

Alayne grimaced as she hung up the last pair of pants. "How was I supposed to know you were up there watching me?" she growled to an absent Ger'alain. "I should have known you would have chewed through that gag and roused the whole camp," she muttered.

"Talking to yourself?" Callie teased. "Isn't that one of the first signs that you've been working too much magic?"

The return of her abilities had spread through the Disorder of Azeroth like wildfire in a prairie. At first, she'd been overjoyed at the celebration and oddly eager to join in, to let herself be a part of them again. It was strange; the habits of the past year were beginning to fade away but she still felt awkward around the others and still looked for hints of suspicion or mistrust. Other than a promise whispered in an undertone to tie her to Ger'alain's arm if she ever ran off again, no matter the reason, delivered by a grinning Tau're, everyone else had acted as if she had just returned from a long trip.

"Come on," Callie said lightly, masking her concern. "It's your own fault you had to watch his britches. Throwing yourself off a mountain? That's dramatic even by your standards. I'm sure that since no one else is watching, though, you could cheat a little and get them drier much more quickly."

"No one else watching?" Alayne laughed, an edge of bitterness in her voice. "If I cast a spell, half the camp applauds and the other half starts shouting for a round of drinks."

"They're happy that you've finally come back to us. Enjoy it while you can," Callie shrugged dismissively. "Soon it'll be 'Alayne, you didn't make the fire hot enough.' 'Alayne, could you remember not to make the hilt of my sword cold when you do that frost spell on the blade?' 'Alayne,'" she whined in mockery. The sin'dorei woman laughed softly.

"You talk as if I had been gone," she said as she dried her hands on one of the towels. "I've been there the whole time."

"You were and you weren't," Callie pointed out diplomatically. "When we first came back to Nagrand before the trial, you were there and it was almost like you were going to be fine. Then came the trial and you started acting almost as oddly as you were when you were going mad. Why do you do that?"

"I don't know why I did that," Alayne admitted as she glanced around. Seeing no one looking for her for the moment, she settled down on the ground near the fire, weary from a day of triumph. "There's some part of me that just...craves that darkness, that sense of isolation and punishment. As if it's what I deserve."

"But that's gone now, right? For good, this time."

"I don't think it's entirely gone," Alayne sighed. "It's part of who I am. But, it's weaker. Whatever that ritual did, it helped me see more clearly and see beyond myself to what I was doing to everyone around me."

"And that's why we're saying it's like you've come back," Callie grinned. "Because instead of pushing us away and ignoring anything we do for you, you work with us again. Even if it is washing Ger'alain's drawers."

"Well, it is my fault they got dirty," Alayne muttered. "Even if I didn't know they were watching me."

"Let's go get something to eat," Callie suggested. "I've not seen you eat much today. Of course, every time you've tried, someone's been after you to cast a spell."

"I'm more tired than I am hungry," Alayne said softly, "but, I could use something to eat," she added quickly seeing the exasperated look on her friend's face.

The two women left the laundry area and walked through the camp. Alayne nodded and smiled shyly and awkwardly at all of the greetings she received on the short trip. Callie wagged her head silently, amused by the goings-on, and hoping that the high spirits would last. They would need all of the warm feelings they could find in Northrend. The continent had a way of wearing a person down. She'd been terrified that Alayne was suffering from the

beginnings of that already. Relieved that it had been something as normal as a person being far too hard on themselves, Callie could relax her vigil a bit. She wished, not for the first time, that the Apothecaries had spent more time studying something to help ease the stay in Northrend and less time devoting themselves solely to the destruction of the Scourge.

“Are they clean, woman?” Ger’alin asked loudly from the other side of the fire as Callie and Alayne walked up. “No supper until they are.”

“Oh can it,” Callie snapped lightly. “They’re clean and it’s your own fault. I’ve never heard of a grown man who wasn’t housebroken. Have you?” she asked Dar’ja, including Alayne in the banter by glancing at the elf woman’s face.

“It’s fairly rare,” Zerith said seriously. “But then, I’ve always had my doubts about him being truly tame. Alayne, you haven’t been doing a very good job over the last year, you know. He’s gotten absolutely scraggly.”

“I told you I was going to throw my razor away and I did,” Ger’alin laughed, rubbing his fingers over the two-days’ growth on his face.

“You look like you haven’t washed your face in a week,” Dar’ja muttered. “And Zerith looks like he’s been eating raw tomatoes.”

“I do not!” the priest protested, throwing his arms around his wife’s waist and rubbing his cheek against hers. She shoved him away affectionately, rubbing her cheek where his stubble had rasped her and shaking her head.

A shadow fell over the group and they looked over to see Sage Mistwalker smiling at them. The smile slipped from his face when he saw them set their amusement aside and meet his gaze evenly. He sighed, shook his head and tugged on his braided beard, and nodded.

“You are well?” he asked.

“I’m doing much better,” Alayne replied.

“What can we do to repay you?” Ger’alin asked, his tone all business.

“I helped her because it is what I do,” the sage returned. “Let there be no talk of payment between us.”

“But there is still something we can do,” Zerith said evenly. “Something is troubling you.”

“The vykrul,” the sage sighed heavily. “I have spoken with those who were captured. The vykrul queen has met with the Lich King. Her husband, Ymiron, is to be roused from his long slumber. If that happens, the vykrul will cease warring amongst themselves and be united under his fist. They will push us out of our lands. They will slaughter our friends, the tuskarr, and they will help the Scourge spread.”

“The vykrul fight amongst themselves?” Zerith asked, his eyebrows raised attentively as he filed the information away for future use. “We know little of them,” he said in response to the startled look from the sage.

“They live for little else other than battle. In Icecrown, they hold great contests of strength and battle. The winners are gifted with women, food, and drink. The losers are raised back up as Scourge, forced to serve the ones who defeated them.”

“Ymiron,” Zerith prompted. “Who is he?”

“He is the long-sought king of the vykrul. Long ago, he rose from the ranks of the Dragonflayer clan and united the vykrul of all clans under his iron fist. When the Lich King first landed in Northrend and began spreading his contagion, Ymiron called his vykrul to him. He told them that the new power of the North held the keys to eternal life and that the vykrul would rule the entire world if they bent knee to him. A short time later, Ymiron disappeared. The rest of the peoples of Northrend believed he had been killed and raised back up. Our prisoners say that his wife, Angerboda, hid him away in Gjalerborn, deep within the heart of the icy mountain. He has slept many years and, if he awakens now, he will still be a man in the prime of his life – strong and able to command nearly fanatical loyalty from all the vykrul.

He's a legend to them," the sage explained. "They say that when he takes the throne of Utgarde Pinnacle, the vykrul will rule over the North and will begin their conquest of the soft lands to the south."

"He's in Gjalerborn?" Zerith asked, cutting to the heart of the story.

"It would seem so."

"It is late," the priest sighed, frustrated. He wished that the sage had come to him earlier in the day with this tale. Had he known hours ago, he could have had the entire Disorder resting for a long night to come. As it was, too many were still celebrating Alayne's return to normal, too keyed up to be able to rest.

"We've fought tired before," Ger'alın said, his tone reasonable.

"Not against those," Zerith pointed out. Ger'alın shrugged. "I'll think about it," Zerith sighed.

"Well, while you're thinking, I'll be rallying the others," Ger'alın replied. "He gave me back the woman I married," the sin'dorei said in his native tongue when Zerith glared at him. "I think killing a few giants even if I'd rather be napping isn't too much to ask."

Zerith shook his head ruefully as he watched Ger'alın lope off. They'd been in Northrend only two days and the paladin's impatient streak was showing. The priest wondered what had happened to the calm, stolid, almost boringly predictable Ger'alın he'd come to rely on over the past year. One glance at his sister gave him the answer. If the pair had been calm this past year, they were about to give 'rash' a new definition.

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Dusk had fallen once more and a tired but still alert Disorder of Azeroth crept quietly up the snowy hills. As they drew near the entrance to the mountain caves, they could see that the vykrul were still on alert from the night before. Several guards stood sentinel at the entrance and a regular patrol walked the lengthy corridor. Watching it pass several times, Ger'alın estimated that it was a long way down into the mountain. He just hoped that there were not guards stationed at regular intervals. While fighting in a narrow corridor would give them a slight advantage because of their size, the vykrul were the ones who knew how far back it went and who could have an army waiting for them at the end.

"What do you think?" Zerith asked quietly as he slipped up beside Ger'alın.

"Draw them out," the paladin said without hesitation.

"Do you really think we can hold them at the door?"

"I think we don't really have any choice until they fall back on themselves."

"I don't like you using yourself as bait for this trap."

"It will be fine. Besides, this way, I can be up front easily to see when we can begin pushing inwards and, if anything happens to me, Alayne can take care of it," he quipped. Zerith rolled his eyes but said nothing. "It's not getting any warmer out here. I'm going," Ger'alın sighed. Standing up, he walked up towards the door, his steps quickening into a jog as he roared, pulling the guards away from their posts.

Spells began raining down on them as they reached Ger'alın. The other fighters ran forward, using their bodies to block the reinforcements from getting out very far, forcing them to fight in the doorway and then forcing the ones behind them to climb over the bodies of their own dead. Alayne felt the tingle of pure arcane magic flowing through her as she sent simple bolts of flame, much like those her imp had used, at the vykrul. She wished desperately now that she had not burned those books. They would have been useful in helping her regain her former skill. Still, her spells were effective enough and she felt at peace in the midst of battle. Even when she saw Ger'alın nearly being overwhelmed she was able to keep her head and throw them back away from him, snaring them with the very ice of the frigid

northern air to keep them from her husband. Instead of blinding her with fury and fear, her battle rage cleared her thoughts and helped her to focus. She found herself smiling with joy as she realized how much better it was to feel in control than at the mercy of forces which sought her destruction.

Zerith marveled at the change in his sister. He'd always thought she was a natural spell caster but now he could see that she had always struggled to pull off her warlock spells. Where fel magic had come to her like swimming, arcane came to her like breathing.

Ger'alın risked a glance inside the corridor, forcing his way through the vykrul to see how many more they stood to face. Seeing only a handful left, he motioned for the others in the front lines to smash through, leaping over the giant corpses themselves and slaying the last ones in the hallway. The magi and healers followed behind, the strongest of them surging to the front, spells ready on their lips as the Disorder of Azeroth made its way through empty, echoing mountain corridors.

"What are these?" Zerith asked, seeing statues of vykrul men lining the walls. "Some kind of memorials?"

Ger'alın squinted his eyes and stared at them, trying to figure out why the vykrul would have carved such life-like representations of themselves into the walls. It seemed far too civilized a gesture for such a savage and war-loving race. When several of the Forsaken gasped and Alayne yelped in shock, he turned his questioning gaze on them.

"These are not statues," one of the Forsaken muttered.

"They are not, Diami," Alayne agreed, picking up her pace to join Ger'alın and Zerith. "They're vykrul."

Ger'alın jumped back from the wall and pulled his shield around, ready for the fight of his life. They were completely surrounded by the vykrul in the walls and, in such close quarters, would not long survive the fight. "It was a trap," the paladin muttered bitterly.

"They aren't going to attack you, Ger'alın," Diami laughed, shaking her head. "They feel...empty. Like demons who have been banished yet have their shells trapped on this plane," she explained.

"It's like they're hibernating?" Callie asked, hoping that would clarify the matter if it didn't twist it beyond any hope of understanding.

"Something like that, I think," Alayne agreed as she studied the vykrul in the wall. "There's a strong spell shielding them. I think it would keep them from getting out as much as it keeps us from getting in."

"Why would anyone hibernate in a wall?"

"I don't know. Perhaps the taunka would."

"I've just had the most horrible thought," Ger'alın groaned. "What if one of these is Ymiron?" he asked, flinging his hand back up the direction they had come.

"I don't think they'd put their king this close to the entrance of the mountain," Zerith pointed out. "It wouldn't be very wise and, while we can all agree that the vykrul are strange, they're not stupid."

"Anyone who allies with the Scourge is stupid by definition," Diami muttered before she strode off further down the hallway, her gaze sweeping along, watching for watchers.

"Whether they're stupid for that or not," Ger'alın muttered dryly, "they wouldn't keep their king within easy reach. Let's press on."

The group made their way slowly down the corridor, everyone watching the walls warily as if expecting an attack from all sides at any moment. Alayne lagged behind often enough that Ger'alın watched her with concern. She was focusing on the walls, trying to determine what kind of spell held the vykrul in their strange suspended animation. She could detect blends of necromantic magic and something else. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on. It was like arcane magic yet it was something completely different.

Her ears perked forward as she detected something she did recognize. Two things. “Arthas,” she whispered, her face turning pale and her lips green. Sweat popped out on her forehead and she slumped against the wall.

“Alayne?” Zerith asked, worry on his face. Ger’alin was jogging back towards the middle of the group, leaving Tau’re to watch the front lines for signs that any vykrul were coming to meet them.

