael'Thas. That she was trying to find a cure for Ger'alın. That you knew these things. Why did you not tell me and why did you continue to treat her like filth if you knew she was trying to make up for her mistake?"

Akama sighed and stared off in the distance, gathering his thoughts. "I said nothing and treated her that way because she asked that of me. She laid out her plan to me, telling me in strictest confidence that it required that she be hated. She couldn't let you in on it because you would have tried to stop her. As it was, you did try. But, at least you were trying because you feared she might have turned against you. She intended for you to believe she had. She said the rage would help you get over the loss quicker. But she..."

"Enough," Zerith said, tears of anger blinding him. "So, Mordenai spoke the truth. She intended for her name to be reviled and hated through all the rest of time while she worked to restore our people's hope of survival. And you, a priest of the Light, sworn to uphold truth, you lied and would have let her memory be spat upon! Why, Akama? So you could have your damned Temple back? The Temple she helped to return to you? Is that all that mattered to you? To the orcs? That we came here and cleaned up the messes you couldn't or wouldn't?"

"The lady swore me to secrecy until such a time as it could not matter," Akama said calmly. "I will overlook your words today, Zerith, for they are flung while the hurt is still fresh. Still, if she were to find out..."

"She's dead," Zerith spat. "Ger'alın is too."

"When? How?" Akama asked, aghast.

"Perhaps I'll tell you when the omens are more favorable," Zerith snarled, storming out of the Temple. "I suppose you'll be in Shattrath for the trials. I'll see you there. Your actions on her behalf when she's put on trial posthumously will speak the volumes they haven't already. I'm done with you," he said quietly. "I'm done with all of this. Come on," he gestured to his companions, "I need to deliver the same message to Shattrath and to Garrosh and then we'll find a quiet corner or the universe to call our own."

~\*~\*~\*~

Jez'ral paced up and down one of the bridges leading from Terokkar into Shattrath. He'd done this every day for over a week since word came of the Legion's defeat at Quel'Danas. Soon, Zerith and the others would be back and they could finally all go settle down like Alayne and Ger'alın had wanted. He'd even sent a very confused but very sincere note to the man he recalled as Mir'el explaining what little he could and begging him to join him in Outland and help him regain what he'd lost. He thought he'd seen them pass by earlier only, instead of taking the branch into the city, they had headed towards Shadowmoon Valley. Jez'ral wondered what business they would have had there. Schooling himself to patience, he sat at the foot of the bridge. His nervous energy would not allow him to sit still for long and he found himself pacing restlessly again.

Un-noticed by the warlock, his steps were shadowed. Sar'la giggled to herself quietly as she adopted the serious demeanor on the warlock's face, her small strides matching his pace behind him. When he turned around, he nearly tripped over her. "This is becoming a tradition," he laughed when he regained his balance. "What are you doing out of Lower City, Sar'la?"

“I wanted to see if you were going to come to the party,” she said happily. “Everyone will be there.”

“Of course I’m coming to the party!” he laughed. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

“I hope that everyone who went to Quel’Danas will be coming back,” she said seriously. “I want to see them all again. Do you think they’ll stay out here? Or would they all go back home?”

“I don’t know,” Jez’ral replied, considering his words with care. “Some will probably go back home. They were fighting to protect their homes. Others, like me, don’t really have much to go back to. So, some will be staying out here.”

“I wish everyone would stay out here. I don’t want them to leave me.”

“They wouldn’t be leaving you,” he protested, “merely going back to other people who want to see them like you do. You can’t have everything you want in life, Sar’la. Things and people will change. If you can’t accept that and change with the times, you’ll never be happy.”

“That sounds like what Matron tells us,” the little girl sighed irritably. “That one day we’ll understand and have prospective.”

“Perspective.”

“Whatever. What is that anyway?”

“Something I don’t think I could explain to you if I wanted. You have to have it to understand it,” he grinned, amused at her annoyance.

“I can come stay with you sometimes, right?” she asked after a lengthy pause. By now, Jez’ral had been forced to sit down. The days of nervous pacing and the excitement he couldn’t help but feel at the thought that everyone would be back today were taking their toll.

“Of course you can. I know I’d like to have you around. You remind me of Miss Alayne when she was your age.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he said gravely. “She was just as curious and excited about learning things as you are. She was just as fast to pick them up as you are, too. And, I think the others would like having you around too. Sometimes it gets a bit boring with nothing but grown ups around,” he confided.

“But you guys talk about all kinds of interesting stuff.”

“It’s interesting to you because you lack perspective,” he teased. “I’m kidding, Sar’la. One day, you’ll understand more of the things we talk about. And, I promise you that I will come visit you as much as I can. Maybe I’ll even start teaching you and the other children about magic. I need to relearn a bit of it myself so we can all learn together.”

“That sounds like fun,” she said, sounding sleepy. The hour had grown late. It had been mid-afternoon when Jez’ral thought he’d glimpsed Zerith, Dar’ja, and Callie passing by the city. Evening was setting on and it was past time for Sar’la to be back at the orphanage and getting ready for bed. The warlock berated himself for letting her sit there with him so long. No doubt she had missed supper. He didn’t fancy having to deal with her adopted big brother should the man find out he’d let that lapse.

Wadding his cloak up, he set it next to him and gently pushed the tired child back. She was already half-asleep and, by the time she’d settled in, snuggling on his cloak, she was out. He stood up, feeling sleepy himself but not wanting to abandon his position on the bridge. As the light of evening began to wane, he sighed and prepared to pick the child up and carry her down to the orphanage before returning to his room on the Scryer’s tier. He must have been mistaken. That wasn’t Zerith at all. His own hopes had just caused him to see the man where he wasn’t. Disappointment welled up in him but he quashed it and bent down to lift the girl into his arms.

“Ho the bridge!” he heard a painfully familiar voice shout. Straightening, he smiled and began running. Zerith and Dar’ja sat atop their mounts, neither looking very happy. Callie was grinning manically. He noticed neither Ger’alin nor Alayne was with them and wondered at that for a second before he found himself standing in front of Mir’el.

“Remember me, old friend?” Mir’el asked, his eyes sparkling. “Remember the boat?” Jez’ral affected not to understand, putting on his most befuddled expression.

“What about Dalaran?”

It was all Jez’ral could do not to break into laughter.

“Oh, come on, you have to remember something,” Mir’el said, his expression falling into despair. “Miris? Tal’ar? Alayne? The fight we had just before the Battle of Mount Hyjal over the very thing you did out here, you damned fool?”

“No,” Jez’ral said slowly, “I’m afraid I don’t remember you nearly drowning me in the middle of Lake Elrendar. I also don’t remember you and me nearly causing a diplomatic incident when we started a duel in The Good Knight’s Sheep over which of us would marry Miris in order to fulfill that silly contract. Nor do I remember helping you set up the portal that let her and Tal’ar sneak out of Silvermoon so they could elope once we found out he was head over heels in love with her. And lastly, no, I don’t remember not being able to blink for three solid weeks because you didn’t bother to pay attention to your father’s lessons on plant lore!”

“Oh, good,” Mir’el grinned, “so you don’t recall all the stuff that makes me look stupid. I’ve always wanted a fresh start.”

