

Dawn had begun to crest over the chapel soon after the battle ended. Ger'alın stumped through the area north of the chapel with Zerith, both scanning the ground for signs of Alayne. "I swear, I thought she had made it back. I did not see her get mixed in with them," Zerith repeated again and again. After the battle, it had become clear that Alayne was not with their group. As soon as his leg had been healed, Ger'alın had scrambled up to begin searching for her. "I swear to the Light, I thought she made it out."

"There," the paladin muttered, seeing the three-toed clawmarks of a hawkstrider. The white feathers it had dropped in its haste said it was Alayne's mount, Leeta. "Where in the name of the Light is she, though? Why didn't she come back?" he wondered, seeing the tracks continue on through the ditch, veering back north into the hills. The pair strode up, climbing the rocky outcrops, neither feeling good about the blood and feathers that dotted the trail. Had a lone death knight broken from the main force to follow her?

"Oh no," Zerith groaned. Ger'alın jerked his head up to see the priest sprinting down the stony hill to where a white hawkstrider stood, its head down and nudging an unconscious woman with its beak. It cawed at Zerith, seeking reassurance, before it went back to trying to rouse its mistress. Ger'alın moaned; he had seen this far too many times.

"This isn't good," Zerith announced as Ger'alın jogged close. "I think she must have hit every rock coming down. She's got grass burns as if she had been thrown, chest-first, and you can see where she must have landed," he pointed back several feet where the earth had been churned up. "This isn't good at all."

"Quit talking and heal her," Ger'alın glared.

"I have," Zerith said defensively.

"Then why isn't she moving? Alayne? Alayne?" he asked, kneeling down and taking her from her brother. He shook her gently. "Come on, woman. Don't do this to me. Wake up." He felt for a pulse and relaxed at finding one, thready as it was. "Oh Light, wake up. Let's not go through this again. Please?"

"Let's get her back to the chapel," Zerith suggested. "Perhaps someone there will know more about why this keeps happening to her."

"A'dal doesn't know or won't say," Ger'alın despaired, "Ishanah is confused. The Aldorites can do nothing. The druids..." he shuddered, remembering how they had turned on her once Var'thanos riled them up, "even the shaman of the Mag'har could do nothing."

"Well, giving up certainly won't help," the priest pointed out. "Come on, let's get her back to the chapel. At the very least, it will let everyone know she did get out of the fight alive."

Zerith helped Ger'alın lift his sister off the ground. The pair picked their way carefully back over the hill, the priest leading her hawkstrider while the paladin concentrated on not falling. They walked back to the chapel in grim silence, their minds filled with unanswered and unanswerable questions.

As they stepped into the whitestone building, Tirion Fordring glanced up. Leaving over the letter he had been composing, he hurried to meet them. Darion Morgraine also looked over, wondering what was going on. When his eyes fell on the woman in Ger'alın's arms, he grimaced. His death knights were out burying enough of those they had slain in last night's mad battle. Would they be adding another name to the rolls of the wronged? He walked over to see if there was any aid he could lend.

"...collapses all the time like this?" Tirion was saying. "Nether exposure? It could be possible, I guess," the paladin replied to some comment Morgraine had not overheard.

"Is there anything you can do for her?" the elf paladin was asking. He reached over and smoothed the woman's hair back from her face. Morgraine's eyes widened in shock as he recognized her.

"Tal'ar's daughter!" the death knight gasped. "She still lives?"

“You knew her?” the three asked at once.

“She was one of the first we brought to us,” Morgraine sighed. “We thought to break the Horde and the Alliance by inducing some of their own to join our cause. The plague of madness; that was our doing. The plan was to send back some of the best and the brightest we’d managed to infect, cure, and seduce to our banner. With them returning to slowly but surely spread the poison of the Cult of the Damned, the Scourge would have been able to move in quickly. However,” he sighed, the ghost of a smile on his face, “the minds of the living are difficult to enslave and control. She refused to return without her father. Others slipped away from us. Some came back to themselves when, finally, in an attempt to rid himself of a failed experiment, Arthas sent that batch of death knights to attack Undercity and be killed in the process. Better that they serve him where he could have complete control than the half-control he had,” Morgraine sighed.

Ger’alin and Zerith stared at the death knight, their jaws hanging in horror. That Alayne had been infected they knew. That she had gone north and served the Scourge, they had found out. But to hear that the very battle that brought her back to them had been supposed to lead to her death and forced resurrection among the ghouls? “I’ll kill that bastard,” Ger’alin swore angrily.

“We’ll kill him together,” Morgraine agreed. “What ails her now?”

“Nether exposure,” Zerith said uncertainly. “She ventured into the very heart of the Twisting Nether a year ago during a battle with Kil’jaeden...”

“She is her father’s daughter,” Morgraine said softly. “Kil’jaeden?”

“At any rate, she’s not well. That spell she threw against you may have sapped her of whatever strength she had. We’re trying to figure out why magic tires her so much and why it takes something like what happened last night so that she can cast at all,” Ger’alin said quickly. Zerith looked at him in confusion. “She tried to go back to it and destroyed all of those things because it still doesn’t come to her. Argh!” he groaned. “It’s too complicated to explain right now.”

“Mir’el or Jez’ral may could...” the priest ventured.

“I suggestd that. You know Alayne.”

“Indeed,” Zerith said gently. “I know Alayne. Well,” he added, raising his voice, “let us gather together those we can and head back to Silvermoon. I believe that Garrosh and Thrall will want to know the outcome of last night’s foray.”

“Hold, sin’dorei,” Tirion requested, lifting a hand, “before you return home, let me finish this letter. When you give your report, I would ask you to give it to Thrall on behalf of the death knights. Too long have we allowed divisions to stand amongst us. The time has come for all life to unite against death,” Tirion said grimly. “Thrall is wise; I hope he can see that.”

“If he does not,” Zerith said softly, “we will do our best to convince him otherwise.”

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Thrall gave no sign of what he was thinking as he read the letter from Tirion Fordring. Zerith stood patiently, watching the orc’s face as if he would be tested on it later and failure would mean execution. Next to him, Ber’lon stood, betraying his nervousness by the way his fingers constantly twitched. Ger’alin had chosen to remain at the house with Alayne in case she woke up. She’d shown signs of coming around as they entered the city. Zerith hoped she would wake up. He hoped she would talk to someone about why she couldn’t use magic. He hoped that Arthas would repent and disband the Scourge while he was at it.

He jumped when Thrall grunted and balled up the letter. “Report,” was all the Warchief said.

“We banded together with the Argent Dawn and others last night to take down the Lich King. Ber’lon’s spies had spotted him in that ziggurat – Ebon Hold, it’s called,” Zerith said quickly, giving his report. Obviously Tirion had not included it in the letter. “The death knights had a trap laid for us and we nearly fell for it. Luckily, we were able to stay out of it and pull them back to the chapel. Morgraine’s sword turned against him and he wound up turning against Arthas and the Scourge. Fordring cleansed Ashbringer and wounded the Lich King severely. That should help with the plans you’ve made to establish a base in the north. With the Lich King busy recovering, he’ll have little time to interfere with our operations. By the time he could, we should already be firmly entrenched.”

Thrall nodded, lifting his gaze to stare at Ber’lon. “Fordring requests that all the others like you be allowed to rejoin the Horde,” the orc grunted. “Tell me, why should we allow that?”

“We’re loyal, Warchief,” Ber’lon answered. “We hate the Scourge. I was stricken with madness and turned to them against my will. When I recovered control of my own mind again, I rebelled and returned home. Had I been able, I would have returned completely to my old life, giving up necromantic powers entirely. The same goes for many who returned as I did. For the death knights who follow Morgraine; they feel much the same. Last night showed them that they were wrong; that they were nothing but pawns in the Lich King’s game. No one likes being a pawn, Warchief. They wish to return as well, to be of service to those they once fought against. Many of them, like me, have friends they care about. They will fight for them. They will fight for the families they’ll regain. They’ll fight for glory and honor for the Horde and they’ll fight, most importantly, beyond their limits and beyond what anyone would ask of them, because they want to earn that redemption.”

Thrall studied the death knight for a long moment before nodding reluctantly. “I cannot promise that everyone will accept and welcome you back. The best I can offer is a forced tolerance until you each have proven yourselves time and time again. Perhaps it would be for the best if you stick close to this Darion Morgraine and his Knights of the Ebon Blade. If they prove themselves worthy of our trust and respect, it may go easier for you to have been associated with them.”

“I understand and I thank you for this opportunity, Warchief,” Ber’lon said, saluting with his fist to his chest.

“You may go,” Thrall said. “I have words to speak to Lightbinder that are no concern of yours.”

Ber’lon saluted again and turned on his heel. Before walking out, he shared a look of hope and concern with Zerith. The priest turned his eyes back to the green-skinned, blue-eyed Warchief of the Horde and waited until he heard the click of the door shutting behind Ber’lon before he spoke.

“What more do you require of me, Warchief?” Zerith asked politely.

“I want to know what you think of these death knights,” Thrall said bluntly. “Can they be trusted? Your friend...”