“I can feel him,” she said breathlessly, swallowing hard. “Arthas is nearby.”

“Then let’s move quickly and make an end of him,” Ger’alin muttered. Before Alayne could say another word, he sprang into action, running back to the front and whispering quick commands. The force began moving more quickly but no less cautiously, pressing further into the vykrul’s stronghold. Alayne began trembling as they drew closer to where she could sense Arthas and a strong surge of arcane magic as if someone were maintaining a portal.

The group came to a chamber guarded by several pairs of vykrul honor guards, their armor shining, reflecting the flames of the torches that lit the hallway. The guards eyed them impassively as they lifted their axes and strode quickly to meet the group. Ger’alin motioned for the front lines to hold the vykrul if they could. Something was odd. Surely the giants realized that even if they did take a few of the invaders out, it would be a futile fight. Would others be coming to aid them? Parting the front lines to let the vykrul fall through the ranks so they could be pinned in by the Disorder of Azeorth, Ger’alin kept a careful eye on the door the guards had been posted by.

Inside the room, vykrul knelt around an altar raised up on a dias. A lone woman, her red hair streaming down her back and her muscular arms flowing in the motions of magic, stood by the altar. Dark strands surrounded one vykrul, then another, connecting them to the figure laying prone on the altar. A look of intense concentration was etched on the woman’s face. One by one, the vykrul kneeling keeled over, dead. The dark strands glowed as the victims died and the figure laying on the altar became more life-like and less like a statue.

“Double your efforts!” the woman shouted, her deep voice carrying through the stone room and echoing up the hallway. The guards outside intensified their struggle to destroy the invaders. Only the most nimble were able to dodge their blows entirely and Ger’alin could hear the crunching that told him there would be healing to be done. Casting a gaze back over his shoulder, he was relieved to see that those who had been knocked down by the vykrul were for the most part being dragged away before they could be killed or crushed.

“Kill them!” Ger’alin hissed. “They’re a delaying tactic!”

Spells filled the hallway and within seconds the pair was dead. Zerith and Dar’ja took over seeing to the wounded while the rest followed Ger’alin into the room with the altar. The kneeling vykrul ignored them entirely, seemingly blind and deaf to everything going on around them. The woman by the altar glared at them with pure hatred. With a flash of the eye, the other vykrul writhed and then collapsed. “The ritual proceeds too slowly!” she shouted. “More sacrifices are needed! You,” she sneered, glaring at the Disorder of Azeroth, “Give me your souls that I might slay the enemy!” she screamed.

Alayne, Ger’alin, Callie, and the other veterans of the battle for the Black Temple gasped when a sudden wind picked up. Colors streaked past them too quickly to be seen clearly yet anyone who had been there when Alayne had called forth the souls of the slain to attack Illidan knew what they were. The spirits of the vykrul killed this night and more were flying to the commands of the fire-crowned woman at the altar.

Ger’alin and Tau’re ran in, blades and hammer flashing quicker than thought as they struck at the woman. They nearly fell over themselves when, without any movement, she was simply several feet further away. Her arms began to flow again, this time calling forth a ball of fire. The pair leapt to either side when she threw it, hoping that those behind them would have the time and sense to duck.

Alayne reached out and ripped the heart out of the spell before it had a chance to land. The woman stared at her in shock but quickly began readying another. Alayne began casting her own and sensed the magic welling and being released from those around her. Ger'alin and Tau're ran at the woman from either side, not giving her a chance to have more than one target to focus her spell upon. The spells flung at her bounced off, shattering on a shield woven around her. More and more souls flew through the air, merging into the man on the altar until he groaned and began to sit up. "Attack the altar!" Alayne shouted.

"No!" the woman screamed, terror and rage twisting her face. Spells began landing on her body as she flung her shield around the figure on the altar. She growled and began swatting at the bolts as if trying to bat away flies. "You will not stop my work here! My husband-king will awaken!" she shrieked when Tau're's blades bit deep in her side and back and Ger'alin's hammer landed flush against her skull, knocking the malevolent life out of her eyes.

The figure on the altar continued to try to orient himself, glancing around in confusion as if waking from a long slumber. His movements were slow but purposeful. When his gaze fell on the body of the woman, his face went livid. Glaring at the two men standing over her, he began to reach for the massive sword he'd had laying on his chest. Pushing himself away from the bier, he growled and roared like a mindless beast.

Just then the portal Alayne had sensed earlier flew open and the Lich King appeared. Where he had been before now, she did not know. The entire focus of the room shifted to him as he stepped through, his dead-black plate soaking in the light from the torches and giving none back in return. His blazing blue eyes landed on the woman's corpse and then returned to the man who now bowed before him, shaking with unreleased rage and tension.

"Attack!" Alayne and Ger'alin shouted, throwing themselves and their spells at the Lich King. The others began to do likewise but were flung back. When Alayne managed to lift her head, she could see that she had been thrown nearly halfway across the room. She struggled to her feet, seeing the others around staggering up on their own and setting themselves for another attack. The vykrul man continued to bow before Arthas while the leader of the Scourge studied him.

"Not yet, Ymiron," the Lich King said in response to some question or request the vykrul had made of him. "I have other plans for you. You will serve me better in Utgarde Pinnacle. And, if these insects survive to find you again, you will get the chance to avenge your wife."

With a flash of magic, Ymiron vanished. "You struggle like flies trapped in amber," the man who had once been a paladin taunted. "In the end, you will serve me. You will have no choice. She will lead you to my very doorstep," he laughed, pointing at Alayne. "I will be watching and waiting, future servants," he said as he vanished.

"He's gone," Alayne said, sensing his presence in the stronghold no longer.

"Why couldn't we hit him?" Ger'alin fumed. "He was right here, defenseless, and we couldn't even lay a finger on him!"

"He's a tough nut to crack, Gerry," Callie muttered as she began helping those who had not yet struggled to their feet back up. "He's less than human, more the Scourge, and tougher than we imagined. I remember, now, when he used to pop in like that before. That wasn't really him. Oh, it felt like him," she shivered, sharing a glance with Alayne that said she and every Forsaken could remember the feel of their former Master's presence. "It looked like him and it sounded like him. But, he wasn't really here. It was some kind of projection. He probably has all kinds of nasty spells in store for anyone who attacks even his image, though."

"So, he wasn't here?" Ger'alin asked.

“Yes and no,” Alayne answered. “He was and he wasn’t. I can’t get any clearer than she was,” she said, gesturing to Callie. “At any rate, staying here won’t do us any good. If he comes back, he could decide to wake up all the vykrul lining the hallways and then we really would be in trouble.”

“So that was Ymiron,” Tau’re said softly to Ger’alin. The paladin nodded and began making his way back into the hallway to see if his strength was needed with healing the wounded. “Tam’ara will be pleased to know that he’s not all that large,” the tauren muttered to himself. “He’s not so large that he can’t be taken down. Tam’ara will be pleased.”

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“You’re crazy!” the taunka woman gasped when Tau’re told her his plan. “What does Ger’alin say about this?”

“I’m sure he’ll find it an ideal solution to a thorny problem,” Tau’re replied.

“I’m sure that if he has half the brains I thought you had, little cousin, he’ll think nothing of the sort. Storming Utgarde Pinnacle? The high seat of the vykrul rulers? With Ymiron seated on the throne? You’re beyond mad.”

“What would you do then, my lady?” Tau’re asked, his tone overly polite. Tam’ara glared at him suspiciously. She still had trouble making out the expressions and tones of these tauren and Tau’re was the worst of the lot as far as she was concerned.

“I would gather my people together and hide,” she said slowly, speaking as if to one of inadequate intelligence. Tau’re snorted and shook his head angrily. “We’ve survived by hiding before!” she protested.

“You won’t survive by hiding forever,” he snarled.

“What are you two arguing about?” Ger’alin asked, walking up behind Tau’re. “We can hear you both growling halfway across the camp.”

“He wants to attack Utgarde Pinnacle,” Tam’ara sneered. “He wants to get himself killed.”

“Vykrul fall as easily as demons,” Ger’alin said evenly. Tam’ara’s eyes bulged. “We are going to attack them. We have no choice. We’re just not going to do it *right now*,” he added when it looked as if she were about to choke on the words rising up in her throat.

“But...” Tau’re protested.

“But nothing,” Ger’alin cut in. “If we try to attack that fortress with what we have now, they’ll crush us. The best we could do is pin them in and that trick would only work until another group of vykrul took exception to us besieging their king and decided to crack us like a nut between a hammer and an anvil. I’ve sent Callie over to Borean Tundra. The tuskarr offer you safe passage into Dragonblight where you can join more of your people,” Ger’alin said, turning to the taunka. “Sage Mistwalker agrees that this is the best course of action, for now.”

Tam’ara smiled smugly as if to say she had won this round before she walked off, her hooves hardly touching the ground. “We will, however,” Ger’alin continued as if he had never paused, “be leaving a force behind to keep an eye on the vykrul. If they make any move to leave Utgarde Pinnacle or if Ymiron decides to make a grand tour, that force will have to, of course, take care of the immediate problem.”

“And who will you leave in charge of this force?” Tau’re asked. Ger’alin’s grin was the only answer he needed.

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Tam'ara tried to hold her anger on a tight leash as she watched the impassive blood elf saunter by. To think that he would say one thing and do another right under her snout! He'd been so bland when she came to him in shock and rage, demanding to know about this force staying behind to watch over the vykrul. She'd nearly gone blind with anger when he told her, quite calmly, that Tau're was going to be in charge of it. "Tau're's never tangled with a vykrul," she muttered to herself. When she'd told Ger'alín that he'd merely lifted those eyebrows of his and pointed towards Gjalerbron.

True, he had a point. But still, the sensible thing to do was to leave the vykrul to their own devices and try to hide until the Scourge went dormant once more. Several times the Scourge had gone quiet, retreating back into the black citadel in Icecrown. Surely they would again. This time was no different. Or was it?

When Ger'alín passed in front of her again, she glared at him coldly. He took it in stride and bowed to her politely. Ceasing his pacing, he stood at the rail, looking out over the ice-dotted sea while the ship made its way to Dragonblight. "We'll be at Icemist Village soon," he said, his back to her. "I'm sure you'll feel safer there."

"What will you be doing, then?" she asked.

"Pressing on against the Scourge. We have our own plans, Tam'ara. If running and hiding is all you're interested in doing, then by all means do it. Just stay out of our way."

"Don't be so hard on the young one," Sage Mistwalker sighed, walking over to Ger'alín. "She is young and she has seen the warrior who would have been her life-mate slain by the vykrul in the past months." Ger'alín turned, glancing at the taunka out of the corner of his eye and mentally subtracted a few decades from the age he'd assigned to her. "Once we reach Icemist and I speak with the tribe there, I'm sure that you'll find all of them eager to provide information about the nerubians. While there is little to be said about them, we know as much as anyone. They've long been a problem to our cousins in Dragonblight."

"Any help you can provide us will be most welcome," Ger'alín said. "I'll do my best to see that your people are safe."

"The ancestors will watch over us. But, your eyes are most welcome as well," the sage added quickly when he saw the frustrated look on the blood elf's face. Nodding, he walked over to another part of the boat and hoped that the others would come up soon. He'd had to leave the closed in room before he was as sick as the dark-haired blood elf woman.

A few moments later, Alayne walked out of the room and whispered something to Ger'alín. From the way he smiled, it was a private joke between them. The sage watched as the woman leaned up against the man and he put his arm around her. She had changed much since the healing ritual. Sage Mistwalker prayed that the magic that temporarily banished the struggle she carried within her would give her time to come to terms with the causes of that turmoil. Thus far, she'd done well, rebuilding bridges she had burned and being accepted back by her comrades. Still, something niggled at the back of his mind. Something told him that her journey was not ending; that it was just beginning.

The boat shook for a moment before the sage realized they had reached their destination. Small tuskarr climbed and leapt about, shouting orders about securing rigging, lowering a docking ramp, and tying off beams. The other two elves emerged from within the ship, the woman looking decidedly green and the priest looking grateful that the trip was over. The woman groaned every time the water lapped against the boat and the man was quick to hasten her down the ramp and onto the solid dock. Out of the corner of his eye, the sage could see Ger'alín and Alayne watching the entire scene, amusement shining in their green eyes.

"Not so funny when the shoe's on your foot, is it, Dar'ja?" Ger'alín called out, his tone sounding like friendly banter.

Dar'ja hissed at him and the priest glared over his shoulder, his angry expression begging for Ger'alín to shut his mouth before the priest came back onboard the boat and shut it for him. Ger'alín muttered something to Alayne and the pair descended, sweeping down the ramp. Ger'alín lifted Dar'ja up off the ground and carried her, kicking and shouting, off the dock and into an inn. Alayne had jogged on ahead, shouting something about a hot bath and some kind of tea. The priest stood in shock, watching them, before he shook his head and grinned sheepishly and began trotting after them. The sage was the last to leave the ship, seeing that all of his people disembarked politely and offering his gratitude to the helpful tuskarr. Their goodwill was one of the few things the taunka had to count on.