“Oh shut up, idiot,” Jez’ral laughed, throwing his arms around the man. “I’ve missed you.”

“You’ve changed.”

“I gather that losing your memory tends to do that,” Jez’ral said dryly. “Now, come on. It’s too late for us to go home so we’ll stay here tonight and ride over tomorrow. A’dal says that he wants to speak with you, Zerith. And Voren’tal and the others of course want to offer you congratulations on a job well done. Is it true that the Sunwell has been restored?” he asked quickly. “I thought I sensed a change in the very center of my being, as if a hole had been filled.”

“It’s been restored,” Zerith said flatly. “The price was far too high. May the Nether take the Sunwell. I hate it!”

“What’s the matter with him?” Jez’ral asked Mir’el as Zerith, Dar’ja, and the now-unhappy looking Callie rode on into the city. The warlock paused to pick up the orphan and grinned at Mir’el. “It’s past her bedtime. I want to hear everything. They stuck me off here looking after the little ones as if I were already in my dotage.”

“The Sunwell shines again but its light came at the price of blood. Alayne and Ger’alin were lost. Alayne had actually summoned him and no one seems to know what game she was playing at doing that. Akama and Mordenai say she was after restoration. But...to take that high a risk?”

“Think like a youth again,” Jez’ral said, his voice suddenly toneless. “When you think you’re twelve feet tall and immortal, you’ll do stupid things.”

“Like taking a shortcut through Zul-Lightforsaken-Aman?”

“Yes. I guess we won’t be moving in, then,” he sighed glumly. “And after she asked me to bring those carpets over. Is that why you went to Shadowmoon Valley the long way instead of coming through here?”

“What are you talking about, Jez’ral?”

“I guess the druids couldn’t help it. I’ll try not to blame them. Though, if that Var’thanos gets on my back again, I’m going to break his jaw.”

“I’m confused,” Mir’el said helplessly.

“We’ll go over and clear things out tomorrow, old friend,” Jez’ral said, reaching up to pat his knee. “For now, let’s get this one back where she belongs and then go have supper and get caught up. Light, I don’t look forward to tomorrow. I would have thought, though, that Garrosh would have had the decency to tell me himself!”

“I’m really confused.”

“Welcome to my world.”

~\*~\*~\*~

“Fair warning, A’dal,” Zerith said loudly as he strode into the building housing the naaru. “I’m in no mood for anything other than straight speech. If you hand me so much as even the simplest of mysteries, I’m out of here.”

“Be at peace, brother in the Light.”

“I wish I were at peace. Eternal peace. Jez’ral told me you wanted to speak with me. I’m here.”

“Calm yourself, Zerith. These are days of celebration. Take stock and take rest from your battles.”

“Right. Have a nice life, A’dal,” the priest growled, turning on his heel.

Zerith felt his feet sticking to the floor. “You are upset about something,” A’dal rang calmly. “You have been through much lately. Perhaps, in my eagerness to offer my congratulations to you and your followers, I overlooked the differences in how your kind and mine deal with such events. Return to your quarters on the Scryer’s tier. Come back to me tomorrow when you have rested and we will begin again.”

“I don’t think so, A’dal,” Zerith replied. “Once you let go of me, I’m out of here.”

“You won’t even stay for the trials? After giving your word?”

“That was low,” Zerith growled. “Fine, I’ll stay for the trials and then I’m out of here.”

“Zerith, what on earth is bothering you?” Thalodien asked as the priest, now freed of the spell binding him, stormed out of the building.

“That you even have to ask me that question makes me want to tear my hair out and strangle you with it. Good night, Thalodien. It’s far past my bedtime. That’s why I’m so cranky.”

“What is his problem?” Thalodien asked Callie, catching her by the arm before she could hurry after her friends. “Did something happen over in Nagrand? Is that what took you so long to get here?”

“What are you talking about?” the rogue asked, jerking her arm out of the sin’dorei’s grip. “We were in Silvermoon. We came as soon as we could.”

“Silvermoon? What on earth were you doing still there? We thought you’d come through the...oh, I see,” Thalodien said, understanding dawning. “I’ll talk with A’dal. You will want to visit Garrosh and Geyah tomorrow as soon as you’re up.”

“I can’t imagine Zerith will want to speak with Garrosh,” Callie said, confused. “He had it out with Akama earlier. I think he’d probably tear Garrosh and Mor’ghor a new one if he got close to them.”

“Just...just go over there tomorrow morning. Trust me, it will put him in a much better humor.”

~\*~\*~\*~

The sun shone through the trees, casting cool emerald shade upon the house. A little fence, hip-high for an adult but impossibly tall for a child, marked the perimeter of the garden. The flowers were in full bloom, their sweet scent wafting across the gentle breeze. Zerith

smiled happily, knowing he was home. Garrosh had kept his word. He must have had his son Grommash out there bringing talbuk meat to the sequestered sin'dorei every day. The smell of roasting food mixed with the flowers, making the priest's mouth water.

"Uncle Zerith," a young woman said, springing up from her spot by the lake. "It's good to see you again."

"It's nice to see you again, too, Sar'la. What are you doing all the way out here?"

"Uncle Ger'alın was giving me sword lessons," the orphan laughed. "Uncle Ben'lir and I will be traveling back to Silvermoon next week. He says I'm ready to join the guard force."

The name Ben'lir tickled something in the back of the priest's mind and he wanted to correct the young woman. Ger'alın and Alayne were long dead. But, for some reason, he found himself laughing and agreeing that the orphan was ready to join the guard force.

"I shouldn't keep you out here long," Sar'la grinned. "Aunt Dar'ja and Aunt Alayne have been plotting to kill you since just after you left. It seems that Ren'mar got it into his head to study herblore – without telling them – and..."

"If my son brought home a load of itchweed and they didn't recognize it..."

"Worse. Black caps. And then proceeded to study cooking without telling anyone. The spaghetti that night was something to remember, I gather."

"Oh Light! Poor boy. I did the exact same thing when I was his age."

"Yes, well, Uncle Ger'alın hung him out to dry over that. You know how protective he's become of Aunt Alayne. I don't see how she puts up with it."

"She's too tired to get annoyed."

"It really wears you out, doesn't it? I don't see why women go through that."

"If they didn't, we'd run out of sin'dorei before very long," Zerith laughed. "That's why men get so protective of women in that state."

"You're not about to start the 'facts of life' talk with me, are you? Matron did that when I was fourteen and I've still not recovered. She was so embarrassed, though, when Uncle Ben'lir explained things to her. Poor woman. Light bless her soul and guard her in the hereafter."

"I'll spare you the gory details, then. I'd better get in there and remind Dar'ja why she didn't kill me and Ren'mar the day she recovered from having him. I might need to pry Ger'alın from Alayne as well. She's probably ready to punch him by now."

Hugging the orphan they'd adopted and been adopted by, Zerith hurried into the house. He smiled at his son, seeing the boy seated next to the ancient Forsaken. Callie waved at the priest and then lowered her head again, obviously passing on some bit of arcane pranklore to the boy. Zerith made a mental note to keep an eye on him and warn him not to play pranks on Alayne right now. Ren'mar was a sweet child who loved to laugh and make others laugh. Still, at age seven, he didn't really have a good grasp on appropriateness or timing.

