

“You’re looking better,” Callie offered in a hushed voice when she saw Ger’alin collapse onto a bench, a plate piled high in front of him. He looked at her and snorted.

“Pain is an instructive teacher,” he muttered sullenly. “And guilt helps too.”

“They’ll forgive you,” she whispered. “They can’t help themselves.”

“Alayne’s already forgiven me. Her and her damned cold feet got their revenge. Oh, you can laugh,” he growled. “She did.”

“Well, if it helps you at all, I’ve volunteered to be the next bomb carrier if another attack comes. Garrosh thinks it won’t happen, though. He had the shaman out testing the ground – the druids, too. They say that whatever it was that was in the explosives seems to have spread heat through the soil. Most of the rock beneath the quarry has melted together. The metal too.”

“That’s a relief. You wouldn’t have to do that, though. I’ll never ask another to do something I’m not willing to do myself.”

“So chivalrous,” she laughed. “If it comes to it, let me do it, Gerry. It’s the least I can do to make up for...”

“Stop that,” he grimaced. “It wasn’t your fault. Yes, you led the attack that got them killed. But, it’s not your fault they died. You’re starting to sound like Alayne, blaming yourself for things that are beyond your control.”

“Aye, sir,” she said softly, saluting slightly.

Ger’alin sighed and set back to eating. He felt completely out of his depths trying to talk sense into Callie. He wished he knew some wisdom to help people feeling the way Callie did and the way Alayne had. As he thought about it, he grew more and more frustrated. He’d tried for a year to help his wife see reason and it’d taken just a simple ceremony to get her head cleared. Would they now need to do the same for the Forsaken? And why would neither of the women listen to him when he said almost the same things they had to already know? The bitter thoughts soured his appetite and he flung his fork onto the plate with a growl.

“Where’s Garrosh?” he asked harshly.

“In the war room.”

Nodding in acknowledgement, he stood up from the table and stormed into the war room, hoping that *someone* would listen to him today. Garrosh was seated in a chair near the window, his elbows on his knees and his hands hanging out over his legs. He looked chastened as another orc, this one older, grizzled, and well-muscled stood in front of him. Ger’alin almost turned and left the room but the other orc called out for him to remain.

“Ger’alin,” Garrosh said sullenly, “this is Saurfang.”

“Overlord,” Ger’alin gaped.

“Sunrage,” Saurfang grunted in greeting. “The Warchief has requested I come here, Hellscream, and what he requests, I do.”

“I don’t need my hand held.”

“I never said you did. But Thrall wants no trouble with the Alliance. They’ve worked out an uneasy truce.”

“We should sweep them out of Northrend, off of Kalimdor, and out of our way! But I have obeyed my Warchief’s wishes, Overlord. I have held my hand and even allowed the humans to build their own keep here in Borean Tundra. I have held my parties back from raiding them for fresh supplies. I have even treated gently with their deserters, turning them over alive and unharmed to their own commanders. I do not need the Might of Kalimdor standing over me to make me do what I have already done!”

“Good,” Saurfang snorted. “That will leave me more time to spend with my son, then.”

“Your son has traveled with you?”

“My son has journeyed on to Dragonblight as a scout. His forces should be reporting to us soon about what they find. I know,” he said, raising his hand to forestall a comment, “you’ve had your own forces scout the area. My son will be working with the humans as well, to help secure a position from which Icecrown and the Lich King can be attacked, guarding our backs against them while you and your forces here deal with the nerubians. They will also keep an eye on the humans to make certain that Naxxramas is dealt with as it deserves.”

“So you don’t trust the humans any more than I do,” Garrosh grumped.

“I trust them as far as I am able. I know all that they are capable of. Think on that,” Saurfang said before turning on his heel and marching out of the room.

“Thrall sent a nursemaid to corral me,” Garrosh growled when the door closed behind the other orc.

“I’m sure that he sent Saurfang only to help you,” Ger’alin offered half-heartedly. The sin’dorei was still overawed at the thought of the High Overlord, the Might of Kalimdor, the orc responsible for helping to hold the qiraji threat back in Silithus, being here in the very same keep as he was. During the horrible nightmare of a year when the man had believed Alayne dead, he and Callie had journeyed to Silithus and had taken part in a few of the offensives against Ahn’Qiraj. He’d only seen Saurfang, the leader of the Horde forces, there once and he’d been extremely intoxicated at the time. Relief swept over the paladin that Saurfang hadn’t seemed to recognize him and embarrassment at remembering just how little use he’d wound up being in Silithus. Callie still wouldn’t speak to him about that time, telling him only that he really didn’t want to know why he could only remember her dragging him through Un’Goro muttering about the stench in his helm.

“I told the Warchief I would not move against the Alliance!” Garrosh raged. “Even if I think it is insanity to let our enemies sit there in peace, growing strong and fat while we fight off their foes for them! I swore not to move against them and I have kept my oath! Tell me, brother, do you think Thrall thinks so little of my word that he has deliberately crippled my efforts here, refusing to send me all the reinforcements I have asked for, because he fears that too many in the Horde would follow me if I did lead a mutiny against him?”

“Personally, brother,” Ger’alin muttered, “I think Thrall would tear you limb from limb with his bare hands and then he would stop being nice if you even thought of such a thing. I’m sure he’s sent what he can afford to send. Remember, you lost a good number of those reinforcements when they were killed by the vykrul. Perhaps he was merely holding back until they could reach you in condition to be of use to you. I think that he sent Saurfang because that is a legendary orc. If your father were still alive, he would have sent him because Hellscream and Saurfang are names that any of your people would gladly follow into the Nether and would fully expect to return victorious with glory and honor.”

“Are those names truly so legendary, truly so revered among your people?”

“Your people are my people and mine are yours. We’re brothers, are we not? So yes, those names are as revered to mine as they are to yours. And one day, I hope those names will be as revered among the Alliance as they are among the Horde. Perhaps this whole expedition into Northrend is fate’s way of giving all us mortals a chance to come together.”

“And perhaps the pigs will grow wings and fly.”

Ger’alin laid a hand on Garrosh’s shoulder and stared down at the orc, his expression utterly serious. “With us around, brother, anything is possible.”

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Jez’ral huddled deeper into his cloak, wishing there were something thicker than wool. The snow and ice that covered the ground of Dragonblight had seeped through his thick

leather-soled boots, numbing his feet. He was glad that he was not one of the warriors, forced to wear plate in such cold weather. The mere thought of it made him shiver more violently.

“We’ll be in out of the cold soon,” Ger’alin said, clapping a gauntleted hand on Jez’ral’s shoulder. The older man shivered, the iciness from the gauntlet seeming to leak through the layers of cloth.

“Damn Mir’el and his worrying about Alayne,” Jez’ral thought to himself, not for the first time since arriving in Northrend. He didn’t want to admit to himself that he had been just as worried about her, especially since the last time he’d seen her, she had still been tormenting herself and refusing to listen to reason. He had been afraid that she was doing something much like what Mir’el had attempted to do years ago when, as a young man, he was put in a situation he felt he could not honorably escape from. Only, in Alayne’s case, there really had been no hope that someone like Tal’ar might come around and solve the problem for all of them.

“Jez’ral, you really didn’t have to come here,” the object of his thoughts muttered to him. “We can handle cleaning out Azjol-Nerub without you looking over our shoulders.”

“I don’t doubt that you can,” he answered dryly. “Take it up with your other adopted uncle. I was informed last night that I’d be accompanying you or I’d be sleeping outside for the rest of our stay in Northrend.”

“Tell Mir’el he’s dangerously close to being appointed my baliff, whatever that is.”

“Tell him yourself. But let me know when you’re going to do it because I believe I could make a small fortune selling tickets to that particular explosion.”

Alayne snorted and said nothing. Instead, she stared down the cavern, wishing that she had a torch. When she saw Ger’alin lift the torch he carried and blanch, she was glad she didn’t carry one. The stink of burning silk filled the air and she pinched her nose shut.

“Cobwebs cover just about every inch of it. We’re going to have to be careful not to get caught up in it. I’ve no desire to become a meal for an oversized spider,” he said, his voice carrying over the group. “Keep away from the walls as best you can and keep your eyes on your feet.”

The group began moving through the tunnels. Narrow, twisting corridors led them to a large room where several packs of nerubians waited, hissing and clacking their mandibles. One huge nerubian towered over the packs, his multi-faceted eyes glaring down in triumph and hatred at the intruders. “This kingdom belongs to the Scourge!” the deep voice of the giant nerubian roared, echoing through the chamber. “Only the dead may enter!”

Ger’alin rushed forward, smashing his shield against the armored face of one of the other spiders. He bore down with his mace, hoping to crush the creature and get through to the giant nerubian before any further warnings could be sounded. He felt something catch on his leg and looked down to see webbing holding him to the floor, the sticky spray immobilizing him. “Attack!” he shouted, flailing about him with his mace and shield while the spiders buffeted him with their many legs.

Spells flew through the air and the thrill of magic tingled up Alayne’s spine as she hurled arcane bolts at the spiders, sometimes throwing them back against the enormous pillars that rose up to a cavern roof that vanished in the shadows. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see her brother, his attention completely centered on the tall nerubian, muttering the words of a prayer beneath his breath as he tried to counter and hold off whatever un-natural attack the gate-keeper was trying to unleash. The nerubian likewise had his focused on the priest, trying to get around the interference from the holy Light. Alayne and Jez’ral both groaned when they felt their own legs being stuck to the floor. Looking down, their annoyance turned to horror as they saw a web being spun around their bodies, covering them from feet to waist. Both mages stopped casting their spells at the spiders and began trying to

break the wrappings encasing them. All around them, others were doing the same, leaving the melee groups without any covering fire.

“Push harder!” Ger’alin roared, glancing back to see the cause of the loss of magical attacks. “Some of you get back there and cut them loose!”

Callie led some of the others back towards the rear of the room, wielding her daggers to slice through the webbing. She grimaced when the sticky substance threatened to pull her daggers from her hands and began kicking at it, not caring at all when she lost a boot in the glue-like webbing. As soon as they managed to free one caster, the attacks against the rear group intensified. “It’s the big ones,” Dar’ja shouted, pointing out three larger spiders mixed in among the melee groups. “They’re the ones casting that spell!”

Ger’alin nodded and grunted. With a few swift words and gestures, he sent the remaining hand-to-hand forces against those three, focusing their attacks on them and disrupting the strange magical attack against the ranged fighters. Once the three spiders were dead, the others fell quickly to the onslaught of steel and spells. The tall, thin nerubian stood in front of a doorway, glaring down at the attackers, quivering with a mix of rage and fear as Zerith and Dar’ja’s prayers to the Light held him fast, preventing him from surging forwards or fleeing. Ger’alin, dispatching the last of the waist-high nerubians, jogged quickly to their leader and sought for a weak spot. Finding none, the paladin reached out to the Light and flung its outrage at the being who willingly bent knee to the Lich King.

Spells of fire, arcane, ice, and shadow flew through the air to join the spells of Light pummeling the creature. The nerubian shivered, jumped, and shrieked but remained confined, unable to move its legs or counter the offensive. Soon, it toppled over, joining its comrades in the death they served.

The Disorder of Azeroth began to make their way through the door the nerubians had guarded, stopping to eye the fallen creature with a mix of disgust and respect. As Jez’ral passed by, he shuddered. For all that the Scourge minion was fallen, hatred for the living still blazed from its multi-faceted dead eyes.

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Zerith wondered if they were ever going to be able to find their way out of this place. He’d gotten impossibly turned around ever since they’d left the first room. As he watched his groups scaling down the sticky silk webbing, he prayed that climbing up would be as easy as climbing down.

“The first thing I’m going to do when we get back to Warsong Hold,” Dar’ja was muttering beneath her breath, “is take at least seven baths. I *hate* the feel of cobwebs.”