"I hope we have not brought the vykruł down on you, brother," he said to the tuskarr captian.

"Their nets will catch nothing if they come after us seeking you. Without us to keep the shores free of ice, they would starve to death."

"Ancestors watch over you and your people, brother," Sage Mistwalker said with a smile.

"May your nets always be full, brother Mistwalker. I'll bring over one more load of your people tonight before the darkness grows too thick for Bertie here to see," he said, patting the massive tortoise who constituted the ship. "Our new friends don't realize she's alive, do they?"

"Their eyes will be open to many of the wonders of our land soon, brother," Mistwalker said softly as he patted the tortoise. "I had better see about getting my people settled for tonight. We will bring you half the furs we take this season and a share of our meat in repayment of this debt."

"I'll pass that along to my chieftain but I'm sure he'll say what I say. There is no debt. You saved many of our younglings from the summer fever a few years back. You are our brothers in truth."

"Then let brothers help brothers," Mistwalker said calmly. "Send your chieftain my regards."

Walking down the dock, he strode over to the chieftain's hut to offer his greetings. When he entered, he tensed, sensing the gravity in the air. "Sage Mistwalker," the chieftain of the tuskarr in Dragonblight said, his liquid eyes sad and his mustaches drooping. "We have grave news."

"The vykruł?" Mistwalker gasped.

"No. The nerubians," the chieftain sighed. "They attacked Icemist Village. They also attacked our people near the lake. The blue dragons have also returned and are killing many. I know you fled your homes hoping to find safety here but we are planning to flee. The new ones, the ones you brought with you," he explained, "have set up a strong hold in Borean Tundra. We would ask you to ask them to take us in there."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," a foreign voice said. The sage and the chieftain turned to stare at the door. "My apologies for eavesdropping," Zerith said formally, "but we came to introduce ourselves and thank you for your hospitality."

Ger'alín had no such compunctions. "The nerubians have attacked Icemist? You're being attacked by dragons?" he asked pointedly of the tuskarr tribal leader.

"Elder Ko'nani," Sage Mistwalker said, turning to the door, "this is Ger'alín and Zerith. They arrived recently with the other new ones, the Scourge-who-aren't. They've been of great help to my people."

The tuskarr chieftain nodded and studied the two strangers. He hadn't seen many of their kind before; the green-skinned ones were more common in Borean Tundra. "Be welcome to our fires. May they keep the ice away."

“We thank you for your hospitality,” Zerith said in return. “Is there anything we can do to help? We number among us many warriors and magi. If we can be of assistance, let us know.”

Ger’alin managed to keep himself from glaring at the priest. They had already promised to help the Horde clear out the nerubians. If the taunka were having problems with the spiders, then clearing them out would help those people as well. But to delay that task to help out these tuskarr who seemed to be getting along fine for now? That would cause a great deal of anger on sides they couldn’t afford to lose after angering the Apothecaries as much as they had.

“If you want to help us, then help our brothers the taunka,” the chieftain said clearly. “When they cannot bring us meat from inland to trade, we suffer. Their suffering is our suffering and any aid given to them is aid given to us.”

“I’m certain that will be no problem at all,” Ger’alin said quickly. Zerith huffed but kept silent. “Is there a safe way from here to Borean Tundra?”

“We can take you along the coast but you’d have to battle your way ashore,” the tuskarr offered. “The vykrul sailors hold much of the beach in Borean. When the new ones, the green-skins, break through, the vykrul return to close in the breach.”

“What about over land?”

“If you can sneak past the nerubians,” the chieftain shrugged. “But some other new ones, like you but different,” he said, pointing directly at the elves, “have set up a camp south of the entrance to Azjol-Nerub. If they are friends of yours, perhaps you can pass through their lands. So far, all they’ve done is hide behind walls and send out patrols on giant tigers.”

“Sounds like night elves,” Zerith said softly, stifling a groan. They’d had enough problems with night elves over the past year. “I think we can persuade them to let us pass,” he said loud enough for the others to hear. “We’ll set out in the morning to meet with our friends in Borean Tundra. I’m certain that in a few days, we’ll be planning to push the nerubians back and help you reclaim your village.”

The men continued talking quietly for a while longer, discussing the terrain, sharing what they knew about the nerubians and the area around their established borders. Zerith and Ger’alin explained a bit about the “new ones” and the “green skins,” each hoping they were making the first gestures towards what could be a formidable alliance in the north. Ger’alin noticed that when he began talking about the tauren and the Mag’har, Sage Mistwalker’s entire expression changed, going from one of polite interest to intense curiosity. The paladin noted that down for future reference. Once they were finished with their discussions, he and Zerith headed back to the inn.

“First boats and now caves,” Zerith groaned light-heartedly. “Dar’ja’s going to hate it up here.”

“Building things under ground makes it easier to keep warm.”

The priest muttered something about keeping warm that Ger’alin decided to ignore. For now. “I assume you’ll want to be the one to ride over to Borean Tundra in the morning,” Zerith asked.

“I’ll take Tam’ara and Alayne with me.”

“Tam’ara? She wants to kill you.”

“She wants to beat me,” Ger’alin corrected. “But showing her that there is nowhere to hide might cool her temper a bit. Though how anyone could think running and hiding from the Scourge is a viable method of survival is beyond me.”

“She’s not much of a warrior,” Zerith pointed out diplomatically. “Most of the women you know don’t have the whole ‘home and hearth’ tendency.”

“My wife is a good cook,” Ger’alin said defensively.

“A good cook who will sear anyone who endangers those she loves,” Zerith amended. “Not exactly a house-keeping woman.”

“True enough. I wonder,” he trailed off.

“Wonder what?”

“The taunka.”

“What about them?”

“They’re fine warriors. They’ve retreated from the Scourge to fall back to more easily defended positions. They’d make a great addition to the Horde.”

“Take it up with Garrosh when you see him,” Zerith suggested. “But maybe you should find out first if they even want to join the Horde. It’s brought us a lot of benefits but it’s not without its costs.”

“Sometimes the benefits outweigh the costs,” Ger’alin muttered, recalling that his people’s hard-won entry into the Horde, facilitated by the very man he spoke with now and by his own wife, had cost them any chance of peace with their former allies and had broken traditions that he only now was beginning to learn had even existed.

“Sometimes they do. But speak with them before you run off to tell Garrosh about them,” Zerith cautioned.

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“Let me see if I have this right,” Tam’ara said, sounding as if she were putting together pieces of a puzzle. “You all belong to this group called the Horde. You, Tau’re, Zerith, her,” she said, pointing to Alayne, “and those Forsaken?”

“Think of it like a big tribe where many clans are welcome,” Alayne suggested helpfully.

“I know what an alliance is,” Tam’ara snorted. “The taunka tribes and the tuskarr have had a union of trade and peace for many years now. The vykrul also band together beyond their own clans. But why would you not band together with the others? This Alliance?”

“That is a long story that starts and ends with ‘because they don’t want to and it’s not as if we have a terrible lot in common with people who decided to try to kill us all in the last war,’” Ger’alin said pleasantly enough. “Now, no, I don’t dislike all humans or all members of the Alliance. I did grow up among them.”

“As did I,” Alayne added.

“But they turned on us in our hour of need and when we sought help elsewhere, they cast us out. There’s bad blood there and the best we can hope for is that they’ll leave us alone if we leave them alone.”

“But we’re going right through an area they claim as their own,” Tam’ara pointed out.

“Yes, and we’re carrying cloths to indicate we are not there to attack. We’re also doing our best to show that we’re not on reconnaissance. Just passing straight through to somewhere else,” Ger’alin explained.

“Not that they always honor such signs,” Alayne muttered bitterly, remembering a day long ago when she’d thought she would lose Zerith.

“How did your people come to join this Horde if they were in the Alliance?”

“We were betrayed,” Ger’alin said absently, wondering if, by some miracle, they were going to pass this camp unnoticed. “Our leader at the time had all of his forces taken away from him by the Alliance general. He was then told to defend himself against the Scourge with a few sticks and whatever spells he could pull off before he was exhausted. Some allies came from a different source and helped him to survive. The general was angry; we were all supposed to be killed by the Scourge. He wound up throwing every elf he could find in prison to be executed. They escaped and eventually rallied our people back to our homeland.”

“After that, we knew we couldn’t trust our one-time allies again,” Alayne added. “So, we turned to those who had once been our enemies. We had something they needed; knowledge of advanced forms of magic and a way to return to their shattered homeland. They had what we needed; something beyond ourselves and a means of survival as a race. It’s worked out well in the end, despite mistakes made along the way.”

Tam’ara opened her mouth to ask again exactly how one joined the Horde; perhaps such an alliance could be of help to her people. Perhaps it would let them leave Northrend and settle some place where there were not so many Scourge. Before she could ask, a patrol of the other ones, the ones that Ger’alin and Alayne called “night elves” appeared on the road before them. The other elves drew their bows and nocked their arrows. Alayne and Ger’alin quickly lifted their hands to show that they were not reaching for a weapon.

“We are traveling from Mok’ali to Borean Tundra,” Ger’alin announced loudly. “We are making our way through, escorting one of the natives of this land to her people. We heard they were attacked and we have promised them aid.”

“Taunka,” one of the night elves said. “We saw many of their dead days ago. They’ve wakened the nerubians.”

“We have not!” Tam’ara shouted before she had a chance to consider the wisdom of her actions. Ger’alin deducted another decade or two from her age and began wondering if she were much older than he was. Or even younger.

“They’re awake whatever the cause,” the paladin cut in. “All we’re doing is helping the taunka evacuate from Howling Fjord to Borean Tundra if that’s the only safe place left for them.”

“We have not passed close to your camp at all,” Alayne added, pointing in the distance. “We will continue on our path and leave you be as long as you leave us alone.”

“You look familiar, child,” one of the night elves said. Alayne clamped her jaws and said nothing. “Are you sure that you’re not more interested in what the blues are doing? They’ve managed to make quite a mess of things. Of course, magic users normally do.”

“We have nothing to do with those dragons,” Alayne retorted angrily. “Though perhaps we can reason with them and get them to stop scaring you with their spells. After all, I *do* know a dragon or two. I’m sure that I could speak to the scary scalehides and get them to leave you alone so you can stop cowering in your little huts,” she sneered. Ger’alin reached over and put a firm hand on her arm, holding her back. He watched her out of the corner of his eyes.

“We do not fear the blue flight,” the night elf huffed.

“No, of course not,” Alayne said, sounding insincere.

“Go on with you,” the night elf sighed angrily. “Stay away from our camp.”

“With pleasure,” Ger’alin finished before his wife or the taunka could say anything to get them in worse straits than they were. Spurring Lucky to a gallop, he nearly pulled Alayne off her hawkstrider with his iron grip. Tam’ara followed closely behind them on her borrowed kodo, glad that the creature didn’t leap the way Ger’alin’s horse and Alayne’s hawkstrider did. Once they reached the river that marked the beginnings of the taunka’s territory around Icemist, Ger’alin pulled rein and sighed. “We do *not* need to bring the night elven nation or the Alliance down on us in a display of who is the most sarcastic, Alayne!” he muttered.

“I’m sorry. My tongue...”

“Just showed more sauce in the last five minutes than you’ve shown in the past year,” he chuckled. “Woman, where was your backbone hiding? I thought you would curl up and offer to lick their boots when we first spotted them. You’ve done as much for every night elf in Outland.”

“I know,” she cringed, remembering how she had tried to make up to them for what she had done, how she had tried to disprove Var’thanos’s talk about her by being an obedient,

compliant servant. And how her actions had gotten her nothing but contempt, shouting, and derision. “Maybe I’ve just come to realize that if they’re going to hate me, there’s nothing I can do about it. I’ve confessed my crimes and been punished for them. I’ll regret what I did until the day I die. But torturing myself doesn’t undo it and doesn’t help anyone.”

“That’s the first intelligent thing I’ve heard you say in a long time,” he smiled, ruffling her shoulder-length blonde hair affectionately. “Now, let’s press on. I want to speak with Garrosh as soon as I can. He needs to know that the Alliance is already in Dragonblight.”

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“You’re not telling me anything I didn’t already know,” Garrosh grunted as he stumped around the chamber. “Where are those scouts? I sent them east two days ago.”

“East?” Ger’alin asked. “Perhaps they ran afoul of the Alliance.”

“No,” Garrosh grunted, waving his hand dismissively. “While I don’t trust them and I’d much rather push them out of Northrend, Thrall has promised me that if I do anything to rouse the Alliance against us, my head will decorate the gates of Orgrimmar. He worked out an agreement with their king through Proudmoore. We leave them alone and they leave us alone.”

“Then why were you sending scouts east? Forgive me for speaking so plainly, brother, but it looks as if you hardly have the situation here under control.”