“My sister,” Zerith corrected. Thrall nodded.

“Your sister was once among them. You had time to observe her during your adventures in Draenor. Did she still possess ties to the Lich King? You’ve mentioned to Garrosh that she received visions from him. Do you think that these others will be the same?”

“I cannot say, Warchief,” Zerith admitted. “Perhaps they will receive visions from the Lich King. Perhaps they will not. At any rate, they are no more or less trustworthy than any other people. Think of them like the Forsaken or like my own people,” Zerith argued. “They have been betrayed by the ones they trusted and have broken free of the lies told to them. They throw themselves on your mercy and ask that you allow them the chance to prove themselves. Either they will succeed or fail.”

“There is wisdom in what you say,” Thrall said after a heavy pause. “Very well. I will do as I have said and seek tolerance for them. Acceptance will come only when they have earned it. Now, Lightbinder,” he grinned, “you had best be on your way. Garrosh intends to leave within the next few weeks. Knowing your group, you wouldn’t want to be left behind.”

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The next weeks were a rush of planning, packing, and drilling. Ger’alin had the death knights and the Disorder out practicing tactics during the day while Alayne and Zerith poured over information from the libraries of the various cities and reports coming in from the scouts. Garrosh had departed already to oversee the construction of Warsong Hold in Borean Tundra. After many heated debates, it was decided that the Disorder would venture first to Howling Fjord with the Apothecaries and would then meet Garrosh in Warsong Hold for fresh orders once the work in the eastern part of Northrend was complete.

“These tuskarr,” Ger’alin was saying as Alayne and Zerith brought him up to speed on the latest batch of reports. “They sound like potential allies. Perhaps Garrosh is right; we should go with him first.”

“Gerry, we settled this,” Callie sighed irritably, “Garrosh has plenty of soldiers and workers going with him. He’ll be facing mostly nerubians. Those viktuls...”

“Vykruls,” Alayne corrected.

“Vykruls,” Callie amended, “are causing the Apothecaries real problems. We Forsaken are few in number compared to the orcs and trolls Garrosh can call upon. We’ll be needed more in the east than in the west.”

“Not to mention,” Alayne added, “that the first real strike from the west will be at Azjol-Nerub. Garrosh will need time to solidify his base there and send out scouts before he would have anything we could help with. We’re a strike force, Ger’alin, not an army. Our organizational methods and our tactics are different.”

Ger’alin tapped the table with his knuckles in irritation. He knew they were right but still, he did not like the idea of aiding the Apothecaries. The more he saw of Putress, the less he liked them. “I suppose you’re right,” he conceded at last. “Still, I think we should plan to hurry over to Warsong Hold as soon as we can. Garrosh will have need of us in clearing out the heart of the nerubian kingdom. Howling Fjord will be our warm-up, give us a chance to hone our tactics a bit, and then, we go in for the real work.”

“If that’s how you must see it,” Alayne sighed, “then it’s for the best.”

“I know you don’t like Putress,” Callie said, getting to the heart of the problem. “And, you’re right not to. He’s a right bastard. But, he’s intelligent and he’s dedicated to eradicating the Scourge. Once that’s been done, I think he’ll fade back to where ever he came from and we won’t have to put up with him anymore. I wish Sylvanas could have found anyone else to run the Society but she couldn’t. He’s only where he is because he’s needed; not because any of us really like him.”

Ger’alin grunted noncommittally. He was as tired of having this conversation as the others were of repeating it. Alayne smiled weakly and patted his hair. “You’ll like the area around Howling Fjord,” she said. “It’s very...diverse. Forests, plains, mountains, ice fields; plenty of areas for you to use to whip us back into fighting form. Northrend is not like Outland or any other place we’ve been. I’m sure you’ll learn much there that will be of use to Garrosh when we do begin to move against Azjol-Nerub.”

“What is it like up there?” Ger’alin asked. “I’ve seen the maps and read or heard the reports but,” he sighed, “what is it really like?”

Everyone turned and looked at Alayne expectantly. As the only one who had been there and could consciously recall it, she was the one they would turn to for information to

supplement the reports. "It's cold," she began. "I think Ger'alın and Zerith will be glad of their abilities to grow beards. I know I sometimes envied Ber'lon's being able to cover his face with hair. It took me a while to get used to it but, eventually, you do. No," she said, seeing the question in Dar'ja's eyes as the woman sat down next to Zerith. "It's not all snow and ice. The area around Icecrown citadel is but Howling Fjord is actually quite green. It's where most of the vykrul live. They're huge people; they look a lot like oversized humans. I never had much to do with them but they are loyal to the ruler of Northrend," she muttered. "They serve the Lich King with pride. I wish I had been more myself when I was there. Perhaps then I would have listened to them or sought them out more to learn more about them."

"If you'd been more yourself," Zerith snorted, "you wouldn't have gone there in the first place."

"Perhaps I can rectify that mistake now," Alayne sighed. "I would like to learn more about them and see if there is a way they could be convinced to join our cause instead of the Lich King's. Oh, there are tuskarr you mentioned earlier, Ger'alın; they look like oversized up-right walruses," she giggled. "They're very independent. For the most part, they kept to themselves. I think they may have some natural resistance to the Plague. Arthas tried several times to compel them into the Scourge. He would occasionally manage to get a few ghosts but he could never turn the tuskarr into the undead the way he can other races."

"That might be of interest to Putress," Callie muttered. "But, I'll hold off saying anything to him myself until after I've seen these creatures," she added, seeing Ger'alın's fists clench.

"You know about the nerubians," Alayne thought aloud. "I think there is one other race of people living there. I never saw them myself. Ber'lon and Aelonius both claimed they spotted them in the distance. I remember them coming in late one night; the necromancers had been worried," she grinned, remembering. Then she grimaced, remembering that night had been the beginning of their separation. "Several of us had been regaining our minds and slipping off. A few were captured and brought back to be either re-turned or killed as traitors. At any rate, Ber'lon and Aelonius came back and reported seeing tauren in Northrend. We thought that perhaps the Horde was preparing to launch an attack. The Lich King set scouts out along the areas Ber'lon and Aelonius reported seeing them but nothing came of it. Then, one afternoon after they had left, I was out practicing the forms with my father. I fell and saw in the snow next to me something that looked like an oversized tauren track. My father thought it was probably just some beast. But, I think, perhaps, there may be other people in Northrend who have kept low, stayed hidden from the Lich King. Perhaps they would be our allies, if we can find them ourselves," she finished in a whisper.

"What else could we find there? Why would the Lich King base his operations there in the north where there were so few humans lived? Is there some power there in Northrend that we may have to contend with?" Zerith wondered. Alayne shrugged. She remembered hearing tales, most filled with flights of fancy, about some sanctums belonging to the dragonflights. She'd paid little heed to such tales when among the Scourge. Now, she wondered if there had been something to them, some reason or power that made Northrend the logical base of operations for the Scourge. She could remember the necromancers muttering over how few living there were to turn to the Lich King's service and how some had to be left alive in order to ensure that the Scourge would survive at all. It had seemed strange to her; that those sworn to the death of all life had thought to allow life to perpetuate itself in front of their faces. Now, she thought back, losing herself in speculation.

Perhaps there is something there. Perhaps there is a power we could learn to tap into. That I could learn to wield. Perhaps there is a reason for the Scourge being in Northrend, something that would compel us to drive them out so that we can take over whatever power or

beings or whatever it is they have usurped and bring it into the service of the Light and life once more.

“And perhaps,” she whispered to herself as she straightened a sheaf of reports, “I’m just dreaming.”

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Callie, Ger’alin, Dar’ja, and Zerith all heaved sighs of relief as the zeppelin tower at Vengeance Landing came into sight. Ger’alin and Zerith stared out of the windows with tears in their eyes, wishing that the airship would speed up the docking process so they could assess the damage to the bones in their hands. Dar’ja was grateful that she would no longer have to listen to the incessant moaning of a woman terrified of flying and Callie reamed an ear with a finger, her head still ringing from the constant yelps Alayne had let out during the long flight north.

“We are never flying anywhere again,” Ger’alin said hoarsely. Alayne moaned in agreement. “Boats are better even if they do take far longer.”

“Then why didn’t you listen to me last week when I said we should book passage on a ship instead of taking the first zeppelin from Undercity?” Zerith asked, a touch of asperity in his voice. Ger’alin shrugged helplessly, knowing that this was as much his fault as anyone else’s. He’d simply forgotten just how terrified of flying his wife truly was.

“She seemed okay in those blasted ziggurats,” he muttered defensively. Zerith snorted and rolled his eyes. The priest helped the paladin lift the woman to her feet and, yelping when he saw the tower itself, quickly reached up and covered her eyes. He felt cloth meet his hand and glanced over to see that Dar’ja had thrown a sack over his sister’s head.

“She’ll do better if she can’t see it,” Dar’ja grinned. “Just like Lucky,” she laughed. Ger’alin gritted his teeth hearing his horse whinny in fear as the handlers led him down the steep stairways. “She was a different person then, sweetheart,” she whispered to Zerith as they made their way to solid ground. “She’s better this way.”

