

Zerith stood outside the small hut, glad of the chill in the air. It cooled his blood, cleared his mind, and brought a small measure of calm. The taunka had met him on the road as he and the others galloped for Warsong Hold. Offering one of their huts, they had led him to where Dar'ja could rest while the others hurried on to inform Garrosh of the events that had played out. Some of the shaman had even worked their more nature-based healing on the sin'dorei woman, giving her some measure of ease. Zerith was grateful for that though he worried. The shock to her system had been beyond what anyone should be able to endure. Only the Light smiling on him had kept her with him at all.

"Ger'alín's right sometimes," he muttered to himself. "I wish she'd stay home once in a while instead of coming out here with me. I'd worry less, that's for certain."

"Talking to yourself?" Tam'ara asked. The priest gave a small start and glared at her. Ger'alín and Alayne had told him of how the taunka woman had gotten on their nerves during their stay at Warsong Hold. He had not realized she'd left the orcish fortress to rejoin her people here in Dragonblight. Their village had been overrun by the nerubians. The tuskarr and the surviving taunka of Dragonblight and of Borean Tundra had gathered together and cleared the spiders out but a pall hung over the village still; a magical haze that none felt comfortable remaining in for very long. It was just another thing to add to his ever-growing list of things that needed to be done on the way to the final confrontation against the Lich King.

"Thinking aloud," he replied to her, turning his gaze back to the snowy hill overlooking the road. "I tend to do that from time to time."

"She was hurt rather badly," Tam'ara sighed. Zerith clenched his fists and his teeth. It sounded too much like a reproach to him.

"She would rather be hurt taking down the enemy than run, hide, and hope they don't find her and those she loves," he snapped.

"I know," Tam'ara said softly. "I do not understand it, but then, I've always been able to run and hide. I have learned more of your peoples in the time I have known you. You, the tauren, the orcs, the trolls, and the Forsaken were never allowed to run away and hide. Your enemies followed you where ever you went. It is no wonder that you think us strange for hiding and we think you strange for fighting. Will she be well?"

"If the Light continues to shine on me, she will," Zerith sighed, crossing his arms over his chest and shoving his hands under his arms. "It was some kind of demonic lightning. I've never seen or treated anything like it before."

"Wind is one of the hardest elements to convince to heed you and one of the first to turn against you should you abuse its gifts," Tam'ara muttered, lost in thought. "'Demonic lightning' is a contradiction."

"I don't pretend to know how she did it," Zerith admitted. "All I know is what I saw. She pointed at Dar'ja and suddenly my wife was sparkling as if she'd been hit by some strange gnomish device."

"It's strange to think that we had cultists right here, beneath our hooves, and never knew it. We knew the nerubians were nearby; for years, we watched for their attacks, wondered if they would come out of their kingdom. Only recently have they done so and the results have been horrific. With Icemist destroyed, the only place left to run is Taunka'le Village and what would keep it from being attacked?"

Zerith studied the taunka woman for a long moment but kept quiet. Having been married as long as he had been, he knew better than to try to track the myriad paths a woman's mind could travel. Still, why did she speak against fighting with one side of her mouth then seem in favor of it with the other? Turning his gaze back to the road, he inhaled deeply, wondering if the others would re-emerge from Ahn'Kahet soon.

Just when the priest was about to turn back and re-enter the village to check on his wife, he heard hooves pounding on the road. Moving closer so he could see and be seen by

whoever approached, he looked confused when Jez'ral galloped past. The priest shouted at him, nearly startling the man off his hawkstrider.

"I thought you were returning to Warsong Hold," the former warlock muttered sourly.

"The taunka offered us a place to rest and recover. They've also offered aid in the healing. How are things going in Ahn'Kahet?"

"It's been cleared out. Saurfang just came with a few representatives of the untainted nerubians to reclaim it. We discovered the cause of the madness threatening us during the battles there and neutralized it. However, word has just come from Howling Fjord," he rattled off his report quickly. "Tau're has sent for us."

"Dar'ja is still resting. It will be days yet before she can be moved from here and weeks before she'd be back on her feet."

"If you can't come, then you can't come," Jez'ral said evenly. "Ger'alín is rounding everyone up and taking them back to the Fjord. Putress is going with them. I can tell him that you will be remaining here."

Zerith nodded in acknowledgement and Jez'ral hurried back to his hawkstider, brooded the creature's back, and sped back the way he had come. Tam'ara walked over to Zerith and stared the direction the other man had ridden off. "You're staying behind?" she asked softly.