“I know,” he whispered, fearful that the slightest sound might be carried and amplified by the twisting cavern pathways. “Go see how the magi are holding up. I think some of them may have been pushing it too hard trying to float so many down here.”

“Some of them?” she snorted. “Jez’ral’s the only one who fainted and Alayne’s half sure that’s because he hates being underground. I’ll go,” she said when her husband gave her a withering look that said his patience was growing thin.

“At least it’s warmer here than it is up top,” the priest thought to himself. “I would have thought the nerubians would prefer it colder.”

“So?” Ger’alin asked, pulling Zerith from his thoughts.

“I think we should have brought more rope.”

“We’ll muddle through,” the paladin sighed. “I’m more worried about whether or not we’ll be able to get out of here once we’re done.”

“Any luck making your way through the hatcheries?”

“There’s nothing beyond them. I’ve sent scouts further through the corridor there,” he pointed to a web-covered passage that seemed to lead even deeper underground. “I told them not to go too far. I don’t like that we’ve not seen much of anything since... what in the name of the Dark Titan is *that*?” he said quickly, hearing skeetering and screeching from the corridor. Zerith turned to look and blanched as waves of spiders began pouring out of the corridor. They washed over the fighters, seeming to ignore them, wanting only to escape. The Disorder of Azeroth did its best to dispatch the fleeing nerubians, killing many who ignored defense in favor of flight.

“Light them up!” the men heard Alayne shout. “Jump off and brace yourselves!” Walls of flame shot over the silken webs they’d used to climb down into the room. Zerith groaned and Ger’alin cursed beneath his breath as they watched the woman cut off their – and the spiders’ – only means of quick escape. They sneezed as the smell hit them and rubbed at their eyes.

“At least we don’t have to worry about them getting away from us now,” Ger’alin muttered as he turned away and waded into the fighting. When he felt tiny spiders skittering beneath his armor, he was glad of the chain mail that covered him beneath the plate armor he generally wore. Ignoring them for the minor annoyance they were, he focused on helping clear a path through the bodies of the fleeing nerubians to the tunnel through which they had come. As he drew nearer the mouth of the dark entrance, the preternatural silence of the cavern spooked him. Behind him, he could hear the shouts and battle cries of his comrades, and the horrible shrieks of the dying nerubians. Ahead...nothing. Only a faint howling as an underground breeze blew through the long corridor.

He gasped when he felt more than heard the booming echoes shaking the tunnel. The surviving nerubians in the room behind him redoubled their efforts to escape, no longer making any pretense at attacking. Webs shot from their bodies, sticking to the walls as they tried to pull themselves up and away from whatever it was that was coming up the tunnel. Soon the other members of the Disorder of Azeroth felt the tremors that nearly made Ger’alin’s knees buckle. Jogging backwards, not daring to let his eyes leave the dark corridor, he rejoined the others, ignoring the minions of the Scourge, and waited.

A massive, green spider appeared in the opening of the tunnel. Its eyes glowed red and it hissed at its sudden emergence from darkness into Light. Ger’alin’s jaw dropped as he sized the creature up. Before he could think of a plan, the spider scrambled into the room, using its pointed claws as weapons to cut or jab anything that stood in its path. The paladin ran forward, shouting for the others to help him surround the thing. Callie was one of the first to follow after him, her daggers nearly flying out of her hands when she tried to cut one of the creature’s legs off. “Armor plated!” she shouted, looking for a weak point.

Ger’alin did his best to hammer away at the creature, not wanting to let it come any further into the room than it was. Four of its legs were still in the hallway. Of the four in the room, it used the front pair to sweep anyone near it off their feet. Several times, Ger’alin missed being mowed down by mere inches. He could hear the frenzied attack from the back ranks but his total concentration was absorbed in dodging the spider’s attacks and trying not to look into its dripping maw or its demonic red eyes.

Swinging wildly, he managed to wound the creature, grinning when his hammer connected with a satisfying crunch. “Come on!” he roared. “Bring it down!”

“I’m trying, I’m trying,” Callie muttered as she tried to duck under the creature. The thing seemed to be covered in armor. Its scales deflected her blows as well as any plate she had ever encountered. Disdaining the underbelly as hopeless, she squeezed into the tunnel, grabbed onto one of the back legs, and propelled herself up onto the creature’s back. Sensing something atop it, the spider tried to buck but the confines of the tunnel held him fast at the sides. Creeping slowly up the creature, she found what she had been looking for. A soft spot

between the head and the abdomen. Letting her daggers whirl through her hands, she jabbed down, striking that vulnerable point repeatedly and hanging on for dear unlfe when the spider began swinging its head to try to throw her off.

Ger'alın, seeing what his friend was attempting, threw himself into a renewed attack. Again and again his hammer met the creature, breaking away parts of its body, chipping armored scales off its legs. Finally, with a gasp that made Ger'alın gag and nearly faint, the spider collapsed in a heap. Callie leapt lightly off the creature's back as it fell, grabbing Ger'alın by the arm and dragging him away from it. The paladin found he didn't have the energy or strength left to do anything other than lurch after her.

"Ger'alın, what's wrong?" Zerith asked, his face filled with concern. The other man looked deathly pale and his eyes were quickly losing their luminous glow. "Did it bite you?"

"I think," Ger'alın said, his vision growing hazy, "I'm going to be sick."

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"We can't stay here much longer," Zerith sighed. Alayne nodded dumbly, combing her fingers through Ger'alın's hair. He still slept, his face pale. He shivered violently sometimes from the fever gripping him. A myriad of bites marked his arms and chest from where tiny nerubians had managed to get beneath his armor to unleash their venom. Beyond that, he'd taken a full dose from the enormous spider whose body still partially blocked the way deeper into the nerubian kingdom of Azjol-Nerub.

"I'm not leaving him," she whispered.

"I wouldn't dream of suggesting it," her brother sighed. "But we can't risk carrying him with us and there's really no way out of here now."

"What do you suggest?"

"I'm working on something," Zerith muttered, blowing over the tips of his fingers and wishing he knew what to do.

"I could climb that," she said, pointing to the wall that led down from where they had been.

"Carrying him? I don't think so."

"The Apothecaries," she muttered. "I could climb out, go to them, get some kind of antidote, come back here and take care of him."

"We are not going to the Apothecaries."

"Zerith, I'm out of ideas and no one here has the time or the tools to do anything other than hope he fights it off on his own."

"He'd strangle me if I let you go run off to the Apothecaries."

"Well, I hope you're ready to fight him over it because, as you just said, you can't stay here much longer and I can't carry him out of here. The only way you can stop me is to tie me up and we both know that won't work," she said stubbornly. "Zerith, you're right. We've got to keep moving; we can't let up the attack now. I could be back from fetching help within an hour, Light willing."

"Callie!" Zerith called out, startling his sister and nearly pulling Ger'alın out of the fevered sleep that kept the man quiet. The rogue trotted over to the priest, wondering what more she could do. She'd pulled out every posion she'd carried with her to try to help Zerith and the others formulate an antidote but none had been close enough to do anything other than make the man sicker than he already was. "You're going to Venomsprite," Zerith muttered to the Forsaken when she reached him. She blinked at him but nodded. "Alayne, you'll stay here and keep an eye on him. The rest of us are going to move on. Try to keep him warm, give him water if he comes around enough to swallow it, and hope for the best. Of course, if anything gets past us and back here to you, you're on your own to deal with it," the priest finished,

running his hands over his hair and wanting to tug at it in frustration. “I can’t spare anyone to stay here with you. Perhaps if we hadn’t left so many over in Howling Fjord to keep tabs on the vykrul...”

“I’ll be back before you know it,” Callie said quickly, scrambling over the broken rocky floor and jumping to cling to the wall. Burnt remnants of sticky spiderwebs dotted the wall’s rough surface, helping the rogue to pull herself up and along the wall’s face, helping her to reach her goal. Zerith sighed, wrung his hands, and wished there were something more he could do. Finally, Alayne looked up at him, her gaze calm but her worry shining dully in her eyes.

“You’d better get going,” she whispered. “I’ll stay here with him and take care of him one way or another.”

Zerith nodded reluctantly and trotted back down towards the others.

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“Light stay with me,” Callie prayed as she urged her horse to gallop faster. She’d not even slowed to explain herself when several night elven sentinels tried to bar her path. Signalling for her horse to leap over them, she’d continued on, slowing only when she reached the treacherous cliffs that led down and up into a barren waste. She sighed with relief when she passed the huge temple that dominated the desert; it put her as being closer to her destination. “Please don’t let these Apothecaries be complete jerks like Putress,” she muttered to herself as the bony spires of Venomspite appeared on the horizon. She sawed at the reins, bringing her horse to a skidding halt, and jumped from its back, rolling and scrambling back to her feet in her haste to reach someone, anyone, who might be able to help her.

“What do you want?” sneered a voice she recognized. “We’re busy,” the man wearing a wooden-beaked mask growled. “The Alliance has riled up Naxxramas and then left us to deal with the mess.”

“Our allies need assistance in taking the nerubian kingdom,” she gasped, cursing her ill-luck at being face-to-face with the last Forsaken she wanted to see.

“Allies,” he sneered, tasting the word as if it were unfamiliar to him. “Allies? You mean those of you who left us far behind in our research in Howling Fjord? Those of you who riled up the vykrul and have left us to handle them? Allies,” he spat.

“The toxins you had us test out on the vykrul could have killed the testers,” Callie retorted. “So much for your vows that it was ‘perfectly safe.’ And we left a force over in Howling Fjord to keep an eye on the vykrul. We will be returning there – with a contingent from Garrosh Hellscream – to clean them out once and for all!”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, girl,” he snorted. “What did you fair-weathered friends want from us that sent you scrambling over here?”

“One of our number has been poisoned by the nerubians. I’ve brought samples of the venom. Our healers have tried healing it but it’s persistent.”

“Nerubian venom is highly necrotic in nature. Your friend may be dead by the time you get back to him.”

“Then that will be my problem,” Callie snarled. “Are you going to help me or not?” Reaching into her backpack, she pulled out the gory venom sacs she’d cut from the enormous spider and some of the corpses of the tiny spiders they’d found beneath Ger’alin’s armor. Putress rolled his shoulders back and Callie could feel his icy glare even through the wooden beak-mask he wore. He took the samples from her and stormed into a small building attached to the town’s warehouse. When the rogue started to follow him, he turned on his heel and pointed towards the other end of the settlement.

“While I’m trying to help those of you who abandoned us, why don’t you go over there and see if you can keep some of the skeletons the Alliance has riled against us from doing more damage to our siege engines?”

Callie sighed and loped over to the other side of the town when Putress slammed the door in her face. She prayed that Putress would be able to devise an anti-venom quickly enough that she would not feel responsible for Ger’alin’s death. The guilt from leading others onto the southern beach still gnawed at her and she prayed desperately that this would somehow erase or lift the burden she felt weighing her down. When she reached the bend that let her see around the mountain, she groaned. Scores of skeletons wandered aimlessly across a vast plain dominated by the shadow of the floating necropolis, Naxxramas. She could see shadows flying over the ground and, looking up to follow their source, saw the drakes helping the Alliance to fly directly into the ziggurat. She hoped their efforts met with success but she could see why the Forsaken in Venomsprite held the Alliance responsible for the attacks against their town. With each fresh assault against the necropolis, more and more skeletons were transported down to the ground level by the Scourge mages. Necromancers began wandering among them, directing them to attack both the Alliance and Forsaken settlements. While she waited for Putress to finish his work, Callie helped keep the Scourge at bay. Several times, the town’s defenders flung bombs that spat out green smoke, turning anything that was touched by the toxin into a greasy liquid that made the snow boil.

“Don’t let the smoke get to you,” one of the guards cautioned. “They’re still working on trying to make it know we’re not Scourge but it’ll melt anything – living or dead.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Callie muttered ironically.