“I know,” the priest whispered back. “We’re on the ground, Alayne. You can stop shaking now.”

“I hate...,” she shivered.

“Flying,” they answered for her. “We know,” Ger’alin said evenly. “Now, can you walk on your own or do I need to keep carrying you?”

“I can walk,” she said primly. Ger’alin set her on her feet and she staggered, catching her balance, and looked around. The high cliffs leading up to the castle she’d seen only in the distance rose up over a green tundra valley. The smell of salt tinged the air and Alayne could feel the grit against her skin as the wind blew in from the sea behind them. The waves made a roaring noise that at first overwhelmed before it faded into the background, the mating calls of the white cranes of the north echoing over the din. Breathing deeply, she exhaled. Not even a hint of the Scourge’s taint survived the cleansing breezes of the Northrend coasts. “Arthas, you can’t even snuff out all life here. Why do you think you can do it everywhere else? And why do we keep letting you convince us you can?” she wondered aloud.

“It’s freezing out here!” Zerith shouted, his ears filled with the ocean’s roar.

“I’m throwing my razor away,” Ger’alin muttered, pulling the scarf Alayne had given him up over his nose. “Woman, how can you stand this? Even Dar’ja’s ready to give in and run inside,” he said, his voice muffled by the thick wool.

“Well, being dead helps,” Callie laughed. Ger’alin glared at her.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” he said.”

“It’s not bad if you’re expecting it,” Alayne answered. “It’s invigorating. I remember dueling with my father in the snows over in Icecrown. The cold makes you realize you’re alive.”

“Oh, is that why you stayed out swimming all night that one time in Zangarmarsh?” Ger’alin grinned, his eyes shining with amusement over the scarf. “Let’s not have a repeat performance right now,” he added quickly, seeing the way Alayne glanced over at the shore. There were icebergs floating off the coasts. “Maybe we could try it again for a second honeymoon after we’ve taken care of more important matters.”

“You’re no fun,” she laughed. Callie wagged her head.

“Enough you two,” the Forsaken said, all business. “We need to go over and meet with the Apothecaries and find out what they need from us over here. The sooner we can help them with their goals, the sooner we can achieve our own personal goals. Though,” she sighed, “even *I* would find that water cold.”

Stepping into the dark stone building, Ger’alin shivered again. Zerith held Dar’ja against him and chaffed her arms. Even Alayne looked as if the chill had finally caught up with her. The paladin managed to swallow a groan of anger when he saw why the others were so cold.

In the middle of the room stood a stoop-shouldered Forsaken. His vestments were ragged though once-fine. In life, he would have been a magi of the higher orders, the raven’s feathers lining his shoulders and back reminiscent of the ones the last Guardian of Tirisfal had used for his own cloaks and mantles. A wooden bird’s beak hid his disfigured face from the others; Callie had told them that the man’s true face was so ravaged that it turned even her stomach. He showed it only to others who had risen after being struck down by the Plague. The living, he had vowed, would never again see his face. “Took you long enough,” he said gruffly without introduction. “We cannot afford to be held up by the failings of the living. You are to report without delay to New Agmand. Agents there will need your help with testing our new weapon against Scourge forces in this region. Only once we are certain that the failure rate is at acceptable levels will we be able to proceed with our plans to launch it against Icecrown. Now, be on your way within the hour or I will tell Garrosh not to weigh me down with your miserable disorder.” Turning on his heel, he stormed further into the building. They heard a door open and slam and grimaced when a noxious odor hit them in the face. The four living elves ran outside to spew from the smell while Callie just hurried her steps.

“Now I see why you dislike him so much,” Alayne managed to croak out. She turned her face to the sea and drew deep breaths, inhaling the clean salt air.

“He’s a royal bastard,” Ger’alin muttered as he wiped his chin. “The sooner we get his nose out of the knot it’s in, the better.”

“We should get going,” Callie sighed. “He is in a foul mood. Anything that smacks of a delay makes him angry and when he’s angry, he’s impossible to deal with. Come on, I think we can probably find this New Agmand without his help. Not that he would bother offering any. Gerry’s right; he’s a royal bastard like that.”

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The dark, spiked towers of New Agmand rose up in the distance as the group made its careful way south from Vengeance Landing. Ger’alin and Tau’re had their heads together, each looking over his shoulder back at the gleaming white marble pillar that rose from a cliff hidden to the west. As they had ridden south, they had seen huge towns, buildings taller than any being they knew of would build peeking over massive walls. Alayne had pointed them out saying they belonged to the vykrul, a gigantic human-like race. Ger’alin had tried to picture what they would look like. The buildings told him his imagination had not been up to

the task. Even Tau're winced when he thought about the size of the creatures they may have to fight.

As they followed the road back west and crossed a bridge that made Alayne yelp with every step her hawkstrider took, everyone came to a slow halt. "What in the nine hells are those?" Ger'alın gaped, staring up a hill.

"Dead vykrul," Alayne answered simply.

"They're huge," Zerith muttered, coming up alongside them. Alayne nodded. "I mean, really huge."

"The reports told us as much as did I," she pointed out.

"Are they all that big?" the priest asked, hoping that these had been enlarged by the Plague that had brought them back to an unnatural semblance of life.

"No," his sister said quietly. "Most are a little bigger."

"Bigger?"

"Yes. Bigger."

The rest of the trek into New Agmand was made in silence. Zerith wondered just how they would fare in battles with beings larger than ogres and possessing human intelligence. His mind raced back to the reports he had read of them. The vykrul possessed magic users as the ogres did. However, ogre magi were rare and were only intelligent compared to other ogres. Casting his thoughts over what little he knew of magic, he wondered if size could contribute to power to a point. Alayne had always claimed that size did not matter; skill, cunning, talent, and study were the determining factors for the strength of magi. Still, something told Zerith that campaigns against the vykrul were something he would want to avoid until he had more time to observe them himself.

The party followed the dirt path down a small slope and into the Forsaken stronghold. The buildings rose up, black spires clawing at the sky and the dark colored stone a rejection of the human origins of their design. A stench of decay hung thick in the air much as it did around Undercity; heavy enough to be noticeable but not so heavy as to be offensive to the more sensitive noses of the living. Throughout the settlement, Forsaken scurried to and fro carrying vials, powders, and other devices common to the Apothecaries. Zerith recognized many of them from the time he had aided the group following his recovery in Tarren Mill. Over to one side of the area, several Forsaken like Callie – not members of the Society but aiding it in their travels – sat grinding herbs into powder. The priest wondered what plants they were using and what properties they might have for healing. Making a note to inquire more about them, the priest turned his attention to one of the Forsaken who was jogging up to the group.

"Ah, finally," the man said, his voice breathy and raspy. "I heard reinforcements were to begin arriving soon. I hope you are merely the first of many. It will take many to do the work we must be about before we can forge on to Icecrown."

"To Icecrown!" some of the other Forsaken nearby shouted as if out of habit.

"Forgive them," the man muttered. "It's something of our battle cry."

"That is perfectly understandable," Ger'alın said evenly. "If it gets the blood heated and helps you fight on, shout whatever you want. 'To Icecrown!' 'For Quel'Thalas!' 'Lok'thar Ogar!' It's all for the same cause."

"Wisely spoken, sin'dorei. It is all for the same cause, no matter the words or the methods."

Ger'alın pondered that for a second, not certain he could agree wholeheartedly. Before he had a chance to speak, the man skittered off, returning with several contraptions that looked like oversized perfume sprayers balanced awkwardly in his arms. "The vykrul to the north of us have been stricken and risen with the very plague that pulled us back to life," he explained quickly. "We believe that we have found a way to modify that plague to kill and

destroy the body so it cannot be raised again. If we deny the Lich King fresh troops – especially fresh vkyrul troops – it will hurt the Scourge greatly while advancing our own side.”

“What do you want us to do?” Zerith asked quietly.

“Simply spray this on the mindless vykrul zombies to our north and report the results back to me.”

“No,” Ger’alin said quickly. “No. We will go there and kill them or see if they can be turned to our side but we’re not going to make them ill just to see if you can sicken the Scourge.”

“You’re misunderstanding, young sin’dorei,” the Forsaken said, grinning in what he must have believed was a reassuring manner. It was not. “This plague is designed to go after only those who have been infected with the Plague of Undeath from the Scourge. So, it will target only the Scourge or those of us who fell, rose, and later regained our own wills. Therefore, I would urge you to keep any followers who are Forsaken away from where you’re spraying this.”

“Still, good steel is enough...”

“No, it’s not,” the Forsaken argued. “Too many have died fighting the Scourge already. If we can prove that this plague will kill them and destroy the body, then all we have to do is figure out a way to taint Icecrown with it. We can cut the head and heart out of the Scourge with one blow without risking any more lives. The stuff in these sprayers,” he continued, lifting them up slightly to demonstrate, “will not harm the living. We’ve tailored it to be safe for you to use. You’re our allies, after all. We just need you to test it for us since it can’t tell the difference between the Forsaken and the Scourge.”