"I'd be no good over there with my thoughts constantly here," the priest sighed. "They'll do fine in my absence. I have confidence in them."

"Do you know where he is going?" she asked, pointing down the road.

"Probably back to Ahn'Kahet. Or, barring that, Moka'li Harbor to rendezvous with the others there. If I know Ger'alín at all, he's already doing his best to get back to Howling Fjord before nightfall."

"I see," Tam'ara said slowly. "I will leave you in peace, Zerith. I hope that your wife heals well, swiftly, and completely."

Nodding again to the taunka, Zerith cast one last look down the road before turning on his heel to return to his vigil at Dar'ja's side. Tam'ara watched him re-enter the hut from nearby. With a nod of her own, she hurried over to where the animals the taunka favored as mounts were kept penned. With a quick promise to the guard that she would have the creature back soon, she mounted and hurried to follow the other man, hoping to be of some use to these strange people who had done more for her people than she thought possible.

Unbeknownst to Tam'ara, her own people had been watching and listening to the men's conversation. Shortly after she set out on her own, the warriors of the taunka began their march towards Howling Fjord.

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Ger'alín was grateful to collapse into a real bed. The will and adrenaline that had kept him on his feet throughout the day were gone. All he wanted now was to sleep for a few days. That and to eat as much as his stomach could hold. The thought of food made his mouth water even while his stomach twisted. He groaned and tried to get his various functions under control. Pulling the sheets over his head, he firmly told himself that he'd feel better in the morning. After all, if he'd felt better this morning than he had yesterday, he'd feel just that much closer to normal tomorrow. "Light, let me not remember how stupid that sounded when someone else said it," he prayed, turning and snuggling down into the pillow, willing himself to fall asleep.

He drifted for a while, feeling muscles unknot, tensions release, and his mind begin to relax into a pleasantly drowsy state. After a time, the only thing that kept him from slipping

under was the part of his mind focused on waiting for his wife to finish overseeing the first half of the Disorder of Azeroth's return to Howling Fjord and join him.

He nearly bolted out of the bed when the door flew open and a wide-eyed, near panicking sin'dorei woman let it slap back against her hand when it rebounded from the wall. "You...are...not...going...to...believe this!" she panted.

"What?" he asked, his voice two octaves higher than normal. "Woman, don't go scaring the everliving hell out of me like that if you're not going to tell me what it is about!" he muttered, shaking his head and scrubbing a hand through his tangled brown hair.

"The taunka..." she gasped, clutching her side with a hand.

"What about them?"

"Tam'ara came..."

"Oh great," he groaned, letting his body collapse back into the bed with a satisfying 'thud.'

"No," Alayne said breathlessly, rubbing at the stitch in her side and wishing she could gather enough air to just get the news out. "She came. Followed by just about every taunka warrior they could muster. Said they were going to pay us back for clearing out the nerubians. Going to the Fjord now. Vykrul will be history by next week."

Ger'alín had slowly begun to sit back up, staring incredulously as she continued her explanation. By the time he swung his feet over the edge, his jaw was close to joining them on the floor. "At least Dar'ja sounds like she's going to be well," he said at last, wincing when he realized how far from relevant that sounded.

"And she doesn't have to ride the boat," Alayne managed to gasp out, now out of breath from delivering a rapid-fire debriefing while out-of-breath.

"There is that, too," he said dryly. "Any chance I could speak to the chieftain? Icemist, you said his name was?"

"He's here, yes," she said. "I can run and go find him."

"I think you've done enough running for today," Ger'alín said quickly. "Let me get dressed again and I'll *walk* with you. How many more trips do you think the tuskarr can make before it gets too dark?" he asked while he redressed, digging through his saddlebags for a cleaner shirt and settling his tabard over his head. He lifted his arms and smiled his thanks when Alayne hurried over to belt it on him correctly.

"Another two at least, I hope," she answered while she tied the sash. "That will put just over half our forces there tonight. The worry is the taunka. I think they're ready to march the entire way there tonight if need be. But they more than double our numbers which is good but it means we may not have everyone over until the day after tomorrow."

"Tau're can hold another day if need be. If he can't, then he waited far too long to send for us."

"I know," she sighed, her head sinking. Ger'alín cupped her chin with his hand and forced her to look him in the eyes. "I just hate the thought that anyone is waiting on us and we're unable to get there in time."

"Patience is a virtue."

"I know."