"Welcome back," Dar'ja said when she stepped into the living room and saw him setting his things down. "He's been a complete nightmare since you left," she teased. "I thought about selling him to the goblins."

"I have not, Mom!" Ren'mar protested. "I've been good. I even planted some new flowers. And, I did all my chores without having to be asked twice."

"He did that," Dar'ja admitted. "How is everything back in Lordaeron? You were gone longer than I expected."

"We'll talk about that later," Zerith said. "It's complicated. For now, I want to peek in on Alayne and then wash up for some of this 'memorable spaghetti' I've heard so much about."

Dar'ja turned green. "Ger'alın is not going to be amused at the thought of having to dig another set of pits so soon. The poor man was sicker than any of us and yet he insisted on digging new trenches."

"That bad, eh?"

"Worse. He's grounded until he has grandchildren."

"He didn't mean any harm, Dar'ja."

"That's not from me; that's from Ger'alın."

"Then I'd better to talk with them."

Zerith hugged Dar'ja and gave her a quick kiss of welcome before ducking further into the house he shared with his extended family. Passing by Mir'el and Jez'ral's lab, he wondered what new experiment they were up to and decided to satisfy his curiosity later. Poking his head into the area his sister and her husband had claimed as their own, he saw that it was empty. Part of him wasn't surprised; had they not been dead long years now? But then, why did he keep thinking that?

"How are you feeling?" he heard Ger'alın asking.

"Fine. Just as I was five minutes ago when you asked. Just as I will be when you ask again five minutes from now," he heard Alayne reply, her tone much too patient. She sounded exactly like Dar'ja had when she was heavy with Ren'mar.

"Do you want me to get you something to drink?"

"If I have another glass of water, you're going to have to dig new toilets. Again."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. Quit pestering me!"

"I'm sorry."

"I am too."

"You two sound exactly like Dar'ja and I did," Zerith laughed.

"Zerith!" the both exclaimed happily. "I am so glad you're here," Ger'alın continued in a rush. "I feel like a complete moron. What am I doing wrong to have her so annoyed at me all the time?"

"Excuse me," Alayne said peevishly, "I'm sitting right here."

"Breathing," Zerith replied. "She's going to be annoyed with you for about the next twenty years. Welcome to fatherhood, Dad."

~\*~\*~\*~

"Zerith, sweetheart, what's the matter?" Dar'ja asked thickly when she woke up to her husband sobbing next to her. "Tell me."

"It was just a dream," he wept brokenly. "It was just a dream."

~\*~\*~\*~

"If I never see Garrosh again, it will be a day too soon," Zerith sneered over breakfast the next morning. After the dream he'd had last night, the last thing he wanted to do was have a sight of the house. He felt as if his heart might break into pieces if he had to look at it and see it knowing that Alayne and Ger'alın, he and Dar'ja, would never live there together. Would never raise their children there together. "And what is it with everyone treating me as if there's a surprise party planned? I can't wait to be away from here! I hate them all! Alayne's dead, Ger'alın's dead, and all they can do is smile behind their hands at me and tell me to go talk to Garrosh? Nether take them all!"

"Don't snap at me, Zerith," Callie retorted. "I'm just telling you what I was told."

"I'm sorry, Callie," he apologized.

“It’s okay.”

“He was like this when she vanished and we thought she was dead,” Dar’ja whispered to the Forsaken. “Snapping at everyone. Couldn’t stand to see anyone happy. I nearly walked out on him a few times. Give him time. In a few months, he’ll be better.”

The Forsaken nodded dully and fiddled with the food on her plate. She didn’t feel up to forcing herself to eat. Zerith, seeing how upset she was, relented and patted her hand. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t get much sleep last night. Haunted by ghosts of a future that will never come to pass, now.”

“Forgiven,” she smiled through tears. “Let’s just get this over with. We’ll go see what Garrosh wants, say good-bye to Geyah, show Mir’el the house, and then...we’ll ask one of the Mag’har to send word to us when the trials are starting. We can ramble around Nagrand for a while. It’s a pretty place. Maybe it will help.”

“What I need to do,” Zerith sighed, “is say good-bye. I’m not going to be fit to live with until I do.”

“Then let’s go say good-bye,” Callie whispered.

~\*~\*~\*~

The five had skirted around Garadar, taking off the road to wrap around south of the orcish village. Zerith steadfastly ignored the hails from the Mag’har guards. He knew Garrosh and Geyah both wanted to speak with him. He knew, deep down, he owed them both the news of what had come to pass. Still, he didn’t want to deliver it. He didn’t want to speak to Garrosh because of the way the man had treated Alayne. He dreaded having to deliver such sad tidings to Geyah as well. The woman was old, her grasp on life tenuous as her spirit strove to join her friends and loved ones in the afterlife. Zerith did not want to add a reason for her to make that journey just yet. He’d had enough of death. More than enough.

As they made their way through the path Ger’alin had indicated that would take them to the house he’d had built for his wife, Zerith’s heart began to race. Dar’ja reached out and put a calming hand on his thigh, letting him know that she was there and that she understood how difficult this was for him. Callie’s mount dragged its hooves, sharing its rider’s reluctance to go forward.

“I would have thought you’d put the cookfire out,” Jez’ral said suddenly. “Did you want to burn it to the ground?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You left the cookfire burning.”

“Jez’ral, we’ve not been here since before we went up against Magtheridon,” Zerith said.

“What?! Then who’s been looking after...”

The priest didn’t hear the rest of what the befuddled warlock said. The man was right; the cookfires were burning. Someone was staying there. Someone was in his sister’s house. Someone was about to catch unholy hell.

“Wait, what did you just say Jez’ral?” Mir’el asked, stunned. Zerith threw the door open with a bang, letting it slam back behind him as he stormed inside. The interior was in disarray. Carpets had been flung about and the furniture was not set up in a manner conducive to utility. There was a clear path through the mess, though, one that seemed to connect the kitchen to the hallway leading back to the bedrooms. Zerith noted that something was burning in the kitchen and, looking in, hoped that Dar’ja would take the ruined stew off the fire when she passed by. For now, he wanted to see who had taken up residence in this house. Anger and a desperate kind of hope gave wings to his feet.

Checking the bedrooms one by one, he felt disappointment at finding each empty in turn. When he came to the last one, he had to fight to force himself to open the door. Part of him was eager to see who, if anyone, lay inside. Part of him dreaded what he might find. This all seemed impossible.

Opening the door, tuning out the joyful sounding cries he heard from the front of the house, he stepped into the bedroom, seeing that someone was sleeping there. Giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, he fell to his knees. What he was seeing was impossible.

Ger'alın lay on his side, facing the doorway, his hair streaming down his arms and chest. Bandages covered those arms and that chest and, looking closely, Zerith could see burns scarring the man's face. Some kind of ointment had been applied to them from the way his skin shone. Zerith's gaze followed Ger'alın's arms to his hands and saw that he clutched something against him, hidden mostly beneath the blankets. The priest's heart began thundering and he reached up and slapped himself hard to make certain he was awake. Blonde hair peeked out from under the blanket and was wrapped up in Ger'alın's wounded fingers.

