

An icy wind blew, howling its way up the frozen stairs. Atop the peak, unprotected from the wind, the snow, or the bone-freezing cold, a man sat. Encased in dead black armor adorned with skulls, he sat, his breath coming in slow, steady clouds from beneath his helm. His eyes were closed, yet he saw more clearly than many. As the wind whistled past, he grimaced, hearing the voices of his long-dead wife, his murdered father, his mentor-turned-nemesis, and many others he'd slain. Muting them, he continued to reach out to his followers, to the legions of Scourge poised to strike, to destroy the living and bring them under his dominion. Though the foolish living did their best to beat back the Scourge, the figure still had spies in every land. Not only did his mindless minions send him information, letting him borrow their eyes and ears for his own. But his necromancers, well-hidden in their populaces, sent word along paths known only to those who had seen the truth.

As the wind whistled and howled, he continued to reach out. Beyond the reaches of Silithus in once-forgotten Kalimdor, past the wild, violent life of the new so-called World Tree, through the ravaged lands where his rebellious minions clung to their Dark Lady, and then yet further beyond. Following the Nether where he had once been imprisoned and tortured, he sought out his other homeland, borrowing the eyes of the wailing draenei his kind had slaughtered during their brief, magnificent war. On and on he pressed until he beheld what only a few of his necromancers had dared venture close enough to find truth of. A golden city swathed in blinding light. Recoiling, he swept around it, his essence jumping from carrion eater to carrion eater, searching for a way to darken that light forever. As long as it existed, he would have no peace.

"There," he thought to himself, bemused at a familiar sight. A lone elven woman struggled to stay aboard a placid hawkstrider, looking exhausted. Her shining green eyes had once gazed upon him as she swore her life and her soul to his service. She had murdered her own father for refusing to join her in rebellion against their rightful king and god. Drawing back to his frozen throne, cooling the heat he felt rising within him by drinking in the frigid air, he opened his eyes, their blue light flashing out from beneath his helm.

"My lord?" one of his liches asked, bowing.

"It is true," he replied, a faint smile on his lips. "Kil'jaeden was defeated and driven back. Sunstrider is dead, killed by his own 'children.' One by one, she removes the threats to my reign. Piece by piece, she has built the bridge that will bring my armies down on everything she loves."

"As it shall be," the lich said, a trace of what might have been joy in his voice. The man on the icy seat stared hard at the lich, sending his exact plans and commands into his follower's mind. The lich bowed once again and left, gliding off to begin the final fight.

"They grow stronger," he muttered to himself, his voice deep and raspy as he sent out his thoughts once again, this time with only the barest trace of his full being. Monitoring those who would soon fall to his might was second nature to him. "Sylvanas continues to gather in those who attempt to cling to that which does not belong to them any longer. The elves have reignited the Sunwell...but the manner of doing so brought them very close to becoming mine – one way or another. The humans rally around their rediscovered king. They grow stronger. Yet...in that strength is their greatest weakness. And she remains out there. She will bring victory to my gates and my forces. And it will be all the sweeter for the fact that there is nothing she can do to prevent it." In his mind's eye, he could see the elven girl who had once served him. She would be the last to fall to his power, he decided. Only after she had watched herself hand her brother, her husband, and all the others she loved over to him, only then would she be permitted the momentary respite of death before he opened her mind again to the truth she would now deny.

“What is it about her that makes her so important to you?” her father had once asked him. “She is a mere mortal, like any other. Why go to such pains to search her out instead of using one who has already sworn to you?”

“Because, Tal’ar,” he muttered aloud, just as he had answered the dark ranger whom he had raised back up before the gates of the elf’s shattered city, “she will bring me so many others. She cannot help herself. That is her power. That power will be mine.”

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“She’s already gone for the day, Captian,” one of the newly trained guards said, saluting politely. Ger’alin tried not to groan in frustration. “She said she had business to attend to.”

“Thank you, Cerris,” Ger’alin said, returning his salute. “Go about your business. I’ll fetch Lucky myself.” Suiting his actions to his words, Ger’alin strode deeper into the stable, saddling his horse as quickly as possible and hoping that, this time, she would make it home before he did. He’d lost count of the number of times he and Zerith had been forced to range the paths from Shattrath to their home in Nagrand, searching for her. Garrosh had even asked his own wolf-riders to be attentive of her if they saw her, though most of them were willfully blind to her existence, regardless of what their chieftain asked. “She knows better than to keep doing this. Light, how many times do we have to go through this before she’ll get it through her thick skull?” he muttered beneath his breath as he settled into his saddle. “At least the grass is softer than the stone roads.” Clucking to Lucky, he headed out of Shattrath, west, at a brisk walk.

The warm stone walls of the city’s buildings lifted his heart, even as he worried over where he might find her this time. Almost a year had past since his wife had led a desperate attack against the city and, to look at it now, only those who remembered the slight variations on the spiraling stonework could tell that it had ever been different. The red crystals from the Scryer’s tier glinted, giving off vibrant, almost violent, light in the evening sunset. As he rode through the Aldor tier, he took a moment to breathe deeply, inhaling the fragrant scent of flowers from the Temple of Karabor. “Ah, yes,” Ger’alin whispered to himself. “Zerith mentioned that Akama’s gardening was turning out quite well. I’ll have to find time to get over there and see it myself, duties permitting, of course.” Giving his head a shake, he urged his mount to move faster, soon entering the shady tunnel that led from Shattrath to Nagrand. He paused only to speak with the guards at the entrance and exit to learn that yes, she had at least made it into Nagrand. With a hefty sigh, he urged Lucky to a canter, his eyes glancing swiftly over the ditches that lined the path to Garadar. Ger’alin could feel a grin of incredulous relief beginning to form on his face as he followed the path south of Garadar. She didn’t like to ride through the orcish village; she skirted it whenever the sun was up. His grin slid off his face when, rounding the bend, he saw her pure white hawkstrider nosing its mistress with concern. Or perhaps it had to hold its head like that; her wrist was tangled in the reins.

“Alayne, why do you insist on doing this to yourself?” he wondered aloud as he pulled Lucky to a halt. Kneeling down beside her, he gently turned her over, checking for injuries. Aside from bruises, she was fine. Disentangling her hand from the leather reins, he tied the lead to Lucky’s saddle, took a moment to comfort her hawkstrider, praising him for his devotion to his mistress, and then, as carefully as he could, lifted her onto his horse’s back, holding her with one arm while he flapped the reins with the other. “You’re not strong enough yet, woman,” he whispered into her hair. “Getting stronger, yes, but not strong enough yet. Why won’t you listen?” With a bitter sigh, he steered his horse, leading the hawkstrider, through the wooded path leading to their home.

The late evening sun glinted off the lake and the trees, its light reflected onto the windows, making them sparkle. A faint hint of woodsmoke hung in the air, attesting that the home fires still burned. Zerith's garden was still in full bloom, the trees in front of the house carefully pruned back to allow plenty of sunlight in throughout the day. Ger'alın tapped Lucky gently on the flank, directing him around the house and into the small pasture they'd fenced in for the two horses. The hawkstriders they left roaming free. El'a and Leetha would not stray out of sight of the house. Hopping down lightly, careful of his wife's slumber, Ger'alın looped his horse's reins over the fence post before he made his way inside his home.

"Oh my," Jez'ral sighed, seeing the paladin carrying his wife into the kitchen. "She really had hoped to make it here ahead of you today."

"You knew she was planning to sneak off?" Ger'alın growled.

"Not until around lunch time when Mir'el let it slip," Alayne's former teacher answered testily. "And he only told me because I wanted to know why he needed me to get a large jar of honey from Garadar. How far did she get this time?"

"Just around the bend she takes south of Garadar," Ger'alın answered, forcing himself to take the bite out of his words. "Tell Mir'el the next time he keeps something like this from me, I'll have his head. He knows damn well that she's not strong enough, even on her best days, to make it all the way back here! Does he want us to find her dead next time? Were the murlocs poking at her a few months ago not enough to convince him that this is no laughing matter?"

"Alayne has had Mir'el wrapped around her finger since the first time he laid eyes on her," Jez'ral sighed. "If she bats her eyes and asks him ever-so-sweetly not to say anything because she wants to get back here and surprise you with a homebaked cake for your birthday, he's not going to say anything unless I figure out that something's amiss and get it out of him. Was she hurt?"

"Just bruised a bit," Ger'alın answered. "Open the doors for me? Where are the others?"

"Mir'el and Callie went over to the Throne of Elements to confer with some of the Earthen Ring about some rumor she overheard concerning Dalaran. Zerith is asleep; he just got back a few hours ago and has sworn he is never helping birth another orc as long as he lives..."

"How mangled is his hand?"

"Completely pulverized. Dar'ja won't be back for another day or two – Liadrin wants her there to represent us at the Ceremony of Remembrance. We really should have gone, Ger'alın."

"I'm not dragging Alayne through that. She's suffered enough the past year. Light, man, half the crowds would be cheering her and the other half would be after her blood. Besides, she's not going to ask leave of her duties to go attend parties. You know her better than that."

"I know and I'd hate to see her dragged up there for all to see as they would," Jez'ral sighed, "but...she's going to have to face it all one day."

"She's facing it enough out here every day. Every time she has something thrown at her by one of the night elves. Every time she sees the Scryer's tier and knows that it used to be different. Every hour of every day, she pays. She pays more than she should have to. Light, will she ever regain her strength?"

"That's another reason to take her back to Silvermoon," Jez'ral said quietly as Ger'alın laid Alayne down on the bed. "Ger'alın, she gave it all up. She burned her grimoire and she broke her wands in secret, saying nothing to anyone. But..."

"...She's not taken back up her studies. I know. Leave her be."

“Still, I think the best thing for her would be to go to the Ceremony of Remembrance. It would probably be good for everyone. The past year has been filled with tension. We need a release. Something’s got to give, Ger’alin. Even though the war is over, we don’t have peace!”

Ger’alin said nothing. He watched Alayne lying in the bed, her chest rising and falling. Dark circles under her eyes spoke of her driving herself too hard, pushing too far, and resting too little. Gently, he reached up and brushed away a strand of hair that had fallen in her face. She drove herself murderously for someone who barely had the stamina to walk around the Terrace of Light. The naaru, in their mercy, had attempted to lighten her load, to settle a yoke on her shoulders that she could carry. She would not let them. After a while, they had given up, hoping that by exhausting herself, she would find the ability to forgive herself what they had already forgiven her. Even Khadgar, Vorenthal, Ishanah, and the other leaders of Shattrath had pardoned her for the work she had done aiding the city. Only the night elves and the orcs who could not let go of the past still held a grudge against her. Yet, Alayne flogged herself as if they were the only ones who mattered and until they forgave her, she would give herself no chance to rest or recover the strength stolen from her by Kil’jaeden.

“Ger’alin...” Jez’ral said hesitantly.

“I’ll talk with the others about it,” he answered, his eyes focused on his wife’s face. “Perhaps it would be for the best. Perhaps not. Now go.”

“Would you like us to bring you both something to eat in here?” Jez’ral asked, turning to leave the pair alone for a while. “Oh, and happy birthday.”

“I’m not hungry and she rarely eats more than a light midday meal anymore,” the paladin sighed. “And thank you. I wish I could have what I want most: her well again,” he muttered after Jez’ral had left the room. Standing up, he walked over to the window and threw it open. Fresh air would do her good. He looked around for a place to sit for a while and watch her, hoping that she would find some recovery in rest this night. Seeing no other place to sit, he sank down into the chair before her desk. Running his hand across the polished surface, he saw her journal. She’d quit keeping it shortly after the battle for the Sunwell; she said that the days simply blurred into one another and that she was too tired to write in it late in the evening as had been her custom. He thumbed through it, knowing already what it said but needing something to occupy his mind. Sighing again, he set it back with her other books and stared at his reflection in the desk. Not liking what he was looking at, he pulled open the central drawer, pulled out a few sheets of parchment, an ink bottle, and one of her pens. Perhaps he would write a letter to Tau’re, letting his old friend know that nothing much had changed since the last time he’d written him. Or, perhaps, he’d just let it all out, once and for all, before it could fester and rot inside of him. Maybe that’s what she really needed. Maybe that’s what was really wrong...

*From the personal journal of Ger’alin Sunrage, blood elf paladin*

“It has been one hell of a first year of marriage,” he wrote, grinning and shaking his head. “Or it will have been, in a few weeks. I had been hoping to take her out camping for a few nights – recapture the feeling of those first few days. But, I know she won’t be up to it. I’ve known that for months now. I just wonder if her strength and endurance will *ever* return. I wonder what keeps them so sapped; what keeps her so drained and tired all the time. My own strength returned to me within a month after the battle with Kil’jaeden. True, for most of that time, I was laid up as badly as she has been. The scars have faded, though. My hair has (mostly) grown back. I no longer wince when I look at the sun or when I’m forced to step out into it. Yet, she still suffers. On bad days, she can barely find the energy to swallow broth. On good days, she pushes herself too hard and collapses. Yet, she refuses to let anyone help her.

She refuses to allow the naaru to heal her. She refuses to allow Zerith or I to work any lengthy examinations to try to determine what's wrong. She just shakes her head and tells us that this is part of the price she must pay for the wrongs she's done."

"Alayne, for the love of the Light, you've paid in full. Three times over! Why won't you understand and accept that? You're being more stubborn than I ever was."