“It’s those damned nerubians!” Garrosh growled, slamming his fist against the table as he passed it. “I sent scouts to begin surveying Azjol-Nerub. Those nerubians have sprouted up all over the place ever since we established this base. But, enough of that. How go things with this new weapon?”

Ger’alin grimaced and sighed. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? The whole reason you went over to Howling Fjord instead of coming here was to help the Apothecaries finish it off!”

“I won’t lift a finger to help them any longer and neither will any member of the Disorder of Azeroth! That damned Putress almost killed my wife with his Light-forsaken ‘new plague against the Scourge!’ It works against the living as well as the dead!” Ger’alin shouted.

“What?” Garrosh gasped, taken completely aback. “But Lady Sylvanas and Thrall...”

“I don’t hold the Forsaken at large responsible. It’s this Putress. He’s so obsessed with defeating the Scourge that he forgets minor details like ensuring that his allies will survive the fight. I say leave the Apothecaries to themselves and let’s go fight the Scourge with honest steel and magic.”

“If it wouldn’t be suicide, I’d be inclined to agree with you. The Scourge will have to wait, though,” Garrosh grimaced. “We have more pressing matters to attend to. These vykrul are causing us no end of problems on the coasts. My soldiers are working to push them back, though. It means that I don’t have the numbers to hold the nerubians down here at the base. I’ve requested reinforcements but, for all I know, those reinforcements are at the bottom of the sea.”

“This isn’t exactly what I envisioned when I decided to come here,” Ger’alin whispered to himself. “Let me return to my friends in Dragonblight. We can help push the vykrul back from the coasts.”

“How? You don’t have ships and while your might in battle is unquestioned,” the orc sighed, “you are not sailors. These vykrul are.”

“True we are not sailors. We would leave that part of the battle to those who are,” Ger’alin said, warming to the topic. “We could spread our forces along the inner coast here and here,” he continued, jabbing at the map spread across the table. “With the help of the

taunka warriors and perhaps the tuskarr, we could easily keep them from landing on the beaches. A few well-aimed spells from us and cannons from your ships and their boats become tombs.”

“It could work. Perhaps,” Garrosh mused, studying the plan. “Oh, that reminds me. How is Alayne?”

“She’s better than she’s been in many years,” he replied happily. “I’ll leave her here with you while I make the trip back. She’ll be wanting to catch up on her studies.”

Garrosh nodded. “I’ll send word to Orgrimmar on the next zeppelin that Jez’ral and Mir’el should come up here. Oh, don’t glare at me like that,” he sighed. “I had a letter from them last week asking after you and her. Mir’el seems like he could use an excuse to get out of the duties they’re trying to shove off on him.”

“Duties?”

“Theron is doing his best to reintegrate the elves who followed Sunstrider into their society again. Part of that effort was to register her ‘estate and titles’ the letter said. Mir’el says they’ve named him steward of something and that he’s planning to throttle her for not telling him Kael’Thas did this.”

“Poor Mir’el,” Ger’alin laughed, masking his shock. Of all the things she’d forgotten to mention... “He tried so hard to get away from his station of birth and now he’s stuck dealing with matters that Alayne probably forgot even before she jumped through the portal. Tell him he’s welcome to come up here. My uncle was the baliff for one of the Windrunner’s minor estates. The way he complained about it when I was a child, it sounded like torture to me.”

“Politics and undercurrents,” Garrosh grimaced. “This wasn’t what I expected from the Horde.”

“Things change, brother,” Ger’alin said lightly. “Four years ago, I’d never have imagined I’d be leading a ragtag group of fighters against Arthas, happily married to a woman who still leaves me baffled most days, and wondering if I could trick my adopted-brother-by-marriage into calling me ‘milord.’”

“Four years ago, I’d have spat in the face of anyone who told me I’d rejoin my clan to the rest of the Horde and venture through the Dark Portal,” Garrosh nodded. “Things do change.”

“But some things stay the same,” Ger’alin added, pointing at the map. “Let’s see if we can figure out a way to make the vykrul over here regret attacking our ships. Oh, that reminds me. Perhaps after we’ve taken care of getting the taunka settled, we could cut the heart out of these oversized humans once and for all.”

“Oh?” Garrosh asked, his brows lifting with interest.

“We know where their king is. I’ve set Tau’re to watch them. It’s over in Howling Fjord, a place called Utgarde...”

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“When do we return to Howling Fjord?” Tam’ara demanded when Ger’alin entered the room.

“When are you going to shave that awful thing off your face?” Alayne grimaced when he bent down and wrapped his arms around her waist, rubbing his cheek against hers. “It itches.”

“I told you I was throwing the razor away. Get used to it until we go back where it’s warmer,” he teased. Turning to Tam’ara, he sized the taunka up. “We’re going to help secure the beaches here. After that, Garrosh has promised to lend us troops and weapons to help make taking that stronghold less suicidal.”

“But Tau’re could be...”

“Tau’re is a warrior; not a moron,” Ger’alin said flatly. “I left him in charge of the handful back there because he knows when to fight and, more importantly, when not to fight. What are you so worried about him for?”

“He’s just so young to be...”

“Young?” Ger’alin barked, nearly choking. “Young? Tau’re’s about half again my age. Among his people, he’s been considered an adult since I was learning which end of a sword to hold. Besides, even if he were just my own age, he knows what he’s about. Age doesn’t always mean you know what you’re doing. Sometimes it means you’re just more stubborn and insistent even when you’re wrong.”

“I don’t want him to get hurt. He reminds me of Gar’mah,” she said softly. “Gar’mah got his head smashed in while I hid in the bushes and watched! All because he decided he would ‘defend my honor’ against the vykrul who had tried to kidnap me.”

“If a friend...”

“He would have been my mate,” she hissed.

“Well, if a person who cared for you that deeply sacrificed himself to see you safe, it’s not your fault. And demeaning that sacrifice by either trying to get yourself killed or by refusing to let anyone else face danger is the most selfish thing you can do.” Tam’ara snorted and stiffened. Alayne lifted a hand and, without even looking, laid it on Ger’alin’s wrist on the chair beside her. Ger’alin cut off before he could say another word.

“He’s right,” Alayne said softly. “You can’t blame yourself for everything and you can’t try to protect everyone. We’re free to make our own choices and face our own dangers. If we, if Tau’re, feels it is worth his life to see that the vykrul are held in check or destroyed, that is his decision. To try to take that from him by blaming yourself for his decision or by trying to change his mind when he feels this is what he must do is not something you should do to someone you care about.”

“Then what do you do?” the taunka asked sarcastically. Alayne slammed the book she’d been reading shut and leapt up from the chair.

“You quit feeling sorry for yourself and quit letting your fear paralyze you and you get out there and you fight alongside the ones you care about. If you can’t fight, you heal. You work. You do whatever you can to help them succeed. You don’t try to chain them to you and insist on it being your way or no way at all.”

“Someone’s tune certainly has changed,” Ger’alin whispered in her ear as he walked past her. Alayne glared at him and he returned her look with his blandest expression. Tam’ara, not knowing much about sin’dorei but knowing enough to make herself scarce, bolted from the room, Alayne’s words ringing in her ears.

“Yes, Ger’alin,” Alayne said softly, “I guess my tune has changed.”

“Took you long enough,” he said, his expression as unreadable as his tone.

“I thought you were pleased...”

“Pleased? I’m beside myself with joy,” he said, his voice still carefully neutral. “But I’m starting to get a little worried. You go from one extreme to the other so quickly. For a year you’ve been tormenting yourself. When you first came back from the mountain, I was ecstatic. ‘Finally,’ I thought, ‘finally, she’s well. She’s whole.’ And yet the whole time I’ve been waiting, watching, bracing for the blow to land. For you to revert back to tormenting yourself and tormenting me!”

Alayne flinched and Ger’alin recoiled, horrified at what he had just said. She sighed, gathered her thoughts, and met his gaze with watery eyes. “It’s not easy,” she admitted. “Part of me does want to slip back to that. But, whatever happened at that altar, it showed me that I don’t have to live like that. That I can live a different way and still make up for what I did. Do you think it’s been easy for me this past year, seeing how much I made you all suffer and only

thinking that if I could just suffer *enough*, just be hurt *enough*, then it would all be all right? Watching your pain and knowing I was the cause hurt me as well.”

“I guess I’m just afraid that you’ll fall back into that,” he sighed. “That this whole change of attitude is a passing phase.”

“Maybe it is,” she admitted. “Maybe I will. All I can tell you is that I don’t want it to happen. I’ll fight against it happening.”

“When I was a boy, I used to wonder why girls were never guards. After all, there were the Windrunners who were great warriors,” he said. Alayne stared at him, wondering where this had come from and where it was going. “I asked my father once, when I was just beginning to notice that girls weren’t oddly-shaped boys. He said that some women can be great warriors. But most women are like her,” he pointed at the door Tam’ara had gone through. Alayne’s eyes narrowed. “I won’t send you back from a fight you believe you need to be in but I want you to at least think about it. I’ve watched you for years, Alayne. I’ve watched you fight. You’re good. But is it good for you?”

“If I don’t fight, who will?”

“I will.”

“Then why weren’t you doing anything about Dark’khan before Zerith and I had this crazy idea to go kill him?”

“Because I’m not a visionary like you two are. I’ve become a leader but only because I was a follower. I’m not the kind of person who can see the future as being any different than the present.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. It’s as true about me as you’re being a child of magic is about you.”

“I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“I’d hardly be alone but I won’t ask you to leave. I will ask you something else that’s been bothering me, though,” he said, his eyes twinkling. Alayne grinned, knowing what he was about to ask and warming to the subject. Arguing was always fun because smoothing things over was worth the heat of the fight. Ger’alin put his hands on her shoulders and leaned down until his face hovered just over hers. Opening his mouth, he whispered, his tone dangerously mild, “*Just what in the hell were you thinking not telling me you’d been made a baroness?*”

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“A baroness?” Zerith snorted. “I’m not calling you ‘milord.’”

“I think I’d hit you if you did,” Ger’alin laughed. “I think she’d hit you if you called her ‘my Lady.’”

“Light bless my sister. The things she can just ‘forget’ to mention,” Zerith sighed as he drew breath through a throat raw with laughter.

“Have you heard anything from Tau’re?”

“He sent a report late last night. ‘They’re just sitting there.’”

“Good. In a way, it may be for the best that we’re heading over to Borean Tundra. I shudder to think of what could happen if these vykrul sailors got wind of an attack against Utgarde. It’ll be hard enough taking that place just dealing with the forces on the ground. If they came up that river in those ships of theirs...”

“I don’t know enough about naval warfare to even understand how our plan worked to get us on Quel’Danas,” Zerith sighed, running his hands through his red-brown hair and then shifting the stubble on his cheek beneath his palm. He didn’t care what Dar’ja said; it wasn’t spiky at all to him.

“It worked because it wasn’t naval warfare. Light, I’m no good at that. Let me face my foe on solid ground with a sword or a mace. Those cannons and guns? And ramming tactics? Not to mention boarding a vessel while under heavy fire...”

“Stop,” Zerith pleaded. “You’ve gotten me confused already.”

“It doesn’t matter because we’re just going to deal with the ones that are forced ashore,” Ger’alin continued. “On my way back here, I took the ridge overlooking the beach to the south. They’ve got a post set up in some ancient ruins. Plenty of netting laying about so we should make certain everyone is carrying a blade of some sort. I watched a few of them haul in fish from the shallows with those nets. If we got caught in one, we’d fare no better.”

“I know the plan as well as you do by now,” Zerith answered dryly. “Did you find out where the taunka from Icemist are hiding?”

“Yes,” the paladin replied. “They’re not hiding. They’re gearing up for all-out war against the nerubians. They have a village in the tundra, hidden by the mists from the hot-water geysers. It was difficult to find with the directions from Tam’ara to help me. It would be all but impossible without them.”

“Will they join us?”

“They were marching for Warsong Hold when I left. Does that answer your question?”

“It does. Oh, I thought I would mention this before I forgot. The Apothecaries are here.” Ger’alin groaned and Zerith lifted a hand to stop him. “They just arrived a few days ago. They know nothing about us. A few of them came down this way to see about establishing a supply line from Howling Fjord. They asked me if we would lend our aid and I told them we were already bound for Borean Tundra. I don’t think they’ve heard, yet, that we’re not going to help them at all. They left when the tuskarr told them that they could cut a path on their own.”

“The tuskarr are very intelligent.”

“The tuskarr think they’re still Scourge. They barely tolerate the ones with us. It was only Callie getting out there and fishing all day, helping to haul in the nets, and talking about hunting that won that much from them.”

“Callie’s wonderful.”

“She’s the complete opposite of Putress, that’s for sure. Also, the Alliance...”

“I know. I ran across them on the way over there.”

“No, not those,” Zerith said. “The Scarlets. They’re setting up a base nearby. I’ve warned the tuskarr about them and advised them to let the Apothecaries deal with them.”

“Why oh why must everything happen at once?”