“Yeah,” the guard replied in the same tone, “it’d have been nice if those assholes had warned us. Three of our best scouts gone before we realized this thing wasn’t half as ‘intelligent’ as Putress and his cronies claim.”

“And people wonder why we stopped working for them,” she sighed as she set her bomb in a sling-shot-like device that catapulted it near one of the wandering necromancers.

“Nice shot!” one of the guards cheered as the necromancer toppled over, the smoke from the bomb killing him. Callie averted her eyes from the grisly scene and noticed the others looking away in the distance as well. Though all had seen and dealt death in many fashions, it seemed that few actually liked the manner of death the Apothecaries had devised. Callie sighed, glanced back over her shoulder to see if Putress was on his way, and then prepared another missile for launching.

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“Whoever designed this place was insane, drunk, or some mix of the two,” Zerith snarled quietly in exasperation. “We’ve been wandering in circles for hours now!”

Dar’ja sighed as they stared at the marking she’d made on the wall the second time they’d passed it. The whole group was on edge, wondering if they would ever find their way deeper, or even out of, this place. “Why don’t we split up?” she suggested.

“No,” he sighed. “Then we’d just be lost in different ways with no way to communicate. We need to stay together until we figure out where we are.”

“What if we retraced our steps back to the entrance? Perhaps there is a pathway we missed.”

“I’m not sure we could retrace our steps. I’ve lost all sense of direction in these tunnels.”

“Then we’ll go forward again,” Dar’ja said firmly, refusing to let her husband’s pessimism influence her. “We’ve just missed something that would be obvious to a nerubian. We need to think more like them and less like us.”

“Think like a Scourge spider?” Zerith snorted. “Not very likely.” Dar’ja glared at him but said nothing. Instead, she strode to the head of the group, took a torch from one of the warriors, and began to advance through the tunnels with swift, sure strides. The others, including her irritated husband, followed after her, hoping that she had finally figured out the key to where they needed to go. For long moments, they remained in the dark tunnels, their anxiety beginning to turn into panic. Dar’ja led them, taking random directions through the passageways, soon losing herself and the others in the myriad twists and turns. She calmed herself by telling herself that at least they had not gotten twisted around back to the beginning, again. If her husband’s rational, logical planning couldn’t get them further into Azjol-Nerub, maybe doing something only Alayne or she would think of as reasonable could.

At long last, the tunnels gave way to an open area. The members of the Disorder of Azeroth who filed out of the tunnels and into the dimly-lit cavern sighed with relief. Dar’ja grinned in satisfaction and Zerith walked over to her, putting an arm around her waist to let her know he was proud of her for getting them out of the mess he’d been leading them into. “How did you figure it out?” he whispered in her ear.

“I didn’t,” she admitted in an undertone. “I just kept going.”

Zerith stifled an irritated laugh, knowing that if he gave into his panic, it would be the end of them. They were hopelessly lost now and he just prayed that this was not a dead-end that would force them back into the labyrinthine tunnels. The group began to spread out in the room, taking advantage of the space to relax and try to gather their wits. Several looked to Zerith and Dar’ja, their gazes communicating their hope that the pair were on top of things and knew what to do next. The priest closed his eyes and sent a silent prayer to the Light for inspiration.

“Aieeeee!!!!” a panicked shout roused everyone back to their feet. One of the fighters Garrosh had sent with them clung to the edge of a web-covered crater. Several others were hurrying to him, watching the ground beneath them and hoping there were no other pitfalls. Before anyone could reach him, his grip slipped and he plummeted. Zerith and Dar’ja reached the edge of the crater in time to see his form fading in the eerie green glow that came from below. After what seemed like an eternity, they heard a faint splash in the distance below. Zerith shuddered and closed his eyes, sending out a prayer for the warrior’s soul.

Grumbling began to pervade the room while Zerith prayed and Dar’ja paced. No one wanted to remain where death lurked, waiting for the first misstep to take them into the next life. Tears leaked down the priest’s tired face as he wished, not for the first time, that Ger’alin were there to rally them together with a few words. The grumbling began to fade as the dim echoes of more splashing made their way up the long drop. Incoherent words, their meaning mangled by the distance traveled, began to accompany the splashes. Zerith and the others glanced around at each other, wondering what this meant.

“There is no way in the Nether I’m going back into those tunnels,” the priest announced, doing his best imitation of his sister and her husband. “If you don’t hear from me in five minutes...” he grinned as he stood up and hopped into the empty space that led down.

He felt a rush of exhilaration as he fell through the air. He had only seconds to glance around in awe at the strange, lurid beauty around him. Mosses gave off light, glowing faintly where they clung to the walls. Soon, the space opened into a massive cavern with huge pillars reaching from floor to ceiling. Hatcheries and eggs lay all over the room and a few nerubians skittered about, maintaining a constant vigil over their unborn progeny. Seconds before he splashed down into a vast underground sea, Zerith could see the orc warrior who preceded him treading water calmly, grinning when he saw his leader plummet through.

“It’s a hell of a ride, eh, priest?” the warrior called out in friendly banter. Swimming over to Zerith, he pulled the priest away from where anyone else who had the courage to take the dive would land.

“It certainly is,” the sin’dorei agreed, pulling away from the other man and flinging his head back to throw his soaking hair out of his face. The pair kept a careful watch on the nerubians scrambling among the eggs, wary of an attack. “Come on down,” Zerith shouted, cupping his hands to his mouth and hoping that someone would make sense of his words. “The water’s fine!”

“You’ll feel so much better after a nice bath!” the warrior roared. “It gets the cobwebs right out!”

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“Where is Callie?” Alayne thought to herself as she continued to keep watch over her husband. Ger’alin had roused briefly, drunk some water, and then lapsed back into an exhausted sleep. He shivered with fever and, despite her best efforts, Alayne had been unable to keep any kind of fire going. She shivered herself, having taken off her cloak to lay it across Ger’alin. His face was pale, his scraggly, dark brown beard standing out starkly against his sallow skin. She untied his hair from the tail he kept it in, pulled over his shoulder, and tried to use it to cover more of him, desperate to find some way to keep him warm.

Ger’alin groaned and licked his lips, his eyes opening a crack as he glanced over at Alayne. She quickly unstopped the waterskin and let him sip from it. He held the last swallow in his mouth, swishing it around before he turned his head and spat as if he wanted to rinse a foul taste from his mouth. “I’m not feeling so great,” he admitted, smiling wanly. “What happened?”

“Some kind of poison,” Alayne told him. “Callie’s gone to fetch help. Zerith and the others have pressed on. You’re going to be fine.”

“Of course I will be,” he said softly. “Callie would never let me die until she decides to kill me to call in some debts I owe.”

“Don’t joke around about it,” Alayne said harshly. “You are not going to die.”

“I know that, woman,” he whispered affectionately. “I’ve no intention of dying until I’m at least six hundred and our grandkids have grandkids.”

Alayne continued to look around for any kind of cloth, webbing or wood she could burn or use to cover Ger’alin. He lapsed back into a restless sleep, muttering incoherently as his fever rose. Finally, the woman ripped a section from her own robes and wet it sparingly with water from the waterskin. Settling it over his forehead, she watched the tunnel Zerith and the other had taken and the overhead opening through which Callie had climbed, waiting and praying that help would arrive before the fever burned Ger’alin up.

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“That was the longest fall of my life,” Dar’ja muttered to Zerith once she climbed out of the water basin. “Whatever possessed you to do that? You scared the life out of me!”

“Don’t blame me,” he said defensively as he wrung out his hair. ““I just kept going,”” he quoted her. His wife snarled at him and began cursing softly enough that he could pretend not to hear her over the din of splashing, laughter, and cat-calls from the Disorder of Azeroth emerging from the water.

“That’s enough, everyone,” he said in a soft but carrying tone. “Let’s not let the entire rest of the nerubian kingdom know we’ve come to call.”

The noise died off as the fighters made their way to the shore and climbed out. Zerith took the opportunity to explore the area a bit more while his forces did their best to dry themselves off. The cavern into which they had fallen was enormous, more than rivaling the first cavern they had come to in this underground kingdom. As the priest studied the room, he

noted that the pillars must have been the staircase the nerubians used to climb out of the cavern. Decorated with whorls and phosphorescent mosses, they would give an easy grip for the spiders to cling to for climbing. The few nerubians he could see still skittering about the rooms seemed content to ignore the living. Zerith wondered how long that policy would last once the force began moving against the eggs. Part of him cringed at the thought of destroying defenseless creatures before they could even draw breath but he steeled himself for it. Most of the room was lost in shadow and he wondered if they would have time to fully explore it. Standing before him was a massive stone doorway that he was tempted to take once the others were ready to move forward. With a sigh, he glanced up at the hole in the ceiling, wishing Ger'alin were here.

“What do you think?” he asked Dar'ja, nodding towards the massive doorway.

“It's as good a place to start as any,” she replied, shrugging uncomfortably.

“We'll have to clear out this room first,” he added, glancing meaningfully around at the eggs covered in web, guarded by nerubians. Dar'ja shuddered in distaste. Without another word, he strode back over to where the others were gathered, giving him and his wife a respectful distance to discuss their plans. “We're taking that door,” he explained in a hushed undertone, “but before we do, we're clearing this room.”

The others glanced around the room at the numerous eggs and nodded in glum acceptance. With a few whispered commands, Zerith set the magi to burning the eggs while the melee fighters readied themselves to intercept any of the nerubian guards who moved to defend their young or called for reinforcements. As soon as the first spells were unleashed, the nerubians let loose a screeching shriek that made the hair on the back of Zerith's neck stand on end. Scrambling over to the attackers, they were quickly dispatched by the steel and arrows before they could reach the magi. Zerith kept a constant, roving watch over the door before them and the shadowed depths of the room, waiting for another wave of attackers. Only a few came, scrambling from those shadowed edges, and quickly joined their fellows in death. Once the last batch of eggs had been completely destroyed, Zerith heaved a sigh of relief.

“Keep an eye on that door,” he said. “The rest of you, fan out. Let's find out where the others came from and see if we're about to be overwhelmed.”

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“Really,” Callie said between clenched teeth, “you didn't have to.”

“But I insist, my dear,” Putress muttered, false gaiety coating his voice like rancid oil. “After all, if my antidote doesn't work, would you be able to figure out why and what to add to enhance or counteract it?” Callie glared at him but kept her mouth shut. “And I would rather think you would appreciate having some healers whose abilities lie with natural remedies instead of inherent inner faith and energy around.”

“*Ger'alin is going to strangle me and I'm going to let him this time,*” she thought to herself as they trotted out of Venomspite. After helping the town fend off attacks from the necromancers of Naxxramas, she had found Putress and two of his assistants preparing to accompany her back to Azjol-Nerub. When she had insisted that such a service was not needed, they had insisted on coming anyway. Knowing how little Ger'alin and Zerith cared for the masked man, she groaned inwardly at the thought of their upcoming confrontation. “Can we move faster?” she asked, preparing to kick her horse into a canter.

“I have ensured that everything was packed securely, my lord,” one of Putress's assistants rasped. “We could ride a gallop to help our allies,” he hissed the last word, his contempt clear in his voice though his expression remained one of helpful concern. With a nod, Putress and the others heeled their own mounts to a gallop, overtaking the rogue. Callie bit her tongue to keep from unleashing it at her would-be helpers and hurried after them.

Without letting up the pace a whit, the three raced to Azjol-Nerub. Callie felt relief beginning to wash over her when the entrance to the underground kingdom came into view. The cave that would lead them down had a raised dome, covered in snow, that acted as their landmark. Leaping lightly from her horse, she led him and the other three Forsaken down into the caverns that comprised the nerubian kingdom. As she climbed nimbly down the wall, she sighed when she realized that the Apothecaries might find such a feat difficult with their assorted gear and equipment.

“While I admire your skill at mimicking simians,” Putress sneered, “some of us might find it a bit easier to use a rope. It is a good thing we thought to bring some.”