Ger’alin shook his head again, refusing to be part of this. Zerith wiped his hands against his robes, nervous sweat making them sticky. Alayne sighed and reached out to take one of the sprayers. Ger’alin knocked her hands away quickly and glared at her. The Forsaken sighed bitterly. “You will not aid us? You will not fight the Scourge with us?”

“I will,” Alayne said, her voice echoing in the silence. “I will test this new weapon out and report the results to you.”

“No!” Ger’alin growled.

“How else can I fight?” she demanded bitterly. “I cannot use magic. I will not use demons or necromancy. You won’t let me use a sword. What else am I to do? Twiddle my thumbs and pray for the Scourge to vanish? So what if it’s another version of the Plague? It’s one meant to *undo* what the Scourge plague does,” she argued. “It won’t turn us into mindless zombies and it doesn’t make the Scourge our slaves. It’s more like an antidote or an anti-Plague,” she pointed out. “And, it needs to be tested. If it works like they think it will, just think! We could beat the Scourge without having to risk the lives of every last one of our friends and allies. Ger’alin, be reasonable,” she sighed. “I know it offends your sense of honor and combat, but we’re talking about the Scourge here! *The Scourge!*”

“I cannot be part of this,” he sighed, lifting his hands and settling them on her shoulders. “Perhaps you are right and this is not the horror I think it is. Perhaps I’m letting my personal opinions of Putress color my judgement. Still, I cannot be part of this ‘testing’ myself. If the rest of you think this is the right thing to do, I will stand aside and say nothing for now. I will pray that you are right. But, my gut tells me that this is not a good idea and that we should be looking into ways to either break the bond between the vykrul and the Scourge or looking into ways to make these giants our allies. Stranger things have happened, after all. Alayne, I feel this just as strongly as you felt we were making a mistake in attacking the Black Temple,” he sighed.

Alayne wrapped her arms around him and pressed her face to his chest. “We’ll test this only on a few of the vykrul we can confirm to be infected with the Plague. After that, we’ll

leave the rest alone. Perhaps we can use them as a reason to convince the still-living vykrul to join our cause. From what I remember, they are very independent. The idea of any of their kind being enslaved would be offensive to them...unless something has changed or Arthas has found a way to make slavery seem appealing to them," she muttered.

"Go then," he whispered, his lips moving against her hair. "Go then but try to be merciful. And, if you begin to feel as I do, that this is wrong, know that I understand."

Alayne nodded and walked back over to the Forsaken. Taking a sprayer from him, she asked a few questions and then began walking north out of the town. Only a few others from the Disorder of Azeroth accompanied her, much to Ger'alın's gratitude and dismay. Those who had chosen to remain behind took the opportunity to speak with the Apothecaries at length about possible vaccines against the Plague. While the few were out testing the new weapon, several others rode out of the town or walked down the hills below, gathering plants and animals to help test for possible resistances.

"They've heard nothing about it," Zerith muttered to Ger'alın as the two men walked down the hillside, the priest stopping to gather plants every so often. "Putress swore that the Apothecaries were already working on a vaccine yet these have heard nothing of it."

"I know. That Harris nearly broke his own jaw when we mentioned what we were told back in Undercity. 'We've heard nothing about an inoculation program. Just the anti-Scourge weapon. But it is safe. Perfectly safe for the living.' Bah!" Ger'alın spat. "I do not like the Apothecaries any more. They're making my skin crawl."

"I don't like them either. Still, I'm glad we're out here and not over in Borean Tundra."

"Why is that?"

"I want to keep my eye on them," Zerith said, nodding back towards the town, "and, I want to see if the natives here have any thoughts on that number. Provided, of course, we can convince those natives to speak with us instead of killing us."

"I hadn't thought of that," Ger'alın whispered in awe. "All I've been thinking about is how much I'd rather be elsewhere and how these creepy Putress followers make my stomach churn."

"Well, maybe you should listen to Zerith every once in a while and ready between the lines more often," Callie teased, startling both men. The Forsaken and Dar'ja were just coming around the bend in the hill. Dar'ja held a wild rabbit cradled in her arms while Callie was leading a strange cross between an elk and a cow on a rope. "No one likes Putress unless they're as twisted as he is. But, he's smart. And, the sooner he finishes what he's doing, the sooner we can all go back to pretending he doesn't exist. He's not winning himself any friends with the attitude he's got right now."

"What are those for?" Ger'alın asked, wanting to change the subject for once.

"We found these wandering near the vykrul who have the Plague. I thought I saw Alayne over there as well but I decided to keep my distance. Harris said the stuff she's carrying doesn't know the difference between undead and undead," Callie shrugged. "The way we figure it is this; if these animals can survive living near a town that makes anything I can recall from my days in the Scourge look pure and clean, then perhaps they've got some trait that makes it harder for them to catch the Plague. Or, maybe it's the plants they live on," she added, gesturing towards the bundle in Zerith's arms. "Either way, it's something to do while we wait. And, if the Apothecaries can't make use of it, well...Alayne's still a good cook," she laughed. Ger'alın grunted. He didn't want to think about what Alayne might be doing right now.

A pall fell over the group as they continued their survey of the immediate vicinity. To the north, they could see the tall buildings that indicated where the vykrul test subjects lived. Ger'alın squinted and shaded his eyes against the harsh northern sun and stared beyond that

town. He thought he could see thick smoke rising in the northwest, beyond the town. To the south, they could all smell and feel the clean salt breezes of the great sea. Zerith and Dar'ja muttered about going over to check the lay of the land in that direction while Callie mentioned returning to New Agamand before the Apothecaries, caught up in Putress's haste, sent out search parties for them. Ger'alain stayed rooted to the spot where he was, surveying the land to the north and idly going over possible motives he could offer the natives of Northrend for joining their cause. The taunka that Alayne had mentioned once in passing crept into his mind again. Then, all thought vanished as he saw his wife cresting the hill before him, weariness and desolation weighing her down so that she almost crawled. Jogging over to her, his heart in his throat, he reached down to lift her up, words of forgiveness and comfort on his lips. Her next words dashed them from his tongue and left him nearly gagging with shared distress.

"You were right," she muttered. "And they were wrong."

"Does the spray not work?" he asked gingerly.

"It kills the Scourge," she whispered. "It kills them fairly quickly and painlessly, all things considered. But, it does not merely destroy the body. They...melted," she shuddered. "I've seen and dealt death in many forms, some of them horrific, but that...I wouldn't wish that on anyone. I made it through one test before I turned back. I can't make a report on that. I wish I had listened to you and not gone."

"I wish that as well," he said breathlessly, chafing her arms and back. "That's terrible. How could anyone think up something like that?"

"It gets worse. As we were sneaking back out, another vykrul came, this one coming from the north where there's a wildfire raging. He was most certainly not infected with the Plague. He saw his brother's remains there and ran to them. When he touched the...the...what was left there in a puddle," she said, swallowing hard, "his arm...began to melt. His screams...I've never heard anything like them. I've never caused anything like that with my spells or my sword. I shouted to one of the others; they were all frozen as I was. I think one of them must have felt the way I did because all I saw was an arrow fly down and land in that poor vykrul's throat. A clean mercy kill. After that, I sent the others back to New Agamand and told them to be careful with the sprayers. If it can do that to beings as tough and stoic as the vykrul, I don't want to imagine what it could do to us."

"But they said it was perfectly safe for the living," Ger'alain whispered, still in shock.

"Perhaps they thought it was," she replied, "but it's not. It's not and I think you are right and we should leave the Apothecaries to their own devices."

"At the very least, let's go tell them no more testing," he said, heat beginning to rise in his voice. "And, I'm certain that we can figure out a way to defeat Arthas without having to resort to these kinds of despicable tactics. But first, let's go get a breath of fresh air from the sea down there," he added, pointing to where Zerith and Dar'ja stood off, their silhouettes stark against the light blue sky in the distance. Alayne nodded and followed her husband, praying that something could cleanse her of the horror she felt at what she had just done and the helplessness she'd felt at being unable to cast a merciful spell on the suffering being.

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Callie felt queasy listening to what Alayne was describing. "What did the Apothecaries say about what happened to the living one?" she asked, butterflies fluttering furiously in her midsection.

Alayne sighed and shrugged. "He said he thought it was perfectly safe. That he was following the formula developed by Putress exactly. I believe him; he *did* think it was safe for us. *He* didn't lie to us."

“Putress,” Callie sighed. “Either he’s wrong or he’s insane. I’m siding with Gerry from here on out; let Putress help himself. I’ve never liked him or his methods but for him to put any of my friends in danger just to advance the battle against the Scourge...”

“It’s okay,” Ger’alin whispered in her ear. “He’s probably not evil. Just desperate and short-sighted.”

“I was going to say ‘a sick, sadistic son of a bitch’ but your description probably qualifies as well,” the Forsaken said dryly. “Still, I’m with Gerry on this: let’s stay away from the Apothecaries.”