“Because life would get too dull otherwise?”

Ger’alin growled something that Zerith would just as soon pretend he had not heard.

The two men walked out of the inn and began walking through the small tuskarr town. It was crowded with the members of the Disorder of Azeroth and the taunka fleeing from Howling Fjord. The guests were helpful, fishing, hunting, and doing their best not to impose upon their strange hosts. The tuskarr were gracious, laughing, offering food and shelter to those who were traveling their strange land. Zerith had spent much of his time with Elder Ko’nani learning about his people and about the area around them. In the distance to the far north, he could just make out the Wyrmmrest Temple. Supposedly it was a holy site constructed by the Titans and chosen by the dragonflights. He, Dar’ja, and Callie had ventured up there while Ger’alin and Alayne made their trip to Borean. They found the Temple empty, only populated by kobolds and great beasts that looked half-man, half mammoth. The tuskarr had also mentioned shrines in the area, each place sacred and claimed by one of the flights. Intruders entered those shrines at their peril. As Zerith told Ger’alin about the things he’d learned, Ger’alin grimaced and muttered that he hoped they wouldn’t need to bother the dragons at all. Both men remembered too well the tales they’d grown up with about the red

dragonqueen being enslaved by the orcs and tortured. Ysera was said to tolerate only druids. Malygos, the master of magic and the leader of the blues, was virtually unknown though Ger'alain added that blue dragons were causing trouble to the west, near Borean Tundra. The bronze flight had little to do with anyone and the black... the less said about the black the better.

"Icecrown isn't too far from here either," Zerith added as he finished his debriefing.

Ger'alain's eyebrows quirked and his ears perked forth in attention.

"While we were investigating the temple, I noticed a black spike far to the north. We rode up there to see what it was. It was the top of a massive black gate. We didn't get very close to it; just close enough to see that it was manned by Scourge and vykrul."

"Heavily manned?"

"Ger'alain, I wouldn't attack that gate unless I had A'dal standing behind me. It'd be suicide."

"Is there any way around it?"

"The cliffs are sheer. Unless you can fly, no, there isn't. Though, there is a broken road that leads north from the Temple. We didn't follow it. Perhaps it leads somewhere that will let us enter Icecrown without attacking that gate."

"I see. I'll mention that to Garrosh. He'll be interested in learning that the Lich King is so near. Perhaps he could station a diversionary force at that gate, keep their attention pulled to Dragonblight while we find another way in."

"We're getting a little ahead of ourselves," Zerith sighed. "But, you're probably right. That sounds like as good a plan as any. Let's round everyone up and get going. We'll skirt the area to the far north to avoid the Alliance. They may have let the three of you pass but I doubt they'd let all of the rest of us pass through."

"I wish we could convince them that we aren't the enemy," Ger'alain sighed. "But, even here in Northrend, where it should be obvious..." Zerith nodded sadly. Some things would never change.

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"Thank the Light you're here!" Alayne screeched as she ran and flung herself at Ger'alain and Zerith.

"I'm glad to see you, too," Zerith said, wheezing as the wind was knocked out of him.

"What's the matter, woman?" Ger'alain asked, seeing the tension in her shoulders.

"You'll think I've gone mad."

"I've thought that before," Zerith teased. "What happened?"

"A huge rock just...floated...right over our heads. Not even three hours gone! It just floated north and east! I saw spires! It was some kind of floating city!"

"What?!"

"I swear by the Light I saw it."

"But what...why...where...?" Zerith gaped.

"Those are questions we'd all like the answers to," Garrosh said gruffly as he walked into the group. "Good to see you again. We could use your help."

"I notice that you have a bit of a pest infestation," Zerith muttered dryly. "We had to fight our way in."

"We'll take care of the nerubians for once and for all soon enough," Garrosh replied. "The taunka are eager to destroy the eight-legged monsters. Since you're the ones who stumbled across them, I've decided to let you speak with their leaders first and determine how best to use them in driving off the vykrul from our coasts. After that, we can discuss going over to Howling Fjord and taking care of them for once and for all or taking out the nerubians."

Oh,” he added. “I received word back from Thrall by zeppelin this morning. He’s sending more ships. They’ll be here within the week.”

“That gives us enough time to work something out,” Zerith muttered. Garrosh shrugged and turned back to the hold, gesturing for the others to follow him.

“You can stable your animals there,” he pointed to the fenced in area surrounding the keep. “We have plenty of room inside for everyone. If you hear three long, loud blasts, that means we’re under attack. Listen again and you’ll hear a horn from the direction of the attack. Rally there and do your best. We do face the nerubians quite frequently so be on your toes. The Lady Sunrage has already demonstrated her mettle in battle five times since you departed,” he grinned at Ger’alin.

“The Lady Sunrage?” Zerith asked, his lips quirking into a smile.

“She hates being called that,” Garrosh chuckled. “She threatened me with exile if I did it again.”

“So, how are you enjoying your exile?”

“I can’t complain,” the orc roared with laughter. Just then three long, loud blasts sounded, ringing through the air. Seconds later, a shrill trumpet sounded from the north. Garrosh began jogging that direction while Zerith and Ger’alin shouted for the others to hurry and follow them. Alayne was already well ahead of them, hiking her skirts to her knees and running as if she were in a race. She skidded to a halt at the corner of the building and ducked her head around, gasping at what she saw.

Nerubians had sprung up from one of the tunnels, pouring out like smoke across the northern face of the keep. The guards stationed on top dropped boiling oil, water, and fired missiles down into the nerubian masses but more and more came out of the tunnel. Orc warriors, blood elven magi, shamans, priests, and more battled their way through the spiders, trying to break through the mass and get close enough to the tunnel opening to destroy it, collapsing the underground cavern down on the spiders before they could overwhelm the keep’s defenses. Alayne sighed and closed her eyes, reaching out to feel the currents of magic floating around her. Pulling them to her, using the very chill of the northern air to aid her, she threw lances of ice at the spiders, slowing them as the cold chilled their blood and froze their joints. Some were encased in ice that, when struck by another spell or by one of the fighters, made the eight-legged Scourglings shatter with their killing shields.

Finally, one of the orcs reached the edge of the yawning maw through which the nerubians poured. Throwing down a device, he shouted for everyone to clear out. Seconds later, the ground shook as the device exploded, destroying the entrance and much of the tunnel. The nerubians left above ground were quickly dispatched by the Horde fighters. Alayne heaved a sigh of relief and wiped sweat from her forehead when the last of the spider lords was brought down.

“Lady Sunrage,” Garrosh said politely as he walked past her, heading back into the keep. She hissed at him, hating that joke.

“Is it like this all the time?” Zerith asked as he caught his breath and came up beside her.

“No,” Alayne muttered. “Usually it’s worse. The guards happened to spot the tunnel opening right when the ground gave way. We were lucky.”

“No wonder Garrosh wants so badly to press on against the nerubians,” Zerith sighed. “This is nothing like Howling Fjord. Why in the name of the Titans aren’t the Apothecaries over here helping instead of insisting that forces be diverted to them?”

“Because Putress is an ass?” Ger’alin volunteered helpfully. “Lady Sunrage...” Alayne bared her teeth at him, “Have you had a chance to gather any information on the vykrul while I was gone?”

“I managed to get over to the western shore yesterday evening. I came back to the midst of another attack from below,” she sighed. “I know you said you were going to look at the south beach so I didn’t bother going there.” Ger’alin nodded and Zerith motioned for her to continue. “I saw a few of their ships slipping into a thick mist. The mist feels magical to me; as if it’s been summoned there. It’s not natural because the sun doesn’t burn it off. I asked some of the guards on the top of the keep about it – you can see it from there – and they said it’s always there.”

“They could be hiding Light-knows-how-many forces in that mist,” Ger’alin muttered. Alayne nodded slowly. “I wonder if we could smoke them out,” he mused.

“Smoke them out?”

“Burning driftwood,” he sighed, “stinks. And I mean *stinks*. Light knows that I burned enough of it on the run. If we gathered enough for several huge bonfires and set them upwind... the smell might be enough to start driving them out a little if the smoke didn’t get to them first. Smoke doesn’t rise well in a fog like that.”

Alayne nodded dumbly, not understanding. Ger’alin sighed and put an arm around her shoulders. “Your mind isn’t on this at all, is it?”

“Not really. I’m wondering what that was that flew overhead a few hours ago.”

“It certainly couldn’t have been a city,” he pointed out. “Cities are rather heavy affairs that don’t go fluttering around. Maybe it was just some strange kind of goblin or gnomish ship?”

“Maybe,” she sighed. Just then the trumpets sounded three long blasts again. Alayne groaned and Ger’alin took his arm from around her and unslung his shield from his back. “To the south,” she said through gritted teeth as she hiked her skirts and began running through the keep.

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“We need more men,” Zerith sighed tiredly. “We can’t keep this up.”

“We need to go after the nerubians and put an end to it,” Ger’alin whispered, breathing heavily as he tried to catch his wind after yet another battle. It was barely midday and they’d already dealt with four waves of nerubian attackers. “I don’t see how we’re going to be in any shape to deal with the vykrul if these attacks keep up. Garrosh received a pigeon last night. The ships are two days out and we’ve barely had time to send out a skeleton force to gather the wood.”

“When will they be back, you think?”

“By evening. I don’t think anyone wants to be out after dark and have to risk fighting their way back in, unable to see friend or foe clearly.”

“Two days,” Zerith sighed. “Just two more days of this and we’ll be able to take care of the coasts and the quarry at once, Light willing.”

“Two more days of this and I’m going to hang up my shield and retire,” Ger’alin said sarcastically. “I’m too old for this.”

“Bah. You’re not even thirty. Besides, you could always stay back and help with the healing. You don’t have to throw yourself into the thick of the fight every time.”

“If I find the strength and energy, I may throttle you.”

“Gentlemen,” Dar’ja said, cutting through the tension. “I realize everyone’s on edge but could you please stop shouting at each other? We can hear you clear across the hold.”

Abashed, Ger’alin and Zerith looked away from each other and from Dar’ja. She sighed, settled her fist on her hips, and glared at both of them. “Everyone is tired. Everyone’s on edge. We’re being overwhelmed slowly but surely by the nerubians,” she said. Both men began staring at her, knowing this as well as she did. “We cannot afford to have you lose your

heads right now,” she continued. “Light knows none of us asked for this and we really had no idea what we were getting into by coming up here but we’ve all got to stay calm.”

Three trumpet blasts rang through the air. Ger’alin and Zerith both tensed and began to move. Dar’ja grabbed them by the arms and called upon the Light to give her strength. When they found themselves unable to break out of her grasp, they began muttering beneath their breath. “Let the others fight. Spare yourselves occasionally. Alayne can handle it; she’s been doing her best to keep things smoothed over for the past two days now. Callie helps her. The two of you are too worn out and too frayed to be of much good right now.”

“Dar’ja, I swear by the Light if you don’t let me go,” Ger’alin began. Dar’ja let go of Zerith’s arm and smashed her fist into Ger’alin’s jaw.

“I’m a little on edge myself,” she said too calmly when he began rubbing the darkening bruise, “so just do what I’m telling you to do because I just had Callie and Alayne tell me that if I didn’t keep myself and the pair of you back for the next five fights, they’d set my hair on fire and tie me up to the flagpost for a mascot.”

“And you say we’re on edge,” Zerith growled.

“In a few days, reinforcements will arrive and we’ll need to be ready to go after the vykruul to see them land safely,” Dar’ja sighed tiredly. “Callie and Alayne pointed that out to me. You two need to be putting your heads together and finalizing the plan; not wearing yourselves out fighting spiders. Three more or less won’t make much difference in the skirmishes here. But you two being too tired to come up with a workable strategy will make a difference – a rather big one, I might add – when we go to fight on the beaches.”

“I am not leaving her out there alone,” Ger’alin scowled. He tried to shake off Dar’ja’s grip and grimaced when he felt her fingers digging deeply into his arm.

“She’s hardly alone.”

“Let go of me, Dar’ja.”

“No.”

“Let go of me, Dar’ja.”

“Ger’alin...”

“I’m not in the mood for these games!” he exploded. With a muttered oath, he shoved with all his might, sending her sprawling across the room. Zerith leapt in front of the paladin, his fists clenched and raised. Ger’alin raised his own fist, ready to bring it down hard. Zerith braced for the blow and let his own anger flare, ready for a brawl. Ger’alin roared in rage when his fist smashed against a shield. Glaring daggers at Dar’ja, he paused when he saw that she was just as confused as he was.

“Alayne and Callie said you might not listen to reason,” another paladin said lightly from the doorway. “And they told me that if I didn’t get back in here and break up the fight, they would come in here and break it up for you and I think they meant for that to involve breaking various bones.”

“Andeo, release the shield,” Zerith said evenly.

“And let the pair of you go at it? I don’t think so.”

“We won’t,” the priest said wearily, the anger evaporating out of him, leaving him lethargic and fatigued. “My sister obviously thinks she knows better than any of us. I’ll trust her judgement in case it’s right this time.”