Callie growled deep in her throat but continued to climb down, relieved to see Alayne hurrying to meet her. “How is he?” she asked the woman.

“The fever is scalding him,” Alayne whispered. “I hope that whoever or whatever you’ve brought can help him.”

“I hope so, too,” Callie sighed. “Where is he?”

Alayne pointed behind the debris where she and Ger’alin had been hidden from anyone or anything that might have found its way into the room. Callie jogged over, leaving Alayne to direct the Apothecaries and Putress to them, and shivered when she saw Ger’alin. She was taken back to the times the pair of them had spent together; the year he’d thought Alayne was dead. Several times she had had to stand guard over him while he slept the deep, restless sleep of the drunk, shuddering and crying out from nightmares during the long days and night of his torment. Now he lay almost as still as death itself, pale, heat radiating out of him while he shivered ever so slightly as if he did not have the strength to do more. Alayne had piled cloaks, webbing, torn tapestries – anything she could find in the ruined area – over him. A small fire crackled nearby. The stench of burning silk was strong in the air.

Alayne and the other three Forsaken made their way over to Ger’alin, the sin’dorei bringing them up-to-date in a careful undertone. Putress actually sounded almost concerned and gentle, even going so far as to put a comforting hand on Alayne’s shoulder and telling her that it would all be well in the end. Motioning for her to sit at her husband’s head, the head of the Royal Apothecary Society knelt next to the poisoned man. “Necrosis is beginning to set in. It’s a wonder he fought it this long,” he muttered to himself. “Salvan, get the rejuvenation mixture I brought and get as much of it into him as you can. Madam,” he said, glancing at Alayne, his tone respectful, “you may wish to step away for this. The potion will make him violently ill; it will force the poison out of his system so that Jermad,” he pointed to the other Apothecary, “can heal him. It will not be pretty to watch.”

“I’ll stay with him,” Alayne whispered firmly, licking her lips and swallowing hard.

“You there,” Putress said, pointing to Callie, “I want you to hold his arm. If he pulls up to sit, let him do so but keep him from swinging and hitting one of us. Salvan, hold his legs down. I’ll keep this arm from doing any damage and Jermad can just concentrate on the healing. Is everyone ready?” he asked, cupping Ger’alin’s head in his hand and pressing a glass vial against the man’s lips. The others nodded and Putress put his knee on Ger’alin’s arm, forced the potion into his mouth and then held his jaws shut until the sin’dorei swallowed. Moving as quickly as a viper, Putress backed off, dropped Ger’alin’s head, and gripped his arm. Seconds later, the man surged upwards, his shoulders and hips coming off the floor as his eyes flew open. Putress grabbed at Ger’alin’s shoulder and shouted for Salvan to move while not letting go of his legs. Alayne covered her mouth with her hand, fighting to hold her own queasiness at bay as she watched her husband bring up all the poison and toxins he’d inhaled or had injected into him. Long moments later, Putress helped the paladin lay back down, the man shuddering with weakness as his muscles spasmed wildly. Alayne placed a hand on his forehead, weeping with relief to find it sodden with sweat but otherwise cool.

Jermad exhaled heavily and lay down on his side, exhausted from pouring that much healing energy into a patient that quickly.

“What are you doing?” Callie asked in amazement when she saw Putress and Salvan begin taking samples from what had come out of her friend.

“It’d be wonderful if we could devise an antidote that didn’t react so violently,” Putress explained, a mildly sarcastic tone to his voice. “One that didn’t exhaust the patient as much as our current ones do. Perhaps with a little more study of what is in nerubian toxins and what it does to a living body, we can develop something a little more targeted and a little less...explosive. We learn through trial and error, just like everyone else.”

Listening to him, Alayne felt a pang of guilt. For so long, she’d heard almost nothing redeeming about the head of the Royal Apothecary Society. She’d even managed to convince herself he was up to no good and was needlessly endangering them all in Howling Fjord. But then, she and the others had assumed that the Apothecaries knew more than they did, perhaps. Putress sounded sincere when he said they learned from trial and error. Perhaps they had all been wrong to judge him and his efforts so quickly. Perhaps they could begin to rectify the mistake by assisting them in Dragonblight, once the threat of the nerubians was contained and Naxxramas dealt with. “Thank you for your help,” the woman said softly.

“We are always happy to be of help to our allies,” he said smoothly, bringing a stinging blush to Alayne’s cheeks. “Perhaps we can be of further help to you,” he continued, cocking his head to the side and cupping a hand to his ear as if to better catch a sound. “I do believe that someone – or something – may be about to pay us a visit and your husband might not be up to playing the part of a proper host.”

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Zerith glanced down through the massive door and clicked his tongue in frustration. They had thoroughly searched the entire cavernous room, finding only a few crawl-spaces where nerubians could have entered only one at a time. After long moments of hearing nothing, they decided to risk pressing further onwards in hopes of not finding an attack waiting to take them from behind. As he studied the next leg of their journey, he wished that Alayne were with them. The next room consisted of nothing more than a stairway leading down to a raised platform floating over empty space. Cobwebs connected the platform to the far walls. A massive creature unlike anything the priest had ever seen before sat in the middle of the platform, effecting a bored air. Two guardians stood where the stairway connected to the platform, their mandibles clicking audibly and their forelegs twitching with what seemed to be anticipation.

“What do you make of it?” he asked Dar’ja in a soft undertone.

“If the nerubians have leaders, I’d say he’s one of them,” she muttered.

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” he said. “I wish Alayne were here. I think she knows more than the lot of us combined about the nerubians.”

“Try asking one of the death knights?”

“That’s not a bad idea. Go find Ber’lon for me, would you?”

Dar’ja trotted back to the group, glad for once to have something to do that she at least understood. She recalled reading over the reports about the nerubians but feared she hadn’t paid them as much mind as they deserved, figuring that Scourge spiders weren’t very intelligent – little more than mindless beasts. She found Ber’lon standing alone, his icy gaze freezing the ground in front of him as he seemed to be mulling something over in his mind. “Zerith would like to have a word with you,” she whispered to the man, pointing to where her husband stood watching the room that awaited them.

“Oh, him,” Ber’lon snorted when he reached the priest and looked down into the room. “I wondered if he’d be here or if he’d just send his minions to die while he ran and hid like the coward he is.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That’s Anub’arak,” Ber’lon said, pointing to the massive creature on the platform. “He’s the nerubian version of Arthas Menethil, the traitor prince. He helped lead his people into slavery and he’s devoted to the Lich King. He’s a coward, too. Whenever we faced an honest push against us in the north, Anub’arak skittered away from it. I recall once we lost almost a full force of zombies and necromancers when the nerubian riled the tuskarr up and then scrambled away, leaving us to face the brunt of it.”

“Do you have any suggestions, then?”

“If he’s sitting there, waiting for us, then he thinks he’s got a way to win,” Ber’lon sighed. “If he thought there was a chance he’d lose, he’d have been out of here before we set foot in Dragonblight.”

“So, you think this is a trap?” the priest pressed.

“I know it’s a trap. I’m just not sure what to do about it because there’s really no way out of here except to go forward and hope to find a tunnel behind that bastard that takes us out of here.”

“I see,” Zerith sighed. “I wish Ger’alin were here.”

“I wish that too. I’ve seen what nerubians can do to a man. I’d not have wanted that for him or for anyone.”

“He’ll be fine,” Zerith said firmly.

“I pray that you’re right. Alayne would grieve to the end of her days if he’s not.”

Zerith sighed and walked back to the rest of the group. “There’s nothing left to do but to just press on,” he admitted. “The leader of the nerubians is just ahead of us. From what I know, he’s a tricky one who only fights when he’s certain he’ll win. We could be walking into a trap but we have no choice.”

The Disorder of Azeroth nodded in grim acceptance of what the priest said. “Let’s go,” he sighed, gesturing for them to follow him. Stepping up the pace, he motioned for the melee fighters to rush into the room ahead of the healers and ranged forces. The two guardians were quickly overwhelmed while Anub’arak sat quietly, his posture changing from boredom to smugness, as if he had just taken a bit of candy from a small child. The guardians were quickly dispatched, their corpses flung and kicked off the walkway and into the abyss.

“I was king of this empire once, long ago. In life I stood as champion. In death I returned as conqueror. Now I protect the kingdom once more. Ironic, yes?” the spider lord said as the fighters formed a ring around him. He considered them idly, as if wondering which one he would kill first. “Eternal agony awaits you!” he roared as he lunged at one of the warriors. Zerith shouted and pointed for the healers and ranged forces to take position at the edge of the ring, careful not to be too close to the edge lest the monster force them off. Spells, missiles, and swords flew to land against the nerubian king’s armored body. Zerith twitched and shuddered when he saw part of the creature’s armor fly off, exposing the necrotic flesh beneath. With a wordless howl, Anub’arak began pounding at the ground before him, softening the hard-packed dirt and then drew himself into it, leaving the stunned group wondering what would come next.

The answer came quickly as all manner of creatures began dropping down from the wings of the room. Once again, spells and swords flew in a flurry of furious combat as everyone tried to keep the spiders at bay. While they struggled to keep from being overwhelmed, the ground beneath Zerith and several of the magi began to give way. Leaping to the side, they rolled and managed to miss being thrown up in the air or over the sides of the platform as Anub’arak appeared once more, his multi-faceted eyes glowing with anger. The

group quickly repositioned themselves, the magi focusing on killing the spiders Anub'arak had called to aid him while the melee forces hammered away at the massive spider-lord. Zerith shuddered again when he heard a crunch, then liquid growling as one of the fighters drove his blade through Anub'arak's throat. "I never thought..." the spider gasped, "that I would be free of him..."

The creature's massive body quivered and then, with a ground-shaking thud, fell and lay still.

"What now?" Zerith wondered aloud as he and the others made their careful way down the thin spiderwebs that connected the platform to the far wall of the room.

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Alayne stood in front of Ger'alín, spells flying through her mind as she tried to concentrate on selecting the one that would do the most damage with the least amount of time or energy required in case they needed to flee. Putress had pulled out a vial of the very liquid she had tested for his Society once, prepared to hurl it at whoever or whatever was coming for them. For long moments they had stood at the ready while Ger'alín groaned and tried to gather his wits and strength. The two assistants split their attention between their patient and their master, waiting for the cue to know what they were to do next.

"I've never been one for patience," Putress muttered at long last. "Stay here. I am going to investigate this noise and see if perhaps it is just this cave crumbling around us."

"Hold on," Ger'alín panted. "Give me a moment, Putress," he drew in air through a raw throat, "and I will come with you. It does us...no good to...lose you to whatever...is out there."

"I admire your sentiment, Blood Knight, but you can barely sit up."

Ger'alín seemed to be about to find the strength to do more than sit up when Alayne laid a gentle but firm hand on his shoulder. Reaching down, she took up his mace. "I'm rusty and I was never very good with these, I know," she forestalled him, seeing the stubbornly angry look on his face, "but I can use magic and you know I can at least smack the Light out of anything waiting for us and give you enough warning to get ready. Just stay here another few moments, Ger'alín," she pleaded, her concern shining in her blue-tinged green eyes. "Let us see what this is so we'll quit scaring ourselves with our own imaginations."

"You owe me, woman," he muttered sourly. "Use both hands – a child could get that from you the way you're letting it dangle."

Alayne smiled her sweetest smile and received a half-amused, half-regretful grunt in return. Grasping the mace with both hands, she nodded for Putress to lead the way, hoping she wouldn't have to swing the heavy hammer too many times. Her respect for Ger'alín's strength grew every few feet she had to carry the thing; how he lugged it around without breaking a sweat was beyond her. Letting herself wonder about how he managed to carry all that plate armor, a shield, a heavy pack of supplies, and the weapons he bore without breaking under their weight let her set aside, momentarily, the fear and concern she felt for him and whether or not she'd be able to do anything to protect him from whatever awaited them.