"I guess I should start at the beginning," he sighed, dipping the pen into the ink again. "Late last summer, just as the seasons were changing from warm to cool, we led an attack against the Black Temple's master, Illidan Stormrage. As part of that attack, I was captured and exposed to arcane energies that caused my addiction to rear its head. Illidan was killed, I got my hands on his Vial, and then tried to get Alayne to break the warding so I could use it to feed my hunger. She wouldn't help me so I attacked her. She ran off, stole back the first Vial we'd found, and then surrendered them to Kael'Thas Sunstrider. She had hoped to put him off his mad plan to summon the Legion into our homeland. Failing that, she made herself an integral part of his operations, planning to sabotage the whole work, killing herself and hopefully destroying Kil'jaeden while reviving the Sunwell."

"To call her plan 'audacious' would be an understatement. Still, it almost worked as she had hoped. There was just a little problem with it. No matter what she did, no matter what tricks and traps she set up, she couldn't convince Zerith and me to completely give up. Once I finally submitted to the naaru and allowed them to heal me, we set out looking for her all over Outland. We didn't find her until after she'd left for Quel'Danas. We set out after her and came upon her just as she was finishing the summoning spell. She damned near killed herself then and there. Light, that was a battle to remember. I wish I could forget it."

"She threw herself into the closing portal to keep Kil'jaeden from being able to force his way back into our world. I jumped in after her; my life wouldn't be worth living with her gone. How we survived is something I don't think I'll ever understand. The demon overlord was about to tear her to shreds when I got there. I called on the Light and it answered, shielding us long enough for her to rip open a small rift, just large enough for us to fall through. We landed in Tempest Keep and she sealed the rift, locking Kil'jaeden on the other side. We dragged ourselves to the room that had been hers there and used the sheets as bandages. Together, we managed to make it outside before we collapsed, certain we were both about to die."

"Imagine our surprise when we woke up in our own home. Akama and some of the elves under the Scryers had remained out in Netherstorm and happened upon us. Not knowing quite what to do, they took us home and had the druids tend to our wounds. For a brief moment, I thought everything would be all right. I thought she would be given a chance to explain and redeem herself. It wasn't until after the trial that I saw that the night elves would never forgive her. Some are decent enough and at least leave her alone. Others though..."

"...not that everyone else has been quick to forgive either. The Mag'har still hold a grudge. Well, some of them. Akama's Ashtongue Deathsworn don't really know what to do about her for all that he says she's paid her penance. Some of the Forsaken still tiptoe around her, uncertain of what to do. Light, they were the worst in the days after Illidan's demise. Callie's tried to bridge that gap but it's done nothing but widen."

"I wonder...perhaps we should leave again. Perhaps we should go somewhere where no one has heard of us. Perhaps we could bury ourselves in obscurity. Or, again, perhaps not. I've sworn my oaths to the naaru. I cannot leave Shattrath. She's sworn her oaths as well; she won't leave. Zerith and Dar'ja have found work and Jez'ral and Mir'el are happy out here where the land is pure and memories of destruction don't touch them. But still..."

"Ger'alín?" Alayne asked thickly, sleepily. "Where am I?"

“You’re home, Alayne,” he whispered, dropping the pen on the desk and hurrying to her side. Squatting down to look her in the eyes, he smiled and ran a gentle thumb over her cheek. “We’re both home.”

“I wanted to get back here and cook you that roast you like,” she whispered softly, sadly. “I guess I didn’t make it. Again,” she finished with a hint of bitterness. “Last year I was...gone for your birthday. And this year I screwed it up again with my...”

“Hush now,” he said firmly but tenderly. “Having you here with me is the only gift I need.” Alayne rolled her eyes and grimaced but said nothing. “If you’re feeling stronger now, I’ll help you into the kitchen and we can have a quiet dinner together. You know I’d like that. Just you and me and not you, me, Jez’ral, Mir’el, half of Garadar, most of the orphanage, and a good quarter of the Shattrath guard force,” he teased.

“Yes,” she sighed, pushing herself up with shaking arms. “I guess dinner together would be fine with me.”

Ger’alin stood and helped her to her feet. Holding one of her hands in his and wrapping his arm around her waist to support her unsteady, weary steps, he glanced back at the pages he’d been writing upon. “But still,” he thought to himself, concluding his entry, “sometimes I wish we could just get away from all of it. The past, the present...even the future.”

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Alayne padded quietly through the sleeping house. As usual, she was the first to rise. She was determined to have breakfast ready for everyone this morning; a double helping ready for her husband. She groaned to herself, remembering her failure of the previous day. She’d been doing so well, too. She’d felt her heart lighten as Garadar drew near. It had been the cliffs, she decided. If only there were a way she could skirt around the north...

Sitting down at the table to catch her breath, she set the hunk of bacon on a cutting board and laid the knife down next to it. After a few moments’ rest, she was able to force herself back to her feet and slice the meat in thin, even sections. Sitting down again, this time shaking and sweating with the effort, she wondered if she’d be able to make it in to Shattrath this morning. “Of course I will,” she told herself firmly. “I don’t have a choice. Until my sentence is lifted, I must serve whether or not I feel like it.” Pushing herself to her feet, she walked over to the larder, took out several handfuls of eggs, and, cracking them open, stirred the mix in a large bowl. With many starts and stops, she was able to get breakfast cooking. Sinking onto the bench at the table, she shivered with the effort that simple task had cost her. Already, she could tell that today was not going to be one of her better ones.

“That smells great,” Zerith said as he walked into the kitchen. “Are you feeling better? Jez’ral said you took a tumble on the way home again.”

“I’m fine,” she said simply, too tired to think of anything else to say. “How are you?”

“Well, thanks to Ger’alin, I’m great. My hand is working again. I am never going to attend to an orcish birth again.”

“You’ve said that every time you’ve been called to one,” Alayne muttered, trying to sound amused but too tired to inject much enthusiasm into her words. “You know you’ll keep doing it. It’s not as if there are a lot of others out here.”

“This time I mean it.”

“And you didn’t the last time?”

“I just can’t win with you, can I?” he teased as he made himself a plate. “Did you want anything or have you already eaten?”

“Oh what?” she asked, momentarily confused. “I’m not hungry.”

“You look rough. You really should eat something. Skipping meals as often as you do can’t be helping you at all.”

“I’ll be fine. I just need to wake up.” Lowering her head, she rubbed at her eyes as if she could rub out the weariness. Zerith sighed and said nothing. He was tired of having this argument with her. Alayne laid her head down on the table, intending just to catch her breath for a few moments before she did force herself to eat something. She jumped in fright when she felt a hand on her back. Jerking up, she saw Ger’alin staring at her, his expression carefully neutral. “I’m fine...” she started to say.

“No, you’re not,” he said, speaking over her. “I could barely get you to eat anything last night. And, from the smell that greeted me when I opened the window this morning, you didn’t keep that little bit down, did you?” Alayne shook her head, knowing it was useless to lie to him. “Today’s going to be one of your worse days, isn’t it?” She shrugged helplessly, not knowing how to answer that question. “This can’t keep on. You can’t keep doing this to yourself, Alayne. It is going to kill you and that will kill me.” Zerith averted his gaze and stood up from the table, giving the couple their privacy. “What’s wrong, Alayne? Something’s been eating at you ever since the trial. Something is standing in the way of you getting better. Let me help you as I swore to do when we married,” he pleaded softly.

Alayne sighed and let her head fall against his shoulder. “I...can’t,” she sighed softly. “It’s too hard. I try and I struggle but I just can’t...”

“You just can’t what?” he asked softly.

“I can’t,” she moaned. “I just can’t! Not ever again!”

Ger’alin sighed and patted her on the back. Part of him feared that her earlier madness was returning. Part of him wished it were just that. In his heart, he knew what the problem was. It was as he had told Jez’ral the day before. After everything she had wrought, after all the pain she had caused, after running away twice from those who loved her to chase after something she craved, she no longer trusted herself with magic, of any kind, at all. And, to a woman whose very soul thrived on the mystical arts, cutting herself away from them had been almost like a warrior cutting off his sword arm and then trying to soldier on as if nothing were amiss. Over to the side of the room, standing by the window, Zerith watched helplessly. He worried over Alayne almost as much as Ger’alin did. Seeing her so listless, depressed, and ill brought all of his fears of losing her as he had his youngest sister to the fore. Ger’alin glanced over at him, a helpless, hopeless glance that said “I have no idea what to do.” Zerith shrugged; he’d tried his best to help her either see reason or come to terms with her decision.

“There there,” Ger’alin sighed after a while. “You’re in no condition to go to Shattrath today. No, you’re not!” he said swiftly when she began to protest. “You won’t do anyone any good if you’re passing out every five minutes and unable to so much as stand up, let alone do any work. I’ll make your excuses to A’dal. You stay here and rest, Alayne. I mean it. No trying to sneak into Shattrath after I’ve gone. No cleaning the house. No doing anything other than taking it easy. I want your sworn word.”

“I give you my word,” she said, a hint of bitterness in her voice. “I’ll just sit by the window and read my history books. I’ve promised the orphans a lesson in the history surrounding the first invasion of Azeroth. I might as well brush up on that while I’m forbidden to do anything useful.”

Ger’alin and Zerith helped her to her feet and then, guiding her steps, led her to her favorite chair by the window in the library. Fetching her several books, they left her in silent solitude, both knowing she probably wouldn’t read a word. Zerith sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair in frustrated helplessness. “I’ll keep an eye on her for you. I’m taking today off as well. After yesterday, I could use a day to myself.”

“Do that,” Ger’alin nodded as he walked back to the room he shared with his wife. “Light, how long will she do this to herself?” he wondered aloud as he dressed. “Maybe

Jez'ral is right. Maybe taking her back to Silvermoon will help spur her on a path towards getting better. After all," he groaned as he belted on his mace and slipped his shield over his back, "I don't think it can get much worse."

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"A'dal would like to speak with you before you return home for the evening, Captian," Thalodien said politely when he saw Ger'alın making a last round through Lower City. The evening sun cast shadows, bringing out the shadier and seedier sort. Ger'alın had formed a unit of guards dedicated to trying to stamp out crime in Lower City. Thus far, it had worked to a small measure.

"Did he say what he wanted?" Ger'alın asked as he peeked in to the World's End Tavern. Seeing nothing amiss and few of the usual suspects lurking about, he strode out, planning to make a stop by the small apartment Ben'lir kept. The man was out on errands for the naaru and Ger'alın wanted to make certain that no one had violated the sanctuary of Sar'la's first real home.

"He never reveals that save to the person he asks for, Ger'alın. You know that by now."

"I was hoping he'd break that tradition. Tell A'dal I will attend to him when I've finished my rounds here."

"I noticed that she wasn't here today," Thalodien said as he turned to leave. The way he slightly emphasized "she" spoke Alayne's name as if he had shouted it.

"She could barely make it to the kitchen this morning," Ger'alın said in reply.

"She's not getting any better, is she?"

"No, Thalodien, she's not. Does that satisfy you?"

"Actually, it doesn't," the man sighed. Ger'alın whirled around to face him so quickly he almost fell over. "I've read the reports from her. I've spoken with plenty of the others who followed Kael'Thas. And, you've done much to change my opinions. She would be a valuable asset, were she well. She could do much to serve Shattrath, the naaru, and the Light. So, I'd rather like to see her get better."

"That's certainly a change in stance."

"Call it the wisdom of experience and age. I was wrong. Voren'thal would like to invite her to take lessons with the Magisters if she feels up to them. He's wanted to extend the invitation for a while but decided to wait until she was stronger. It's been several months since he decided and there's been little change in her condition. Perhaps he could help her figure out what is wrong? Voren'thal knows as much, if not more, about Nether exposure as Mir'el Darkweaver."

"I'll speak with her about it. I'm sure she'll be very honored," he said quickly, knowing there was absolutely no way he could broach this subject to his wife. "Now, if you'll excuse me," he requested politely as he tested the door to Ben'lir's apartment. Finding it sound, he strode back out into the street, "I have an appointment with A'dal and then a supper to get home to." Thalodien nodded respectfully to one of the captians of the Shattrath guard force and let the man go without further comment. As he watched the younger elf stride up the rise to the Terrace of Light, he wondered just what it was about his wife that had caused the youth to lose some of his bouyance. Ger'alın's face had lightened, tightened, and then darkened when Thalodien made mention of the offer from Voren'thal. Shaking his head, Thalodien went his own way, wishing there were a way to turn back time and spare the youths the pain that the wars had caused them.

Ger'alın walked swiftly across the large chamber in the central building on the Terrace of Light. A'dal, white and pure as the sun on fresh snow, hovered in the air, bobbing and

swaying slightly, his crystalline chimes ringing gently through the minds of those he addressed. “As you have called, so I have come, A’dal of the naaru,” Ger’alin said politely when the being spoke to his mind.

“The Ceremony of Rememberance will be soon,” A’dal rang without mincing words. “Will Alayne be strong enough to attend?”

“I don’t know. We weren’t planning on going,” Ger’alin answered honestly. “I don’t know if it would be good for her to return to Silvermoon – and especially Quel’Danas – right now.”

“Is she yet so weak?”

“She hasn’t much strength. What little she manages to gain, she spends as soon as it’s in. She’s like a debtor who can’t control his spending with her strength. But, that’s not the only reason we’re planning to avoid the Ceremony. I don’t think she could take being so close to the Sunwell. It might break her heart even more than it already is. I’d spare her that, if I could.”

“I wish you could, Ger’alin,” A’dal chimed softly, sadly. “But, she must attend the Ceremony. She and all of the others who aided Kael’Thas are to be part of it. We are hoping that, with them being there, with them showing the fruits of their labors of the past year, true healing will begin. I’m sorry, Ger’alin, but we have required this of all those sentenced to serve the City of Light. We cannot spare her unless she is too ill to attend at all.”

“I will keep you apprised of her condition,” Ger’alin said, dejected. Part of him thought this might be a good idea but the rest of him dreaded the torment he knew his wife was capable of inflicting on herself.