“That’s all well and good,” Zerith sighed, “but, if we aren’t aiding the Apothecaries anymore, what are we going to do over here in Howling Fjord?”

“We could go visit the tuskarr,” Dar’ja suggested. “I saw a few down on the beach below New Agamand. All our reports said they could be valuable allies. At the very least, we could learn more about them and about the situation in other parts of Northrend. That information could be useful to Garrosh when we do make it over to Borean Tundra to help him launch his campaign against the nerubians.”

“I think we should see if there’s any way we can learn more about the vykrul over here. Most of them live in this area,” Alayne pointed out. “If we could keep them out of the fight later on by doing something now, it could prove invaluable.”

“Honestly,” Ger’alin sighed, “I think we should pack it up and head over to Borean Tundra right now. The Forsaken here are not going to be pleased to hear that we have no intention of going along with them anymore. So, unless we can make friends with the tuskarr or the vykruls – not likely on the last ones,” he said, seeing Alayne snort derisively, “we don’t really *have* a reason to stay here.”

“That’s true,” Callie muttered, nodding. “Perhaps we should just head over to where Garrosh is. I know we’re not an army,” she added, looking at Alayne, “but we can fight. Helping Garrosh beats doing nothing.”

“I still say we should do something about the vykrul while we’re here,” Alayne argued.

“Leave them to the Apothecaries. Maybe the one will kill out the other,” Callie suggested gaily. “I’m kidding. What could we do, though?”

“We could observe them. We could see if they receive messengers from Icecrown. We could try to learn more about them and why exactly they’re serving the Scourge. The more we know, the more we’ll be able to determine a better course of action.”

“Alayne wants to spy on giants,” Zerith said, cutting everyone off. “Ger’alin wants to go bash nerubians on the other side of the continent. Dar’ja wants to meet walrus-men. Should I go out and ask all of the others for their suggestions as well while we’re at it? The only thing we can agree on is that we won’t be helping Putress anymore.”

“Let’s spy on the vykrul,” Dar’ja said quickly, knowing that Zerith was getting frustrated with their inability to come to a clear decision. The way the groups had been split on what to do and whom to aid first had been wearing on him for weeks now. Better to put aside her own suggestion and do something – anything – to get them on a united track.

“Alayne’s right. The more we can learn about them, the more we can do to stop them later on.” The others nodded slowly, seeing both of Dar’ja’s points. “So, where do we start?” she asked, turning back to Alayne.

“Nearby is as good a place as any,” the other woman said reasonably. “We could go back over the bridge beyond the bone yard and see what goes on in that settlement. It’s also close to the castle they have so perhaps we can learn more about what is going on inside there as well.”

“I think I may scout the northern part of this region a bit more,” Ger’alin suggested. “It’s all well and good to be spying on the vykrul to learn more about them. Still, it would be

useful for us to see if there is anything else we should do around here or any threats lurking around to the north that the Apothecaries may have ‘forgotten’ to mention,” he added the last words with a bite.

“Take Tau’re with you,” Zerith suggested. “Two pairs of eyes see more than one.”

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Tau’re strode ahead of Ger’alin, his snout pressed to the wind as he sought out scents that would warn them of danger coming. He shook his head in frustration. Northrend was so polluted by the stench of the Scourge that filtering it out to find anything else was difficult. The tauren gagged and spat, wishing he could scrub the filthy taste out of his mouth. “It’s bad, isn’t it?” Ger’alin asked, sounding distracted.

“It’s horrible,” Tau’re grunted. “But, at least I think they’re far ahead of us. We should be clear to scout this area.”

“This is what I thought Northrend would be like,” Ger’alin sighed as he and the tauren ranged through the snow and ice. “I think this lake is frozen solid.”

“The waterfall certainly is,” Tau’re observed, staring at the water that had been flash-frozen in motion. “I almost don’t want to climb up there to see beyond. If it’s this bad here, it must be worse beyond.”

“No telling until we see for ourselves,” Ger’alin replied mildly, climbing up the steep incline. “Oh my. Tau’re, you are not going to believe this!” he shouted down.

“Is it worse?”

“Get up here! Why didn’t she tell us about this?”

Tau’re climbed up the hill to stand next to the blood elf paladin. His jaw dropped as he gazed down a sheer drop to a green, verdant forest below. The trees reminded him of the stunted, twisted ones he’d seen in the Plaguelands and Tirisfal. Instead of carrying leaf, they bore sharp needles that jabbed. “How...we’re in the mountains?” the warrior said blankly.

“I’m glad I was staring at the ground as I climbed,” Ger’alin fumed, his anger keeping him warm. “Otherwise, that last step really would have been my last. Why didn’t Alayne bother to mention that Howling Fjord has a vast mountain plateau? That kind of information is useful.”

“I think she’s had a lot on her mind of late,” Tau’re offered.

“I know she has!” Ger’alin shouted. Taking himself in hand, he forced himself back to calmness. “I’m sorry for shouting,” he muttered. “But between what’s been going on this past year and what’s going on now, I could probably use a good duel.”

“Is that a challenge?” Tau’re grinned, flexing his arms. “I’ve been waiting for a while to have the chance to toss you around again.”

“Toss me around?” Ger’alin laughed. “Old cow, I think I’ll have steak tonight.”

Before the pair could begin, a sharp, piercing cry rang out over the hills. Ger’alin whirled around, looking for the source of the sound. Tau’re unsheathed his swords, standing ready to face the challenge. For long moments, the pair stood poised on their toes, waiting, listening. The cry was repeated, this time further to the west. Glancing at each other, the two men began making their way towards the source, torn between gladness that the cries continued often enough to allow them to track but wary of what would cause a person to shriek in that manner. In grim silence, they tracked, stopping only when they saw the cause of the horrible screaming.

“She could be...,” Tau’re gasped.

“A taunka,” Ger’alin breathed. “Alayne wasn’t sure if they were real or not.”

“Whatever she is, she’s in trouble,” Tau’re muttered, gripping his swords so tightly his gauntlets creaked. “That vykrul...what is he doing to her?”

"I'm not sure," Ger'alın whispered. "But let's put an end to it."

Without another word, the two ran in. The only sound was the sound of their feet pounding against the ground as they rushed in. The hulking vykrul had his back to them. By the time he heard their footfalls over the shrieks of his victim, it was too late. Tau're's swords were buried in its back and Ger'alın's hammer smashed against its skull. The paladin made a desperate grab for the corpse's shoulder to try to keep him from falling on the strange woman. Tau're was there first, the vykrul collapsing on the tauren. He heaved the corpse away while Ger'alın knelt and, reaching out to the Light, poured healing energies into the nearly unconscious woman.

"I thank you," the taunka woman said, her voice low and deep. "But I wanted him to take me."

"We heard you screaming clear across the Fjord," Ger'alın said in surprise. "You wanted him to take you?"

"They are holding many of my people hostage in these forests," she explained. "I had hoped to learn where they are being held."

"My lady," Ger'alın said politely, "to be captured and possibly killed in an attempt to learn what has happened to other captives is hardly a plan."

"It's insanity," Tau're said bluntly.

"Who are you?" she asked, seeming to see Tau're for the first time. "You could be kindred."

"I am a tauren," Tau're explained.

"I am a blood elf," Ger'alın added. The taunka nodded slowly but without understanding.

"I see," she said simply. "Whatever you are, you are brave indeed to attack a vykrul. They are savage creatures, willing slaves to the Lich King," she spat. "My greatest fear is that they have...that my people..."

"If they have been turned," Ger'alın said, speaking the words she feared to hear, "we will send them on to the next life quickly and painlessly if possible. Now, where do you believe the vykrul might be holding your people? Or, better yet, come back with us. Our friends would be glad to be of help in this matter."

"There is no time," the taunka said urgently. "Come with me."

She gave them no chance to argue their points further as she stood and strode off the direction the vykrul had been carrying her. Tau're shrugged and wrenched his swords out of the creature's back and Ger'alın shook the gore off his hammer. Loping after her, they walked further around the curve of the mountains. When she stopped suddenly, the men both ran into her outstretched arms. Following her gaze upward, both of them began cursing softly in their native tongues.

"Gjalerbron," she whispered. "The vykrul's stronghold."

An immense city of white marble rose up out of the face of the mountain. Ger'alın blinked and squinted his green eyes, trying to figure out where the snow ended and the structures began. High archways marked the entries into the buildings, doorways that seemed ridiculously large until one thought about the size of those who called this city home. Up the paved ramps that led into the city, Ger'alın could see vykrul men and women standing guard over a doorway that led into the mountain. Letting his mind drift back to what he had seen earlier over the frozen waterfall, the blood elf gasped. If the stronghold had been bored down into the heart of the mountains, there was no telling how many of the giants they would face. It would take an army as large as the Scourge itself to stand any chance of defeating them. It would probably take the combined forces of the Horde and the Alliance in Northrend just to hold them penned in. And this strange taunka female just expected to walk in there and bring her captive people out? She made Alayne seem sane!

The taunka stepped out of the shade of the mountain and lifted her snout high into the wind coming down from the heights above. A smile split her muzzle. “We’re in luck. They’re alive.”