"And that saying is complete garbage," he grinned. "I know how you feel. We'll be there in time. Whether it will be time to save or avenge them will depend on factors outside our control. Now, take me to Chieftain Icemist. And walk, woman! He's not going over on the next boat, is he?" Ger'alín scolded Alayne when she turned and began trotting back up the hallway leading out of the underground inn. "Light, you're making me tired just watching you," he added when he caught up to her.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

“Tired,” he admitted bluntly. “Like I could sleep for a week. I feel like I could eat for one, too, except when I actually think about food,” he growled softly. “Whatever the Apothecaries did, it worked. I just wish I knew more about what they did do.”

“Perhaps Zerith could find out for you when Dar’ja has recovered?” she suggested.

“Perhaps. I know that you’re of two minds about Putress but, Alayne,” he cautioned, “something is not right about him. I can understand cutting corners when it comes to taking down someone as vile as Arthas but I cannot allow him to endanger any of us with his corner-cutting. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” she replied softly. “Chieftain Icemist is just over there,” she pointed. Ger’alin followed her gesture with his eyes and gasped when he saw the taunka chieftain. The man was a prime example of his people, tall, muscular, with eyes that held fury and wisdom within their dark depths. His shaggy mane hung down his back and sharp horns crowned his bare head. Armor that was battered from use hung from his shaggy shoulders and he carried his weapons as if they were as much a part of him as his tail. The taunka nodded in satisfaction when his eyes fell on Ger’alin and the sin’dorei paladin felt himself being studied just as thoroughly. The chieftain jerked his head one direction, a silent command for Ger’alin to meet him away from both their peoples. Ger’alin whispered a quick request to Alayne, asking her to see if something filling could be prepared and carried to their room and then walked quickly to where the taunka chieftain was going to meet him.

“Sunrage,” Chieftain Icemist said tersely.

“Chieftain,” Ger’alin returned, “thank you for bringing your forces to aid us.”

“Helping you is helping ourselves,” the taunka replied as he crossed his arms over his chest and settled himself. “I know you’ve had scouts watching the vykrul for a while now. What can you tell me of your plan?”

“My scouts report that the vykrul have begun sending messengers to Icecrown. We need to attack and take care of them once and for all before reinforcements from the Scourge can reach them. I’ve left one of my most able and trusted men in Howling Fjord. The plan he suggests is one similar to a tactic we’ve used with much success in the past.”

“Tell me what it is. I will decide how best to aid it or change it based on what it is.”

Ger’alin nodded, liking the way the taunka knifed to the heart of the matter. “Tau’re sent a message and a map of the area he’s scouted. The keep is heavily guarded along the main bridges. There are overlooks everywhere. Any force that approaches the fortress will be spotted long before it arrives and will need to be prepared for an immediate attack. However, Tau’re has set several of his forces to capture vykrul fishing boats.”

“Fishing boats?”

“Yes,” Ger’alin grinned. “Fishing boats. He estimates they can hold up to ten men. He also has asked the tuskarr to make some additional boats in the vykrul style. They don’t have to be perfect; just close enough to fool our watchers. The plan is to land our forces near the base of the fortress at night. The vykrul send out their sailors to haul in fish during the day. They generally return in a group late in the evening. We’ll waylay them here,” he said, squatting down and sketching a quick map in the snow. “At this bend on the river just before the fortress will come into sight. We then take their place. We should be able to take care of the vykrul on the docks fairly quickly. We’ll then sneak in through the catacombs beneath the fortress. The hardest part will be not getting completely turned around while we’re underground,” Ger’alin admitted. “Once we’re inside, we should be able to keep them on edge long enough to flush out Ymiron.”

“They practically worship Ymiron. If we were able to kill him, that would demoralize most of them,” the taunka said. “It is a good plan. I will have half my forces go with yours in the boats if there are enough. The rest I will hold in reserve at the bridges here and here,” Icemist said, pointing out the places where bridges from Utgarde joined on to the mainland.

“I’ll also have archers along the cliffsides with arrows ready to set to flame if any attempt to get out by boat.”

“That sounds good to me,” Ger’alin nodded. “I was planning to leave a few archers and magi of my own out around the small town to slow down any vykrul rushing to the fortress if an alarm is sounded. They would also have orders to do their best to destroy the coop where their flyers are held in the event that they attempted to send for reinforcements that way.”

“Good thinking. Those drakes could serve us well if we can salvage them. Many of my tribe are skilled in work with animals. Unless the vykruls’ control over their drakes is completely magical, we should be able to turn them to our use quickly enough.”