“Remind her that redemption and forgiveness have no price because, so dear are they, they can never be purchased,” A’dal sang. Ger’alin nodded and turned away with a sigh, feeling drained from his conversation with the naaru.

The entire journey home, his mind raced with an argument over what and how much to tell Alayne. He paused outside of Garadar to close his eyes, lean forward and press his face into Lucky’s mane, and wish with all his soul that his father, her father, someone’s father was around to tell him what he was supposed to do in this situation. For all that he loved Alayne with every fiber of his being, she confused him, her pall of depression making him desperate to know what would make her happy again. Forcing himself upright, he continued on through the orcish village, waving politely at Garrosh, pausing before the graveyard to dismount and say a prayer for Geyah’s soul, and then continuing on. Putting his horse to pasture as was custom, he strode inside and smiled. She had listened.

Alayne lay in the reclining chair near the window of the main room. She must have moved in here for more sunlight. One of her books lay open on her lap and a light cover was laid over her chest, the careful tucking in around the shoulders speaking of Zerith’s hand. She dozed peacefully, the circles under her eyes noticeably lighter than they had been. All she needed was rest, Ger’alin tried to tell himself. If he could just convince her to take it easy for a week – perhaps a month – she would be fine. Everything would be fine. Walking over to the chair, he laid the back of his hand against her cheek, thumbing her ear and watching her sleep. *Yes, everything will be fine if she just lets herself get enough rest...*

Alayne opened her eyes and looked up at him. He smiled down, his smile slipping off his face when he saw that her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. “Sweetheart?” he asked quietly.

“I had the most awful dream!” she shuddered, weak, tired, fretful sobs coming from her throat.

“What was it, Alayne?” he asked, reaching down to lift her out of the chair as he would a child, then settling back down in it with her in his arms, letting her cry herself out on his chest. “What was your dream?”

“I can’t talk about,” she wept. “It hurts too much to think about...but I can’t go back to that! I just can’t! After everything...I can’t even if I want to! I wish it would leave me alone! I wish I could have some peace from it! But it’s always there, Ger’alin...oh Light it’s always there like a light in the corner of my vision! I just want to get away from it!”

Ger’alin held her, torn, while she wept. When he heard her quieten, then relax and fall back into what he hoped was a restful, dreamless slumber, he looked down at her tear-streaked face. “I can’t keep doing this,” he whispered to her. “Something has to change. You can’t keep imposing harsher sentences on yourself in an attempt to assuage your guilt. That path leads to destruction. Believe me, dearest, I know that first hand.”

“She’s actually been good today, for once,” Zerith said softly as he entered the front room of the house. “She let me help her in here after lunch. She’s been taking it easy, just like you wanted. What’s the matter now?” he asked, noticing the ravaged look on his friend’s face.

“I hope you feel like traveling in a few days, Zerith,” Ger’alin said softly but firmly. “Because we’re going to the Ceremony of Remembrance.”

Ger’alin braced himself for the explosion. He could plead helplessness because A’dal had ordered Alayne there. He could claim his hands were tied. But, he wouldn’t. Alayne needed to return to the Sunwell. Until she either accepted the path she’d chosen or learned to trust herself with the power she had been born to wield, things would get no better.

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“Please, don’t make me go,” Alayne begged to A’dal a few days later when she returned to her duties in Shattrath. “I’ll do anything you ask of me but don’t make me go.”

“I’m afraid that the matter is settled, Alayne,” A’dal sang compassionately. “I cannot and will not undo it. Consider this part of your sentence; that you must face that which you fear to face.”

“This is too much, A’dal,” Alayne pleaded. “It’s too much! I can’t face it. I can’t!”

“Alayne,” A’dal rang, “what is it that you fear to find in your homeland that you do not already suffer out here in Shattrath, the city you once attacked?”

Alayne shook her head. She knew that Ger’alin knew what ailed her. She suspected that Zerith had a good idea as well. Possibly Jez’ral, Mir’el, Dar’ja, even Callie knew. But she could not bring herself to say it. She could not force herself to name the penance she had set silently for herself. She knew that if she spoke the words, she would not live to hear his answer. Her soul would flee from the curse she herself would cast upon herself by giving utterance to the path she was forcing herself to take.

“You must return to Silvermoon. You must take your place at the Sunwell for the Ceremony of Remembrance. It will bring healing even as it brings pain, young mortal,” the naaru chimed softly. “You must.”

Alayne sighed, her shoulders slumping in defeat. She wondered if it would be wrong for her to pray that she would be stricken too ill to travel for the Ceremony. Steeling herself to face this, telling herself it was merely part of her privately-imposed penance and that it was no less than she should bear, she nodded in acceptance. “I will go if I am able to do so,” she promised. A’dal tried to impart comfort and consolation to her but she refused to allow the naaru’s gifts to touch her. Turning on her heel, she walked out of the building and out into the sun. She paused to enjoy the warmth before recalling herself to her duties. “You are supposed to be being punished,” she reminded herself. “Not even simple pleasures are allowed for yourself.”

She forced herself to stand up and adopted what she hoped was a pleasant, yet humble, demeanor. She never realized that her heartache and sorrow were etched clear on her face for the entire world to read. Walking down the cavernous ramp to Lower City, she hurried on to

the school the Aldor and Scryers had founded. Today she would be giving lessons in her people's history. She hoped to see Zerith there; he often gave classes on plant lore or taught catechism during the afternoons. Seeing no one other than the orphans she was to teach, Alayne steeled herself and strode into the garden where they sat, their guardians watching over them until she arrived.

"Miss Alayne, Miss Alayne!" one girl cried in joy, jumping up from where she had been sitting and running to throw her arms around Alayne's waist.

"When did you get back, Sar'la?" Alayne asked warmly. "And how was your trip? I'm sure all of the others would love to hear about it."

"We got back last night," Sar'la answered quickly, sitting next to Alayne. "It was fun. I got to fly on the back of one of the nether drakes," she said importantly. "The orcs and Akama's draenei have almost finished rebuilding their temple; it's really pretty. Uncle Ben'lire and I got to go over to this floating island where there were a lot of pretty crystals; Akama said he needed some to make some kind of focus-thing for the Light energy. I didn't understand what he was saying to Uncle Ben'lir about it but he did. My uncle, I mean. It was kind of boring to listen to but we did get to fly and then Uncle Ben'lir told me that not all the pretty crystals were the same!" she exclaimed. The rest of the children looked shocked; crystals were crystals. Rocks were rocks. Sure, some looked different, but weren't they all the same? Alayne hid a smile, knowing where this was going.

"They aren't," Alayne confirmed. "What did your uncle tell you was different about them?" she propped gently.

"Some crystals are better for being focus points. Uncle Ben'lir taught me a little of the magic he used to test to see if a crystal was a good one or not. It was fun but it was really hard to do it! He said that I would get better at it with practice, though. Anyhow, we spent a lot of time walking all over that island. Even though there were a lot of crystals – more than I could count! – only a few of them were good enough. I was really tired from all the walking when we finished so Uncle Ben'lir decided we could just camp out and sleep under the stars. It was fun! He taught me some of the constellations. If it's okay, we could all meet here tonight and I'll teach them to you," she offered her fellow students.

"We will do that one day," Alayne promised, "but not tonight. Now, today we're going to talk about..." she began as she launched into that day's lesson. The children watched and listened to her attentively as she expanded upon the stories many of them knew from bedside tales. In answering their questions, explaining where the gaps in their knowledge lay and bridging them, she was able to, for a brief time, put aside the gnawing pain she felt threatening to overwhelm her. *If only I could always feel this way*, she thought to herself, *then it wouldn't be so hard to bear...*

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Alayne leaned back against the wall behind her and closed her eyes. The children had just departed to go to the kitchens for lunch. Her own stomach rumbled lightly, reminding her that she could do with some food as well. The one-time-warlock was just too overcome with lassitude to move, though. She sat there for a long while, her eyes closed, her mind perfectly blank, refusing to let herself think at all.

A soft touch on her knee startled her out of her blank reverie. Opening her eyes, she looked down to see Sar'la grinning up at her. "Nap time?" the child asked happily.

"No, just a little tired," Alayne said, somewhat honestly. "Shouldn't you be getting on to your next lesson?"

“I will in a few minutes. It’s free time right now. I didn’t feel like playing with the other kids, though. I wanted to come visit you for a minute. You haven’t been around much, except to teach us stuff.”

“I know,” Alayne sighed. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s okay. I’m sure you’re busy with all kinds of important things. I see you walking all over Shattrath doing stuff. Is that part of your sentence?”

“It is.”

“Oh. Well...I was wondering something...” Sar’la began, trailing off hesitantly. Alayne sat up and opened her eyes fully, giving the girl her complete attention. “Uncle Ben’lir told me that you are really good at magic. A long time ago, you told me you would teach me to summon magic horses when I got older. I was wondering if I’m old enough to start learning now.”

Alayne closed her eyes and groaned. She could feel tears brimming beneath her eyelids. The girl had broached the one subject that no one, including she herself, wanted to discuss. “Sar’la, I can’t...” she said, her voice thick yet breathless, almost soundless. “I can’t teach you magic. Don’t,” she said suddenly, sensing the question she could not and would not answer. “Don’t ask me why and don’t ask me to teach you that again. Now, go. Play with the other children. I’m not feeling well,” she added, knowing it was true. “And I need to get going. I have other work to be about.”

Sar’la nodded and backed away, letting Alayne stand and stride off. She watched the woman go with wide, luminous eyes. Had she the ability, she would have taken back the question. She didn’t know why the woman she admired so had looked so stricken and ill at the question but she never wanted to see pain like that flit across anyone’s face ever again.

“Sar’la!” one of the other instructors said, spotting the girl. “You’re supposed to be on your way to your next lesson! You don’t want to be late, do you? What were you doing in here instead of playing out in the courtyard with the others?”

“I wanted to visit another friend,” Sar’la said, her voice toneless as she tried to figure out what she might have done to upset Miss Alayne. “But she’s not feeling very well...”

“Oh,” the man sighed, having a fairly good idea of what happened. “She’ll be fine. She’s got friends who can heal her if she needs it. Now, go along. She wouldn’t want you worrying about her. And, if you miss class, your uncle may not let you go to the Ceremony. You wouldn’t want to miss that, would you?” he added, hoping to distract the girl.

“I’m going,” she said softly, her shoulders slumped with a mix of dejection, determination, and concentration. She wanted to figure out what she had done to upset her grown-up friend so and she would not give up until she had made it right. Her uncle had been teaching her about making up for doing wrong and she would rather study that lesson than any other right now.

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Sar’la watched as Miss Alayne, Mister Ger’alin’s arm around her shoulders, stepped through the portal into Silvermoon. The young orphan had not had the chance to speak with her idol since the day she’d asked the question that had made the woman turn pale. Preparations for the Ceremony of Rememberance had kept all of Shattrath busy and now, the afternoon of the day before the ceremony, everyone was journeying to Silvermoon or to the ruined Undercity to rest and be ready to attend.

Alayne had weathered the days between her last class on history and this day as well as she could. Her heart thundered in her chest and cold, clammy sweat slicked her palms, her underarms, and the backs of her knees. She clenched her jaw to keep her teeth from clicking together and willed her legs to hold her up as she watched the magi create the portal

connecting Shattrath to Silvermoon. She could sense the arcane currents being drawn and woven in to create the gateway and she longed to reach out her own barely trained abilities to aid them. Forcing herself to ignore the magic, she jumped when Ger'alın placed a light, calming hand on her shoulder. Giving her a fond one-armed embrace, he whispered, "Just one step after another."

The pair stepped through the portal together, both feeling the rush of arcane magic surround, permeate, and then transport them from the City of Light to the city of silver lights. Blinking as the magic dissipated, Ger'alın smiled to see Garrosh standing with the orcish contingent. The Mag'har chieftain nodded at the elf but, before Ger'alın could make his way over to greet his brother, his attention was taken by his own Regent Lord.

Lor'thermar Theron had weathered the various crises well. His long silver hair flowed over his shoulders and his face was as implacable and commanding as ever. Only faint wrinkles on his forehead and at the corners of his eyes attested to the strain the elven leader must have been under during the past year. He strode up to Ger'alın as the portal flared once more, this time admitting Zerith into the Sunfury Spire.

"Good," the *de facto* ruler of Quel'Thalas said. "You both came."

"We have," Zerith said, speaking before Ger'alın could ask why Lord Theron approached them so. "Are we needed?"

Alayne was shrinking back, remembering the previous times she had been face-to-face with the man. The first times had been during her illness. The next, shortly after her recovery. The last... the last time she had seen him had been shortly after her trial in Shattrath when he and his two co-leaders had questioned her, at length, about what Kael had been doing, why she had 'defected' to join him, and what she knew about any possible rebellious factions clinging to his name. Short of Thrall himself, there was no one she wanted to be seen by less than the Regent Lord of Quel'Thalas.

"You are," Theron nodded. "All of you," he added, glancing significantly at the woman who was doing her best to hide from his gaze. "You will dine with me tonight at my home. I will send guards to provide you a proper escort. You'll be staying at Baron Darkweaver's home? Good. Tonight, then," he said curtly, giving them no room to question or argue. Turning back to greet the latest passers through the portal, he dismissed them from his attention.

"I wonder what that will be about," Zerith said tonelessly.

"I have no idea," Ger'alın muttered, his voice blank.

"Loktar ogar, my brother," Garrosh said, breaking Ger'alın out of his reverie. "I take it that Theron wishes to speak with you this night."

"He does. Do you have any idea what it is about?"

"Of course I do," Garrosh grinned. "But I will not spoil the surprise. So, you came for the Ceremony," he said, turning to Alayne. The one-time warlock was trying her best to discretely hide behind her husband. She had not seen Garrosh since just before her trial.