“It is right,” Andeo muttered as he released the shield. Ger’alin pulled off his gauntlet and began shaking his hand to try to clear the pain. “Look at you two. You’re so stressed out that you’re ready to fight each other. Light, what would we do if that happened?”

“I’d dunk them in the ocean,” Callie muttered, her voice thick with weariness. “Maybe the icy water would clear their heads.”

“How did it go?” Ger’alin asked, ignoring everything else.

“It went fine. Alayne’s worked out a shift plan. Notice that she and I stayed to the rear of the last several fights? She’s told off people to rest. What good are we if we all spend our energies too early, leaving us easy pickings for later fights?”

“So, she’s going to wear herself and you out...”

“No,” Callie sighed. “She and I will be remaining behind when you are out fighting.”

“It is a good idea,” Zerith admitted glumly. “I’m sure even he’ll think that when he’s had some sleep.”

“It leaves us out. How can we ask the others to follow us where we’re not going?” Ger’alin demanded.

“Take it up with your wife,” Callie said at last. “I’m not in the mood to deal with your stubbornness right now.”

Ger’alin’s face softened when he saw just how worn out Callie was. Looking around, he saw similar signs of battle fatigue on the others’ faces. He knew his own must look much the same. With a sigh, he sat down in a chair, placed his elbows over his knees, and took a deep breath. His cheeks flushed as he thought about how he’d just been acting. Zerith watched him and looked abashed himself. Had they really been shouting that loudly?

“Yes, you were,” Callie muttered thickly. “Alayne sent Andeo to make sure you two didn’t kill each other before I got here.”

“I’m more tired than I thought,” the priest said, trying to sound amused. “I didn’t realize I was speaking out loud.”

Ger’alin nodded and stood up. He turned to the door. “Where are you going?” Zerith asked suspiciously.

“I’m going to take a nap,” the paladin sighed. “They’re right. We can’t keep on this way much longer.”

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Alayne sighed and knuckled her back, wishing that she didn’t feel as if she had cobwebs coating her skin. “Not one word to him,” she threatened Callie.

“I won’t say anything. Besides, that was our last battle for this shift and I’m just going to go try to scrape the spider goo off me and find a place to collapse.”

“At least they’re going along with it,” Alayne thought to herself as she brushed at her arms again. “Light, let those ships arrive soon.”

“The scouts have been looking for the first sign of the masts cresting the horizon since sun-up.”

“I know. I just hope the nerubians give us a break so we can take care of the vykrul.”

“It’s not likely,” the rogue sighed. “But we are going to need every man we have on the beaches.”

“I...I wonder,” Alayne muttered to herself.

“Oh no,” Callie groaned, recognizing that expression. “If you sneak off again, Ger’alin will have a heartattack.”

“I wouldn’t do this without telling him and Zerith,” Alayne retorted.

“Wouldn’t do what?”

“What if a few of us snuck into the mists? Surely that’s where they’re hiding their ships. We sneak in there, set the ships on fire, and then come back out. It’d be a quick operation; one that we should be able to pull off before the nerubians attack again. That would keep the vykrul from being able to reach our ships before they landed and it would give us fresh troops since the sailors wouldn’t have to fight their way ashore. Not to mention that setting the ships on fire would probably make the driftwood and sea-scum on the shore burn, creating a Light-forsaken stench. That’s about what Ger’alin suggested doing once.”

“Where do you come up with this stuff, woman?” Callie asked in dead imitation of Ger’alin. Alayne shot her an annoyed look. “It is a good idea. Let’s go tell the others and see if we can find people to pull it off.”

Alayne and Callie walked back into the keep and took the long, twisting wooden ramps up to the living quarters. A bleary-eyed Zerith was standing outside the door to Alayne and Ger’alin’s room, his fist raised in mid-knock and a tiredly confused look on his face. When Alayne gently pushed him aside, he yawned and asked her, watery-eyed, “Is it our turn yet?”

“If you feel up to going. Goodness, Zerith, you look rough,” Alayne muttered.

“I will be so glad when this is over.”

“You and me both,” she sighed as she opened the door. Ger’alin still lay sprawled in the bed, snoring brokenly. She smiled, bemused, as she shook her head. “Callie, tell Zerith what I told you,” she said to the Forsaken. “I’ll tell Ger’alin myself. No,” she added when it looked as if they both might come into the room, “he’s not decent and he’d strangle me if I let you in right now.”

“I’ve seen him in his skin before,” Callie grinned. “Not an experience I care to repeat though, considering he was three sheets to the wind and singing. I wonder if we’ll ever be able to go back to that inn.”

Alayne barked a laugh before closing the door and walking over to the bed. Sitting down, she nearly jumped back up again when Ger’alin lurched upright, looking around for whatever had just disturbed him. “Oh, it must be my turn,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his face to wake himself up when he saw Alayne sitting there.

“It is,” she said, smoothing the sheets at the edge of the bed. While he stood and dressed, she waited, giving him a chance to wake up more completely before she hit him over the head with her idea. When he was belting his sword on and looking around for where he’d set his gauntlets, she nodded to herself. “We have a plan to make things much easier on ourselves,” she announced. She exhaled in exasperation when he turned to look at her, one eyebrow raised as far as it would go and a look of bland surprise on his face. “Callie thinks it’s a good one,” she muttered defensively.

“No, I’m just surprised you’re telling me about it beforehand is all,” he said dryly. She snorted and rolled her eyes and he softened. “What is your plan?”

“To sneak a few of us into the mists and set the vykrul ships there on fire. We might set anything on fire that will burn in there.”

“Go into those mists? We have no idea what could be in there or how many of them are hiding there.”

“It’s a risk we’ll have to take,” Alayne argued. “If we can get in there and destroy most of their ships, then we make it much easier for our own to land and for the fresh forces to get here, take over dealing with the nerubians, and let us work out a longer shift-plan so that we will all be rested when we go against Azjol-Nerub.”

“I don’t like it,” he sighed, thinking it over. Before Alayne could explode and begin listing off all the reasons it was the best plan, he raised his hand. “But just because I don’t like it doesn’t mean it’s a bad idea. It’s probably the best thing we could do at this point. We’re all too worn out with the constant fighting here to really be of much use of the beach the way we originally wanted to. If we can make the fighting at sea a non-issue and let those troops land completely fresh, then that’s what we should do.”

“I’m glad you think it’s a good idea,” she said wryly. “I hope you won’t argue about me being one of the ones to sneak in there.”

“If we had more mages with us, I would argue,” he grinned. “But we don’t. I want you to take all of our casters. Take a few of the best with bows and arrows as well. I’ll go

down and tell Garrosh about this plan and have him supply you with tar and torches so they can fire flaming arrows at whatever they see.”

“You’re not arguing with me,” Alayne stated flatly.

“I won’t argue with you when you make sense,” he replied in like tone. “It’s a good plan and I’ll do my best to see it succeed. If it does, it’s just that much sooner that we can stop all the attacks...”

Both sin’dorei groaned when they heard the three long blasts announcing a new wave of nerubians. “You would think that with all that digging, they’d collapse the whole ground on them,” Ger’alin muttered sourly. “I’ll speak with Garrosh as soon as this one’s over. You get some rest,” he said as he hurried out the door. “If all goes well, you’re going to have a very busy rest of the day.”

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Alayne jogged to the front of the line, eager to be on her way. Callie waved at her as she took her part of the force south to the beach near where the Horde forces from Orgrimmar would be landing in a few short hours. The sin’dorei prayed that the rogue and her group would have enough time to clear the beach and then put the fires out, giving the reinforcements a safe, clear spot to land. If this didn’t work, then it would be a tired, demoralized force returning to Warsong Hold to try to hold off the waves of nerubians. “And we still have to trek over to Howling Fjord before it’s all done,” she thought to herself. “Light, will this never end?” For a moment, she could understand why Ger’alin and Zerith were almost beside themselves from the stress of trying to figure out how to help the Horde accomplish everything that needed to be done in such a short amount of time while not giving Arthas any time to adjust to their presence in Northrend and make the first strike.

“We’re here,” Andeo whispered, pulling Alayne out of her reverie. She nodded to him absently and motioned for the others to move in closer to her. Together, they began padding swiftly and silently through the thick mists.

For a long moment, they were all blinded by white fog. Blinking quickly and waving her hand in front of her face, Alayne soon could make out the shapes of ships and buildings in the distance. Vykrul sailors lay sprawled under lean-tos, tents, and any other place where they could sleep off the effects of too much drink. As the group passed by one snoring giant, the stink of strong liquor wafted from him, turning Alayne’s stomach. “We strike and run,” she whispered, reminding the others of the plan. Throw off as many fire spells on the ships as they could and then run. “The fires should spread. They’re docked fairly close together,” she added.

Moving into position, the group waited with bated breath for her signal. Closing her eyes, Alayne summoned the heat in the chill air around her and threw a ball of flame at the nearest boat. Fireballs, firebolts, and flaming arrows exploded from the group, quickly engulfing ships and sails. The vykrul roused, most running to try to extinguish the flames while a few began looking for the cause of the fires. Spotting the now-retreating Disorder of Azeroth, the giants gave chase, eager to smash those who would encroach upon their territory. The casters redirected hasty spells at their pursuers, knocking some back, searing the skin off of others, and slowing them all down. Once they had crested the rise leading up to Warsong Hold, the Disorder of Azeroth turned on its heels, spinning to face the chasing vykrul. Those with bows unleashed a torrent of arrows, raining steel and burning wood down on their attackers. The rest threw what spells they had left, hoping it would be enough to convince the giants to cut their losses and hurry back to try to extinguish their burning ships. Through the swirling fog, Alayne could see thick plumes of black smoke rising. The wind from the sea brought the stench of seaweed and salt-coated wood. “Come on,” she muttered to the vykrul

who continued to try to close the gap. “Be ready to fall back to the Hold!” she shouted to her followers, watching, waiting to see if retreat would be needed. By the time the last few vykrul reached their position, they were so weak that a few well-shot arrows dispatched them.

Alayne heaved a sigh of relief as the giants fell to the ground. Wiping her sleeve across her forehead, she hoped that Callie and the others were faring as well as her group had. “Back to the Hold,” she said tersely, too keyed up to think about anything other than getting back and making certain that the nerubians didn’t overwhelm their base before reinforcements could arrive. “But stay sharp. Let’s make certain that none of the other vykrul decide to come hunting us for revenge.”

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Callie was glad she didn’t need to breathe. The stench coated her tongue, making her tongue feel thick and swollen. She could see the smoke billowing down from the northwest. Alayne’s group must have been successful. Callie’s group had also been successful. *Perhaps a little too successful*, she thought to herself as she watched the smoke billow in.

“This isn’t exactly how we planned,” Diami muttered dryly.

“No,” Callie sighed. “It’s not. Ger’alin’s going to murder me.”

The living members of her group were gagging and passing out, trying frantically to fumble their way out of the mists and smoke to clear air. The Forsaken tugged at them, trying to drag them away but lost in the thick, blinding clouds once they left the small rise hiding the cave where most of the vykrul had been waiting for them. Callie prayed that the ones who had made it to the water were still alive. With a sigh, she sent up another flare, praying that someone would figure out soon that they were in dire straits and needed aid.

“I’m going to try again,” she said sourly. “You stay here. Send up flares every so often. Eventually someone’s got to put two and two together and get four.”

Callie leapt down from the lip of the cave and landed lightly on her feet. She opened her eyes and immediately regretted it. The smoke stung so badly that tears streamed down her cheeks. Lifting her arms out in front of her, she moved slowly and uncertainly through the area, wincing whenever her foot prodded something soft. She cringed even more when she could hear the gagging, retching coughs from the living who were still struggling to find their way out. She hoped with all of her heart that the reason she heard so few coughing was because most were already to safety.

The battle had been brief. No sooner had they broken through the mists than they had set most of the ships on fire. That had been the problem. The ships caught quickly and the sails fell into the oily, fetid water that lapped against the filthy sand. The scum on top of the water caught fire as well and, before anyone realized just how bad things were, the wind had carried sparks to the few wooden buildings in the mists. Callie thought that this was what hell must be like; blind, alone, and terrified that the whole mess was your fault and you’d never be forgiven for it.

“Stop it,” she growled to herself as she bent at the waist to lift up a troll who had collapsed, wheezing. “You sound like Alayne.” She stumbled around, lost. “Where is the blasted end of this shit!” she screamed in frustration, clawing with one hand at the mist as if to force it away from her. The troll she was dragging had grown still and silent. “Please don’t be dead,” she pleaded to him, not daring to stop long enough to check.

“Ho the beach!” she heard a deep voice shout. “Ho! We come to help!”

“Tuskarr,” she thought, recognizing the accent. “Stay away!” she shouted. “It’s death to any who breathe here!”

“Ho!” the voice called out again. “Come this way to safety, then!”