She nearly ran into the Forsaken when he stopped suddenly in front of her, flinging a hand out behind him. "Ssh," he hissed when she started to ask what he saw. All she could see was pitch black darkness staring them in the face. "My hearing was always good; death only sharpened it," he added. Taking a few careful steps and hissing whenever Alayne made a move to follow him, he reached out and smiled when his hand touched a cold, stone wall. Closing his eyes and letting himself recall the days he was controlled by the Lich King, he pulled up memories of nerubian patterns. Running his hands over the whorls and loops, he pressed the wall in a few places and was rewarded with a slight clicking sound as the hidden

doorway opened and fresh air began streaming through the small crack he allowed the door to open. "I suspected there was more to it than just Azjol-Nerub," he whispered, motioning for Alayne to move up closer to him. He pressed her hand to the door, silently commanding her to hold it open while he scouted ahead down the twisted tunnel it opened in to. As he walked, he counted off the numerous tunnels that opened, branching off the one he walked. Once he reached the end of his own path, he sighed with relief and with a touch of surprise. His suspicions had proven correct about this place. With a quick prayer of thankfulness to the eternal shadow, he hurried back to the young woman he'd left in the tunnel.

"What is that?" Alayne asked when Putress returned to her.

"The Old Kingdom, the birthplace of the nerubian race: Ahn'Kahet," Putress answered simply.

"I thought it was just..."

"A myth?" he asked, misunderstanding the confusion in her eyes. Alayne had never heard of such a place -- not even during her first stay in Northrend. "Most of us did. I certainly never laid eyes on it before today. I doubt any Forsaken or death knight serving the Horde has. Ssh," he said softly, raising a hand and cupping the other to his ear again. "You hear it too?" he asked in surprise when Alayne mimicked his gesture.

"I hear voices," she whispered. "And footsteps."

"Go back to the others," he said softly.

"No need," Ger'alín hissed, startling both Putress and Alayne, "patience isn't one of my virtues, either," he added. Reaching for his mace, he managed to hang it from the loop on his hip, proud of himself for being able to mask just how much energy it took from him to continue standing up. Alayne wrapped an arm around his waist and tugged gently, leaning against the wall and letting him lean against her. As they continued their vigil, Putress grew more and more agitated. Finally, he marched back into the tunnel and, letting the sounds guide him, shook his fist in exasperation once he reached the source.

"Do you intend to bring the rest of the nerubian kingdom down on your heads and those of your friends or could you at least try to be quiet?" he snarled at a very startled and very confused Zerith.

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"I didn't like the idea myself," Zerith confided in Ger'alín while the others took up positions in the tunnels above Azjol-Nerub. Most were dropping to the ground and wrapping themselves up in the blankets their allies had brought. "But you needed the help."

"Frankly, I think we ought to leave him and Alayne alone together more," the paladin snorted, sipping a mug of steaming soup that Alayne had pressed on him. "He seems almost human around her -- no offense intended," he added when Callie smacked him on the shoulder.

"At least he was able to help you," the rogue muttered. "That goes a long way in my book. I still don't trust him, though. I don't think he's acting human at all. I think he knows that if he can get Alayne to doubt her initial judgement, he'll have her under his thumb. Oh, don't glare at me like that, Gerry. Alayne is sweet but you let her get on that spiral of questioning her motives and her actions and it's easier to get a child off a merry-go-round than it is to make her stop."

"Could you please let me keep my delusion that my wife is not going to revert back to her old habits for just a week, Callie?" Ger'alín grimaced.

"She has been doing well, all things considered," Zerith sighed. "Maybe she is snapping out of it."

"I pray that's the case."

“What are we going to do about Ahn’Kahet?” the priest asked, changing the subject. “Mir’el and Jez’ral both swear they read some dusty book about the nerubians and the qiraji ages ago. Alayne thinks they’re both confused because she’d never heard of Ahn’Kahet before today and she knows a good bit of history and trivia.”

“We’re going to go in there and make certain that the nerubian race becomes history,” Ger’alin answered.

“You’re going back to Warsong Hold.”

“Let me get one good night’s rest and we’ll see about that,” the paladin replied.

“You’re worse than your wife sometimes,” Zerith huffed. “At the very least, you are *not* standing watch tonight.”

“I won’t argue there,” Ger’alin agreed. “Speaking of my wife; where is that woman?”

“I think she said something about getting some sleep before she took second watch,” Callie offered. “Look for Mir’el and Jez’ral and chances are you’ll find her.”

Ger’alin pushed himself to his feet and, gathering the thick woolen blanket around him like a cape, went in search of his wife. He stopped at several fires for a word and to ask if those sitting around the warming blazes had seen her. Finally, he stumbled upon a small cavern, barely more than a crack in the wall, where Alayne lay huddled on her side, two blankets piled on her and two men arguing softly while she slept.

“...not the kind of life they wanted for her,” Mir’el was muttering. “Theron’s lost his mind.”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” Jez’ral disagreed. “He’s trying to hold our people together and stave off a civil war. If she can help with that, then so much the better. And you can’t dare dream that Miris would want her daughter in Northrend of all places!”

“Tal’ar wouldn’t have minded but no, Miris wouldn’t have,” Mir’el agreed. “Still, it’s her life and if she doesn’t want to live in the prison that Theron’s put her in, she shouldn’t have to. Don’t you dare lay any guilt on her about her duty to our people either, Jez’ral.”

“What in the name of the Light are you two arguing about?” Ger’alin asked softly.

“Whether or not we’re dragging Alayne out of one hell and into another,” Mir’el muttered sourly. “Theron’s serious about making her a noble and I know that that is no kind of life for her. I’m not overly fond of the adventurers life for her myself but if this is what she wants, then this is what she shall have and Quel’Thalas and the sin’dorei, quel’dorei, and anyone else can rot in the Nether. Including you, Jez’ral.”

“I never said I wanted that for her,” Jez’ral protested. “I merely pointed out that it would be far better for her than wandering around in this frozen wasteland! No, Mir’el, I’m through arguing with you about this. I’ll stand by whatever decision she makes in the end but I’ll be damned if I’m going to just let her get herself killed up here for nothing.”

Jez’ral stormed off and Mir’el glared after him. “Dragging her back and forcing her to live in the very prison I spent decades getting out of would kill her just as surely as it tried to kill me,” he shouted after the other man. Ger’alin stared after them as they walked off and shook his head.

“One thing at a time,” he told himself, “and the first thing is the nerubians.” Settling down in the small enclosure, he wrapped an arm around Alayne, nearly jumping back up when she bolted upright. “It’s just me,” he whispered. “Remember me? Ger’alin? The idiot you married?”

She rubbed her eyes sleepily. “I thought it was either Mir’el, Jez’ral, or someone coming to get me for my turn at the watch,” she sighed. “Are you feeling any better?”

“I managed to hold down supper and I can walk a good bit without feeling tired.”

“You should go back to Warsong Hold. I’m not sure why you didn’t go this evening.”

“Because there are still nerubians alive and I intend to be involved in correcting that problem. One night’s sleep is all I need. As much as I hate Putress, whatever he did worked wonders.”

“I wonder,” she yawned tiredly. Ger’alin tugged at the back of her robes until she lay back down in his arms. Tucking the three blankets over them, he waited, wondering if she had fallen back to sleep so quickly. “Maybe we were wrong about him and the Apothecaries.”

“We could have been,” Ger’alin admitted. “But still, even if we were wrong, they endangered us all. Until they have a formula that won’t kill us and they’re absolutely certain of it, I say we leave them to their own devices.”

“Might be useful against the vykruk,” she muttered. “Tau’re?”

“Tau’re is fine. If he wasn’t fine, we’d have heard it by now. Go to sleep.”

“I would if you’d let me,” she sighed.

Ger’alin lay quietly, not moving and barely breathing, hoping she would nod back off. Fatigue tugged at his own eyelids and he fought to stifle a yawn. His last thoughts as he drifted off were what the tauren would make of this whole mess he’d gotten into. A wife who was a baroness if she wanted to be; an Apothecary he could barely stomach saving his life; undead spiders who had two kingdoms he had to destroy. “I wish all I had to deal with were the vykruk,” Ger’alin mumbled as sleep swarmed over him.

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Tau’re glanced at the sky, glad of the northern lights that made the night so bright. It made watching Utgarde much easier. As it had been for the past week, the vykruk continued to patrol the area around their fortress and paid attention to little else unless it came within the bounds of their territory. In his gut, the tauren felt that they were regrouping, preparing to pour out and wash over Howling Fjord. Tense anticipation had hung in the air ever since Ger’alin and the others had left him here. He wondered how they were faring in Dragonblight or Borean Tundra. He was tempted to send a runner to fetch Ger’alin to tell the man that now was the time to strike.

“They’re not going to move until we move against them,” Davran, one of the oldest members of the Disorder of Azeroth sighed. “They know we’re here watching them. They’ve seen us and shown us that they’ve seen us often enough the past few days.”

“We’re not moving against them just yet,” Tau’re replied to the unasked question. “There’s no reason to move until they show signs of activity beyond just going about their normal daily routines.”

“I know,” Davran muttered. “I just feel useless.”

“You volunteered to stay and watch the vykruk and the Apothecaries.”

“I did. Little good watching the Apothecaries has done; they’ve moved part of their forces fresh from Undercity over to Dragonblight. I’ve no clue if they are preparing something else or if the others have already stumbled across them.”

The two stood quietly and continued their watch. The northern lights began to fade as the sun peaked over the edge of the horizon. In the pearly grey pre-dawn haze, Tau’re blinked when he saw Ymiron striding along one of the walkways of Utgarde. The vykruk king stopped to speak with another of his number and then waited, his posture reeking of impatience, while the other bowed and began to run towards the front of the massive marble fortress. Tau’re and Davran trotted around the perimeter until they could see the messenger dashing out of the massive gates and into the small vykruk town that sat on the island in front of the keep. He took one of the strange red dragons from the town’s center and flew off, heading north and east.

“That doesn’t bode well for us, does it?” Davran asked, his tone rhetorical.

“Probably not,” Tau’re agreed. “Ride for the tuskarr village immediately and see if they can take you to Borean Tundra. Tell Ger’alin and Zerith that the vykrul may be on the move and that the time has come to engage them.”

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Alayne shivered, hating the chill, dank feel of the monstrous tunnels. Mir’el and Jez’ral flanked her, a few feet behind, neither man speaking to the other. It was obvious to her that the argument had raged on most of the night and still continued. She pushed it out of her mind, preparing herself for the fights ahead. “If I never see another spider again,” Ger’alin muttered, “it will be a day too soon.”

“You should have gone back to Warsong Hold.”

“I’m fine, Alayne. I’m a little tired and a little on the shaky side but I’ll be all right. We can’t afford to have anyone sitting this out; Light alone knows how big this place is or how many nerubians there are left. I just hope that Garrosh can spare us some forces later today if this keeps on.”

“I hope so as well. Light, I’d almost rather be in Naxxramas than underground again.”

“Don’t dwell on it,” he cautioned.

“Callie didn’t think the Alliance was doing too well over there...”

“We’ve got enough on our hands right now,” he grinned. “Let’s mop up the mess we’re making and then we’ll go see if they need our help. At the very least, they can probably barricade that place up and hold the fights until we have time to handle them.”

Alayne fell silent, losing herself in her thoughts while she followed her husband through the tunnels that led to the old nerubian kingdom of Ahn’Kahet. As they neared the first bend that would put them in sight of the watching guards, her ears perked forward as she felt something familiar. Jez’ral and Mir’el trotted up to the front of the group as well, their faces filled with grim determination.

“Warlocks,” all three said at the same time, the slightly oily feel of fel magic in the air.

“Twilight cultists unless I miss my guess,” Jez’ral added.

“At any rate, they all serve the Legion,” Mir’el muttered.