The two men chatted companionably for a bit longer, the topic changing from the current plan of battle to other battles they had been in. Ger’alin’s respect for the taunka as warriors increased as Icemist spoke. The paladin had been worried that they would be mostly pacific after his experiences with Tam’ara. It seemed that she was something of an oddity among them. Ger’alin just hoped that she wouldn’t cause any trouble if she was planning to tag along. He had Alayne and Callie with him and those two could cause trouble enough as it was.

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Alayne woke the next morning wondering why half of her was freezing while the other half was burning up. Groping the bed, she grunted and opened her eyes. Ger’alin had stolen the covers. Turning to face him and lifting a hand to gently shake his shoulder, her eyes widened when she saw that he was huddled beneath the thick blankets, shivering. Laying her hand on his forehead, she exhaled between clenched teeth. He was burning with fever. He grimaced and rolled towards her, opening his eyes a crack and clenching his jaws so his teeth would not clack together. “I’m not feeling so well,” he groaned between gritted teeth. Alayne nodded dumbly at his understatement. His skin was pale and dark circles marred the skin under his glazed eyes. He trembled violently before relaxing into normal shivers. A pain in his stomach made him hunch up under the covers, groaning and moaning as it pulsed through his midsection.

Alayne smoothed his hair back from his face and got up from the bed. Dipping a cloth in the water basin, she wrung it out and laid it over his forehead. Slipping on a clean robe, she padded out of the room on bare feet, ignoring the icy chill of the floor. She glanced through the common room of the inn, searching for anyone who could heal. She saw one of the shaman, Grognaak, she thought it was, from the Disorder of Azeroth speaking with Putress. Walking swiftly over to them, she explained the situation. The Apothecary hurried to his room to retrieve his bag while Grognaak followed her back to her room. Closing the door behind them both, he slid the bolt and shook his head at the question in her eyes.

“I don’t care for his methods,” was all the shaman said. “Stand here and if he knocks, open the door to tell him to just pass the vials to you. He doesn’t think much of my methods and I think less of his.”

Alayne nodded helplessly, not understanding what the tauren was getting at. Grognaak walked over to the bed, pulled some totemic symbols from his belt pouch, and began muttering beneath his breath. When Alayne heard the doorknob being tested, she hurriedly opened the door a crack and asked Putress to pass her whatever was needed. Putress sighed heavily, handed her several vials, explained what each was for, and told her he would remain in the hallway in case he was needed.

“Come here,” Grognaak said softly, gesturing for Alayne to draw closer. “He’ll be calmer with you close. This isn’t good.”

“What’s the matter?”

Grognak managed to coax Ger’alin out of the ball the sin’dorei had curled himself into and pressed gently on his right side. Ger’alin groaned loudly and curled back up, knocking the shaman’s hands away and growling. “I’ve seen it in others; I know what to do. There’s part of him that is holding some kind of posion. It’s dying and if it dies, it will release the posion into the rest of him and he’ll die.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You are going to ask Putress for the strongest sedative he can provide you. Something that will knock Ger’alin out completely. I’ll take care of the rest. He’ll have to spend the next several days in bed, though.”

“But we’re supposed to go to Howling Fjord...”

“He’s not going anywhere that involves him getting on his feet. You’ll have to go. I realize the dilemma you face; someone has to lead our group in his absence. The only two I know of who could are you and Callie with Zerith away. Now, go ask Putress for that sedative.”

“Can I...can I stay while you do...whatever it is you’re going to do?”

“Only if you promise not to faint,” the shaman said, a faint trace of bitter humor in his voice. “I can’t abide fainting women. Sit there,” he pointed to the head of the bed. “You can hold his hand. After you’ve gotten the sedative,” he muttered when Alayne moved to sit down. She leapt back up and hurried from the room. When she returned moments later, the shaman had Ger’alin laying flat on his back and a slight breeze wafted through the room. She handed Grognak the vial and watched as he forced it between Ger’alin’s teeth. Her husband fought the drink at first but then, finding it to his liking, he swallowed convulsively. The tauren then waited for several minutes before settling a sheet in the air and gesturing for Alayne to take her place. She sat where he had indicated and waited, wondering why the sheet blocked her view of what the shaman was doing. When Ger’alin jerked in his sleep, grunting and grimacing as if in pain, she nearly rose to her feet. A gentle grasp of air held her in place while the shaman continued whatever it was he was doing. “Don’t move from where you are. You won’t like what you’d see.”