"If you wake her up just when I've finally let her drop off to sleep," the Blood Knight said, opening his eyes a crack, "somehow, I'll find the strength to beat you into next week."

"You're alive!"

"Zerith?"

"You're alive!"

"Oh great, a repeat performance of what your sister did after the second battle of Stromgarde," he joked. "You thought we were dead?" he said somberly. "Alayne, wake up."

"Let me sleep. You've kept me up three nights straight," she moaned.

"Zerith's here. Oh Light woman, you're covered," he laughed when she reached up and jerked the blanket well over her head. Zerith winced when he saw burns and blisters dotting her fingers before she snatched them back under the cover. "You didn't get the message from Garrosh? He and Akama are the ones who found us, burnt up and bleeding on the floor of the bridge of Tempest Keep."

"I've not spoken with Garrosh. Akama didn't say anything about this. Not that I really gave him a chance to say much of anything," Zerith admitted guiltily. "I was too angry. How did you two survive? We all thought you were dead."

"That is a very long story," Ger'alın yawned. "And neither of us has gotten much sleep lately. Oh, get your mind out of the gutter, man. We've been in too much pain to sleep. Well, that too," he admitted with a rueful laugh. "Make yourselves at home. Clean it up if you want, and we'll tell you all about it in a little while. For now, just let us sleep. It may be a while before we get anymore rest."

~\*~\*~\*~

"They're alive," Mir'el, Dar'ja, Callie, and Zerith all said at the same time for the dozenth time that hour. The five had busied themselves cleaning up the kitchen and the living room, rearranging things so that some semblance of order prevailed. Every so often they would pause in the work, listen for one of Ger'alın's great snores or one of the couple's insane babblings, and then pronounce the statement they had just repeated.

"Yes, they're alive. You had me terrified they had died, though," Jez'ral replied. "How could you do that to me? Did I wrong you in a past life?"

"Why didn't you tell us they were alive?" Zerith demanded.

"I didn't know you thought they were dead. I didn't know you thought they'd died falling into the portal. Really, Zerith, for a man as wise and knowledgeable as you are, your education certainly has been spotty in places."

“Welcome back, Jez’ral,” Mir’el laughed, striding across the room and nipping the man’s ear. Jez’ral blushed but permitted the embrace. “I figured she was killed on the other side. She’s good, but overcoming Kil’jaeden?” he said, shaking his head.

“She almost was killed by him,” Jez’ral replied. “Ah, the lady is up. I’ll let her tell the tale. Do you need help?” he asked.

Zerith and the others dropped what they were doing and rushed to help the injured couple. Both wore thick house robes that were bloused out so as not to touch their skin more than necessary. Glancing at Ger’alin’s chest and stomach, Zerith could see why neither of them would want to wear more than that. Ugly, angry burns scored most of their bodies. He thought he could see the beginnings of claw marks on Ger’alin’s neck, the spacing too wide to be friendly fire. Alayne supported him with her body as he limped into the room. Her own steps were not much steadier. “Sit down on the couch, both of you,” the priest said. “We cleared it off. I want to look at you both. What happened?”

“We fell through a portal into the abyss,” Ger’alin said lightly. “Kil’jaeden was not happy with us. He didn’t have much time to spend on his displeasure, though, before Alayne managed to open a small portal that dropped us into Tempest Keep. Still, he had enough time to make both of us decide to remove the Twisting Nether from our list of possible retirement locales.”

“It was a close run thing,” Alayne admitted frankly. “If Ger’alin hadn’t jumped in after me and pulled up that shield, I would be dead.”

“Are they arcane burns?” Zerith asked. “Let me examine you both.”

“They’re worse than arcane burns,” Alayne answered. “Prayer and magic won’t heal them. Only time will. Consider it a demon’s curse. Or, consider it my punishment for the worry I put you through. I knew it would hurt you but...no, no excuses. I was wrong. I almost destroyed the very thing I was trying to save because I was wrong.”

“What was that whole thing about?” Zerith asked, moving over and tugging at Ger’alin’s robe so he could get a better view of the wound that had the man limping. He gasped when he saw blood-red bandages wrapped around his thigh from nearly hip to knee. “Those need to be changed.”

“Ysiel Windsinger will be coming by later to do just that,” Ger’alin answered. “And Geyah will be by with something for us to take so we can make the journey to Shattrath in a few days.”

“If Grandmother had her way, we wouldn’t be going at all,” Alayne said quickly. “But, the trials can’t be held off forever. I need to explain and answer for what I did.”

“We both will,” Ger’alin said, draping a careful arm around his wife’s shoulders.

“But...tell me what was going on!” Zerith pleaded.

“Remember how I fell to my addiction after the Black Temple?” Ger’alin answered. “Remember how everyone turned against Alayne because of what she did there? Well, my wife got it into her head to cure me. She thought that the only way she could do it, though, was to take the two Vials we’d found and go to the Sunwell. Her only means of reliably accessing the Sunwell? Kael’Thas. Had she gone back to Silvermoon, she would have set off a war for certain once news got out that the Vials were there. Also, she needed the assistance of those more experienced and knowledgeable than she. She could have gone to the Scryers...”

“If I thought they had the boldness to do what needed to be done, I would have,” she interrupted.

“But, instead, she took a chance and went to Kael’Thas. She figured she could also thwart his plans with the Legion, maybe even turn him around again, but she needed a key to get in. The Vials were that key.”

“Let me tell it. I went to Kael’Thas because he was already trying to reignite the Sunwell. I had hoped that, with the two Vials, he would halt his plan to summon Kil’jaeden and go along with what I had worked out. He didn’t, of course, so I stayed on and proved myself trustworthy to him in order to be in a position to stop him. Yes, I ramped up production of the manaforges. I saw, working with Telonicus, that the Vials by themselves would not be enough. They were the key to my plan but I would need a vast reserve of energy to call upon. So, I worked out methods to speed production of the manaforges. That also greatly increased Kael’Thas’s plans. Then, we heard rumors that the Scryers were massing for an attack. We were nearly ready to start the next phase of operations so I diverted energy into the shield, setting it up so that only the destruction of the forges would bring it down. I suppose, since you managed to get into Tempest Keep, the forges are destroyed?”

“Mostly,” Zerith answered.

“That’s good and bad,” she sighed. “Perhaps the Netherstorm will renew itself with the forges off-line. Another time,” she said, forestalling questions. “I gather that you managed to kill or mortally wound Kael’Thas when you attacked Tempest Keep. By that time, I and any others he trusted were on Quel’Danas. The energy we’d harvested with the forges was being used to power the crystals and the golems on the island. I wondered at this, but not for long. It turns out that the essence of the Sunwell had survived. Kael’Thas had me attune myself to it so that I could tap into it. I revised my plans accordingly. By now, I knew that the Scryers were after me, Zerith, and I knew that I didn’t have much longer to put my actions into play. I thought you were under arrest or were being held in Shattrath. I figured I’d put you off the chase in Nagrand with the vision I’d sent you of your father and my own...”