Callie thanked every deity she could think of, the entire Pantheon, and the Light three times for good measure. Every few seconds, the tuskarr would let out a shout that gave her something to follow through the thick clouds. Within moments, she was setting the troll down near the water. Other tuskarr surrounded him, wafting herbs beneath his nose. The troll roused a bit, coughing and sputtering and Callie nearly wept with joy. Running back into the thick, roiling clouds, she shouted for any Forsaken to follow the sound of the tuskarr and drag out any of the living they could.

As they worked to drag the others out, Callie noticed that the smoke from the fires was beginning to thin out. She could feel a light drizzle coating her skin and soaking through her clothes. Where she normally would have cursed the rain, she blessed it because it put out the fires and cleared the air, making it easier to see more than an inch in front of her and helping any of the Disorder of Azeroth still trapped in the mists to survive longer. Still, when she had to tote up the number of those who would not rise, she wept. Almost a dozen of their best magi were gone, their life choked out of them by the very fires they had raised. "Light, let the fleet get here soon," she whispered. "This clearing has had a high cost."

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Alayne tried to console Callie when she joined her forces to those the rogue had taken south. Still, the shock of the loss in victory numbed the sin'dorei. Eight of their strongest casters lay dead. Two healers they could scarcely afford to lose had joined them, the position of their bodies giving evidence that they had done their best with their last breaths to save the others near them. Even for a group that had grown as large as the Disorder of Azeroth, such losses were not things to be written off.

"The ships are arriving," Callie said numbly, pointing to the horizon where sails could be seen cresting the ridge of the world. She sighed, feeling guilty at the relief she felt seeing the Horde banners dancing in the wind. Soon someone else would be here and she could go back to falling in line with the Disorder of Azeroth instead of playing at being a commander. Alayne studied the rogue, wondering if there was anything she could do or say to help. "Oh no!" Callie groaned. Alayne glanced to the horizon and reached out to grab on to the Forsaken, needing to steady herself when the ground threatened to go out from under her. Pulling up alongside the Horde ships were ships bearing the flags of the Alliance.

"Great," Alayne muttered. "Just what we need. Another battle."

"Why aren't they firing at each other?" Callie wondered as they waited in tense silence for the ships to come near to the beach. Alayne shrugged and shook her head; she knew less about naval fighting than she did about any other kind of fighting. Advanced tactics and strategies were things best left to Zerith and Ger'alain as evidenced by the poorly-thought out fire attack against he vykru, she thought to herself.

Long moments stretched on in silence as the Disorder of Azeroth gathered on the beach held their breath, waiting to find themselves in the thick of a fight on the shore again. The Alliance ships veered off, moving towards the east, only one remaining near the Horde fleet. "What in the name of the Pantheon?" Alayne wondered.

"Ho the beach!" she heard Ger'alain shout from the ridge far behind them. He galloped down the sands, his horse nearly throwing him off when he sawed back on the reins. Callie cringed and began bracing herself for the recriminations he would heap upon her when he tallied up the losses. "We saw the Alliance ships from Warsong Hold," he said instead. "Garrosh and I figured you could both use some reinforcements yourselves if they're coming to pay us a visit. What happened here?" he asked, seeing the bodies stretched out and covered with their own cloaks.

“I killed ten of our own,” Callie whispered. “I got them lost in the mist and the smoke from the fires choked them to death.”

“Damn!” Ger’alin breathed. “Callie, are you all right?”

“No,” she groaned shakily. “I just killed ten people.”

“You did not. I hate to sound callous, but these things happen sometimes. The wind might not have been right; the air might have been too heavy for the smoke to rise through it. Perhaps there was a spell in the area that held everything close to the ground like that, including the smoke. We’ve lost people before. We’ll lose them again. I hate writing letters to their families and I hate speaking over their graves to rally everyone’s spirits but it will happen again and again. As long as we’re not content to sit at home and let others fight, it will happen. This is the first time it’s happened to you like this but...friendly fire is sometimes a fact of life.”

“Friendly fire,” Callie snorted. Ger’alin stared at her, uncertain of what to do next.

“I think it’s a stupid term myself,” Alayne muttered. “Callie, if you need to go back to Warsong Hold, go now. We’ll stay here and deal with the Alliance ship if need be.”

“No,” the rogue whispered. “I’ll stay. I owe it to them.”

The Disorder of Azeroth and the tuskarr strung themselves out along the beach, waiting, watching the ships as they drew closer. Once they reached the shallows, they put down anchor and began sending the rowboats in to carry the reinforcements to the shore. The Alliance boat waited until the last Horde boat pulled up its anchor and the first wave of forces reached the shore before putting down its own anchor. Ger’alin signaled for the group on the beach to ready themselves for an attack.

“Hold!” one of the orcs in climbing out of a rowboat shouted. “They’ve come to parlay with Garrosh. Warchief Thrall sent his assurances of safe passage for their ambassador. They are not going to attack us.”

“A parlay?” Ger’alin muttered. “Put up your weapons, then. Let us wait and escort the ambassador back to Warsong Hold. You men,” he said, pointing to the ones coming ashore, “make haste to Warsong Hold. It’s due north. There’s no telling when the next attack will strike and they need every hand they can get.”

“We were told that we should expect to fight our way ashore,” the orc muttered. “I take it the vykrul are gone?”

“They are,” Callie sighed. “It cost us dearly to ensure your safe arrival.”

“Get on to Warsong Hold,” Ger’alin interrupted her before she could embarrass herself in front of strangers. “Garrosh will have orders for you there.”

The troops debarking on the beach followed the sin’dorei’s command and began heading to Warsong Hold. The Disorder of Azeroth continued to wait as the ship bearing the Alliance ambassador rowed closer. Ger’alin’s breath left him when he laid eyes on the man and both Alayne and Callie began wondering just how much trouble they were about to get into. “It’s Highlord Bolvar,” Ger’alin breathed between clenched teeth. “They’ve sent the second-in-command of all the Alliance forces *here*? As an *ambassador*?”

Alayne swallowed hard and blinked. She remembered tales of Bolvar’s bravery from her time growing up in Menethil. Callie trotted down the beach, grabbing at the prow of the rowboat to help drag it ashore while Ger’alin followed, offering a hand to help Bolvar out of the boat and onto the wet, slippery sand. “You are the ambassador?” he asked, stunned.

“I am, sin’dorei,” Bolvar said politely. “I thank you for meeting me here on the beach. Your Warchief promised every courtesy and he has delivered. It is good to see that ‘strength and honor’ are not mere words.”

“I will take you to Warsong Hold immediately,” Ger’alin replied. “Have your men ready themselves, though. The Hold is under constant attack from the nerubians. We may have to fight our way through to safety. Under the Light, I swear I will do my utmost to

ensure that you reach Garrosh Hellscream whole. However, it would be wise of you to be prepared to look after your own safety against the Scourge as my words hold no sway with them,” he added dryly. Bolvar chuckled.

“We’ll do our best to drive the nerubians away. That’s part of why I have been sent by my king to speak with the Warchief and with his appointed leader in Northrend. For too long, we’ve let matters drive us apart. That can no longer be allowed to continue. As we rallied together with the Aldor and the Scryer against the Legion last year, we must rally together again to bring down the Scourge.”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Alayne whispered, hoping they would not realize that she was the one who had been responsible for summoning Kil’jaeden. That would make things far more awkward than was needed at the moment. Ger’alin motioned for the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth to close ranks around the Alliance and began escorting them all to Warsong Hold, praying, like Alayne did, that things would go smoothly.

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“Ger’alin, what of the...” Garrosh began to ask when he saw the sin’dorei duck into the room. When a human followed after him, Garrosh began to wonder just what was going on.

“We were able to secure the beaches, Garrosh,” Alayne answered smoothly, sliding through the door with scarcely a sound. “The vykrul have been killed or driven off. The tuskarr are helping us to hold the beaches clear until such time as we can take full control of them on our own. They ask only fishing rights and landing rights in exchange for this service.”

“Those are granted,” Garrosh said evenly. “What of the Alliance ships we spotted near our own? Did they fall in battle?”

“No,” Ger’alin answered, casting a sidelong look at Bolvar. “They have come from talks with the Warchief. May I present the ambassador of the Alliance in Northrend, Highlord Bolvar Fordragon? Highlord, may I present Garrosh Hellscream, chieftain of the Mag’har orcs and Thrall’s appointed representative in Northrend?”

“Greetings, Highlord,” Garrosh said flatly.

“Lok’tar ogar,” Bolvar smiled. “The Warchief asked me to speak with you if you would have me.”

“I’ll hear your words,” Garrosh grunted. “What did the Warchief bid you say?”

“Lady Proudmoore opened talks between our peoples shortly after you left to make the trek north. Just as we were able to come together in Outland under the Shattered Sun, we need to set aside our differences here to fight the Scourge.”

“That I agree with,” Garrosh muttered sourly. “Ask your friends in Dragonblight to stop threatening to cut off my supply lines from the tuskarr and from Howling Fjord. We nearly starved the first few weeks here because those blasted night elves killed most of the men I sent to barter for food.”

“I will have an end put to that immediately. You will be granted safe passage through all our settlements in return for the same from you.”

“As long as you don’t attack us, we won’t attack you. My Warchief was clear on that before I left to come here.”

“Good,” Bolvar sighed. “Now, the next issue I wish to discuss with you. Perhaps we could speak more privately about this matter, chieftain of the Mag’har?” he added, glancing at Alayne, Callie, and Ger’alin.

“Considering that between them and Zerith, they command most of the forces keeping Warsong Hold standing, I have no problem with them overhearing any discussions between us.”

“They are commanders in your army?” Bolvar asked, eyeing the elves. It was difficult for humans to put a proper age on the long-lived elves but those two seemed young even to his untrained eye. The Forsaken; she could be twenty or forty. There was no telling how long she’d been dead.

“They are brave warriors who have inspired others to their cause and have brought those others here to aid us. They are the leaders of the Disorder of Azeroth.”

“Ah,” Bolvar brightened. “I have heard of them. The Aldorites speak highly of them. Very well then, the next matter I have to discuss with you has to do with Naxxramas and Azjol-Nerub.”

“We are already planning to put an end to the nerubian kingdom,” Ger’alin cut in quickly. “Naxxramas will have to wait until after.”

“Actually, my king wishes us to destroy Naxxramas in conjunction with your destruction of Azjol-Nerub. He wishes to see the traitors there brought to justice, their heads hanging over the gates of Stormwind as a warning to any who would serve the Scourge. The nerubians we will happily leave to you, rendering whatever aid you require of us so long as it does not deter us from our goal of destroying Naxxramas.”

“We can take care of Azjol-Nerub on our own,” Garrosh snorted. “We don’t need any help from you.”

“Very well then,” Bolvar said, bowing politely. “Shall I take word back to my people that there will be a truce between us all in Northrend?”

“I will order my forces not to bother you or impede you so long as you stay out of our way.”

Bolvar nodded and glanced at the door. Garrosh waved and grunted, granting him permission to depart. Ger’alin leapt up and began escorting the human out of the orcish stronghold. Alayne hung back, wary and awkward lest Bolvar find out about her. Instead, Zerith followed the pair out of the keep and down the road, Ger’alin desperately wishing he could debrief the priest on everything that had happened that day.

“Taking Azjol-Nerub won’t be easy,” Bolvar said suddenly as they reached a crossroad. “Go on ahead of me. I would speak with these two,” he told the rest of his escort, pointing at Ger’alin and Zerith. “Garrosh doesn’t trust me,” he said bluntly, dropping his diplomatic persona.

“Garrosh has heard stories about what the humans have done to those of us in the Horde,” Ger’alin muttered. “About Garithos’s betrayal of our prince years ago. About the Cult of the Damned, Kel’Thuzad, the Scourge, the internment camps, Admiral Proudmoore’s aborted invasion of Durotar. He’s heard these stories and no, he doesn’t trust you.”

“Do you?”

“We have no choice,” Zerith answered. “Obviously you’ve come to ask us to either aid you or to assure us you won’t bother us. That’s to the good. We’ve enough on our hands without having to worry about the Alliance hindering us in Northrend. We’ll trust you until you give us a reason not to.”

“Taking Azjol-Nerub will be difficult,” Bolvar sighed. “Taking Naxxramas will be well nigh on impossible. The Argent Dawn and the Argent Crusade are having difficulty establishing a teleport. There’s little hope that the mages of Dalaran will aid us. The dwarves of Aerie Peak say that their gryphons refuse to make the journey to the north.”

“Why do you speak of Dalaran?” Zerith wondered. “No one has heard or seen much of them since Archimonde destroyed the city. There’s only a huge shell guarding the area where it once stood. I’ve seen that with my own eyes.”

“Five days ago, the people of Southshore awoke to a terrible earthquake. They ran out of their houses and into the open plains, terrified that the buildings or trees would collapse on them. What they saw... the city of Dalaran was torn from the earth and began floating northward. Riders pursued it all the way to the Isle of Quel’Danas where it vanished in the distance. As we were journeying overseas, I received missives by falcon informing me of these events and asking me to be on the look-out for a floating city.”