"She came," Ger'alın answered for her, moving out of her way.

"You came to face the crowds? To make yourself a target again? To put yourself back on trial for what you did that nearly destroyed your world?"

"I did," Alayne said faintly, her voice barely above a whisper. "I did not want to; I keep hoping that by staying low, everyone will move on. But, the naaru ordered me to attend and I obey them without question. It's the least I can do," she sighed sadly, not looking forward to what she saw coming.

"It is not right," Garrosh said at long last. "I saw you after you returned. I have seen you since. You have done enough. It is not right that the beings of Light demand you do yet more."

"That's certainly a different tune," Ger'alın muttered wryly.

“I told you, I saw you both. And, I’ve heard her reasons. My blood has cooled and I think, were I in her position, I would have done the same. Perhaps worse. I pray that I am never so tested. Lady, I hold nothing against you.”

Alayne gazed at the ground, uncertain of what to do.

“I hold nothing against you and I ask you to stop holding it against yourself. I will see you both tonight for the evening meal,” he added. “Thrall will be glad to see you as well. All of you,” he emphasized. “I believe that the Lady’s heroine will be there tonight. Sylvanas herself, the leader of the Forsaken, will attend the Ceremony of Remembrance. Perhaps this is the time when all will finally be healed and we will all know peace.”

Alayne said nothing as Garrosh stumped off. Ger’alin held his peace knowing that nothing he said would help her feel any better. She had to come to terms with the fact that people were forgiving her on her own. He wished he could offer her some wise saying or something to help her handle it but, in truth, she was much the same as he. He found it difficult to accept that she had forgiven him for something he considered unforgiveable.

“So, dinner with the leaders of the Horde tonight,” Zerith said dryly, rubbing his hands together. Dar’ja had run over to him as soon as she could free herself from her duties. After having been apart for several weeks while she worked in Silvermoon and Quel’Danas on preparations, she wanted a few hours alone with her husband and her friends before she had to return to any kind of official business. “I wonder just how much trouble this will give us.”

“More than we ever wanted,” Ger’alin sighed. “How did we wind up in this position?”

“It was your idea,” Zerith retorted lightly. “Wasn’t it you who decided we needed a name for our little following?”

“It wasn’t my idea,” Ger’alin said defensively. “I can’t remember whose it was.”

“It was your idea,” a gravelly voice said, spooking him. “I remember it. We were sitting outside the inn over in Tarren Mill and you decided we needed a name.”

“Callie!” Ger’alin laughed, turning around and embracing the Forsaken. “Your room has been empty for far too long.”

“I’ve had work to do back in Undercity,” Callie said simply. “I’m sorry I haven’t been by more often. The Royal Apothecary Society is really working hard on some new project and they’ve been paying a king’s ransom to anyone willing to gather materials for them. Putress, the new leader of the Society, is convinced that the Lich King is up to something. Ever since the last series of attacks, he’s been working on a way to destroy the Scourge.”

“Has he found anything?”

“I don’t know,” Callie shrugged. “He’s had every last Forsaken he can afford to pay out gathering ooze, slime, posions, bombs...the list is endless. I hope he comes up with something. I wouldn’t mind seeing the Scourge eradicated. I’d dance for joy until the day my body falls apart if we could finally put an end to the Lich King. But, enough about that. How have you been?”

“I’ve been fine. They’ve kept me busy out in Shattrath. Between guarding the city, working with the new recruits, and doing my part to clean up Lower City, I’ve not had much time to myself,” the paladin grinned.

“And you, Alayne? How are you faring?”

Alayne blinked in surprise, uncertain how to respond. “I’m well,” she started to say.

“Have you returned to your studies?”

“I teach at the school for orphans,” Alayne answered lamely.

“I didn’t ask if you taught others; I asked if you’ve gone back to being a mage. You always used to say you’d give up the fel arts in a heartbeat if you could sense the arcane again. Well, you restored the Sunwell! So, can you do normal magic again? Could you turn Gerry into a toad? That would be fun,” she laughed.

Ger'alin winced. Alayne began an intense study of the ground. Zerith stared at the ceiling as if he would be tested on the number of tiles lining it. Dar'ja just shook her head sadly, giving Callie the answer she wanted. "Well, why not?" Callie asked softly. "Can you still not use..."

"I've got to go," Alayne said quickly, striding out of the Spire. "I'll meet you at the house."

"What's the matter?" Callie demanded. "Ever since the Black Temple, I've done nothing but put my foot in my mouth with her. I had thought that my apology before her trial would help but..."

"She won't take up her studies again," Ger'alin said quickly. "She refuses to allow herself. She hasn't cast a single spell since we jumped in after Kil'jaeden."

"What? Why not?"

"That's a long story," Ger'alin sighed. "Come on, let's go back to where we used to stay and I'll tell you about it."

"Shouldn't we go find Alayne?" Callie asked.

"She'll be fine," Ger'alin answered. "But, she needs time to herself now. She's been as nervous as a young colt about coming back here ever since she found out she had no choice. Maybe seeing this city, seeing its magic, will do her good. Besides, what trouble can she get up to in Silvermoon with everyone and their brother here for the Ceremony?"

"This is Alayne we're talking about," Callie said flatly. "Plenty."

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Alayne sat glumly in the chair she'd once spent many hours in, lost in her books of magic, theory, and spellcraft. She'd brought a few tomes on history with her, intending to read up on the events that happened around the time she was born. Yet, her second passion could not catch her attention with the Sunwell there, off in the horizon, its power shining down on her like the noon-day sun.

Ger'alin and the others had caught up with her just as she was entering Murder Row. She was glad they had; she'd been cornered by several of her former fellow students, all eager to speak with the warlock who had not only summoned Kil'jaeden, but had driven him back. It had been all she could do to stand there calmly, trying to hide the frayed state of her nerves, as they badgered her. Only Jez'ral's insistence that she was weary from preparations for the Ceremony had gotten her out of that boiling pot.

And now, she sat alone in the house that had once been home. Zerith and Dar'ja had gone off with Callie to visit Undercity. The priest was keenly interested in the undertakings of the Royal Apothecary Society and wanted to meet this Putress. While many had spent years trying to formulate a cure or a vaccine for the Plague, none had succeeded. Still, the three were hopeful that some new insight had arisen. Ger'alin had been taken aside by several of the guard force of Quel'Thalas. All were anxious to hear the young weapon-master's thoughts on some strategy they'd devised. He'd tried to drag her along as well, mentioning that her knowledge of magic would be useful in helping bolster their defenses. A frosty glare from her had put paid to that idea. Jez'ral and Mir'el had locked themselves away in the basement laboratory, both laughing about some of the experiments that had gone right – and wrong – in their younger days.

The young woman sat, staring into the cold fireplace, feeling utterly alone.

A knock on the door made her leap from the chair in fright. She began walking to it, wondering who would be calling. Who, aside from the leaders of the Horde, even knew they were here? She hoped it wasn't the other warlocks. She didn't think she could stomach a moment's discussion with them.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" she said irritably as the pounding continued. "No need to take the door off the hinges!" Swinging it open, she grunted. "Oh, you."

"It's good to see you, too, Alayne," Ber'lon grinned.

"Don't forget me back here," a scratchy voice growled.

"And you brought Aelonius," she sighed. "Great."

"Are you going to invite us in?" Ber'lon asked, putting a foot on the threshold. "Or is this a bad time?"

"It's always a bad time, lately. Come in," she sighed. "What do you two want? I thought, after the last time we spoke, we'd never see each other again."

"Well, we've had over a year to get over being called witless bootlickers who were going back to be enslaved by those who were out to kill us," Aelonius muttered. "After hearing what you did to the Lord of the Legion, we decided that maybe we could forgive you for being a fool."

"Don't make me regret letting you in," she warned.

"What has you in such a foul mood?" Ber'lon wondered. "I heard you were selected to be part of the first wave into Northrend. We're still not trusted enough for that; we're stuck back here spying on a ziggurat that just appeared over Tyr's Hand a few days back."

"I don't want to get into it," she sighed. "So, what have the rest of you been up to? I heard I was one of the few to go back to my old life. Not that I could do much good there," she muttered, the last bit said to herself.

"We've been around," Ber'lon answered. "Trying to win our way back into our peoples' good graces. Not making much headway on that. At least we did win some points by discovering this Scourge citadel before anyone else. Containing the Cult of the Damned in Stratholme didn't do us much good. Neither did finally pulling down Scholomance. Sometimes I wonder if we'll have to rout the Scarlet Crusade while composing a treatise on 'I'd go back to being a hunter in a heartbeat if I could but nature is offended by necromancy and so I'm a little out of luck on that measure' before we can pass through the city gates without being glared at."

"Speak for yourself," Aelonius growled. "Hunter? I'd go back to the priesthood again only even the Shadow-followers won't have me."

"At any rate, we heard you were in town," Ber'lon sighed, "and we wanted to know how you did it. How did you go back? How have you stayed there? And how do you continually manage to prove yourself without even trying?"

"I just did," she replied. "I swore never to practice necromancy unless I had to. In the rare instances where I have, it has always been to aid the living. Just as I did with the fel arts. As for 'proving myself...' All I've managed to prove is that I'm a lot of trouble."

"Tell us something we didn't already know."

"Why did I let you in here again?"

"Good question," Ber'lon sighed, pulling a dagger from his belt and flipping it in his palm. "Well, we got the first part of what we came here for. Now, we have a favor to ask. Oh, don't go rolling your eyes at me. I remember besting you three out of five in duels in the north."

"Let me get a sword and we'll see about that," she muttered.

"Oh please. It'd be like taking candy from an infant. You went back to magic."

"I can still heft a blade. I'll be hefting them aplenty in the north."

"Only if you're handing them to someone else," Ber'lon sputtered. "Alayne, no offense, but you don't have the frame you did back then. As a matter of fact, you look like you could barely heft a walking staff, let alone a sword. I guess the magic makes up for it, though. I could sense the power in you when we first met. I just wish I'd had the brains to follow you instead of haring off on my own. Maybe then I wouldn't be on the path I'm on."

“I don’t have the magic!” she shouted suddenly. “I gave it up! I burned my books! I broke my wands! I’ll never touch it again!”

“What?” Aelonius and Ber’lon said together. “Why?”

“Because of what I’ve done,” she sobbed. “First, the fel arts helped to drive me mad, making me easy prey for Arthas. Then, I watched Ger’alin succumb to his addiction and ran off after Kael, hoping that someone with him would have the brains and guts to help me reignite the Sunwell. Light, I never wanted to be part of summoning the Legion but it was do that or die and let some other fool do it anyway! At least, that’s what I tell myself. If I hadn’t gone, Kael never would have had all the Vials. He wouldn’t have figured out the new production methods that let that plan of his become reality. We could have brought him down in Outland and never let the threat draw near to Quel’Thalas. All that because I was a hot-headed fool! And now everyone thinks I’m so wonderful! *I summoned the leader of the Legion!* Because I was a fool! A complete and utter fool!”

Alayne glanced up, hiccoughing and wiping her face with her sleeve. Ber’lon and Aelonius were both staring at her in stupefaction.

“Oh why in the name of the nine hells and the Dark Titan did you do that?” Aelonius muttered. “Burn your books? Break your wands? Was that part of the sentence the naaru gave you? You know, I never thought they were so great. Everyone kept jabbering on about them. But, they’re really no better than the haughtiest of the humans.”

“What? No!” Alayne protested. “I had to. Don’t you understand? It’s dangerous, magic. It’s so seductive, so alluring. I would have done anything to bring it back. Yes, I wanted to save Ger’alin but...but...”

“So, I guess we won’t be counting on your magic to help us with a certain plan we were coming up with,” Ber’lon sighed. “That’s the last reason we came here. If we couldn’t convince you to let us join your group, we were hoping you would at least come with us to the Plaguelands and help us with some illusions. The pair of us have rounded up most of the death knights who couldn’t go back to their old lives. We were thinking that, should we manage to infiltrate or even overthrow the Scourge there, we’d have done enough to finally be allowed some peace in our lives.”

“Oh,” she sobbed. “Trust me. No matter how much you do, it’s never enough. Never. Not ever. You’ll always find something more to do and, even if they do forgive you? Forgive you for turning your back on everything you knew to be good and right and throwing in your lot with everything you knew to be foul and evil? You’ll feel even *worse*. You’ll spend your time trying to come up with something – anything – that will let you feel as if you should have been forgiven. And, no matter what you do, you’ll always feel that it comes up short. Light, there are times I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up again. It tears me so,” she shuddered. “They’ve forgiven me. And yet...I don’t deserve it! I should be damned! I should have been executed for what I’ve done!”

“I see,” Ber’lon said slowly, dragging the word out. “Well, I guess we’ll see ourselves out. Sorry to have disturbed you.”

Alayne sat with her head in her hands as she listened to their footsteps fading away and the door clicking closed softly behind them. Fresh tears streamed between her tightly shut eyelids. She had wanted everyone to leave her alone and now she wanted nothing more than for someone to come and comfort her. Someone to tell her it would be fine in the end. Someone to stand between her and what she was forcing herself to do yet she could not allow anyone to do that. She felt torn in two. Laying her face flat against the table, she wrapped her arms over her head and sobbed until her throat was raw and she was gasping for air.

“I did not give up everything for this to happen,” a gentle voice spoke in her mind. “I did not make the ultimate sacrifice so that you could weep yourself to death.”

“Who?” she asked, sitting up and looking around in confusion. There was no one there. “Jez’ral? Mir’el?” she called out, sniffing and wiping her face, hoping to dash away the signs of her grief should one of the men answer her call. “Who’s there?”

“Come to me,” the voice said, a tinge of irritation coloring its tone. “Come to me that we may speak.”