“...that was you?”

“Yes.”

“I told you I sensed arcane energies. It seems that she set up a trap for us. Periodically, an illusion would happen around us if we weren’t in Shattrath. She was trying to divert us and keep us from finding her until she was gone. It worked, too,” Ger’alin sighed.

“At any rate, you managed to make it to Quel’Danas just as we were beginning the summoning. Kael’Thas was watching my every move. I also had ‘honor guards,’” she said, her mouth twisting in distaste. “Eredar sorcerers, the ones you fought, the ones who nearly had us kill each other. They guarded me closely. I had to pretend to be on their side until Kil’jaeden was nearly through the portal. My plan was, then, to enclose myself and Kil’jaeden in a dome using the energies from the Sunwell and then destroy him while he was still weakened from the summoning. Then, with my final strength, I would have shattered the Vials, killing the eredar holding them and unleashing their power into the matrix with the Sunwell’s energy. That would have been enough to reignite it. Then, Ger’alin would have been healed, as would all the Wretched, and life could have gone back to normal.”

“Why stage the attacks and make it look as if you were siding with Kael’Thas willingly?”

“So you would hate me,” she admitted. “I wanted all of you to hate me. I thought it would hurt you less that way.”

“Are you crazy? Or stupid?” Zerith asked, horrified.

“I’ve asked her the same thing. Sometimes there simply is no understanding what goes on in her head,” Ger’alin sighed. “At any rate, you know most of it, now...”

“I still don’t see how you survived falling through that portal.”

“Luck,” Alayne said, staring at her hands.

“Faith,” Ger’alin grinned, stroking the back of her neck gently. “When we fell through, Alayne and Kil’jaeden were hurling spells at each other. Her skin was already nearly scorched off. I reached out to the Light for one desperate act and threw a shield around us. The Light was with me and it healed her enough for her to open a portal to Tempest Keep, the

closest location to the Nether she could reach. I think my prayer must have reacted with where ever we were because Kil'jaeden roared and vanished in short order. He looked fairly wounded to me. Perhaps he'll die of his wounds and leave the rest of the universe in peace."

The group sat in silence for a while. Only the occasional groan from Ger'alín or Alayne broke the quiet. Each was pondering over what the pair had told them, fitting it in with what they knew. At last, Callie broke the silence with a sigh.

"We were all wrong," she said. "All of us. Alayne, you were wrong to head down that path. It nearly killed you and ruined everything you hope to save."

"I know," the woman said softly.

"Let me finish," Callie requested. "We were wrong to turn on you like we did. One of my greatest fears after you vanished and we couldn't catch up to you was that I would never have the chance to tell you that. You did what you did not to hurt us, but to help him," she said, pointing to Ger'alín. "We should have understood that and forgiven you instead of getting upset about it and leaving you alone so that you felt the only thing you could do was go off on your own. I feel as if I contributed to this whole business by standing aloof when you needed us there to help you with Gerry. I hope that, in time, you can forgive me for that."

"If you can forgive me for pulling Kil'jaeden halfway into our world, I suppose I can forgive you for not helping me wash his hair," Alayne said, her eyes shining. A knock on the door interrupted their discussion. Without waiting for permission, several druids entered and, exclaiming over the pair being out of bed, hurriedly ushered them back to the bedroom. Zerith rose and followed, hoping to learn enough of the druids' treatment plan to take over for them. Dar'ja stood and finished straightening the room while Mir'el and Jez'ral began discussing what they could go find for supper. Callie sat back in the shadows, watching the scene, happy to be home at long last.

"I wonder," the Forsaken muttered to herself, "how long I should give them to recover before I start a prank war of epic proportions."

"My dear Forsaken," Mir'el said, glancing over at her. "I could not help overhearing. Shall we put our heads together and plot out how to bring some welcome laughter to this house once all of the inhabitants are over their shock and injuries?"

"I'd offer to marry you and bear your children," Callie cackled, "only I'm dead and you're spoken for. So, Mir'el, what do you have in mind?"

~\*~\*~\*~

Garrosh and Akama escorted Geyah into the house. In the days since their arrival, Zerith and the others had purchased reclining chairs that allowed Ger'alín and Alayne to get out of the bed and move to the front of the house while still resting. The change had done them good. Ger'alín's leg was healing and most of Alayne's worse burns had faded to a dull pink. The priest was still upset that both of them insisted on standing trial in Shattrath. He felt they had confessed enough. Both had been interviewed by Voren'thal and Ishanah.

In his heart, Zerith feared that Alayne still faced execution for her part in the attack on Shattrath. That no one had died and only Jez'ral had been truly injured did not ease his mind at all. She had violated the sanctuary of the city. Even with all of the precautions she spoke of, there had still been a real risk of death to the inhabitants. It had chilled him to hear her acknowledge that and explain that her choice, as she had seen it, had been the probable death of a handful or the certain death of hundreds. He'd made the same dread calculus, yes, when designing battle plans. But to hear those words from her lips...

"How are you feeling?" Grandmother Geyah asked once she was settled on the couch near Alayne and Ger'alín.

“I’ll be up to riding in a few days,” Ger’alin laughed, touching his healing leg lightly. “It itches like nothing I’ve ever experienced before, though. I guess that means it’s healing.”

“I’m still just so tired,” Alayne muttered. “I never thought I could be this tired.”

“Exposure to pure Nether does that to a body,” Geyah said wisely. “I’ve seen orcs age before their time from channeling those energies. Even discounting the war and violence, warlocks rarely lived long.”

“That’s true,” Mir’el agreed. “That’s why we harped on you students so much to be sparing of your spells and to rely on free-floating energies instead of tapping from the Nether too frequently.”

“I know, Murl,” Alayne slurred. “I did pay attention in class. Wasn’t I your best student?”

“Second-best, actually,” he teased. “Jez’ral was and now is my best student.”

“You’re biased.”

“So, brother, how goes the tribe?” Ger’alin asked, turning to face Garrosh.

“It goes well,” Garrosh answered. “Mor’ghor sends word that the drakes are increasing and flourishing now that we’ve convinced them to leave Netherstorm and Shadowmoon Valley to settle in Nagrand and Terokkar. In a few years, we’ll be able to use them to help renew both areas they’ve left. There’s good land, there, if it’s allowed to lay fallow a few seasons more.”

“What of the Temple?”

“Akama’s dearest wish is for the pair of you to attend its first service of dedication.”

“We’ll be there, in one form or another,” Ger’alin promised. Reaching over, he took his wife’s hand in his own, careful of the still painful burns. “How goes the restoration of the Broken?”

“That will probably never come to pass,” Geyah interjected. “It has been too long for too many of them. And, theirs was not a devolution due to loss of an energy source like what you describe with the Wretched. It was more like a binding curse laid on them by the fel energies they were tainted with during the war. Akama and the others have come to terms with it, over time. While they pray and hope for restoration, Ger’alin, I would not have you worry too strongly over it. Especially not when you still can’t sit a saddle,” she teased.

“Bah,” the paladin laughed. “Has Oshu’gun cleared out?”