“So she wasn’t crazy,” Ger’alin sighed. “She really did see a city fly overhead.”

“Who?”

“My wife.”

“Your wife is out on campaign with you?” Bolvar asked, surprised.

“My wife is the one who formed this whole force. Her and her adopted brother,” he grinned, eyeing Zerith. “Of course she’s out here. She wouldn’t hear of staying put in Nagrand like a sensible and civilized woman.”

“I see,” Bolvar mused. “At any rate, we may not have a means by which to enter Naxxramas. I had hoped to negotiate something with Garrosh but he seems...resistant to the idea of helping us or of us helping him at all.”

“I’m not certain what aid we could offer,” Zerith sighed. “But we’ll think of something.”

“Mordenai,” Ger’alin said suddenly. Zerith stared at him for a moment before he recognized the name. “He always said he’d be willing to help us if needed. I’m sure that if all we asked was for a lift for a few soldiers, he’d be willing to provide it. Alayne can contact him and see what he has to say.”

“It seems we may have a way to get you to the floating citadel,” Zerith said softly.

“So it seems,” Bolvar agreed. “In return, I can have some of our allies provide you with the latest in explosives. They’ve worked out some version that heats up the ground a great deal, causing it to melt together and making it difficult for the nerubians to dig through. It could buy you precious time to rest and regroup before you set out against their home kingdom.”

“I thank you for this assistance,” Ger’alin sighed, relieved. “And, once I’ve informed Garrosh about your offer and its success, I’m certain he will be more receptive to dealing with you.”

“He could hardly be less so,” Bolvar grimaced. “Yet, we must hang together or we will all hang separately here in Northrend. I will keep you and your leaders informed on our progress towards Naxxramas. If you need any assistance from us in Azjol-Nerub, you need but ask and it will be yours.”

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“So the human thinks they can take Naxxramas?” Garrosh asked without preamble when Ger’alin and Zerith returned to the hold.

“He thinks they can and should,” the paladin replied smoothly. “It’s not as if we had given it much thought. We’re too focused on the nerubians at the moment.”

“The nerubians are a nuisance that must be dealt with. The Scourge, however, are our primary goal. We will destroy Naxxramas when the humans fail. However, until then, we’ll let it be their bodies and their blood that dots the snow beneath the floating citadel.”

“That’s not a very honorable thought,” Ger’alin growled. “They may not be our allies, but we should wish well anyone who has the nerve to take on Kel’Thuzad’s stronghold.”

“I do wish them well,” Garrosh protested. “I wish them well enough to wish that they’d never formed the Scourge to begin with. I wish they had never known the Burning Legion. I wish them well and I wish them gone from my sight and my thoughts.”

“Then let’s not speak of them,” Ger’alin suggested. “Instead, let’s discuss our part of the bargain; taking out Azjol-Nerub.”

“We’ve been planning that campaign since you arrived. I think we should move in the next few days; give your forces a chance to rest from keeping the spiders away from us but not give the reinforcements time enough to grow weary from the constant attacks.”

“I think we may have a means for slowing down the rate of attacks. I’ve happened upon a new version of the explosives we’re using. It will melt the metal in the ground, creating a seal through which the spiders can’t tunnel. It will take them time to dig around or under it. Time we could use to rest and march on their kingdom. Hopefully, by the time they do finally arrive here, we’ll be right behind them in their tunnels with a force here, ready to crush them between us.”

“And where did you ‘happen upon’ these new explosives?”

“A friend of a friend,” Ger’alin said blandly. “If they work as he claims, perhaps I can arrange an introduction.”

The dusky-skinned orc eyed his adopted brother suspiciously. Ger’alin met his gaze with the most innocent and helpfully useless expression the sin’dorei could muster without laughing. Zerith snorted but said nothing. “Very well then,” Garrosh muttered sourly. “Tell me, do you honestly think these humans will track down and destroy one of their own, brother?”

“I believe that Bolvar will have them doing their best to accomplish that, yes.”

“Then I will trust your judgement and that of the Warchief in this matter and will leave them alone, as I have promised. Should I need assistance from them, I will ask it and accept it when given.”

“I suppose that’s the best we can hope for,” Ger’alin sighed. “Garrosh, I’m not the world’s biggest fan of humans or the Alliance for all that I was raised among them and fought alongside them in the marshes of Dustswallow. I can tell you that there are honorable men and women amongst them. Jania Proudmoore, Thrall’s friend and ally. Bolvar Fordragon, the man who held the humans together after their king vanished. Varian Wrynn, the human king, who was at least considering peace with the orcs and the Horde before he vanished. Tyrande Whisperwind who would give aid to any who sought it and who has ordered her people to stand aside. There are also dishonorable bastards among them. Garithos, Fandral Staghelm, Var’thanos, Arthas before he became the Lich King. They’re not all the same and we should trust them until they prove they can’t be trusted; just as we do with our own.”

“As I said,” Garrosh grunted. “I will trust them until they prove they can’t be trusted. And, if half of what I’ve heard since leaving Outland is true, that won’t take very long at all. Now go. Procure and use these new explosives you’ve mentioned. The sooner we can take out the nerubian kingdom, the sooner we can quit worrying over it and begin planning how to take out the Lich King.”

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“I don’t want to hear another word!” Alayne screeched. “Why couldn’t you stay back in Silvermoon or return to Nagrand?” she moaned.

“If you think I’m going to spend the rest of my life handling reports from your estates, my Lady...” Mir’el teased.

“Light, I thought that was all forgotten,” she sighed.

“It was until Theron started looking for something to stabilize our people. If it’s any consolation to you, Alayne, you can probably afford to hire a baliff.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” she said. “Don’t bother explaining it either. I’m not interested.”

“You’re certainly back to your old self,” Jez’ral said dryly. “I guess adventuring agrees with you. Or is there another reason you’re up here where it is far too cold for any sensible person to do anything other than huddle near the closest fire?”

“Ger’alin suggests growing a beard,” she replied in like tone. “Apparently it does some good beyond annoying me.”

“Do it and I’m turning you out on the couch,” Mir’el threatened. “You didn’t like it fifty years ago and you’ve gotten no younger since.”

Alayne eyed the pair speculatively, wondering if she could figure out a way to keep them both out of her hair. Ever since Mir’el and Jez’ral had arrived on the last ship bringing reinforcements and supplies from Orgrimmar, they had shadowed her, commenting on everything from her state of dress to the bags under her eyes to the return of her ability to use magic. Mir’el, upon finding out that she was able to cast again, had dug his spellbook out of his packs and tried to convince her to attempt an invocation without letting her see what it was. When a dancing orc barged into the room ten minutes after, demanding that the curse be lifted or someone’s head would leave their shoulders, Alayne had seriously considered whether or not she could devise a way to charm Jez’ral and Mir’el as succubi did just so they would leave her in peace for a while.

“We’re not going back until you’re done here and that’s final,” Mir’el sighed. “First of all, I’ve been worried absolutely sick over how you’ve been. You’ve not written even one time to let us know anything!”

“Couriers are a little busy to be carrying personal missives,” the woman snorted.

“And, added to that, Theron is rousing the entire sin’dorei population to get up here. With the Sunwell restored and our powers returning to us in full force, he says it’s high time we raised our entire race’s stance in the eyes of the Horde. He also is struggling to unite our people under his leadership. The throne stands empty and he’s working damned hard to put himself on it or to find someone he could stand to serve under. It’s a thousand pities that Anasterian died leaving Kael his only child and Kael died without issue.”

“Without issue?” she quoted. “Speak like a normal person. Besides, what is it to us who sits on the throne?”

“It matters a great deal since your name has been bandied about.”

“I wouldn’t do it.”

“Frankly, I don’t think anyone would accept you as a ruler,” Jez’ral snorted. “I was shocked to hear that you’d even been offered entry into Sunstrider given that your ancestors can’t trace their lineage back to the Exile. Oh relax, woman,” he grimaced. “Your name was mentioned in exactly one discussion and that was only because Mir’el was tipsy and pointed out that Kael had offered you marriage to a kinsman.”

“I wasn’t tipsy,” Mir’el said defensively when Alayne glared at him.

“All right,” Jez’ral said slowly, “you were three sheets to the wind, then.”

“Not helping,” Mir’el whispered. “At any rate, you’re stuck with us. It’s a good thing we did come, Alayne. Now we can teach you everything your mother would have wanted you to learn. Now we can help you step out on the path you were born to walk. And, we can make certain that you don’t catch cold.”

Trumpets sounded three long blasts, making both men leap in fright. Alayne sighed and waited, cupping a hand to her ear to hear where the attack was coming from. Taking sweeping strides out of the room and to the western exit of the keep, Alayne hoped that Jez’ral and Mir’el would both be too out of sorts and too confused to follow after her.

She jogged out of the exit and her breath caught in her throat when she saw Ger’alin and Zerith pushing into the front of the lines, both men’s arms filled with what looked like sticks of dynamite. Neither of the sin’dorei participated in the battle. Instead, it seemed as if they were trying to deliver as much of the explosive they carried as was possible without

dropping any. Over the shouts of the fighters and the screeching screams of the dying nerubians, she could hear Zerith and Ger'alín both crying out, their voices raw and hoarse, for everyone to stand clear once they were finished. The spiders themselves seemed to be more desperate and more determined than ever to flood as many of their numbers through the underground tunnel as they could. Several times, Ger'alín would begin throwing explosives into the tunnel, the muscles in his arm and chest tensing as he heaved them down, killing a few of the climbing, scrambling spiders with well-aimed projectiles. Alayne could see her husband's expression growing more and more frustrated as the spiders poured out until he finally let go of all the explosives he carried, jerked Zerith in front of him with a shouted "Drop them!" and then began scurrying back to the keep.

"What is going on?" she demanded when Ger'alín and Zerith both nearly collapsed on top of her.

"Get the hell out of there!" Zerith shouted. "Out out out out out!"

"What's going on?" Jez'ral repeated Alayne's question, slightly out of breath from jogging to catch up to her.

"Brace yourselves!" Ger'alín roared, nearly laughing with pleasant anticipation. "Pull it down!"

The ground shook violently, knocking everybody off their feet. The very hold rocked and plaster began raining down on those inside. A deafening roar filled Alayne's ears and she was glad when she found herself being crushed against Ger'alín's chest. She shook with fright over what had just happened and over the fact that she could feel his laughter but not hear it. "What was that?" she shouted, unable to hear her own voice over the ringing in her ears.

"The sweet sound of salvation!" Ger'alín shouted back, likewise unable to hear anything but too exultant to care. "Those things work just like Fordragon said they would!" Gently prying his wife's hands away from his shoulders, he staggered to his feet, disoriented by his deafness. With careful steps, he walked back over to where the hole in the ground had been. A quickly cooling, smoking layer of tar and melted stone met his gaze where the yawning entrance from below-ground had been. The stench of roasting nerubians made the paladin gag until he retched. He waved his hand in front of his face when he finished, afraid that if he could not waft the odor away fast enough, he might collapse. He flinched when he felt hands grabbing his shoulders and arms slipping around his waist to tug him back towards the keep. Closing his eyes, he let himself be led back, glad to let someone else steer him while he was yet so unsteady.

For long moments, he and the others sat sprawled on the stairs of the keep, excitement and fear making their breath come short and the stink causing them to gag and their eyes to water from the smell and smoke. Only the Forsaken were unaffected and, this time, Callie was glad to be of more use than she had been on the beaches. Though they were deafened by the noise of the explosion as much as anyone, they could investigate the swiftly solidifying ground, testing it to see that it was indeed growing more solid and more dense. The entire area of the quarry seemed to be hardening. It was almost a quarter-hour before anyone's hearing returned and, even then, the elves' ears rang so badly they all almost wished to be deaf again.

"I don't think," Zerith panted, squeezing his eyes shut and covering his sensitive ears with trembling hands. "I don't think I can survive another one of those."

"Light..." Mir'el gasped. "Another?"

"Please not another," Jez'ral whimpered. Alayne just nodded dumbly then wished she hadn't. The ringing seemed to grow worse when she moved her head.

"Only if they come back," Ger'alín growled grimly, his jaws clenched tightly and his eyes pulled shut. "Light, let that have worked. Why didn't he warn us about the effects?"

Callie jammed a finger in her ear and wriggled her jaw several times until the pressure released and she was able to sigh with relief. "I guess it's not so bad for them," she said.

“Still, a warning would have been nice for you,” she added when the sin’dorei all glared at her. “Come on,” she sighed, gesturing for the other Forsaken nearby to help them lift and carry the elves back to their rooms. “A good nap and you’ll all be fine.”

“A good nap and we’ll all be ready to put an end to those blasted spiders before we’re forced to go through this hell again!” Ger’alin roared before he had a chance to consider the wisdom of his actions.