Ger’alin nodded. The vykrul were very much alive. “They’re alive enough to kill us thousands of times over,” he gasped, cold fingers of dread clutching his heart like a vice.

“Not them,” the taunka said, startled. “My people. I can smell them. Most of them. They’re being held outside, thank the ancestors. That’s one small mercy in the midst of the vykruls’ cruelty,” she spat.

“Mercy? More like a miracle. These vykrul must be stupid to keep their prisoners outside instead of locking them within the mountain,” Tau’re muttered, his words stinging.

“The vykrul would not ‘pollute’ their halls with outsiders,” the taunka retorted, her voice heated with anger. “Can that thing you call a nose not smell the fires burning hot?” she continued. “They burn fires near where my people are held. They think to make them sweat. Then, when the sun goes down, the fires will go out. No doubt the vykrul have been feasting on our meat these past days. Though why they chose now of all times to come after us is a mystery that not even our sage can penetrate.”

Ger’alin felt a tendril of dread creep along his spine. “They have not always done so?”

“Normally they leave us alone and we leave them alone unless we run across each other in our hunting. My people do not bend easily to the Scourge or their plague. But, since the strange ones have landed on the coast to the west, the vykrul have not ceased their raids, their captures, and their murders.”

Tau’re sighed heavily. He shared a glance with Ger’alin. *It is our fault, the glance said. It is because our peoples have begun arriving. The Lich King knows and is doing his best to destroy any allies we might find here.*

Ger’alin nodded in grim agreement. “We’ll help you rescue them,” he said to the taunka woman. “What do you think would be the best plan?”

The woman blinked and shrugged. Ger’alin ground his teeth in frustration. “You have no plan? What was your plan? Just get captured and hope you could figure some way out?”

“The ancestors would...”

“Counting on them to get you out of trouble isn’t a plan,” Ger’alin cut in harshly. “It’s suicide. Tau’re,” he said, turning to the tauren. “Go back and get the others. Tell them to bring white cloaks if they can. When they get here, we’ll see what we can learn before nightfall.”

Tau’re nodded and began jogging back the way they had come while Ger’alin turned to the taunka. “Tell me everything you know about this area,” he said, his face utterly ruthless. “If you want to have any chance of saving your people, tell me everything.”

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Tam’ara was surprised to find herself spilling out everything she knew about Gjalerborn. The strange, small creature whose glowing green eyes seared into her brain had an air about him that would not be denied. He reminded her of her grandfather though he could not be as ancient as that. Something about his impatient manner spoke of a youth struggling into manhood. She made a note to try to learn more about his kind and about the kind of the one who had been with him. Perhaps the sage would be able to learn from the ancestors if he knew what questions to ask.

Once she trailed off, realizing that she was just repeating things she’d already said, she took her time studying the stranger. He wore a pensive frown, now, a dimple forming in the strange protrusion beneath his puffy lips. His eyes were clouded with thought and his hairless forehead wrinkled with concentration. Occasionally, he would mutter to himself in a language she did not understand. After a while, he squatted down and began jabbing his finger in the

snow, his mutterings increasing as he drew lines, arrows, and circles. “How much longer until sundown?” he asked suddenly, glancing up from his work.

“A few hours. Less, perhaps,” she answered quickly, glancing at the sun and trying to judge its distance left to travel. So close to the mountain, it was hard to tell from the glare of the snow.

“Dusk,” he said, then trailed off in his own language again. Tam’ara left him to his own devices, wondering if she had just walked into a trap by not killing the man earlier. It wasn’t a trap the vykrul would use; against the ‘lesser races,’ the giants didn’t believe in using aught other than force. It was, however, the kind of scheme the Lich King would lay. Offer her salvation for her people, even using his own followers as offerings, and before she or any others knew it, they would be snared deeply by the Scourge.

A gentle rustle snapped her from her thoughts. For a moment, she shook her head ruefully, amazed that the mere sound of leaves in the wind could give her fright. When she heard a throat clear behind her and felt a warm, strong hand on her forearm, she nearly jumped out of her skin. Turning around, she saw another man, one much like the one squatting before her. Next to him stood a woman of the same people, her green eyes stormy. Tam’ara took a step back, feeling the cold, solid rock of the mountain behind her, and prepared herself for the trap she feared she was in.

“We came as quickly as we could,” the new man said, smiling pleasantly but his face serious. “We will do our best to free your people and help you find a place of safety. We may have to travel across the world to find it,” he muttered, “but we will not leave you until it’s been found.”

Tam’ara relaxed a bit. These strange people seemed honorable enough. Yet, the most deadly poison often tasted sweeter than honey though it turned to bitter gall in the stomach. She nodded slowly; if they could help her free her people from the vykrul, she would leave it to the sage to decide whether or not they were friends or foes. For now, she needed to believe with all of her heart that they were friends. Friends who would help her. Friends who would not lead her into a trap that would have her become a Scourge slave.

The two men began talking swiftly in their strange, melodic language. The woman with them stood staring at Tam’ara. The taunka was discomfited by the intense gaze but did her best to reveal nothing. “I wasn’t sure if you were real or not,” the woman said at last, her words flat. Tam’ara blinked. “I’d seen sign of your people before now but...”

“When did you see sign of us?” Tam’ara asked, startled. They’d been careful to avoid the strangers coming from other lands. She was probably the first taunka to break the silence and bridge the distance that the tribal fathers had decided was the best course of action. With the Scourge stirring again, the vykrul raiding like they never had in living memory, and strange creatures appearing all over the coasts, the taunka elders had decreed that all of their people were to hunker down, hide, and wait until more could be learned before doing anything – including talking with the strangers who had appeared on the shores.

“Long ago,” the woman sighed, looking irritated at herself.

“You’re Scourge!” Tam’ara accused. The woman’s eyes widened as the taunka glanced around for something she could use as a weapon. This was a trap!

“She was but she’s not anymore,” the man who had been with her all afternoon said, his gaze holding the taunka trapped in place the way amber held insects. “She was tricked into serving them for a time. She returned to us and fights them, just as your people do. She lived here long enough to hear rumors of you. I’d heard of you from her and from reports from our scouts before as well. Now, come here and tell me what you think of this plan and whether or not it will work. You know your people and the area around here best. No sense in us going with a plan that winds up leaving everyone vulnerable because of your ignorance. Not when you’re standing right here,” he finished firmly, his tone and his stance brooking no arguments.

He squatted back down and motioned for her to bend lower so she could see what he had sketched on the ground. With a few quick sentences, he outlined the plan he'd come up with. Tam'ara nodded and added a few suggestions of her own. He thought them over in silence and then went over the plan again. This time, the other man nodded and hurried off. He was gone a few moments, returning with the white blankets that were central to the plan. The strangers divided themselves into groups with one large group making its way back down the hills and slopes, planning to hide in the forests to the east until the group going into Gjalerbron came out with the rescued taunka. Those who were sneaking in wrapped themselves in the blankets and began lowering themselves to the ground. Tam'ara kept close to the front, between the priest and the paladin with the cousin-warrior close behind her. The glaring woman, Alayne, had been sent off with the others after some swiftly exchanged harsh words from the two men of her kind, Zerith and Ger'alín.

Tam'ara held her breath as they crawled up the hills through the cold, wet snow. She felt chilled even though the effort of climbing made her sweat. She was surprised that the warriors could move so quietly in their metal armor. Soon, though, just as dusk was deepening to night, they reached the cusp of the hill. The group stopped, laying still long enough for Ger'alín and Zerith to orient themselves. Only a handful of vykrul stood watch over the prisoners now. Most of the others had gone inside, deep into the mountain caves where it was warmer. Still, those few vykrul would be enough to sound an alarm if they spotted the group of rescuers coming.

Several of the smaller, lighter members of the group shrugged out of their white blankets. Letting the night fade around them and moving with the grace of hunting cats, they made their way forward. Ger'alín and Zerith watched as their scouts stealthily advanced. If all went according to plan, the vykrul would be dead before they knew what was coming for them. If the alarm was sounded, the rest of the group was close enough to hold the reinforcements from arriving long enough for the taunka to escape. Ger'alín watched as, one by one, the vykrul were killed, the last few making it only a few steps into the tunnel before spells or arrows took them down. Everyone froze, making no more movement than a mouse when the hawk flew overhead. Tensed, waiting for the alarm to be sounded, they waited. When, after long minutes, no help came for the fallen vykrul, the others threw off their cloaks and ran to the cages.

Tam'ara beat most of them to the cages and began tugging at the locks. The taunka inside were huddled together, nearly piled on top of each other, trying to stay warm in the frigid northern twilight. Ger'alín and the others quickly pulled out the tools that let them pry open the locks and whispered the plan to the rest of the taunka. The strange tauren-like creatures nodded in understanding and gathered themselves together quietly. Forsaking stealth for speed, Ger'alín set them all running down the sheer mountain slope, praying they would make the forest before any change of guards came to replace the vykrul.