“The naaru have sanctified it once more. K’ure rests more comfortably, his transition guarded by his brethren.”

“That’s good. What of the last hold-outs from Kael’Thas?”

“They have surrendered. They are being held with the other prisoners in Shattrath. They’ll stand trial along with the rest of you. I myself have asked for leniency for them. They fought well and honorably and surrendered with no tricks. They would make worthy allies, just like certain other members of their race I could name,” Garrosh supplied, smiling at the pair. “I know I’ve not said it, but I was wrong.”

“Of course you were,” Ger’alin joked. “Little brothers always are.”

“Little?”

“Considering the way you hunch over all the time, I’m a full foot taller. So, yes, little.”

“I see,” Garrosh snorted. “Since I am now the chieftain of the Mag’har, the mothers of the clan have made it clear that I need a wife.”

“You mean the mothers of the clan found you a bride and have told you to marry her or fight all of them in single combat,” Geyah laughed. “A chieftain without a woman is no chieftain at all. Who would do the thinking?”

“It would honor me if you would attend the marriage ceremony,” Garrosh said, looking at the floor.

“In one form or another, we’ll be there,” Alayne answered softly.

“I can’t take this waiting much longer!” Zerith said suddenly. “Why must you put yourselves on trial? Certainly after everything you’ve done, after the reasons you’ve given for doing it, and after having saved our people from destruction, certainly you should be able to serve a period of exile instead of giving your neck to the headsman!”

“The naaru and the Light will decide my fate, Zerith,” Alayne said gently. “To ask otherwise would be unjust and unfair. I hadn’t planned to live this long. I’m sorry to put this burden on you.”

“I just don’t want to lose you again. All these times of thinking you’re gone...”

“At least this time you’ll know.”

“Don’t be glib!”

“I’m sorry. What else should I do? Refuse to face justice for what I wrought?”

“I don’t know,” he whined.

“It will all be over soon,” she promised, “for now, let’s enjoy what we have.”

~\*~\*~\*~

Ger’alin sat gingerly in his saddle, his leg throbbing and making him glad he’d let Zerith talk him into bringing crutches. Alayne sat huddled against his chest, still so exhausted from her ordeals that she had fallen off her horse after just a few steps. The Blood Knight prayed that they would provide a chair for her. She didn’t have his stamina or strength.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said softly, rubbing his good leg with her hand. “I’ll make it through.”

“You had better, woman,” he teased. “I don’t know if there will be a handy hole for us to leap into if you get in trouble again.”

“I’ll be good,” she said, keeping it light.

“Sar’la will probably knock you to the ground when she sees you.”

“I’ll try to make it look intentional, then.”

“You don’t have any tricks up your sleeve for if they do decide to kill you, do you?” he asked suddenly, careful to keep his voice pitched low. “If you’d let me drag this out another few days, I would have been able to be sure of getting you out of there, come what may.”

“No, I don’t,” she said, sounding a touch exasperated. “I told you, I will face this. I owe it to myself and to everyone else. If I were to run away and hide, the suspicions, the mistrust, and the hatred would never end. Of all who followed him, I’m one of the highest ranking members of Kael’s followers still alive. I’ve explained this to you.”

“I know, Lady Sunrage,” he growled. “You certainly have picked up a lot of noble mannerisms along with that title he granted you.”

“Oh, leave me alone,” she sighed irritably. “I told you, I refused to accept that rubbish.”

“Whether you’ve accepted it or not, you’re playing the role. And, while it pains me what might come of it, I’m proud of you,” he said, pressing his lips against her hair. “You drive me absolutely crazy, but I’m proud of you.”

The pair rode on in silence, taking stock and trying to enjoy what might be their last time together in this life. All too soon, the gates leading into the Aldot tier appeared at the head of the trail from Nagrand. Ger’alin gritted his teeth as they entered the shady confines. He’d heard it said that the walk from the prison cell to the hangman’s square was the longest walk a man could make. This one didn’t seem nearly long enough.

Crowds were gathered around the central building on the Terrace of Light. Seeing the newcomers arriving, they parted to let them through. Attendants for the Shattered Sun Offensive took the mounts, leading them away with promises that they would be well cared

for regardless of the outcome. A few clapped Ger'alın on the shoulder, their expressions sad but accepting. Zerith wondered at that, wishing he knew what communications had passed between the pair and the inhabitants of the sanctuary city while he and the others had believed them dead.

Ger'alın kept a steadying arm around his wife, leading her over to the front lines of those who were to face justice this day. He nodded at Ben'lir who had stepped forward, spreading his own tattered cloak on the ground and gesturing for Alayne to sit down on it. The rest of the former forge workers under her command saluted her, recalling the times when she had been in the trenches with them. "I never thought it might come to this, my Lady," Ben'lir said calmly, "but, it has been an honor to serve at your side."

"The honor was mine," Alayne said as she sank to the floor, not having the energy to continue standing. Ben'lir knelt beside her, glancing up at Ger'alın. "I can..." he started to say, his voice dropping when he saw the hammer the man carried. "Where did you get that?" he asked, pointing.

"A friend loaned it to me," Ger'alın said, puzzled. This was hardly the time to wonder after weaponry.

"Who?"

"A little orphan girl named Sar'la. We'll discuss this later, I hope," the paladin said quickly. "I must go. Take care of her for me."

"I will," Ben'lir promised. "You just sit here and rest, my Lady. Save your strength."

When Ger'alın rejoined the forces on the other side of the room, his eyes never leaving his wife, silence settled across the gathering. Standing beneath A'dal were those who would act as judges alongside the naaru this day. Ishanah of the Aldor, Voren'thal of the Scryers, Tiris'alan of the Shattered Sun, and Khadgar of Shattrath. The hush was broken when, just as A'dal called for order, the crowds parted again. A draenei priest and a blood elf paladin strode through the crowds, taking their place alongside the other judges. Ger'alın recognized Lady Liadrin but could not put a name to the draenei beside her. "Our apologies for our late arrival," the draenei said loudly. "We were held up by the zeppelin."

"Be welcome to Shattrath, Velen of Argus, Draenor, and Azeroth," A'dal chimed warmly. "You have been missed."

"I hope that this is merely the first of many visits, A'dal of the naaru."

"Let us begin," A'dal suggested. "Today, we are called to bring to account those who, through their actions, recklessly endangered the lives of countless millions across two worlds. For, by continuing to follow their prince in his schemes to bring the Burning Legion into their world, the followers of Kael'Thas Sunstrider brought death, destruction, and destitute to peoples without number. They ravaged a once fertile valley, turning it into a barren desert we call the Netherstorm. They worked with Illidan Stormrage and tainted several of the orcish clans with demonic bloodlust. They threatened the stability of the ecosystems of Terokkar and Zangarmarsh. All this was done for their prince's lust for power and glory. Worse still, they did all these things and more believing they were serving a greater good."

"That is not enough, naaru!" a voice cried out from the crowd. Shoving his way forward, Alayne groaned when she recognized Var'thanos. "They did all those things and more! Their entire race is tainted. For millennia, they have recklessly pursued the very power that once nearly destroyed our world. They pursued it knowing how destructive it was. Long ago, Malfurion Stormrage made a great mistake in allowing them to live in exile. Their poison should no longer be allowed to pollute the world. Even their young," he spat, pointing at Alayne, "are twisted. Did she not attack this city and steal the Vial housed within?"