“Who...” she muttered, glancing out the window. The sun was beginning to set over the ocean. She would need to prepare for the dinner party soon.

“Come!”

“I’m on my way,” she said, realization dawning on her. The dinner party could wait. She owed this person an audience at the very least. Even if it was the one person in the one place she dreaded to go. “I’ll be there.”

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Alayne shivered as the salty sea breeze blew around her. She huddled deeper in her cloak, hoping that her nervousness was taken for awe instead of dread and outright fear. She knew that she should be back at the house preparing to go to the dinner party. She hoped that her hasty note to Ger’alin would allay his fears and keep him and the others from following her out here. She needed to be by herself when she did this. She owed it to herself and to the one who had helped her in that last, desperate fight.

The ferry docked with a minimum of jostling and Alayne hurried down the plank as soon as it was lowered. She was one of the few pilgrims making the trek from the mainland to the island at this late hour. Most were going the other direction. She prayed that she would be left alone; that the others would be delayed by the many wonders left for them inside the Magister’s Terrace. Her heart pounded in her chest and a chill sweat slicked the palms of her hands and her underarms. Had she not been moving, she would have been trembling with the anxiety gripping her. Her stomach churned and she was glad she was not sitting at a table, trying to force herself to choke down food that would stick in her throat.

Into the terrace she went, padding quietly down the stairs and pausing before the rise that would lead her into the Sunwell sanctum. She stopped to catch her breath, nervousness and fatigue weighing down on her like a press. Gingerly, she mounted the stairs, taking them one at a time with many pauses as she forced herself on, flogging herself mentally, telling herself to swallow this bitter medicine with grace. When she drew near the top, she paused again, letting the stairs hide her as she peaked around, standing on her toes, hoping that everyone involved in preparations for tomorrow’s ceremony would be gone. She growled in irritation when she saw a human, his hair an odd color for one of his race, standing in front of the golden pool.

“Come,” the voice of the Sunwell, the voice of a woman she had known as Anveena, commanded. “Face me and answer for what you have done.”

Alayne took the final stairs and gasped. Instead of being in the Sanctum, she stood on a sun-soaked glade. Flowers bloomed around her, the air heavy with their sweet scent. Trees dropped their fruit around the perimeter of the clearing and butterflies, their wings a riot of color, fluttered through the air peacefully. The woman she had known as Anveena sat in the midst of the glade, her eyes on the sky. A blue dragon flew overhead, his wings creating a gentle breeze so far above them was he. And, through it all, Alayne could hear crystalline chimes. They sounded different, deeper, more liquid, than those belonging to A’dal. “Where am I?” she asked.

“In the sanctum,” the avatar of the Sunwell answered, never taking her eyes from the sky. “Oh, you thought it was that building? Or perhaps the pool? It is neither,” she said,

sounding amused. "It is where ever I wish it to be. The pool is but a reflection, contained by your people."

"Why have you called for me?" Alayne asked quietly. "I have come to answer for what I did to you. For how I used you."

"I called for you because I wished to see how you fared without me," the Sunwell said simply. "For, since last we were together, you have not drawn from my strength. I wish to know why. You were willing to sacrifice everything to achieve this victory, to restore the pool of magic from which your people grow. You succeeded, albeit not in the manner you planned. And yet, you have cut yourself off from it. Why?"

"Because..."

"Because you are afraid. Because you hide behind that pathetic excuse of not wanting to wield power, of always causing trouble, because you are afraid."

"So what if I am? What does it matter to you? You should want me dead and gone more than anyone else!"

"Why would I want that?"

"Because I forced you to help me summon Kil'jaeden..."

"...you forced me to do nothing. Had I willed it, I could have crushed you and obliterated the rest of your people."

"I took your life from you..."

"You got me to abandon an illusion. You opened the doorway back here for me. Now, why would I want you dead for bringing me home? For Kalec? He can visit me here whenever he desires. Beyond that, by your machinations, you brought me something more; you brought me the Light of creation itself. M'uru has joined me and this sanctum shines because of him. It lives and thrives with a different power, because of him. So, again, I ask you, why would I seek revenge? And why do you hide behind excuses instead of taking what I offer freely? Would you rather I set a quest for you? Send you off to slay the Lich King? After that, would you accept?" The human woman ceased her skyward vigil and glanced over at the elven woman. Alayne was staring at the green-carpeted ground at her feet, tears of frustration stinging her eyes. "I have existed aeons longer than you, child. I have seen the whole scope of mortal emotion. I know when someone lies to themselves. Name your fear and see it vanish!"

"You are not as you were..." Alayne began, licking her lips, her mouth suddenly dry as a desert. "I *did* try. I did. The day I burned my books and broke my wands, I tried. A simple spell. The first that my mother taught me. One that I used many times as a child when the darkness seemed to close in on me and my nightmares take form and walk my bedroom." Alayne lifted her left hand and muttered the incantation that would make small sparks dance over her palm. "And," she sighed sadly, "just as then, I now feel nothing. It is gone for me. Forever. I tell the others that I cannot as if there is a choice because to admit that I truly cannot..."

"And you try to hide once more," the Sunwell laughed, bemused. "Alayne, Alayne, I remember the first time you gazed upon me as a toddler. I remember the first rush of magic we shared. You remember it, too. And, you know what you are doing wrong. But it is your choice. However, I sense a change coming. I sense darkness drawing near again, just as I did when that foul Arthas damaged me, shoving his necromancer's filthy remains in my waters, forcing my powers to raise that pollution. I sense a break and, just as I did then, I seek out one who can ensure that the true essence of what I am survives. Yet, if you continue to refuse, if I cannot reach out to another, then there will be no second rebirth."

"I can't!" Alayne sobbed, covering her face with her hands. "I've tried! I've been trying for years now! And always, it fails!"

“It fails only because you want it to. Only because you believe it must. Only because you need it to fail. Remember, Alayne, you can try to lie to yourself. But you can never lie to me. I am here. Always...”

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Alayne pondered the meaning of the strange dream she had had while she sat through what seemed to be an endless dinner. Ger'alín and the others had returned to find her asleep at the table. She still did not know if the visit from Ber'lon and Aelonius was part of the dream or had actually happened. Jez'ral and Mir'el claimed to have heard nothing but admitted that they were both wrapped up in trying to clear out the hypocaust and probably wouldn't have heard a cannon go off in the front yard. She'd tried to puzzle out what was real and what was just a dream while she hurried through changing, tuning out her husband's droning on and on about how vile fighting with diseases was and how it made them no better than the Scourge. Most of it had gone in one ear and out the other though she had perked up when he mentioned a possible vaccine against the Plague.

“They're not sure it works, though,” he'd said when she had asked him, his face lighting up at her interest. It was the first time she'd shown interest in anything in months. “They'll be testing it soon, I think.”

Finally, the last dish was cleared away and Alayne had to refrain from heaving a sigh of relief. She could see her own impatience mirrored in the faces of the orcs, much to her chagrin. Garrosh and Thrall, diplomats though they could be, no doubt found elven formalities excessive. She grinned to herself, remembering her first meeting with Thrall. The two heavily-muscled orcs looked out of place among the delicate elven scenery. When the last servant had left the room, the door to the kitchen clicking shut behind him, Lord Theron cleared his throat. Glancing between Thrall and Sylvanas, he seemed at a loss as to where to begin.

“My lord,” Zerith began smoothly, ill-at-ease with the treatment he had received that evening and wanting nothing more than to get to the bottom of why they had been invited, “perhaps now is the time to tell us why we are here. Is there something more you wish us to do at the Ceremony tomorrow? Is that why we were ordered to attend?”

“No,” Theron said, looking relieved at having a way to say what he needed to say. “You've been invited here because, of all the groups and gatherings out there, yours is the most competent and seasoned.” Zerith and Ger'alín both lifted their eyebrows at that statement.

“You are needed,” Thrall said, without preamble. “And Garrosh swears he will venture north only with you and the handful of others he has found worthy of such an expedition.”

“Venture north?” Alayne asked, her voice almost inaudible.

“Indeed,” Sylvanas answered, looking at the young elven woman with a mix of sympathy and confidence. “Arthas is stirring the Scourge once again. More and more of our numbers have been seduced or tricked by the Cult of the Damned. A new necropolis has appeared off the eastern coast of the Plaguelands.”

“Over Tyr's Hand,” Alayne whispered. Sylvanas and Lor'thermar looked at her sharply. Very few new exactly where it was or even what it was.

“Yes,” Lor'thermar said at last, “the Scourge harries the Scarlets. For now, we have left them to each other, hoping that they'll destroy each other and leave us in peace. However, it seems that the Scarlets are preparing to abandon their posts and that would leave the Scourge free to attack either Undercity or to bring their filth back to our forests.”

“That is why it is imperative that we strike Arthas at his home base,” Sylvanas continued. “We must hit him hard where he least expects it. Your group is known for its

bravery, its audacity, and its willingness to press on in the face of insurmountable odds. You two,” she said, pointing to Ger’alin and Zerith, “are known to be talented in devising strategies that work where others have failed. After all, you took down Illidan Stormrage,” her voice held a tinge of awe, “when most others expected you to die doing so.”

“You’ve also shown the ability to prove yourselves to locals, to bring them to your aid,” Thrall added, looking at Garrosh. “You do not balk at performing tasks to benefit strangers; you are dedicated to serving your peoples and your friends above all else. That alone makes you ideally suited for this task. Others would go seeking glory, or vengeance. You will go seeking justice.”

“And we will bring them all to justice,” Garrosh swore, his eyes blazing with eagerness. “Any who stand in our way will be crushed beneath our boots and their blood will stain our axes!”

“What will be done about the Scourge threat to our south?” Dar’ja asked, visions of pillaging, mindless undead making their way back through Quel’Thalas. “Would we not be needed there?”

Garrosh opened his mouth to answer but Alayne cut him off. “It would take time to rally everyone to Silvermoon anyway. While we wait for word to spread and for the others to join us, we can watch and help with the Scourge to the south. As a matter of fact, I know just the people to bolster our numbers while we wait...”

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Ber’lon staggered out of bed and wondered what had wakened him. Normally, he slept through the day, preferring to go out at night when he was less likely to be spit on. He tripped over Aelonius and stifled a curse. The pounding on the door continued and he grunted, realizing what had woken him up.

“I’m coming, I’m coming!” he shouted hoarsely, pulling on a pair of pants and stomping his feet into his boots. He shook his head forward and let his jet-black hair cascade over his chest when he realized he would have to do a considerable amount of searching to find a shirt. “This had better be good!” he yelled warningly at the door. “It had better be one of my spies,” he muttered to himself as he walked to the door. “If it’s another person come to try to run us off after we’ve paid up...”

He pulled the door open, blinking against the harsh light of the sun. Momentarily blinded, he raised a hand to shade his vision. His jaw dropped when he saw the woman. He hadn’t expected to see her again, ever. She wore a thick cloak with a cowl that nearly covered her face. Anyone doing business this far back in Murder Row would hide themselves so; unless, of course, like him, they were forced to live here.

“Put your tongue back in your mouth,” a man growled. “That’s my wife you’re leering at.”

“I wasn’t leering,” Ber’lon said quickly. “I’m just surprised to see her is all. The last time I had dealings with her, she told me she’d cut my heart out and lay it at the Lich King’s feet.”

“Well, I’ve not come here for that,” Alayne said dryly. “Why on earth did you pick this part of Murder Row? Do you realize who your neighbors are?”

“The warlocks wouldn’t have us near their precious crystals,” Ber’lon answered, waving them in. “We weren’t always back this far. We get bounced around a good bit. For all that we’re good neighbors, we’re not wanted as such.”

“Was the last time we spoke truly in the north?” Alayne asked once Ber’lon had closed the door behind them. “I thought perhaps...”

“The last time we spoke, you called me a fool, a traitor, and a deserter. You tried to kill me. Had I been a second slower with my own blade, I’d be standing here dead. However, the last time I saw you; you were sleeping, recovering and regathering yourself after your time with the Lich King. How have you fared, Alayne? I heard you were able to go back. Some of the rest of us couldn’t. What we did offended too greatly for us to ever return.”

“I...we’ve come to ask you if you know anything about the Scourge ziggurat that appeared over Tyr’s Hand a few days ago.” Ber’lon gave a start; had his spies been spotted already? Was she about to accuse him of being in league with the Scarlets? Light knew it had been hard enough to sneak outsiders in; to put in those who could fool the Scourge while still sneaking past the Scarlets to report.

“What is it to you?” he asked slowly.

“Come on, Alayne,” the man who had accompanied her said. “I told you, this was a waste of time.”

“No,” she said quietly. “What do you know of them?”

“Not much,” Ber’lon admitted. “And, the more we learn, the more we know how little we know. We were lucky; a group of us was trying to put an end to the Cult of the Damned over near Stratholme when, one night, Rivendare rode out of the burning ruin with an assortment of guards. We followed him to the fields behind Tyr’s Hand where, out of the night sky, a ziggurat floated down. The next thing we knew, waves upon waves of Scourge were attacking the Scarlets, harrying them. I think most of the townspeople who could leave got out that night. The rest are bottled up, praying for rescue. I don’t know that they’ll find it, though, because the Scarlets are packing up. I know the Horde has their own spies out there, watching, reporting back. I have a feeling you may even know a good bit more than I do. But, for now, what we know is that Darion Morgraine is leading this attack. He’s got Rivendare with him. I...I believe that his is no mindless wave, here. I’ve seen signs. Familiar signs,” he sighed, pointing across the room to where his skull-adorned armor sat in a neat pile. “This isn’t a bunch of necromancers or a sweeping strike. This is a beach-head. He’s sent death knights. We’re doing what we can to thin their numbers, to foil them, or to convince them to return to our side. Precious few have chosen that path, though.”