Just as they reached the edge of the wooded area, Ger'alín heard horns up the mountain. Hanging back, he waited, watching from the dark shadows of the forests, as the vykrul poured out of the keep and began following the clear tracks through the snow. Zerith and Tau're hung back with him while the others ran on ahead to alert the reserve.

"Will she go?" Zerith wondered.

"No, she won't. But at least she stands a better chance of surviving the fight in the forest than she would have had we been caught up there," Ger'alín answered, his tone far too reasonable. Zerith wanted to hit him. Alayne could not consciously cast a spell and she was far too weak and out-of-shape to survive tangling in melee combat. When she did manage to pull off a spell, it left her out cold and the last thing he wanted to worry about was having to find her in the dead of night in Northrend. She could freeze to death before they found her. Yet, Ger'alín had a point. The woman was not going to go along with what was best for her.

Sighing, he waited until the vykrul were almost down the hill before unleashing a blinding blaze of Light. Ger'alın followed with his own. The vykrul, their eyes flashing with the after-effects of the stunning glare, halted their advance long enough for the two sin'dorei to make a quick retreat back to their fellows.

Zerith and Ger'alın almost missed the groups hidden in the underbrush as they jogged past. Only an irritated "hhst!" from the dark shrubs caught them in time. Zerith ducked behind a tree, leaving Ger'alın standing in the middle of a small clearing. The vykrul would be able to follow their trail into the forest and here is where the real fight would take place.

"Come on, you overgrown sons of bitches!" Ger'alın shouted, cupping a hand to his mouth to help the sound carry. "Get a move on! I've got plans for the rest of the evening, dogs!"

Zerith winced as the ground shook. The vykrul were making their way into the trap. Ger'alın continued to taunt them, letting them follow the sound of his voice. Just as the first wave crashed into the clearing, Ger'alın threw himself into them and the battle was unleashed.

Spells flew through the night air. Fire crackled and the vykrul screamed where it seared and scorched them. The air hummed with arcane power and Zerith concentrated on casting his own illumination spells, the healers working to help the Disorder of Azeroth see clearly in the twilight confusion. Fighters surrounded the vykrul, corralling them and cutting them down while the magi worked their deadly magic. Out of the corner of his eye, Zerith could see his sister standing beside a tree, her hands clenched into fists and her jaws held together so tightly he wondered if her teeth would crack. Occasionally, she would close her eyes and Zerith could feel her concentrate, feel her will herself to cast a spell. She would begin shaking her head and muttering furiously beneath her breath. Nothing would happen. She would open her eyes and glare at the battle. Then she would close them again and repeat the cycle. With each repetition, her shoulders sagged more and more and he thought he could see tears glisten down her face.

As the sounds of combat grew quiet and were replaced with the tired groans of the lightly injured, Zerith walked over to his sister. Placing a gentle hand on her shoulder, he grimaced when she jerked away. Dashing the tears from her face, she turned on her heel and strode off towards where the taunka would be waiting.

"I can at least tell them it's time to move," she said bitterly. "I can at least be that useful."

Zerith watched her stalk off wondering if she would ever be herself again. Turning around, he jumped when he saw Ger'alın standing next to him, the paladin's heart etched on his face. "She couldn't do anything," Ger'alın asked, his question more a statement than anything else. Zerith nodded slowly. "This is going to kill her," Ger'alın said softly. "Between doing something monstrous and then being unable to do something benevolent, she's going to tear herself in two."

"She wouldn't stay back," Zerith whispered.

"No, but she can't go forward either," Ger'alın said grimly. Slamming his mace into the loop at his waist, the paladin strode after the one-time warlock and the priest wondered if things would ever be the same again.

"We'd better get going," Callie said softly, startling Zerith nearly out of his skin. Was everyone going to sneak up on him now? "We need to find some place safe to rest and the taunka said they knew a place up ahead. Let's get going. I'm sure things will seem clearer in the morning."

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“Clearer in the morning,” Zerith growled as he gulped down a bowl of stew. “I’m going to wring her neck.”

The camp the taunka had led them to was hidden deep in the cleft of the mountains. The path boring down into the sod was well-hidden. The group had missed it several times stumbling around in the night. Once they had made their way through the tunnel leading down into a small aerie-like valley, they had been welcomed by the other taunka. Spreading out into the caves that ran alongside the river that created the gorge, the weary Disorder of Azeroth had let itself fall asleep among the taunka. Zerith had wanted to peak in on his sister and Ger’alin but could not bring himself to wake them when he finally found where they had hidden themselves. Alayne had looked as if she’d been run through a gauntlet and Ger’alin’s face wore a look of grim determination even in his sleep. Zerith did not look forward to dealing with the man when he finally woke up and learned what had happened.

“WHERE IS SHE?”

Zerith winced and began counting to thirty.

“WOMAN, I WILL WRING YOUR NECK FOR THIS! GET ME OUT OF HERE!”

Finishing the last bit by skipping by fives, Zerith began jogging towards the small cleft where his sister and her husband had slept. Ger’alin sat, his eyes blazing with rage as he glared out of the hole in the sheer cliff-side. His muscular arms shivered as he tensed and flexed them, obviously straining against bindings. His chest heaved as he grunted and lurched, trying to tear the cloth keeping his hands bound behind his back apart.

“WHERE IS SHE?” he roared at Zerith once his mind recognized what his eyes were seeing.

“She left before I was awake,” the priest said quickly, stepping into the small space and squatting down behind the paladin. “Callie said she wished she’d known what Alayne was up to. She spoke to one of the taunka and then ducked back in here. After that, she and the taunka went off somewhere. Callie tried to follow them but got lost. She came back here and asked the others,” he paused jerking his chin towards the opening to indicate he meant the taunka, “about where they would have gone. All she got was a bunch of riddles for answers which is all they’ve given me. I think she’s safe, though. The one she left with was their sage.”

“So why did she truss me up like this?” Ger’alin fumed. “I’m going to tie her to the ceiling by her ankles!”

“That you’ll have to ask her. The taunka have been skittish all morning ever since it got around that she’s gone off somewhere with one of them. They keep telling us we must let her face it alone and that to attempt to intrude would be deadly. To be honest, they sound a lot like Geyah did when you were screaming and calling out under the influence of that potion she brewed for you.”

“I’m going to chain her to my leg. I’m going to bundle her up in a trunk and send it back to Mir’el with instructions for him to shove stale mush through the airholes and not open it until I’m back. I’m going to find some magi who knows the geas spell and get him to lay one on her that she’ll never vanish without telling me where she’s off to again. I’m going to learn to go without sleep the rest of my life so this doesn’t happen again,” Ger’alin swore, his voice soft and deadly. “Does she have no clue what it does to me to not know where she is when I wake up? And did she learn nothing from me about how to bind someone without cutting off the circulation?” he growled. “Help me out here and I’ll let you have the first go at her when we find her.”

“Stay still,” Zerith muttered. Studying the knots, he sighed. Ger’alin had wrenched them tighter in his struggles to free himself. Looking around, he crawled over to the saddlebags, opened a flap, dug through until he found a small knife, and then cut the bindings. Ger’alin clapped his hands in front of him and flexed his arms, elbows, and wrists to get the

blood flowing again. Grabbing the balled up shirt he'd discarded the night before, he slipped it over his head and pulled on his boots, intending to be out of the area and finding his wife before another five minutes passed. As the pair stepped out of the small cave, they were met by taunka guards.

The taunka held Callie by one of her arms. The Forsaken woman was squirming to try to get out of their implacable grasp. They stared down at the two sin'dorei, neither looking pleased at this turn of events. "This one said she intended to hunt down the Sage," the taunka said slowly.

"She didn't mean it like that, I'm sure," Zerith said quickly.

"He has taken the other to the Altar," the second guard said evenly. "They cannot be disturbed while they make the journey."

"I don't care where they're going or what they're doing," Ger'alın huffed angrily, "I'm going to go after them and you'll have to kill me to stop me."

Zerith groaned.

The taunka blinked.

Ger'alın stood his ground.

Callie continued to try to wriggle free.

Finally, one of the guards snorted. "She didn't tie you up nearly as tightly as you needed."

Ger'alın blinked. The taunka continued. "She spoke with the Sage last night while she wandered, unable to sleep. At first light, when the sun was strong enough to light the path up the mountain to the Altar, they left. He agreed to help her in remembrance of a debt owed to one like her. And, in hope of the future, he said. They cannot be disturbed. No warrior who makes the trek to the Altar can be accompanied by anyone other than the Sage who will guide him through the rites."

Ger'alın took a step forward and one of the taunka grabbed him. A scuffle broke out and Zerith sank to the ground, covering his ears and closing his eyes and planning to strangle Alayne the minute he saw her. When he felt a prodding on his arm, he glanced up to see Callie's sparkling eyes laughing down at him. Looking over cautiously to where Ger'alın and the taunka guards had been fighting, he saw the three of them sitting on the ground, laughing so hard that tears rolled down their faces and Ger'alın was wheezing. Zerith shook his head; there were some things in life he would never understand.