"I did," Alayne said calmly, her voice cutting across the room.

"Did you not use the Vials to summon Kil'jaeden?"

"Not exactly but I intended to."

“Did you not...”

“That is enough,” A’dal rang softly. “She will be interrogated shortly.”

“It is not enough, A’dal! All those who have brought about this last war must be executed! For weeks, we have lobbied you to do just that. And now you put them through a farce of a trial? They are guilty! From their own mouths they admit it! Let justice be done!”

Many in the gathering murmured their agreement with that sentiment. Alayne herself nodded as if conceding the point. She knew very well that they did all deserve to die. She hoped that this trial would bring out the suffering they had undergone and, even after their deaths, would provide a common point for healing. Glancing around her, she saw grim acceptance on the features of her former workers. Only a handful still thought they had been in the right; that Kael’Thas was a hero. Most of the others, after having heard that he had worked to summon the Legion, were aghast and still in shock at how quickly things had gone so far. Alayne pitied them. Had Kael’s machinations not been sped up by her presence, many might have defected. She bore the brunt of their guilt and she intended to make that clear at this trial.

A stirring in the crowds tore her away from her thoughts. Velen, the draenei priest beside Liadrin, was moving over to the ranks of the accused. Several other draenei walked with him, planting themselves firmly in front of where Alayne sat.

“Velen, what is the meaning of this? Do you mean to side with those damnable sin’dorei over your own allies?” Alayne heard a Darnassian-accented voice demand. “Do you mean to break with the Alliance?”

“No,” Velen said calmly, “I merely mean to take my place among those who brought about this last war. Did you not hear what I said at the Sunwell just a few short weeks ago, Fandral? If you would execute all who are responsible for the Legion, you must kill every last draenei who draws breath. For, it was from our ranks that the eredar came. Once we were them, on Argus. We are now what they could have become had they rejected the offerings of the Dark Titan. They are what we would have become had we been seduced by his temptations. If you would point the finger at your own younglings, at those you cast out to live or die on their own merits, then you must point the finger at us as well.”

“This is ridiculous! You’ve fought the Legion alongside the rest of us, Velen. None would accuse you merely because once you and Kil’jaeden and the rest of the cursed eredar shared blood.”

“Nevertheless, we are responsible. Had I been wiser, had I been more persuasive, the Legion might never have been born.”

“So you would shield the guilty, forcing us to kill innocents in order to protect them?”

“No. I merely ask that we remember the teachings of the Light.”

“Does the Light not call for justice to be done upon those who reject it?”

“The Light calls for justice, yes,” Ger’alin said loudly, stepping forward. “Would justice be served by further death?”

“You’re prejudiced in their favor for your wife stands among their number!”  
Var’thanos accused.

“She does not stand. She sits. She may never be able to stand for long again. But that is neither here nor there. Would justice be served by further death?”

“Yes!” he screamed. “We should have killed your ancestors long ago! Had we done so, the Dark Portal would never have been created. The orcs would never have devastated our new allies’ lands. The Scourge would never have been created. Our forests would never have been profaned and we would still dwell at peace around the World Tree. Our immortality would not have been lost to us and we would not sicken and weaken! Our people would live on instead of dying out by inches!”

Ger'alín was at a loss for how to respond. "Had you done that, many lives might have been saved," Alayne was saying, her voice sounding thin and weak. "Had you done that, our people would never have known pain, despair, and the devastation that comes from watching friends and family die before our eyes. I would not have buried my mother. I would not have killed my father. Zerith would not have buried four sisters and two parents, watching them waste away in front of him before they passed on. Much suffering would have been avoided. So why didn't you?" she asked.

"Because Malfurion did not want his brother's blood on his hands. He was weak, then, and foolishly sentimental. I'm certain that where ever he is, he regrets that, now, knowing that Illidan would turn himself into a demon for lust of power and that the exiles would nearly destroy the world again, just like Azshara tried to do once before!"

"Was there no other option?" Ben'lir asked, casting back over what he recalled of history. "You point the finger at us, but if you had not exiled us to begin with, if you had worked with us, perhaps this would not have happened."

"You're just trying to save your own skin."

"I am indeed. I don't want to die. But did you not contribute to this disaster by sending our ancestors away where they could cause more problems? Wasn't that just what Velen was talking about?"

"Enough!" A'dal roared loudly, his patience at an end. "These arguments go back a long way. None can say whether a chance changing of one action for another would bring about a better or worse result. That is not for us to know. What is for us to know is that the Light will shine upon us and give us justice if we rely on it. Now, Alayne, you stand highest among those who followed Kael'Thas Sunstrider. You were responsible for much of the continued destruction of the Netherstorm. You summoned Kil'jaeden into Azeroth. Why?"

"For love of power," she admitted. The fellows around her gasped. "I was born into a world where magic reigned. The sun of the heavens shone down on a world lit by the Sunwell. I, and every other sin'dorei, was bathed in its power, its glow, its warmth. Then it was taken from us and we began to sicken and die. A temporary cure was found, one that did not ease the emptiness we felt but allowed us to survive.

I would have been content to keep it that way," she continued, "but I came across a new method of hope and a reason to use it. The man I love," she pointed at Ger'alín, "succumbed to the illness that threatened so many of our race. I feared losing him, I feared remaining with him once the hunger took hold of him. So, I set about trying to cure him, to cure all those of my kind who suffered from this horrendous disease."

"Why did you seek out the Legion instead of the Light?" Velen asked, turning and looking down at her. She stared up at his face, shading her eyes against the glare of the shining crystals high above his head.

"I was afraid," she admitted. "I saw the Scryers and the Aldor sitting in Shattrath with one of the Vials, doing nothing. I saw that any time the mere thought of using it came up, the night elves had a convulsion. I knew that if I returned here and suggested it be used, the riots that sparked up when its existence here was discovered, would return tenfold. I didn't want that. I thought that if I could take the Vial to Kael'Thas, he would use it to restore the Sunwell and would give up his plotting to summon the Legion. It was a longshot and I was wrong. He took the Vial but did not use it to restore the Sunwell. He continued to summon the Legion. So, I remained with him to do what I could to ensure that his summoning would not lead to disaster."

"You could have died. Had he found out, he would have killed you," Velen pointed out. "Then where would your plotting have led?"

"I knew that. I did my best to make myself invaluable to him to spare myself that fate. I became the image of what he wanted from me, excelling in all of the tasks he entrusted me

with, helping his dreams to come true. And, I planned to use the Vials he did not want to destroy the very being he wanted more than anything. I hoped that would restore the Sunwell so that no more of my people would sicken and die from its loss.”

“You could have come to us. When your husband fell ill, you could have brought him to us for treatment,” A’dal added gently.

“I didn’t believe it would help. Our own priests, like my brother Zerith, had tried to cure the Wretched. It did not work. Nothing but restoring the Sunwell would have worked – or so I thought at the time.”