“Why did you come back?” the man asked. “I know why she did,” he said, pointing at Alayne. “It was because of us. Because, when forced to choose between Zerith and her father, she chose Zerith for she saw that her father could not choose. But why did the rest of you come back?”

“That is a question I have asked myself many times, Blood Knight.”

“Ger’alin.”

“I thought I remembered you vaguely,” Ber’lon snorted. “It came to me, while I was in the north: that *life* suffered. Oh, don’t look at me like that. I went up there convinced that my own talents with the forests, with animals, with nature were being used to pollute it. Don’t ask me to explain; it made perfect sense at the time.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Ger’alin sighed, glancing at Alayne.

“While I was there, I would see, from a distance, bears. At first, it didn’t bother me. They were grizzled veterans. Old elder bears. But then...one day, I watched a group of zombies fall upon a little one. Something inside of me snapped, then. To take down the older ones, to leave room for the younger, the stronger; that is one thing. To devour the young before they’ve had a chance to prove themselves? That is a different matter altogether. From that, I started to see the truth. I started to see that I had been tricked. My mind began to return to me and, knowing that I could not stay, I left soon after. I didn’t know that I would be coming back here. I thought I would probably die crossing the sea again. If it had not been for the kindness of some of the natives who have held out against the Scourge, I would have died

before I began the crossing. But, I made it back and promptly set out to lose myself in the world, to hide away what I had done, to unbecome what I had become.”

“I believe I was doing much the same when our paths crossed at that time,” Ger’alin mused.

“We’re going far afield,” Alayne sighed. “Ber’lon, would you help us with a task? We have been called northward. However, we will need the aid of those who have been there before. Among our group, only I have been there and, to be completely honest, I’m not much use. There is much I do not remember; I believe it may have been lost when I severed my connection to the Lich King.”

“I see where this is going,” Ber’lon nodded, “and I will come with you if that is what you are asking. All of us will. For the chance to strike out at the Lich King...few would pass that up. Especially if it means going along with the nearly legendary Disorder of Azeroth.” Alayne and Ger’alin both rolled their eyes.

“We must be going,” Alayne said. “Do you remember the house we once lived in, when we lived in Silvermoon?” Ber’lon nodded; he’d been there before. “Come there tonight for supper. We have roles to play in the Ceremony this afternoon. After that, we should be free. Come there and bring any others – within reason, of course – who would like to accompany us north when we go.”

“I’ll be there. Aelonius as well. Yes, he’s here too,” Ber’lon answered when Alayne gave a small start. “I’ll have my messenger report to those still surveying the Scourge to the south and see how many are interested in going. It may be that we remain behind in order to prevent them from overwhelming us while you’re gone.”

“We’ll discuss that tonight,” Ger’alin said, putting an end to the conversation. “Now, let’s hope we can get out of here as we got in: unseen. Light, my father would strangle me if he knew I’d even walked past a brothel...”

“We prefer to think of it as remembering life in the midst of death,” Ber’lon said with a wry smile. “I will see you tonight. Meeting at your house would be better than meeting here of an evening. Quieter, for certain.”

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Ger’alin said nothing as he watched Alayne mount the stairs leading up to the Sunwell. Ben’lir and the others who had been under her command once waited for her off to one side of the platform. He and Zerith would stand with Voren’tal and Ishanah, representing those who had actually led the fight. Liadrin and Velen stood in the center while the rest of the leaders who had opted to come: Cairne, Vol’jin, Sylvanas, and Thrall for the Horde, Tyrande and Highlord Bolvar Fordragon for the Alliance stood in the front rows, waiting impatiently. As he watched his wife walk over to her place, he sighed. Why had the naaru insisted on dividing them again? Had those who followed Kael out of ignorance or misplaced loyalty not been punished enough? Had they not proven themselves?

The last thought set off an explosion in his mind. He’d spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon trying to figure out why Alayne wanted to track down her former colleagues among the death knights. Was she planning to return to their ranks since she had not returned to her arcane or fel studies? The answer had been in front of him all along; she felt as if she had not proven herself. That was why she had destroyed her books and her wands and then tried to hide it from everyone. She understood how they felt and she wanted to give them a chance to do something to prove themselves. That was why she had argued long and hard this morning with him and Zerith over admitting them into the Disorder of Azeroth. But why, after all she had done, after everything the Aldor and Scryers had told her, after the letters from Theron, after the speech from Garrosh, why did Alayne still feel that she had not

proven herself? She had; dozens of times over! Several times, she'd come so close to dying in one of her efforts that it had been all he could do not to put his foot down and forbid her to leave the house afterwards.

Ger'alın was forced away from his thoughts by a sudden silence descending upon the gathering. Though none had been speaking loudly, the din of thousands, the crowds spreading out to the docks, was loud. Ger'alın glanced up to see Liadrin and Velen lifting their hands for silence. Settling himself at a relaxed attention, he focused on them.

"Was it really only a year ago that I spoke here?" the prophet of the draenei said, his voice amplified by magic to carry to all corners of the crowd. "A year ago, we gathered to remember those who fell, giving their lives that the Legion might not advance into this world. A year ago, we thought to mourn the loss of many, among them two who stand with us today." The alabaster draenei gestured towards Ger'alın and Alayne. "In a few days, it will be one year since the trial in Shattrath where the lady there," he said, pointing at Alayne, "and her companions standing with her were sentenced to servitude to Shattrath. As part of remembering those who died to stop Kael'Thas Sunstrider in his attempt to summon the Legion, let us also remember those who have since dedicated their lives to eliminating other threats from the Legion."

"And why should we remember them?" Tyrande asked. Ger'alın glanced at her and reached over to hold Zerith back. The words were unexpected to them but the tone spoke of something planned. A murmuring from the Alliance spoke of consent to her askance. After a pause, she answered her own question. "We should remember them, just as we should remember Dath'Remar Sunstrider. As we should remember Durotan and Orgrim Doomhammer. As we should remember even Illidan Stormrage who, for all his faults, did what he thought was best for those he cared about. We should remember them and that they, like us, are mortal."

A rush of air filled the gathering and a bright light temporarily blinded everyone near the Sunwell. Gentle chimes filled the air as A'dal and the rest of the naaru made their entrance, hovering above the golden pool.

"And, like all mortals," the naaru said, his chimes singing gently through the minds of all gathered, "we should remember that they are imperfect. We should remember that, but for the grace of the Light, we could be in their places. And, we should extend to them the one gift all of us would hope for were we in their place and struggling with the burden of wrong actions. We should give them the gift that lightens guilt, that comforts the sorrow of remorse, and that bridges the gap between admitted and regretted wrongs and that which is right."

"Forgiveness," Liadrin said, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "Over the course of the past year, M'uru," she said, gesturing to the pool behind her, "and the other naaru, as well as many others," she said, including the Aldor, the Scryers, and Velen, "have taught us the meaning of forgiveness. No longer to we venture forth with vengeance in our hearts, seeking power above all else. While the actions of the past have set us on the road we travel, we will travel it with grace, dignity, and honor," she finished proudly. "And, this lesson we have learned from our own children," she added, glancing over at Zerith and Ger'alın.

"So let us today," Velen said, stepping forward and taking the lead again, "let us come here to the treasure of the sin'dorei, and let us say the words that are in our hearts. If we are angry, let us be angry and let go of that anger after this day. If we are sorrowing, let us sorrow but find our darkness lightened by the Light. If we are rejoicing, let us share our joy with others."

Ger'alın and Zerith glanced over to see Alayne and those with her bracing themselves for blow after blow. The priest and the paladin both hoped that Alayne would not bear the brunt of it. They both knew, though, that she would force herself to be the center of the worst outbursts. Both heaved twin sighs of relief when they saw Velen take position near them, his

gaze calm and peaceful but brooking no senseless anger. He would see that Alayne and the others did answer for what they had done. However, his posture said that the questions had better be reasonable.

“Nice and short,” Garrosh said, coming up the stairs to speak with Ger’alin and Zerith. “She will have to put up with the long part,” he grimaced, wincing in sympathy as he saw a long line forming from those who had gathered for the Ceremony. The priests of the Aldor and the magisters of the Scryers spread out as well, bidding each other fond greetings or partings, remembering their shared battle as the Shattered Sun. Though not everyone was forming a line to pass by the Sunwell and to demand answers that many of them had every right to ask, enough were that Ger’alin wondered if his wife would be able to stand through it all.

“If I were A’dal,” he heard a deep voice say, catching him off-guard as he studied his wife, “I would consider being forced to stand through this entire afternoon and relive my greatest mistakes grounds for unconditional and total pardon.”

“Tau’re!” Ger’alin laughed, turning to see the tauren grinning down at him. “I didn’t see you in the crowds.”

“That’s because the tauren are famous for stealth,” Callie laughed from the other side of Zerith. “We saw the two of you standing up here and decided to tell you that, so far, it looks like just about everyone will be rejoining us. Most were planning to come to the Ceremony anyway. The others will be here within a few days. They’re looking forward to a good adventure in the north. Most have been able to make their way in the world based on what they’ve learned with you.”

“That’s good,” Ger’alin nodded. “It will be good to have everyone together again. That reminds me; Alayne will have to speak with the naaru about whether or not she can go. She’s still, as far as I can tell, under sentence. Perhaps they will consider this a service to Shattrath since, if he is not stopped, Arthas will lead his hordes of zombies to eradicate all life. He won’t stop with Azeroth; Outland would be next.”

“She really drives herself hard, doesn’t she?” Callie muttered, glancing over to see Alayne standing, allowing herself no cover and no excuse, while a night elf berated her for something. Though the distance between the two groups was not great, the noise generated by the crowd allowed the others to catch only snatches of what she was hearing. Ger’alin glanced at Velen and, seeing the draenei standing impassively by, sighed. As much as he wanted to rush over there and protect her, he had to let her face this. “You’re as much under sentence as she is, aren’t you?” Callie asked softly, her voice pitched for Ger’alin’s ears alone.

“She does,” Ger’alin sighed. “And, yes, I am. Light help us both. But come,” he smiled, “let us talk of happier things. I have a feeling we’ll be having a bit of a warm up before we head to Northrend. Let me tell you about some of the things I’ve learned just since arriving in Silvermoon.”

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Alayne sighed and rubbed her feet tiredly as she sat on the bench in the kitchen. Mir’el, Jez’ral, and Ger’alin were hastily cleaning up the unused dining room while Zerith and Callie spoke with Ber’lon about how he thought his group could best fit within their own. She had escaped the worst of it by offering to prepare the meal. Now, she wished that perhaps she had chosen to stay in the other room and speak with the guests. After spending most of the afternoon forcing herself to stand, forcing her legs to hold her up even when she wanted nothing more than to collapse in a heap, she was ready to fall asleep with no effort.

“At least I can go to Northrend with the others,” she muttered to herself as she slipped her shoes back on. “A’dal said that he thought it would be a good idea for some of us to serve

Shattrath's interests in this world. I wonder what he meant, though, when he said that he hoped I would find 'true healing' in the northern plains." Standing up, she walked over and bent to check on the bread she had baking in the oven. Straightening, she gave the sauce a good stir before taking the pot off the stove and turning to go baste the roast. She nearly dropped the pot when she saw Ger'alain standing in the doorway. She had not heard him enter the kitchen.

"It looks good," he offered, nodding. "I want to know something, Alayne."

"Majoram and a bit of garlic," she said quickly. "Added in with melted butter and a bit of the drippings from the roast pan."

"No," he laughed. "Not about that. I want to know if you're well. I want to know why you haven't returned to your studies of magic. I want to know if you're even considering doing so. I know you burned everything; I'm no fool, sweetheart. I can figure out that the arcane residue coating the fireplace probably comes from the wands that have suddenly vanished just as quickly as anyone else."

"I...I...I just couldn't, then," she sighed. "And now...I still can't."

"Alayne, you can't keep punishing yourself," he said, sounding frustrated. "Believe me, I know that it can dest..."

"I'm not anymore," she protested. "I had intended to but...we came here, and the Sunwell, it...I can't explain what happened," she sighed. "I'm not even sure if it was real or not or if it is right or not. But, I've been trying. And, I cannot make it work. It's just like when I was back in Menethil during the war," she shivered. "I reach out and I can feel it but...when I try to weave, the tendrils slip from my fingers."

"If you can't cast spells," Ger'alain said slowly, hesitantly, "then what will you do when we go to Northrend?"

"I...I can still fight," she said firmly. "I may be rusty with a sword but..."

"You're not only rusty," he said harshly, "you're weak. You've not nearly recovered the strength and endurance you used to have. Standing for very long wears you out. You wouldn't even be able to don the chain mail needed for hand-to-hand combat, let alone swing a sword. No, you will not be joining my ranks, Alayne."

"Then I can stand back and analyze," she said coldly. "I can still see spells being woven. I can still sense magic. I'm rusty at that, yes, because I've not been practicing it for a year but I can still do it. Perhaps I could work with this Putress that Callie keeps talking about and see if together we can come up with a way to undo the magic holding the Scourge together. Perhaps we could break the necromancers' control and add their minions to the ranks of the Forsaken."

"As good an idea as that sounds, I like it even less than the thought of you wading into the melee," he sighed. "I don't like this Putress, Alayne. I don't think Callie does either, for all that she has helped him. I've a feeling it was done more from a sense of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' than genuine admiration."

"You're just saying that because he's fighting in a manner you don't understand," Alayne accused. "Because you think it's dishonorable. Ger'alain, demons and the Scourge have no honor. They must be controlled or destroyed and the Nether take the means used to do it."