"It's true," one of the taunka managed to gasp out, "that we're not allowed to interfere with the rites once they've begun. However, there isn't a father or brother in this tribe who hasn't spied on his fellows while they were taking them. We'll take you to see her but you must let her face it on her own. The Sage says she is close and that the rites will help her heal."

"If they do that," Ger'alın said breathlessly, the tears shining in his eyes not entirely from amusement, "then I will never be able to pay you back. Come on, Zerith," he said, taking a deep breath, "they said they'll take you and me up to this Altar."

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Alayne glanced around uneasily. She still felt guilty about tying Ger'alın up but she couldn't afford to have him barging in on her while she did whatever it was these taunka said she needed to do in order to cleanse herself. Sage Mistwalker gripped her shoulder reassuringly and nodded when she glanced over at him with fear and doubt in her eyes. The cave was dark but warm. Still, she shivered as she stared into the fire before her. She stared at the dancing flames until her eyes watered and ran down her face. Then, with a resigned sigh, she turned back around to tell the Sage that his efforts had been wasted.

The cave vanished before her eyes and was replaced with a once-sumptuous room. Wall-hangings covered dark stone walls and the carpets spoke of a room where wealth had once been on display. The hangings were tattered and faded and the carpets scuffed and ragged. The only furnishings in the room that were intact were bookshelves and rough wooden tables. She'd been in this room twice before. Once when she was looking desperately for an answer and once when she had found something that terrified her to this day. Turning, she saw it again.

Ger'alín was sitting in a small cage, his legs pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them with his face buried on his knees. He shook and shivered in withdrawal. From where she stood, she could see the sweat trickling down his tightly clenched arms and hands. Her heart lurched sickeningly in her chest as she watched him go through the agonizing pains.

You felt so certain after seeing this, a voice whispered to her. Your conviction drove you to stop this, to make him whole and well. Why did you desire to do that, though?

"It doesn't matter," she told herself, recognizing the voice as her own. "What I did was wrong. I hurt them more than I ever imagined."

Here you cannot lie to yourself as you have done for so much of your life. Here there can be no excuses, no justifications, nothing to hide behind. There can also be no weapons with which you can punish yourself for acts that cross from darkness into light, a different voice whispered, this one deep and sure of itself. This is the testing ground.

"I've done this already," she growled to herself. "A million times. I've played this out again and again."

The scene shifted, leaving her gasping for air. She could feel Ger'alín's hands around her throat, feel his rage washing over her for lying to him. Beneath that, she could feel a thread of fear, of hatred directed at himself for what he was doing. She could hear his own voice screaming at him to stop. Before she could do anything, the scene shifted again. This time, she saw him suffering, tormenting himself, willing himself to fade into the grave if it would undo what he had done. "No," she whispered to him, "no you didn't drive me away! I left to help you. I left because I thought it was the only way. I was wrong..."

*No, her internal voice said, you were **right**. Had you stayed, he would have died and you know it. **That** is what scares you so that you wake up screaming in the night. **That** is why you burned your books and your wands. Because you know that you were **right**; you know that the path you walked was the only one that could have brought salvation. Yet, you refuse to let yourself truly see it, to let yourself look beyond your own actions. You hide behind self-imposed penances. You must stop hiding and learn to see, to accept that which you cannot accept... Until you begin to accept it, you will wander alone, blind and bereft.*

"The time has come," Sage Mistwalker said slowly, bringing Alayne out of the trance.

"But I...I was just," she said sounding like a kitten being forced out of a restful slumber. She shook her head as if to clear it but the tendrils of the trance would not fade. She willed herself to fall back under but could not. She felt helplessly frustrated. She'd been so close to understanding something about...

"Come with me," the sage said softly, nodding to himself. The veteran of many a spirit-walk, he led her out of the cave and into the blinding sunlight with ease. She followed along, stumbling as the ground rose beneath her feet, blinded by the reflection of the midday sun against the snow. Up and up the hill they climbed until she stood before a simple black-stone altar. The sage left her kneeling before it, the trance beginning to wash back over her.

Ger'alín and Zerith found the path leading up the mountain that the guards had spoken of. Following its twists and curves, they soon reached the overlook above the altar. Just as they got there and began wondering where Alayne was, they heard a taunka speaking with her lower on the other path. Settling down, they hid themselves as best they could.

"At least this time she and Dar'ja aren't wrestling," Zerith muttered. "And she doesn't have any weapons."

"I still say we lost out on a pile of gold by not talking them into doing that in public," Ger'alín whispered. "I'm going to wring her neck when she's done here."

"What is she saying? Who is she talking to? The sage is gone," Zerith wondered, hearing her voice drift on the wind.

"Be quiet and maybe we'll find out," Ger'alín growled, wondering the same. The two men settled down to watch and listen.

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After the Sage left her kneeling on the snow before the Altar, the sky began to darken. Alayne shuddered with relief; the harsh, unrelenting sun had made her eyes feel as if they were set on fire. As the white faded to grey, she sighed in contentment. All of the doubt, all of the anger, all of the torment she'd been feeling for months slowly seeped out of her, absorbed by the dark stone of the altar. She felt almost light again, feeling the self-imposed burdens and punishments slip off her shoulders, eaten by the altar. Closing her eyes, she reached out and nearly wept for joy. She could touch the arcane currents in the air around her. Almost in disbelief, she wove a simple spell that called forth a small, flickering flame over the palm of her hand.

A snarl from the altar drew her attention away from the first arcane spell she'd cast since childhood. She blanched, seeing herself rise from the altar's flat top, every inch of her doppelganger a twisted reflection of herself.

"You won't get rid of me so easily," the shadow snarled. "I've been a part of you for far too long. You think a little meditation and a magical rock can pull me out of your soul? I'm your very essence; you are nothing without me!"

Alayne stepped back, studying the other woman. Now that the initial shock of her appearance was over, Alayne noticed that the more the woman threatened and blustered, the more she seemed to be trying to convince herself of the truth of her words. The trembling that Alayne had taken for anger was really fear. Her doppelganger was afraid of her. But why?

"I won't leave," the other woman raged. "Without me, you'll never get them to trust you again. You'll never be accepted again. They'll never forgive you! You need me!"

"Who are you?" she wondered.

"I'm you!"

Alayne let herself reach out towards the other, tendrils of her spirit touching the shadow gently. The gnawing doubts, the self-condemnation, and the need to punish herself began to seep back into her. Blinking, she drew back, shaking her head. "You are going to destroy me," she whispered.

"I would not!" the other protested. "You'll destroy us both without me! We've done so many things that can't be forgiven. Together, we can overcome them."

"Forgiveness is a gift freely given that cannot be earned or bought," Alayne quoted, recalling something that she'd overheard many times. Now she felt confident that it was indeed true.

"Fools! It must be bought and paid for with blood and tears!" the other scoffed. "Do you remember what we did?"

Images assaulted Alayne. She saw Kil'jaeden rising out of the Sunwell. She heard and felt the woman Anveena sacrificing herself so that Alayne would have the power to shove Kil'jaeden back into the abyss. She saw Ger'alín leaping in after her and recalled the horrible torment they shared for the few moments they were in the demon lord's grasp. Then, she saw the suffering that had been etched on his face over the past year as he watched her turn away any overtures of forgiveness, as she pushed away those who would bridge the chasm she had created. She saw the lines of concern on Zerith's forehead, chisled by her refusal to let herself rest and recover her strength. She saw the exasperation and fear that Callie and Dar'ja had felt whenever she pushed herself too far and refused any assistance. She looked down the path she had been walking and saw her death, broken on Arthas's throne while those she loved most watched helplessly. Killed because she would not reach out to them.

"You're right," Alayne whispered soundlessly. "I would destroy us."

The other one began to sigh in triumph.

"I would if I let you back in. I can't hide behind you any longer," Alayne continued firmly. "I've done it for far too long. It's cost me too much. Yes, it will be hard," she admitted, "and yes, I do have much to make up for. But, without you to drag me down, I have a chance."

Lifting her hand and spreading her fingers apart, she whispered words she'd heard her mother and Jez'ral use before. The currents flowed around her, caressing her, then through her, blasting her shadow with pure light. The shadow faded with a howl and the darkness lifted. Alayne blinked and lifted her chin, smiling into the sun. She felt better than she had in years. She felt almost like a child again, clean, refreshed, and safe. Staring at her raised hand, she stretched out and pulled currents to her again, this time letting sparks dance over her upturned palm. "It's back," she laughed softly. "I've found it again."

Like a child, she danced for joy around the altar, feeling lighter than she had in years. She didn't want to leave this area, didn't want to risk feeling weighted down with worries again. Yet, after a while, she knew that she must return to the others to let them know that she had come back to herself. She smiled to herself, a sad and secret smile, as she thought about how much she had worried them over the past few years. She couldn't undo what had been done but she could promise to live each coming day with an eye towards smudging the image she'd created of herself. Nodding to herself, she walked over to the edge of the mountain. Closing her eyes, she felt the tendrils of the wind. Then, with her eyes still closed, she took a few steps backwards and, running, threw herself into the empty space, drifting down the mountain on the wings of magic.