“Why did you bear this on your own shoulders? All of you? Why carry on with such a dangerous plan instead of turning to others for aid?”

The accused sin’dorei glanced at each other then stared at the naaru, shrugging helplessly. “No one would have helped us,” some said.

“We’d been cast out by our one-time allies already,” another volunteered.

“Even the Horde doesn’t really trust or accept us,” Ben’lir added.

“In the end,” Alayne sighed, “we sin’dorei have only had each other. We’ve been cast out,” she said, looking at the night elves, “we’ve been imprisoned,” she continued, her eyes landing on Khadgar. “We’ve been mistrusted, distrusted, and used,” she finished, taking in the entire gathering. “Who were we to rely on to help us with this great work? No one wanted to, no one offered to. We were left, as we have been many times in our history, to fend for ourselves.”

“If you had known that I would have helped you,” A’dal offered, “would things have been different?”

“I can’t answer that question,” she admitted. “I don’t know.”

“Very well, then,” the naaru chimed. “Justice must be done. The Light calls out for mercy and compassion but for justice above all. And it must be rendered here, this day.”

Ger’alin clenched his fists and teeth. His stomach fell to his feet. Zerith placed a shaking hand on the paladin’s shoulder, wishing he could offer comfort. It seemed certain that the sin’dorei who had followed Kael’Thas were to be put to death. A whispered conference was taking place around the naaru, the voices pitched low so as not to be heard by the watchers or the accused. Ger’alin tore away from where he stood and ran to Alayne’s side. Throwing himself down beside her, he stared defiantly at the judges. “I do not ask you to change your verdict for me. I only ask that whatever sentence you pronounce upon her, you pronounce upon me as well. For, she is my wife. We are united. If the axe must take her head, let it also take mine.”

Shocked silence met his declaration. After a beat, A’dal chimed in, “There is not an axe sharp enough to cut through your stubborn neck, Ger’alin. So, I suppose it is a good thing that our verdict, reached by the elders of each race and under the Light, is that those who followed Kael’Thas are to be given a choice. Death may still come for them, but it will not come today. All of you who served the Legion, knowingly or unknowingly, are sentenced to serve the Light. Until the memory of this war and your part in it has faded, you will be sentenced to serve in Shattrath, acting as janitors, custodians, servants, medics, teachers, cooks, or in any other role you might be needed to fulfill. Only you will know when your sentence has come to an end. Should you leave the city without permission before that time, you will be executed as fugitives. That is your choice: to serve the Light or accept the price of your part in this war.”

“Preposterous!” Var’thanos snorted. “I have done with this mockery!” he and many others of the same mind stormed out of the building and city. Alayne stared up at the naaru, nodding.

“It is preposterous,” she said, “but I accept this sentence.”

"If our leader accepts it, so do we," Ben'lir answered. Only three elves shook their heads, protesting. "If she accepts it, so do we," he growled at them, reaching for the sword that normally hung at his hip until he remembered he'd been disarmed for the trial.

"They'll come around, in time, I hope," Ger'alın said as he watched the three being dragged away, back to their cells.

"You will stay in the servant's quarters in Lower City," Velen was explaining to the rest of the convicted. "Except for you, of course, Lady Sunrage. You will be paroled to your husband's care and allowed to stay at your home in Nagrand. Your first act of servitude will come in three days. You will all be excepted to help clean and decorate the city for its victory celebration. Until then, you are free to acquaint yourself with Shattrath provided, of course, that you do not leave without permission. Should you desire such permission, merely request it of Voren'thal, A'dal, or Ishanah and, provided your reason is sound, it should be granted."

The convicts nodded and began dispersing uneasily, no longer certain of their place in the world. Alayne sank back in her husband's arms, exhausted even by merely sitting up for so long. "If I'm expected to clean and decorate in three days, I'd better spend that time sleeping if I want to do more than look at a broom," she yawned. Ger'alın glanced down at her worriedly but held his peace.

"Miss Alayne, Miss Alayne!" Sar'la shouted, running across the emptying room. "I heard you were back! Are you okay? I heard you got sick, too."

"I'm okay, Sar'la," she sighed. "Just tired."

"Did you get to use my papa's hammer, Mister Ger'alın?" she asked, switching tracks quickly, not wanting to bother Alayne. "Was it good?" she asked when he smiled and nodded.

"I cracked Kil'jaeden a good one with it. I'm sure your father was smiling from heaven knowing that his hammer beat up the leader of the Legion."

"You have to tell me that story!" she cheered.

"Is this the friend who loaned you that fine mace?" Ben'lir asked quietly from where he'd been standing a few feet back. Ger'alın nodded and Ben'lir began studying the little girl closely. "You said that was your father's mace?"

"Yes," she answered happily. "I loaned it to Mister Ger'alın."

"You're certain that was your father's mace?"

"Yes. Matron told me so."

"That's not possible," he said breathlessly. "That mace belonged to my brother-in-law. He and his sister were killed by the Scourge before you were born..."

"Matron says that one of my papa's friends brought me here when I was a baby. She told me that papa and mama had escaped from the Scourge and come here with Prince Kael'Thas. Then papa got hurt by some demons and mama had me and then she got really sick. Papa's friend brought me here because, as Matron said, there was no one to look after a baby where I was. If papa was your brother-in-law, are you my uncle?"

"Do you know your father's name?"

"Matron says he was Ra'lin Keysworn. That makes me Sar'la Keysworn, I guess."

The girl blinked and tried to regain her balance. The world seemed to whirl as the man picked her up in a tight embrace. "I am," he laughed, tears in his eyes and voice, "I am your uncle. Your mother Ginaria was my sister! I thought I'd lost all of my family."

"It seems that you didn't," Ger'alın smiled.

"No, but I almost did," Ben'lir sighed, setting the girl down. "My Lady, following you has brought me here. I will continue to follow you until death comes for me. My blade is ever at your beck and call."

"I told you, Ben'lir," Alayne grimaced, "I didn't accept that title."

"Accept it or not, you are my Lady."

She glared at his back as he turned, took Sar'la's hand in his own, and began to walk to Lower City to introduce himself to the Matron of the orphanage and explain his connection to the child. "At least something good has come of all this," she sighed.

"More good will come," Zerith added, walking over to the pair. "For now, let's go home. This chapter has ended and I want to enjoy life and leisure before the next one begins."

"What are you talking about, Zerith?" Alayne demanded as Ger'alın scooped her up and began carrying her back outside.

"He means that life has been one adventure after another since we met you," Dar'ja grinned. "And that he's getting too old for all of it."

"Adventure?" Alayne grimaced. "I'm too tired for any more adventures."

"You say that now," Ger'alın teased. "But I'm certain something will come your way sooner or later. And we'll all be out following you again. As we always do. But, for now, let's just follow you into a nice, long nap."

"I have no objections to that," she smiled as Ger'alın handed her to Zerith while he climbed aboard Lucky's back. "I'm ready to go home. As long as you all are there, that's the only place I want to be. For now, at least," she added, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

"Why do I have a feeling this isn't the end?" Ger'alın laughed.

"It is," she protested.

"For now," the others said simultaneously.

"Yes," she agreed tiredly. "For now."