“What would warlocks and other servants of the Legion be doing here?” Ger’alin asked, confused. “Didn’t Arthas turn the Scourge against the Legion?”

“That’s a good question,” Mir’el grimaced. “The Forsaken have told us that the Scourge serves the Legion no longer; the Lich King longed for independence from his masters as managed to gain it. Perhaps the nerubians want the same; independence from the Scourge.”

“So they sell themselves to new slave masters?”

“Or there could be something else at play here,” Alayne whispered, feeling a presence trying to invade her mind. She pushed it away easily, wondering if the cultists were behind it. She stopped short when she felt it again, this time far more forceful.

“What in the name of the Dark Titan is that?” Ger’alin growled, rubbing his forehead. “Who’s talking?”

Alayne glanced around to see the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth looking around themselves in confusion as if wondering who was speaking. She let the presence wash into her mind and grimaced, recoiling at the insane utterings that began racing through her thoughts. It reminded her of the first several times she summoned demons. The tugging, the confusion, and the chaotic ramblings were enough to wear down anyone not used to strict mental discipline. “Ignore them,” she said, her voice just loud enough to carry over the soft mumblings of the group. “It’s hard but you just have to focus on blocking them out.”

“But what is it?” Zerith asked, echoing Ger’alin’s question. The priest strode up to the front lines, his stare demanding an answer.

“It’s probably something to do with the warlocks down there,” Jez’ral offered. “I can sense fel magic in the air and I’ve a feeling we’ll be dealing with more than just Scourglings.”

Zerith nodded and turned to Ger’alin. The two men walked off a pace and had a hurried, whispered conference. Mir’el leaned against the cavern wall and folded his arms over his chest while Jez’ral stared at the floor. Alayne wondered how much longer the pair were going to stay angry with each other. She stared back and forth between both of them, wondering if she dared interfere in their feud. “I hate these voices in my head,” Mir’el grumped. Alayne nodded in agreement but noticed that Jez’ral seemed to be staring intently into the middle distance. His focus was turned entirely inward as he mulled over what he was hearing.

“I don’t like this at all,” he sighed at long last. “There’s something worse than the Legion itself at work here.”

“Let’s just take this one step at a time, shall we?” Zerith suggested. Gesturing for the others to begin filing into the tunnel that opened almost directly into Ahn’Kahet, he whispered to Ger’alin that the paladin should rush in to attack the nerubians on the open platform as soon as he was ready. Glancing back over his shoulder, Ger’alin waited until Alayne, Mir’el, and Jez’ral had settled themselves in the rear group before hoisting his mace from his belt, unslinging his shield from his back, and running down the steep incline to smash against the startled spider guardians. They recovered quickly and others began rushing in to the attack. Web, spray, and the stench of venom filled the air as the nerubians engaged their attackers. Howling winds called up by the shaman and the mages dispersed the toxic venom, letting the melee forces breathe and see. Zerith focused his energies on the still-recovering Ger’alin while the paladin forced his way deeper and deeper into the fight. Once the nerubians lay in a heap, their bodies smashed almost beyond recognition, Putress and his assistants hurried in, gently pulling the spiders apart and cutting them open. The entire Disorder of Azeroth recoiled in fascinated horror from the smell and the sight of the Apothecaries carefully extracting the venom sacs of the dead Scourge spiders.

Ger’alin studiously ignored the trio while glancing around the rest of the room. Spying a small corridor that led further into the area, he trotted up the stairs to it and glanced around. The sight nearly took his breath away. A beautiful marble fountain, the fountainheads worked in gold, stood in the center of an airy room. Black green-veined marble trimmed jade-worked walls and aquamarine windows shone from a light that was not the sun. As the paladin gazed on in wonder, the others came up behind him and stopped in the same kind of amazement.

“It’s beautiful,” Callie muttered. “Nothing I’ve ever seen before compares to it. Not even Lordaeron before the fall.”

“I remember the old Library,” Alayne whispered, “before the Scourge invaded Quel’Thalas. But it had nothing on this. Nothing.”

“That anyone who serves the Lich King could appreciate this...” Zerith sighed, trailing off. “Let’s keep moving.”

The group made its way down two pairs of stairs before Ger’alin raised a hand, signaling a halt. Glancing into the vestibule before them, he could see eggs quivering, near the point of hatching. Webs clung to and obscured some of the beautiful walls of the room in front of him and he sensed a presence waiting, watching for them. “There’s something waiting for us in there,” he muttered when Zerith and Jez’ral came up to him. “Is it your cultists?”

“I still sense them but not here,” Jez’ral answered. “They’re further on. I would suggest pressing ahead as quickly and carefully as we can. There’s no telling what they are up to but chances are it does not bode well for us.”

Mir’el glared at Jez’ral as if annoyed with the man for stating the obvious. Alayne strode ahead quickly, her anger with both of them moving from a simmer to a near-boil.

Ger'alín jogged up behind her and flinched hard when searing, mind-numbing pain lanced through him.

A massive nerubian guardian, much akin to the gate-keeper of Azjol-Nerub, stood at the far end of the vestibule. His multi-faceted eyes burned with intense concentration as he wove shadow magic against the paladin. Alayne hastily flung spells at it, hoping to break its hold on her husband while the others quickly poured into the small room. The fighters began hacking away at the creature's legs while the magi threw their most potent spells at it. Finally, the nerubian reared back, his forelegs kicking away all who were close to him. Ger'alín gasped with relief and gathered himself, hunching down and then leaping with all of his strength to throw himself against the guardian. Eggs began hatching throughout the room and soon spiders of all sizes were threatening to overwhelm the fighters. Ger'alín divided his attention between the massive nerubian and the small, skittering spiders, panting with fear as he watched his friends be overcome. First one, then another, fell to the floor, swept over by the onslaught of the Scourgling spiders. Ger'alín tried to make his way to them, to place his own body between theirs and disaster. Some spell seemed to slow him, holding him where he was, forcing him to watch as Callie, then Jez'ral and Mir'el, then Dar'ja, then Alayne were overtaken by the nerubians. He wept, his mind numb and hazy, part of him screaming that something was not right with what he was seeing.

"You are a pawn of forces unseen..."

"Who's that?" he shouted, looking around in confusion.

"Give in to your fear..."

"Ger'alín, what's the matter?" he heard Zerith ask. He glanced down to see the priest laying on the floor in front of him, his eyes glazed over.

"There is no escape... not in this life... not in the next..."

"We'll just see about that," the paladin growled as he closed his eyes and focused on clearing his mind. The haze he felt began to lift as the Light flooded through him and the sounds of battle washed over him once more. The illusion he'd been experiencing faded and he saw that the Disorder of Azeroth was carrying the battle easily. Turning around slowly to face the nerubian, he let loose a primal shout and threw himself back at it, his fear broiling into rage at what the creature had just tried to do to him. Calling on the Light, he flooded the nerubian guardian with pure holy energy, feeling it course through and around him like an inexorable tidal wave. The nerubian chattered madly, its mandibles clacking and gagging sounds coming from its throat as Ger'alín continued to press his attack. The creature collapsed in a heap after a few moments of frenzied but useless defense and Ger'alín stood over it, his chest and shoulders heaving and his nostrils flaring as he breathed out his anger.

"Ger'alín, are you all right?" Zerith asked in a soft undertone.

"I'm fine," the paladin said, his voice flat in an effort to keep calm, to keep the memory of fear from touching him.

"Are you sure you shouldn't return to Warsong Hold..."

"I'm fine."

"I suppose Putress will want to remain here a while and gather samples," Zerith continued faintly. Ger'alín grimaced but said nothing. "I think I'll let Jez'ral and Mir'el scout the balcony ahead," he sighed, glancing out the other door and relieved to see that the balcony seemed to provide a great vantage point from which most of the rest of the underground kingdom could be seen. If the watchers were careful, they could spy on the entire area without being seen themselves. "Perhaps they'll be able to determine where the warlocks weaving those spells are. I could use a few moments to catch my breath right now," the priest finished.

Ger'alín shrugged and nodded, not trusting himself to speak just then. The anger began to abate and the floodgates threatened to open if he let himself think about what his mind's eye had just watched happen. Muttering something about wanting fresh water, he

stormed back the way they had come, jogging to the fountain to hide away until he could regain control of his conflicting emotions.

“Ger’alin?” he heard Alayne ask softly as she strode up the stairs moments later. Splashing cool water from the fountain over his burning face, he tried to pull himself into some semblance of normalcy. “Ger’alin, what’s the matter?” she asked worriedly, recognizing the strain of his shoulders and the way his back hunched when he was holding himself together by sheer effort of will.

“I hate magic,” he groaned between gritted teeth and clenched jaws. “It’s horrible, the things they can make you see, make you think are real, during battle.” The sights he had seen poured out of him as he turned to face his wife, desperate to purge himself of the memories by releasing them. “I hate this place. I hate it when my enemies use my own mind against me,” he finished, shaking with the remembered fear and rage.

Alayne stepped over to him and put her arms around him. It was the only thing she could do.

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Zerith glanced up, relieved to see his sister and her husband rejoining the others. Ger’alin looked as if he had been run through a wringer and Alayne wore an expression of grim determination to protect everyone. The priest sighed and sent a silent prayer to the Light that it would see them through this without requiring any more sacrifices. Just after Alayne and Ger’alin returned, Mir’el and Jez’ral walked back into the room, neither man looking happy.

“We are standing directly over several hundred cultists,” Jez’ral said without preamble.

“What of the nerubians?”

“I didn’t see any others. I’ve a feeling that these cultists may have killed a good many of the nerubians themselves. Or, perhaps most were recalled to the Lich King. We’ve probably stopped the flow of spiders against Warsong Hold with our attacks. If you want my opinion, I say we leave this place now before we’re discovered and just hope that the cultists kill themselves summoning whatever it is they’re after.”

“It couldn’t be Kil’jaeden again, could it?”

Mir’el and Jez’ral shared a look of mutual consternation at the priest’s question before they could recall that they weren’t speaking to each other. “It’s very unlikely,” Jez’ral replied, his voice gruffer than it would normally have been. “There’s not enough power stored here for them to tap in to to attempt a summoning that massive. The last time it was tried, it required the entire remnant of the Sunwell at a junction of several active ley-lines and it was still almost not enough.”

“They are coming for you...” Zerith heard someone whisper. He turned his head to see who it was.

“What’s wrong?” Mir’el asked.

“I thought that someone just...” the priest muttered, shaking his head. “Nevermind, it’s nothing.”

“Shall we head back to the surface then?” Jez’ral asked.

“No,” Zerith replied. “We can’t just leave this job half-finished. For all we know, there could be more nerubians hiding further in. Or the cultists could decide to attack us now that the threat of the spiders has been removed. I can’t see just leaving servants of the Legion here in peace to continue whatever insanity they are about.”

“If we’re going to continue on, I say we get going then,” Mir’el sighed. “It’s taking a tremendous amount of energy to keep myself from seeing illusions.”

“I always knew you were crazy,” Jez’ral grimaced.

“Oh stop it!” Mir’el said loudly, wincing when his words echoed slightly. “I’m talking about the illusions that the cultists are trying to use on us. The creepy voice that some keep hearing or the false visions some saw during the fight. Though, I must admit, these attempts are stronger than anything I’ve experienced from demons or the Legion’s various cultists over the years.”

“It does feel stronger than what I would expect from that rabble down there,” Jez’ral admitted grudgingly. “Are you hearing anything unusual, Zerith?”

The priest stared slack-jawed at the two men. Covering his open mouth with his palm, he glanced around the room, seeing the familiar signs of mental exhaustion and the beginnings of creeping paranoia on many veterans’ faces. He caught Alayne’s eye and she nodded once before shrugging helplessly. “I think haste may be called for. Go, tell the others about this. Perhaps the knowledge will help.”