"It's not that!" he protested. "Something seems...not right about him. Zerith says that the whole of that Royal Apothecary Society has changed since Putress took it over. We went there, Alayne. You didn't. I met them. I saw Putress. They talk to each other, ignoring us. They treated us like we were trespassers instead of allies. Callie says that they talk a lot amongst themselves and that it seems like there is almost a society within the Society. Whatever is going on, it set my teeth on edge. I won't have you working with them. Light only knows what they might do."

“Then what can I do?” she asked, disappointed.

“You can try to figure out why you can’t cast spells,” he replied, cupping her chin with a hand and running his thumb along her jaw. “Talk to Mir’el or Jez’ral. See if one of them can help you. I remember hearing Jez’ral say that Mir’el had a hard time casting after the Battle of Mount Hyjal. And you remember how many times Jez’ral had spells backfire on him this past year because of the problems he’s had with his memories. Talk to them. They are older and wiser and perhaps they can help you get to the bottom of it.”

Alayne opened her mouth to speak but was cut off by a pounding on the front door. Ger’alin moved to answer it, Alayne walking after him, her arms crossed over her chest. Zerith beat them to it, though, emerging from the living room into the front entrance before they could get there. When the pair saw it was just another one of Ber’lon’s death knights, they walked back towards the kitchen. Alayne checked the vegetables and the roast again before sitting down at the table with a sigh. Ger’alin sat next to her, putting his arm around her, silent. He had pressed her as much as she could bear for now; it was up to her to decide what to do next.

“Ger’alin, I,” she started to say after a pause of several moments. The kitchen door flew open again and a very excited and agitated Ber’lon stepped through.

“Sorry if I’m interrupting anything,” he said quickly, “but we won’t be able to stay for dinner. Alayne, you might want to come with us. I think...” he was breathing quickly, his excitement shining in his eyes and face, “it’s our chance! He’s there! In the Plaguelands!”

“Who?” Alayne asked, her stomach in knots.

“Arthas,” Ber’lon breathed. “My spies spotted him. We’re going there to put an end to him before he can sneak out of our grasp.”

“Are you certain?” Ger’alin asked doubtfully.

“As certain as I can be. Alayne, it would be an honor for you to come with us. Even if you do nothing, Aelonus and I feel you deserve to be there when he’s finally put down. You suffered along with us, after all.”

“I’ll be there,” she said hollowly. “Just give me a moment to go change.”

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“Who goes there?” came a shout from the chapel to their south. Alayne nearly fell off her hawkstrider in fright at the unexpected living voice. “Who goes there?” it demanded again, a tinge of fear edging it.

“Living beings like yourself,” Zerith answered, pitching his voice low so it would not carry up the hill to where the Scourge was massing. They had left the bulk of their groups behind in a ditch that ran from the road while they scouted ahead. The priest was glad they had. There was no way to break through the milling mass of undead blocking them from the ziggurat. “We’re here on business of our own.”

“Oh, Horde,” the voice said as the speaker stepped out of the shadows, letting the moonlight shine down on him. It was a human man, his armor dented and worn. “The Scourge is active this night.”

“The Lich King is here,” Ber’lon said, causing Zerith to groan and Ger’alin to curse beneath his breath. Even Alayne sighed, knowing that had not been a wise thing to say. “Of course they’re active with the master looking on.”

“How would you know that he was here?” the human asked. “We’ve not seen any leave this area save for the Scourge who sweep down upon Light’s Hope Chapel from time to time. We’ve fended off more waves of attacks in the past day than we’ve faced in the entire year before.”

“We have our ways of knowing what we need to know,” Ger’alin said cryptically, shooting a glare at Ber’lon that ordered the death knight to keep his mouth shut and his profile low. The last thing they needed was a bunch of human zealots figuring out they were working with death knights. That would truly set the fox loose in the hen house.

“Do you need reinforcements?” Alayne asked.

“No,” the human said, shaking his head. “We can hold. What I need to know is how you know that Arthas is there. General Fordring will not be happy if someone has been letting their tongue flap where others can hear.”

“General Fordring?” Ger’alin gasped. “Tirion Fordring? He’s here?” The human flushed.

“Now I’m letting my tongue flap,” he muttered. “Come with me,” he ordered briskly.

Ger’alin and Zerith exchanged glances and, with a ghost of a shrug, Zerith leaned over and whispered for Alayne to go and get the remainder of their forces hiding in the gully. Ber’lon flapped his reins in impatience, not wanting to go along with the humans. Ger’alin hushed him with a look and, after a few seconds of glaring, Ber’lon fell in with the rest, careful to keep himself and his fellows to the rear and shadows.

The chapel was nestled back against the foothills, the small mounds embracing it, protecting it on three sides from any flanking attacks. Once the land around it had been green and lush, filled with the very life the chapel revered. Now, the blighted lands made the whitestone appear dusty and dim. Even in the moonlight, the chapel had lost most of its once peaceful splendor. Warm light from oil lamps shone out of the stained glass windows and the open door, the only sign that the chapel was in use. The small army drew closer, led by the human and the elves, and hidden guardians rose from the piles of dirt and dry brush, their posture demanding to know who came to this holy spot.

“They’re with me,” the human said calmly. “I think the General will want to speak with them. They aren’t spies,” he added quickly, seeing a look on one of the others’ faces that made Zerith want to scream in frustration. Would the politics and the divisions of history forever keep the humans from seeing that the Scourge was a greater enemy than the Horde?

The humans moved away a space and had a hushed conference. A few moments later, one jogged into the chapel while the others stood warily, watching the force that had followed them. Ger’alin dismounted from his horse and Zerith followed suit. Ber’lon and the other death knights likewise dismounted, hiding themselves behind their animals and hoping they would not be noticed in the mass of people. Yet more moments passed before a human dressed in armor that proclaimed him one of the highest ranking members of the Silver Hand strode out of the chapel. The light reflected off his silver-grey hair, giving him a halo-like effect. His eyes were shrewd yet curious and his expression open. “I am Tirion Fordring,” he said modestly. “Who are you and what plans do you have here in the Plaguelands?”

“I am Zerith Lightbinder,” Zerith said, introducing himself, “and this is Ger’alin Sunrage, my second. We’re leading a force against the Scourge beyond that ruined mill over there. Or, rather,” he sighed, “we were planning to. However, that avenue seems blocked. We’ll try to sneak past your people down by Tyr’s Hand. If you’ll send word to them that we intend no attack against them, then the only fighting should be against the Scourge.”

“The Scarlet Crusade rarely listens to any not of its cause,” Fordring said simply. “I doubt they would heed the words of a convicted traitor to the Alliance even if they did listen to me before killing me. No, you’ll not be able to sneak through Tyr’s Hand without raising a hue and cry that would be heard all the way to Kalimdor. Besides, I’ve a feeling the true attack will not come from there. My own men are forming a barrier to prevent any Scarlets or Scrouge from flanking us from the south,” he explained. “We would not see the Forsake suffer any more than they have and we have no desire to be tortured and killed ourselves out

of mindless fear of contagion. What, exactly, brings you here tonight, though, Zerith Lightbinder?"

"As I said," the priest repeated himself, "we are here to put an end to the Scourge. We do not like the idea of an enemy organizing itself on our very doorsteps. Quel'Thalas and Undercity are but a stone's throw away. The Scourge who had been here were, for the most part, contained and utterly mindless. However, word has reached our people that a new master has arrived and that we can no longer merely contain the Plaguelands. We intend to begin cleansing them."

"Tonight?" Fordring asked, a small smile on his face. "Tonight and not last night? Or the night before? Or tomorrow night? Or next week? This night it must begin?"

"If you must know, human," Ber'lon growled, hoping the general couldn't pick him out of the crowd in the dark, "there's a larger threat there now and we mean to put an end to it forever. Now, either aid us in breaking through the blockade up the hill or vow not to attack us from the rear as we do the job that your own kind was too foolish to do years ago."

"Who speaks so to General Fordring?" one of the younger humans demanded angrily. "Step forward if you are not a complete coward."

Ber'lon weighed his options, wishing he had kept his mouth shut. No part of him wanted to back down from the challenge but neither did he wish to upset the delicate balance Zerith's group trod upon. To reveal that they tolerated his kind would do no good and much harm. And, it was not as if he were truly accepted as part of that group. He was there because it was his spies who had uncovered the knowledge that had them all out here, in the night, hoping to make a desperate strike against the one person responsible for most of their sufferings and misery. He could see the strain on the priest's and the paladin's faces that spoke of a thread stretched too far already. Even Alayne had her shoulders hunched as if she could feel a useless fight brewing.

"Well, speak up, coward!" the human demanded again. "Speak up you who would dare imply that any of us would fail to fight against the traitor prince of Lordaeron."

Tirion stood patiently at the fore, his eyes scanning the crowds. Zerith and Ger'alın had turned around, twin glares of accusation painted on their faces as they stared at Ber'lon. The death knight truly wished he could hide now. Tirion must have followed their gaze because, his eyes falling on Ber'lon, his expression changed. Ber'lon cringed.

"You there," the human said, his voice soft yet carrying, "how do you know of this threat?"

"We have our ways," Ber'lon said evasively, hoping that in the dark, the signs on his armor and sword would not be noticed.

"Of course you do," the human next to Tirion spat. "I should have known it. The Horde has allied with the Scourge! For Lordaeron!" he screamed as he unsheathed his sword and began running, blade flashing, towards the gathering. The Disorder of Azeroth readied itself for a hasty defense as Zerith and Ger'alın both began shouting for them to fall back, to retreat, not to do the Scourge's work for them. Through it all, Tirion Fordring stood calmly.

"Hold, Falir," the general said mildly, "there is no soul beyond saving. Perhaps this one is one who has foresworn the Scourge. I said hold!" he added sternly. "Hold!"

"But, General, they..."

"Once, years ago, I was exiled for the crime of refusing to torture and kill a lone orc after that orc saved my life," Tirion said calmly. "All around me believed the orcs to be demonic monsters. Eitrigg showed me that they were noble people, little different than humans. Years later, Sylvanas broke free of the Lich King's control and rescued others, bringing them back to their blighted homeland and rebuilding it. They call themselves Forsaken but, truly, they should be the Redeemed for they show that even the Scourge can be

saved from damnation through the grace of the Light and strength of will. Are you one such, young sin'dorei?"

"We broke away from Arthas's control several years ago," Alayne answered for him, keeping her head down. "We were taken by the Scourge because of the plague of madness that had spread through all of our peoples. Some of us were able to regain our wills again and we returned, trying to fit back into our old lives where possible. Where it was not possible, we've kept to the edges, aiding where we can and fighting the Scourge."

"You there," one of the other humans gasped. "You're the one who summoned Kil'jaeden!"

Now it was Alayne's turn to cringe and wish she'd kept her mouth shut. Ger'alain stepped into the fray, hoping he could find the words to salvage a nearly unsalvageable situation. Turning to face Tirion Fordring, he tried to explain.

"She only did that under duress. She went to Kael'Thas with two Vials from the Well of Eternity – a vast source of magic power much akin to our Sunwell," he tried to explain, seeing the confused look on the other paladin's face. "She was hoping that with the Vials, Kael would end his alliance to the Legion because she thought, as we all did, that he was merely seeking a way to restore the Sunwell. When she learned that he had truly gone mad, she stayed on, did his bidding, and, at the last, used the very power he'd entrusted her with to destroy Kil'jaeden. Or, at least," he amended, "to hurt him fairly badly from what I could see. And, she did all of that in the hopes of saving me from certain death and in hope of restoring our people. So, like you, she, I, and the others," he gestured to the gathering, "believe in the power of redemption."

The humans with Fordring grumbled but held their peace when their general nodded. "I have spoken long with the leaders of the Alliance, arguing that those death knights who have returned to us should be allowed to come and go in peace. I am glad you have your own with you this night, Ger'alain Sunrage. For, my own wait behind the chapel for my signal to attack." The humans gasped in shock. "For years, they have sought a way to prove themselves worthy of re-entry into the Alliance. For years they have existed on the edges, living in virtual exile, for a choice made in madness. I suffered much the same for longer and I will not stand by and let those who deserve a second chance be denied. Come aside with the leaders of your band and let us discuss how we might best put an end to the threat facing us this night."

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"You truly believe that they can be redeemed?" the young human who had stood with Fordring asked as they led the forces into the ruined Bowman's Mill. "That anyone can be?"

"Yes," the grizzled exile said softly. "Anyone. Even Arthas himself."

"Arthas," the younger man spat. "I'll have to disagree with you there, general."

Tirion nodded in understanding as the young man rode off to rejoin his troop. Fordring watched as the two groups comprised of normally bitter enemies merged and mixed, following his orders even when they did not like them. He nodded to himself in satisfaction; the two elves seemed to be able leaders and well-respected. He tried to think if he had ever heard of them before tonight. Nothing came to mind but then, much was lost to the elves in the Scourge invasion under Arthas. Perhaps their leadership skills had been born and honed in the fires of that destruction. Small wonder he would have heard nothing then. He'd spent those years in exile, far away from the Alliance, joining the battle only once the Scourge were on his very doorstep. "This used to be a nice place," he whispered to himself. "Clean air. Good land. If one had to be exiled, this was the place to be exiled to."

"We're ready, General," Ger'alain said as he rode up to where Fordring stood. "The plan is a good one. Thank you for letting us be involved."

“No,” Tirion said, “thank you for being involved. Perhaps things like this will show both our peoples that we can and must work together against a common threat. Go now. I will watch from here. The Light be with you, Ger’alin Sunrage.”