As the pair split up and began whispering their discovery to the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth, Alayne whispered something to Ger’alin and the couple made their way over to Zerith. Ger’alin looked as if he were holding himself together by sheer force of will and Alayne looked as if she was torn between putting a permanent end to his suffering or spiring him out and away from Ahn’Kahet. “It’s the cultists,” Zerith explained quickly.

Alayne shook her head. “It’s too strong for them and too persistent to be the effort of many. There is something waiting for us ahead that knows we’re coming.”

“What do you suggest?”

“It would be rude to keep whatever it is waiting,” Ger’alin said sarcastically. “Let’s continue on. We can stop and have sanity checks every so often until the job is done. Light, Zerith, imagine if we leave it like this and the Alliance finds out? Bolvar might understand why we’ve done as we have but the others? Not until they’ve faced this themselves and perhaps not even then,” he sighed, thinking of how many night elves had acted towards his wife.

“Is there any way to block it out?” Zerith sighed.

Alayne shook her head again. “It’s mental discipline. We’ve told you as much as we know ourselves about how to prevent these kinds of things from washing over your personality. It’s something that those of us who have practiced demonology can do with little to no effort. It’s something we had to do in order to practice the shadow arts. Priests do something similar, I think, in order to block out the self and listen in to the Light. Mages just have to empty their minds to cast their spells; unlike warlocks, they don’t have to worry about the results of the spell seizing their minds.”

“Then let’s press on,” the priest said finally. “Let’s put an end to whatever it is that is trying to drive us all mad and then get the hell out of here.”

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Callie was relieved that she was not going crazy. When Mir’el and Jez’ral had offered her the explanation behind the strange sights she had seen during the fight, she nearly wept with relief. While Ger’alin had been struggling against some unknown horror, Callie had been swept back to the beach the day she’d led ten of her own comrades into the grave. Mocking laughter and a voice that repeated “Tell yourself again that these are not truly your friends...” and “It was your fault...” over and over in her mind had made it impossible for the Forsaken to do anything other than curl up in a huddled ball of fear and guilt until the battle was over and Dar’ja had noticed her hiding behind a mass of webbing.

Striding through the empty vistas of Ahn’Kahet, Callie wondered who was behind the strange voices she kept hearing. Her eyes, like those of many of the others, were tight with

strain as she focused on hearing her own internal monologue and blocking out the thoughts that tried to intrude from the outside. She forced herself to think of things like the first time she'd met the Banshee Queen or the day when she had decided to become a fighter instead of just another corpse shambling around the Undercity. She thought about the days when she had been alive, the pranks she had played on her friends, her family, and strangers. Looking up to see Ger'alín and Zerith deep in conversation while they cautiously peeked over the rim of the balcony, she recalled the first time she'd ever seen an elf and how startled she'd been at their pointed ears that twisted and turned like those on a horse. She thought of the days she'd spent after that one, staring in a mirror, her concentration focused on trying to get her own ears to twitch back and forth the way the elven ambassador's had. The thoughts relaxed her, easing the strain in her face and lightening the fatigue weighing down on her spirit.

"Let's go," Zerith said, his voice pitched low so that those further away from him had to strain to hear what he said. "There's a passage that leads down lower into this kingdom but I fear we may be walking directly into the cultists. Be ready for a fight the minute we get there."

The Disorder of Azeroth fell in behind Ger'alín as the man, receiving a nod from Zerith, began trotting lightly across the courtyard and into a twisting corridor that sloped down into the open area beneath the balcony. As he left the passage, he ducked behind the walls on the sides of the platform that opened up into the room, glad to have some place to hide. The others followed his example, giving him a chance to see what they faced. Looking over the rise, he nearly sighed with relief. The cultists were, for the most part, occupied by one of their own speaking on the other side of the room. Ger'alín's view was obscured by a large pillar and several strange fires. He blinked as he stared at the bonfires. The hazy image of a strange creature seemed to hover over them, fading in and out of existence. Slapping himself lightly, he told himself he was just imagining things.

With a quick series of gestures, Ger'alín split the group in half, sending one half jogging up the right walkway while he led the others up the left. They would meet on the platform where the cultists stood, their attention absorbed by whatever the woman in the center of the group was saying. "You have traveled long and risked much to be here. Your devotion shall be rewarded. The elements themselves will rise up against the civilized world! Only the faithful will be spared!" she exulted. Several elemental creatures, beings of fire, water, and wind, appeared at her command. The shaman of the Disorder of Azeroth glanced on with clear discomfort. The un-naturally stiff, lurching manner in which the elementals moved spoke of a strange force manipulating them, forcing its will on beings whose existence was tied in with Nature itself.

"This isn't good at all," Grognaq muttered to himself. Ger'alín turned to glance at the tauren, wondering what he was talking about. Just then, the strange cultist woman began her preaching again.

"The faithful shall be exalted! But there is more work to be done. We will press on until all of Azeroth lies beneath his shadow! Here on the very borders of his domain. You will experience powers you would never have imagined!"

"Who is she talking about?" Ger'alín wondered. Just then, one of the fighters on the other side of the room was spotted by the cultists. The paladin yelped as he saw the servants of the Legion surge towards the far end of the platform away from him, rallying to protect their speaker.

"These are sacred halls! Your intrusion will be met with death," she shouted, pointing at the intruders she could see. Ger'alín sprang forward, his mace swinging in an arc, ready to connect with the cultist leader's skull the moment he came in range of her. She turned swiftly, surprise clear on her orcish face, and danced to the side at the last moment, leaving Ger'alín to crash into the wall behind her as his own momentum continued to carry him forward. Raising

her hands, she summoned crackling lightning to fling at her attackers. Ger'alín threw himself to the floor, rolling back up to his feet, just barely dodging her spell. Glancing around, he saw that the others were still struggling to make their way through the cultists to him. For the moment, he was alone with the strange speaker.

Dancing in and out, trying to keep her off-balance long enough for the others to get free of their engagements, Ger'alín called on the Light, wielding it as deftly as he wielded the hammer in his hands. A few times, the orc woman managed to call down fire or cause the ground to tremble, knocking everyone, her followers included, to the floor. The mad scramble of battle continued until, at last, most of the cultists were dead and the Disorder of Azeroth was able to redeploy itself, focusing their attentions on the orc. She glanced around, focusing her gaze on Dar'ja, and pointed. Strange syllables spilled from her lips while Ger'alín tried frantically to break her concentration. When he heard Dar'ja begin screaming, he swung hard with his hammer, grunting and forcing himself to stay on his feet when it seemed to strike an invisible wall.

"Get back!" he heard Zerith's hoarse shout as the priest ran to his wife. Dar'ja's body crackled, blue sparks dancing over her skin like static electricity gone wild. She groaned and thrashed as the energy coursed through her, the priest's desperate prayers providing only minimal relief while the spell raged on over her. Ger'alín saw Alayne's eyes narrow and felt the crackle of arcane power surging through her as she began firing, her spells backed by the raw power of her focused rage. The orc shrieked when Alayne's spells broke down the strange shield she'd woven around herself and Ger'alín used the opportunity to bore in, his hammer landing against her skull with a sickeningly satisfying crack. The cultist's eyes rolled back in her head as her legs lost their strength and she collapsed in a heap at the paladin's feet. Ger'alín looked up from the corpse to see the still-living cultists staring at the body. For a moment, he wondered what they were about to do. Then, before anyone could react, the remaining cultists turned their blades on themselves, committing mass suicide. Ger'alín thought he heard them murmur something that sounded like "Yoggsoron."

"What the hell kind of spell was that?" Zerith demanded of the gathering when the sparks ceased their torment of Dar'ja. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Is she going to be all right?" Ger'alín asked, kneeling down beside the barely conscious woman.

"I hope so," Zerith answered, closing his eyes and focusing his energies. "She's taken quite a beating, though."

"Corrupted elemental magic," one of the shamans offered, squatting down by Dar'ja's head and taking it in his hands. "When we call lightning, we call for a quick bolt, one that will send the enemy on with a minimal of suffering. Whatever that one," he nodded towards the cultist's body, "did was more like what a warlock would do, leaving his spell to slowly kill the person instead of granting them a swift death."

Alayne bristled slightly at the shaman's description of her former spellcraft but said nothing. It was true that fel magic was slower to kill, usually focused on incapacitating the target of the spell instead of killing them outright.

"Whatever it was," Zerith muttered, "it's really caused problems. Her heart isn't beating as it should; it's like it's gone mad."

"If I might be of some help?" Putress offered, striding up the stairs. "I saw what happened to her. I can remember when I lived, sometimes something much like it would occur to workers who were cooperating with the gnomes. I remember the treatment we gave them; it may work here as well."

"What is it?" Zerith asked, uncertain of whether to let the man help or not.

"A mild sedative and a brew that puts the body in a state of total relaxation. I have several vials with me that could be used for such."

The priest nodded and stepped back just far enough to allow the Apothecary to kneel down, press his medicines against Dar'ja's lips, and help her to swallow the liquids. Long moments passed while she lay twitching helplessly, her thrashing growing less violent and her body relaxing into sleep as the potions took effect. The Disorder of Azeroth held its collective breath while Zerith stared at her, heaving a mass sigh of relief when he nodded and whispered "thank you," to Putress.

"I'll take her back to Warsong Hold," Callie offered, placing a gentle hand on Zerith's shoulder. "She'll be safe there."

"I will send one of my assistants with her," Putress offered. "They are skilled healers; they can help with any issues that might come up while in transit."

"No," Zerith said softly but firmly, "I'll take her back myself. Ger'alın," he said louder. The paladin glanced up and nodded in understanding. "It's in your hands now."

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Ger'alın watched as his friend lifted his unconscious wife into his arms and began walking back the way they had come. Several fighters and magi accompanied them, tasked with safeguarding their passage out of the ancient nerubian kingdom. The paladin waited until they were out of sight before turning back to the gathering. Callie shared a concerned look with him as his gaze flitted over her, settling on the distance ahead.

"Let's get moving," he said flatly.

The entire Disorder of Azeroth fell in behind the paladin as he strode across the lower courtyard. Strange blue blazes still burned, the feel of the air around them oily and un-natural. A ghostly figure shaped like something out of the dreams of a madman hovered over the fires. Ger'alın resolutely ignored it though several Forsaken stared at it and began muttering amongst themselves. The group stopped short at the edge of the platform, waiting for directions from their leader. Ger'alın stared up a cobweb ramp to a room set high above their heads. All he could see from his current position was a tall, open doorway that seemed to lead only further into darkness.

"Any thoughts?" he asked Alayne.

"Something strange is up there. Strange and powerful," she sighed, wringing her hands.

"More cultists?"

"Perhaps," she said wistfully.

"Where are Jez'ral and Mir'el? What are their thoughts on this?"

"They're in the rear lines with the other casters," she answered, "I can't imagine they'll know any more than the rest of us. No one had even heard of this place until we came in here."

"Go get them," he muttered. "Even if they don't know more, it'd be nice to see if it compares to anything they've experienced or been around in the past."

Alayne nodded and hurried off, returning with the two men shadowing her steps, twin looks of disgust and determination on their faces. "You can both get over whatever has you angry at each other," Ger'alın said in a tone that brooked no argument. "I want to know if whatever it is that even *I'm* sensing is akin to anything either of you has encountered before."

The pair of former warlocks glared at the paladin and then glared at each other. Finally, Mir'el spoke. "The only thing remotely like this would be what it was like when the Scourge magi and the Cult of the Damned marched on Lordaeron in the days after Arthas returned from Northrend. But, even that wasn't the same as what I'm sensing here. It's more as if it were in the same hemisphere, not really closely related," he explained. Jez'ral snorted

and muttered something beneath his breath, yelping when Alayne turned around and slapped him.

“Really,” she growled. “I’m tired of it. I’ll make my own decisions about my own life and either the two of you and the rest of Silvermoon will get used to it or I’ll start slapping every sin’dorei I come across on general principle.”

Jez’ral’s face flushed but he held his tongue. Ger’alin could tell from the man’s expression that he was about two seconds from lifting Alayne by the scruff of her neck and teaching her a lesson. The expression Alayne wore said she knew as much and was ready to give her own lesson in return. Mir’el stifled a laugh, masking it with a cough, and stepped aside. Ger’alin took Alayne by the arm and pulled her away before she and her former teacher decided to forgo magic altogether in favor of an old-fashioned brawl on the floor. Glancing at her irritably out of the corner of his eye, he wagged his head ruefully and shared a grin with her when he saw that she was struggling not to burst into laughter. “Quit teasing him,” he said softly. “I think that old man’s about ready to explode.”

“It would do him a world of good,” she replied in the same amused tone.

“I agree. Still, could you hold off on it until after we get out of here? I’d rather not be confined underground with Jez’ral when he gets truly grumpy. Unless, of course, we could convince Callie to threaten to eat him again.”

“I’m not even going to ask. So, what is the plan now?”

“The same as it’s always been,” he replied with a sigh. “Continue on until this kingdom is empty or no longer poses a threat to any of us.”

“I wonder what the cultists were doing.”

“I don’t know but something tells me we’re about to find out. I want you to stay close to me. If a magical attack lands, I want someone I trust completely to deal with it and to tell me what measures to take against it. Besides,” he said lightly when he saw her eyes shining, “you have a distinct tendency to get into trouble when I don’t keep my eyes on you.”

Alayne shot him a look of mock irritation and patted his shoulder. Glancing back to the gathering, he motioned for them to follow him up the silken incline leading to part of the kingdom they had not explored. When they neared the top of the ramp, he motioned for the group to split in two and to hide alongside the walls while he quickly glanced into the room, his heart thundering against his ribcage at what he saw.

“That’s not possible,” he muttered. “There’s no way something like that could exist.”

Alayne peered into the room and gasped, freezing in place. Ger’alin grabbed the back of her robes and pulled her away before the whatever-it-was could see her. “It has no face,” she muttered over and over again in shock. “No face at all.”

“No face?” Putress asked, surprised. He had walked over to see what was in the room for himself. “Dark Lady...you’re right. I didn’t think they were real.”

“What are they?” Ger’alin hissed.

“Faceless ones. Anub’arak and the nerubians spoke of them sometimes. I don’t recall ever seeing one myself, though. I just remember hearing that faceless ones haunted the nerubian birthplace and served evils that made the Burning Legion look mild.”

“That doesn’t tell me what they are,” Ger’alin growled.

“I don’t know what they are, sin’dorei,” Putress grimaced, throwing his hands up in the air. “I’m half-remembering something from a time where my mind was not my own. For all I know, it could be a dream I’m recalling and everything I’m telling you now is just a made-up figment of an overtaxed imagination.”

“What do you think?” he asked, turning to Alayne.

“I think that they look like the strange things we were seeing over the fires down below. I think that we’re probably not going to figure out what they are or what they can do until...”

Ger'alín shoved her aside as the strange creature, accompanied by two others, began running down the hallway. Smooth skin covered a high, round skull. No features marked the creature's eyes, nose, or ears. Tentacles hung down its shoulders and chest, flapping as it ran and strange arms, ending in hands with fingers that looked more like tails than digits waved madly at the intruders. Skidding to a stop a short distance from the group, the creature lifted its oddly-shaped arms and a missile of pure shadow energy appeared, launching itself towards the group who were now forming a semi-circle in front of the doorway. They dove out of the way of the missile, most whistling through their teeth at the smoking black hole it left on the floor. Ger'alín put himself in front of the door and, lifting his shield, ran in to meet the creature while the three would be confined by the narrow corridor.

Spells flew through the air, whistling past Ger'alín as he slammed at the creatures' heads with his shield and hammer, uncertain of how much damage he had done to them until they collapsed in a bloody heap. When the last one fell, he heaved a sigh of relief and turned to face the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth. He blinked in confusion and sucked in a horrified breath as he felt tendrils of magic washing over him. The room faded into pitch blackness and the images of his friends and comrades turned hazy and vanished. For a few seconds, he stood alone, his pounding heart and his panting breaths the only sounds he could hear. Turning around, he saw an enormous creature, identical to the ones he had just slain save that it was larger, with a tentacle-ending arm lifted over its head. The creature gibbered at Ger'alín, nothing it said making any sense to the bewildered blood elf. The gibbering turned into angry shrieks and Ger'alín cowered, covering his ears with his hands, wondering what was going on.

"Gaze into the void. It is the perpetuity in which they dwell," whispered a voice in his mind.

"Who are you? What are you?" he shouted.

Incoherent roaring filled his ears and his mind. Closing his eyes, he tried to block out the sounds the way he could block out the sight. He felt magic crackling in the air around him and let his eyes open. Standing behind him were the others, only their eyes glowed red as if they had all been tainted by drinking demon blood.

"What is going on here?" he demanded. "What is going on?!"

First one, then another of his fellows attacked him, spells, daggers, and swords striking against his armor. Ger'alín stood agog, blocking with his shield while he tried to puzzle out what had happened to his friends. He batted nearby attackers away with his hammer, careful to adjust the strength of his blows so as to not accidentally kill one of his own. Slowly, they began to surround him, spreading out in a circle around him, never letting him break through to put his back to the wall. He felt ice chill the back of his armor, freezing the plates of his legs together so that he could barely move. His shield began to heat up as firebolts were flung at him, forcing him to keep it aloft in hopes of not being burnt to a cinder.

"They're not real!" he heard someone shout. "Illusions," another voice called out.

Ger'alín tried to focus on the distant sounds while seeking a way out of whatever trap had been laid for him. Suddenly, Callie appeared next to him, her daggers whirling in her hands faster than he could follow. She picked herself out of the crowd looking for a way through his defenses and attacked. Ger'alín watched as the Forsaken grappled with herself, wondering if he was going mad. When Alayne appeared and began flinging spells at the others, he shook his head as if to clear it. One by one, the other members of the Disorder of Azeroth appeared in the hazy mist and turned on their red-eyed doppelgangers.

"It's an illusion," Mir'el explained. "The whole thing is an illusion."

Ger'alín nodded without understanding. When the last copy vanished, the haze lifted and he found himself staring at the strange, impossible creature. Voices filled his mind, keening, screaming, babbling. He tried to blot them out but couldn't. Instead, he gathered

what was left of his wits and will and focused on attacking the creature. Several times, haze threatened his vision again but he refused to let it overcome him. The others did likewise, most managing to barely cling to reality as they wove spells or wielded steel against the monster. After long moments of frenzied attack and many more attempts to press its mad visions on the minds of the attackers, the creature swayed and toppled, gasping out words that made no sense. When at last it lay still and silent on the cold floor, Ger'alín sighed with relief. The constant mental bombardment ended. He had not even realized how much energy the battle to keep his mind clear had been until it was over. Sinking down to the ground, he shuddered with the release of tension.

“What in the name of the nine hells was that?” he demanded, not expecting an answer.

“I don't know,” Putress muttered. “Let's carry the corpse back with us. Perhaps someone else will be able to tell us what it was.”

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“It's heavy,” Ger'alín growled as he tugged at the ropes tied to the makeshift sled they had fashioned. The massive creature lay atop it, covered with draperies they had ripped from the walls. “I wish Tau're were here to help with this.”

“You should let someone else do this, Ger'alín,” Alayne muttered. “You're still not well.”

“I've got every man who can lift more than a quill helping me already, woman. Move, would you?” he grunted. “Come on now!” he shouted over his shoulder. “Put your backs into it or we're never getting this thing out of here.”

Alayne winced as she heard the collective groaning of every male in the Disorder of Azeroth. Every one of them held ropes or were behind the sled pushing with all their might. Some of the women were even helping out as best they could despite the protests that they lacked the strength. Alayne focused on the corpse and wracked her brain for the method of casting a levitation spell. Mir'el had tried that already but she thought she might be able to succeed where his effort had left him in a sweaty heap swearing that whatever it was had been in desperate need of a diet.

“Alright!” she heard Ger'alín roar angrily, “whoever is doing that, please stop it!”

She glanced at the creature to see its arm flailing in the air. She quickly ceased her manipulations of the arcane currents and looked chagrined when Ger'alín glared at her. Still, it gave her an idea. “I'll take the arm if someone else can handle the other arm and a few others can take care of the body, legs, and head,” she called out. Ger'alín swore and wondered if he would be forgiven if he carried Alayne out of the caverns and tied her to a tree so she couldn't make him work any harder than he already was. Light, but the thing was heavy!

He growled again and began swearing more loudly and with more vigor when he felt the ropes held by those in front of him go slack. “What is going on up there? And the words ‘imminent attack’ had better be part of the explanation or I'll have every last one of you standing extra guard duty for the rest of your natural or un-natural lives! Don't let up! This thing is heavy!”

He gasped and dropped his own ropes, reaching for his mace when he heard the tell-tale scraping footsteps of nerubians. Had the others atop the ramp been overcome so quickly? Why had they not called out? Shouting that an attack was indeed imminent, he ran up the rocky incline, ready to smash into whatever had taken down his allies. Instead, he stopped short, nearly tripping and falling on his face, when he saw several taunka standing near a trio of nerubians. High Overlord Saurfang stood with them, his thick arms folded over his chest. “Put that up,” he grunted, nodding at the hammer. “These are untainted. They heard we were

clearing out the Scourge from their homeland and asked us if we would allow them to return in exchange for certain services they'll perform for us."

Ger'alín scrubbed a hand through his hair and grimaced. He wondered just what kind of services these so-called untainted nerubians would perform.

"We can keep the others from attacking you," one of the spiders, a large specimen who stood twice Ger'alín's height, hissed. "You have done well in clearing out Azjol-Nerub. We saw the work you did in the hatcheries. Very thorough. Our own females are completing the cleansing of those areas and soon the hatcheries will house our young. When we peered through the scrying portals into the Old Kingdom, we saw that the haze over it had been lifted. For many months now, Ahn'Kahet has been closed to us. What did you do, sin'dorei, that it has once again been revealed?"

"There were cultists in there," Ger'alín explained. "I suppose they were why you could not see it in your scryings. Servants of the Legion," he elaborated. "And a few other strange things as well," he added, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "We're not sure what it was but it is rather heavy."

The paladin led the friendly nerubians down the slope, gesturing to those gathered around the covered mound to pull the tapestries off so the nerubians could see what they hid. "My apologies if any of these held value," he started to say, wanting to explain their vandalism.

The nerubians hissed, clacked their mandibles together, and whistled wildly. Their bodies twitched in agitation as the strange creature's body was uncovered. "You know this thing?" he asked.

"Long ago, many of our kind worshipped them," the nerubian explained when he had calmed down. Ger'alín tensed, certain he was about to fight another battle for having killed a potential ally's god. "They in turn worshipped a force more powerful and darker than even that of the Scourge," the creature continued. "Today, worship of these creatures is forbidden by all our codes and customs. We called them the 'faceless ones.'"

"A fitting name," Ger'alín muttered softly, "but what is it?"

"No one knows for certain, elf. They were long forgotten by many of our kind. Legend says that long centuries ago, before the world was rent in twain by the destruction of its center of power, our ancestors dug the tunnels of Ahn'Kahet. It was the deepest kingdom, home to the greatest nerubian empire in history. But, one day, the nerubians of Ahn'Kahet went mad. Something from the depths which they had plumbed reached into their minds. The faceless ones appeared then and many turned to worship them. Others scattered, seeking to build a new kingdom elsewhere and be free of the madness the faceless ones carried in their wake. That is all I can tell you. Here," he gestured with one of his forelegs, "leave the body with us. We will destroy it and take heed from it; the faceless ones may yet linger nearby and one of our services to your peoples will be to ensure that their insanity never escapes our control."