“And with you, General,” the blood elf paladin said politely as he wheeled his horse and rode back to the front lines, preparing himself for the charge. Tirion noticed that one elven woman hung back from the attack, almost as if she had been given orders to watch and not join in. He wondered at that. He had seen Zerith and Ger’alin speaking with her. Then the death knight had spoken with her and she had pulled to the side, her head hanging with either shame or anger. *Ah well*, Tirion thought to himself, *one more or less would make little difference.*

With a shout, the horses in the front lines began a quick walk, then a trot, then cantering up the hill to the Scourge massed there. They quickly broke through the first line of skeletons, ghouls, and banshees, their blades and hammers cleaving through the undead. Behind them came the magi, their spells flying ahead of the attackers, taking out the rows further away. The entire area broiled and seethed like a cauldron left on the fire too long. Fordring could hear the ring of steel against steel, the crunching of bone, and the cries of his own wounded as the fight pressed on, the Scourge forced to give ground until they were pressed back nearly beyond the cusp of the hill. Tirion felt a moment’s hope as the Scourge seemed to retreat. Then, he saw that Ger’alin and Zerith held the others at the edge, not letting them go forward another step. Dark horns sounded in the distance and the shouts of “fall back! Fall back! For the love of the Light, fall back!” reached his ears. “What is going on?” he wondered.

Alayne galloped from where she had been ordered to remain, desperate to see what had turned the battle back. Like Tirion, from her vantage point, it had seemed to be going in their favor. “Alayne, no!” she heard Ger’alin shout as she skirted around the retreating forces to see what was going on. “Alayne!” he screamed.

She drew rein then, seeing what had them scattering and praying she would be able to join them. Before she wheeled her hawkstrider back around, she could see the twin sapphire fires dotting the faces of hundreds of death knights. The Scourge at the mill had been a feint. Bait to lure them into attacking. Now, the death knights surged up the hill, far out-numbering the forces and easily reanimating the slain Scourge that the living force had shattered. Alayne heeled Leeta and stared in horror at Ger’alin. He held himself at the rear of the retreating force, his desperation painted on his face for all to see as he prayed she would reach them ahead of the death knights surging up mere steps behind her. He wanted to shout at her for being so foolish, for rushing right into an enemy’s attack when anyone with sense would following a retreating force but his fear held his throat shut. Alayne glanced back over her shoulder; the death knights would overtake her before she reached Ger’alin.

“Go on!” she shouted at him. “Go on!”

Ger’alin waited. If this was to be the end, it would end for both of them.

Alayne glanced back one more time. She could see the horrible skulls worked on the death knights’ armor clearly. She couldn’t let them reach her; she couldn’t let them reach Ger’alin. With a scream of frustration, she reached down and, pulling from deep inside of her, called down fire from the sky. Leeta bolted, gaining a fresh burst of speed, passing Ger’alin with a nearly unconscious Alayne clinging to the hawkstrider’s bridle. Ger’alin barely had time to see her streak past before he had to wheel and gallop for his own life as the fire she’d called down spread. Brimstone, sulfur, and flame fell from the sky over the mill. The ruined wooden structures, the dead, brittle growth, and the few remaining trees lit up like torches. The skeletal and ghoulish remains of the Scourge burned likewise, denying the death knights the corpses needed to supplement their forces. The death knights themselves fared better; their dread horses impervious to the normal fear of fire. Still, many showed signs of the heat that

flashed in the enclosed area. Ger'alın himself could feel it and wondered if Alayne were going to burn the entire area. Glancing around, he blinked and grimaced in confusion when he could not find her.

“Ger'alın, to us!” he heard Zerith shout. “To the chapel! She's out of harm's way!”

Ger'alın galloped to where the others waited, nearly strangling Lucky as he forced the stallion to wheel on his rear legs and face the coming onslaught. The death knights were making it past the firestorm and were pressing on to the chapel. The humans and the Horde forces rallied themselves quickly, their backs to the holy place, prepared to defend it with their lives. Seconds later, the knights of the Scourge threw themselves against the guardians of the chapel and the battle began in earnest.

Ger'alın did his best to stay on Lucky's back as he fought the waves of death knights. No sooner would he cut one down than another would appear and take his fellow's place. The blood elf could hear and feel spells being thrown around him and once, risking a glance back, saw the magi running to put distance between themselves and the attacking force. As they fled, the death knights raised some kind of shield around themselves and Ger'alın groaned as he saw the spells fizzle and fail against it. The magi looked stunned and helpless as the death knights began to close in on them once more.

“Back!” Ger'alın shouted. “Defend the casters!”

“But they'll take the chapel!” one of the humans protested.

“The chapel is nothing but brick and mortar! Is it more valuable than the lives of our comrades?” Ger'alın yelled as he tried to back out of the front lines, desperate to put himself between the magi who had been rendered defenseless and the death knights. He grunted as he felt a stinging on his leg and then screamed when he felt the bones of his knee give way. His horse reared in fright and pain as a death knight's runeblade sliced through the saddle straps, cutting the horse and dropping Ger'alın to the ground on his back, his right leg all but useless where the knee had been destroyed. He struggled to try to pull himself up, tried to stand on one leg and continue the fight, but he was buffeted by horses' hooves and strikes from runeblades whenever he tried to rise. Rolling over on his stomach, he began trying to claw his way out of the fight and to safety, praying he would not be trampled in the bloody melee taking place above him. He grunted everytime he was forced to move his shattered knee. Sweat beaded on his forehead. He could see the clearing ahead, a space open in front of the chapel. If he could just make it...

A chilling laugh from over him froze him in his tracks. Turning over carefully, he saw a death knight dismounting from a horse that made the demonic nightmare Alayne used to summon look normal and right. “A Blood Knight,” the death knight sneered. “Call on the Light, coward. See if it will save you!” he laughed as he lifted his sword, a blade that seemed to reflect a twisted mockery of the Light. “My father served the Light once. It failed him in the end. Come, paladin,” he sneered, his arms tensing for the swing, “come see the truth: only death is supreme!”

“Darion!” Tirion shouted. “Darion Morgraine!”

Ger'alın tensed, waiting for the blow that would send him into the next world. He closed his eyes, whispered quick good-byes to his friends, and waited. Seconds that seemed like hours passed and he opened his eyes a hair. The death knight still stood over him but it seemed that he struggled with his own blade. “Ashbringer defies me,” he muttered, focusing his will on the dark sword. “Obey me, blade! You will do as I command! I am in control here!” Still the sword seemed to defy its dark master. Ger'alın hastily raised his shield over him, praying he could deflect any strike long enough for another to come to his rescue. He prayed that Alayne was nearby. Perhaps if she saw that he was threatened, she could overcome whatever it was preventing her from using magic again. That would be the only good thing to come of this. “What is this?” Darion seethed. “My...I cannot strike...”

“You cannot win, Darion!” Tirion shouted. “Fall back, brothers! Bring them before the chapel!”

The death knights surged over the retreating forces but quickly came to a halt as their feet touched the ground of the chapel proper. Lassitude seemed to wash over them and they shot glances between themselves, all seemingly confused as to why they had lost the will to attack. Darion Morgraine seemed to be trying to fight against it, desperation and fear on his twisted face. “I...I...Stand down,” he sighed. “We have lost. This place...the Light...no hope,” he whispered, his head hanging in defeat. Tirion Fordring strode over, his own face painted with anger and disappointment.

“Have you learned nothing, boy? You have become all that your father fought against! Like that coward, Arthas, you allowed yourself to be consumed by the darkness...the hate... Feeding upon the misery of those you tortured and killed! Your master knows what lies beneath the chapel,” Tirion sighed sadly, shaking his head, “It is why he dares not show his face! He’s sent you and your death knights to meet their doom, Darion. What you are feeling right now is the anguish of a thousand lost souls! Souls that you and your master brought here! The Light will tear you apart, Darion!”

“Save your breath, old man. It might be the last you ever draw,” Darion Morgraine said, some of his former spirit rousing within him. Tirion shook his head again and glanced over towards the hill to the south. The death knight’s gaze followed the paladin’s and he gaped in shock. Ger’alin watched in awe as a mighty paladin, one of the heroes of the many human stories he’d heard growing up, appeared in a halo of light. Alexandros Morgraine, father of the death knight in front of him, the Ashbringer himself, stood on the hill, a smile of joy on his face.

“My son! My dear, beautiful boy!” he shouted, throwing his arms wide.

“Father!” Darion shouted, his heart in his voice. Angrily, he shook his head as if to clear it of the vision. “Argh...what...is...”

A younger and uncorrupted version of the hideous death knight appeared, tearing away from Darion as he was forced to watch in horrified fascination. Studying both, Ger’alin could tell that the shade embracing Alexandros was Darion as he had been.

“Father, you have returned!” the uncorrupted Darion was saying. “You’ve been gone a long time. I thought...” he trailed off uneasily, glancing around as if afraid to give voice to his thoughts.

“Nothing could have kept me away from here, Darion. Not from my home and family,” Alexandros said warmly.

“Father, I wish to join you in the war against the undead. I want to fight! I can sit idle no longer!” the young shade said suddenly. His shoulders were set with determination and his fists clenched with the rightness of his conviction.

“Darion Mograine, you are barely of age to hold a sword, let alone battle the undead hordes of Lordaeron! I couldn’t bear losing you. Even the thought...” his father trailed off, choking at the end. He shook his head and Ger’alin could see the shining unshed tears in the Ashbringer’s eyes.

“If I die, father, I would rather it be on my feet, standing in defiance against the undead legions! If I die, father, I die with you!”

Ger’alin glanced back at the death knight, seeing him mouthing the words his shade spoke.

“My son, there will come a day when you will command the Ashbringer and, with it, mete justice across this land. I have no doubt that when that day finally comes, you will bring pride to our people and that Lordaeron will be a better place because of you. But, my son, that day is not today. Do not forget...”

The vision of the younger Darion and his father vanished as a cold, dark shadow swept over the moon. The stars seemed to vanish as if running to hide their twinkling faces from the evil that appeared. Hideous blue eyes glared out from behind a helm that rose up in a mockery of a royal crest. Long washed out blond hair, a dull silver in the darkening light, flowed down armor adorned with skulls and spikes.

“How touching,” the Lich King sneered.

The death knight Darion seemed to regain his senses. Glaring at Arthas, he tightened his grip on his blade. “You have betrayed me!” he shouted accusingly, “You betrayed us all you monster! Face the might of Mograine!” he cried, running at the Lich King with this sword held high.

“He's mine now...” the Lich King laughed at the horrified look on Tirion's face. Darion flew backwards, landing on the ground so hard he bounced. Ger'alın shivered, not envying at all the pain the death knight must be feeling from both the landing and the betrayal. “Pathetic,” Arthas smirked.

Tirion rushed over to help Darion. “You're a damned monster, Arthas,” he spat as he bent down to lay his hands on the death knight.

“You were right, Fordring. I did send them in to die. Their lives are meaningless, but yours... How simple it was to draw the great Tirion Fordring out of hiding. You've left yourself exposed, paladin. Nothing will save you...”

Tirion's eyes grew wide and he clutched at his throat. He opened his mouth and tried to suck in air. Tears flowed down his cheeks and his face began to redden. His lips turned blue and he clawed at his throat as if he were being strangled.

“Attack!” one of the humans shouted, rousing the living forces against the Lich King.

“Apocalypse!” the Lich King cried, throwing them back, sending them flying in screaming agony.

“That day is not today...” Darion Morgraine whispered to himself, his eyes on Tirion. “Tirion,” he gasped, lifting his sword. Tirion reached out dizzily and grasped it, his face relaxing as his hand closed on the hilt. The sword changed as soon as he touched it, the dark metal becoming a glowing silver.

“Arthas!” Tirion shouted, leaping to his feet.

“What is this?” the Lich King asked, taken aback. His blazing blue eyes widened in shock as he beheld what Tirion wielded.

“This is your end,” the paladin said softly. He lifted the blade and slashed at the Lich King, striking him hard across the shoulder. The sword buried itself in the Lich King's flesh and seemed to try to burrow its way deeper, as if thirsting for vengeance.

“Impossible,” the Lich King gasped. Wrenching himself free of the blade, he stepped back. “This isn't over,” he swore. “When next we meet it won't be on holy ground, paladin.”

The shadows thickened and then he was gone. Ger'alın groaned and heard his own disappointment echoed in the throats of every living being in the area. Tirion stared angrily at the space where his enemy had stood just seconds before. With a sigh and a shake, he walked over to where Darion Morgraine still lay on the ground. “Rise, Darion, and listen...” he said as he bent down and healed the man. “We have all been witness to a terrible tragedy. The blood of good men has been shed upon this soil! Honorable knights, slain defending their lives - our lives! And while such things can never be forgotten, we must remain vigilant in our cause! The Lich King must answer for what he has done and must not be allowed to cause further destruction to our world. I make a promise to you now, brothers and sisters: The Lich King will be defeated! On this day, I call for a union. The Argent Dawn and the Order of the Silver Hand will come together as one! We will succeed where so many before us have failed! We will take the fight to Arthas and tear down the walls of Icecrown! The Argent Crusade comes for you, Arthas!”

“So too do the Knights of the Ebon Blade... While our kind has no place in your world, we will fight to bring an end to the Lich King. This I vow!” Darion shouted, grasping Tirion’s outstretched hand with his own.

“We will discuss that, Darion, and all the others who followed you or fought against you,” Tirion promised. “I will do my best to see that the Horde and the Alliance see that these men,” he pointed at the death knights, “are no longer our enemies. And you, Zerith and Ger’alin,” he added, glancing around for the pair. He gasped when he saw Ger’alin stretched out on the ground. Zerith was rushing over from where he had been healing several of their own. “Will you join us in the fight against the Lich King?”

“Of course,” Zerith said quickly. “We will help you in whatever way we can that brings no harm to our people.”

“Then come,” Darion said, “let me tell you what we know of the events coming to pass in Northrend. You may pass them along to your people. Horde or Alliance; I care not as long as that foul traitor Arthas comes to justice!”