Long, silent moments stretched out before Grognak looked up, set something near Ger’alin’s side, and began making motions as if he were stitching a wound. When Alayne tried to rise again, Grognak growled at her and this time, she growled back. Grognak grinned and shook his head. “You sound like a wet cat.”

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Saving his life,” the tauren replied blandly. He finished his work and Alayne heard splashing, as if he were washing his hands. Drying them on the sheet that hovered blocking her view, she winced when she saw that the water he wiped away was stained pinkish as if with blood. Ger’alin’s face had relaxed once Grognak finished and Alayne was relieved to see that he appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Grognak wrapped up whatever it was he had removed and muttered something about Ger’alin being “damned lucky to have survived that.”

“I’m referring to Putress,” the shaman added when Alayne shot him a look that would have peeled paint from the walls. “Whatever the Apothecaries gave him, it didn’t stop the necrosis from the nerubian’s poison entirely. Luckily, the spirits saw fit to give us the gifts that allow us to survive inspite of such things. He’ll sleep the rest of the day. I would suggest asking the tuskarr to take him to Icemist Village. Your brother can take care of the rest. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” the tauren said, gathering up his implements, “I have a conversation that you shouldn’t hear but probably will.”

The shaman swept out of the room and Alayne jumped when she heard him pounding on Putress’s door and shouting for the man to open it before he broke it into splinters. With a last sigh, she touched Ger’alin’s cheek with the back of her hand, grateful to find it a little

cooler than it had been before his strange treatment. Making a note to herself to actually read up on healing craft at some point in the future, she kissed him lightly on the forehead before leaving the room to see to the transport of the rest of their forces over to Howling Fjord.

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Tau're raised his eyebrows in askance when he saw Alayne and Callie walking over to his camp. He respected both women as able fighters and as good leaders but he wondered where Ger'alín and Zerith were. Why had they sent the women ahead? It was especially unlike Ger'alín to let Alayne out of his sight for more than a few moments. When the pair explained to him what had happened over the last several days, his fears were somewhat allayed. "He'll be well, though? And Dar'ja as well?"

"Grognak says he will be," Alayne replied.

"He would know. He's the best surgeon I've seen," Tau're said firmly.

Alayne paled and looked as if she might be ill. "I'd rather not think about it," she said faintly. "Let's go over the plan."

Tau're listened patiently as Alayne explained the plan Ger'alín had told her. He made a few suggested changes based on what he had been able to observe of the fortress. By the time he was finished, he was satisfied that the vykrul would be broken by the next sunrise. He was also pleasantly surprised to hear that the taunka would be joining in the fight and that Tam'ara had chosen to come along. Her skills were not in combat but she did know enough about battlefield healing to be of use there. He just prayed that there would not be too many wounded on their side.

"We should rest before nightfall," the tauren suggested. "There is a place nearby where we can sleep relatively unseen and without threat. The Forsaken who patrol from Vengeance Landing to New Agamand do keep the wild beasts and the strange creatures of the forest away," he explained as he led them into a thicket. Tents were pitched low to the ground and the naturally thick covering had been enhanced by skillful weaving, vines from nearby trees woven into the underbrush to make it much less likely those hiding inside would be spotted easily. "There are five other thickets like this one within shouting distance. If you hear the call of a wolf, that means that we're under attack. So far, we've not had to use that warning but it is better to be safe than sorry."

Tau're ushered the pair into his own tent and urged them to get some rest. Alayne looked frazzled for all that she had slept well the night before and Callie was growing more and more nervous by the minute. When he left them there, promising that he would take himself off somewhere else to rest, Alayne unrolled her own blankets and laid them down on the ground. "Might as well," she muttered. "Light knows that if I'm asleep, I'm not spending my time worrying about whatever it was that happened to Ger'alín."

"I wish I could sleep," Callie sighed wistfully. Alayne shot her a studying look. "I just keep hearing myself saying that if I lead anyone in this battle, they're going to wind up dead. Just like those I led on the beach in Borean Tundra."

"Callie," Alayne sighed, trying her best to sound like Ger'alín or Zerith. The rogue glanced over at her, a little put off by the snappishness of her tone. "What happened on the beach was a fluke. It was not predictable. Holding it against yourself will do neither you nor anyone else any good."

"I just..."

"No," Alayne said firmly. "You just nothing. Now, I need you to do your part here. That means you don't have the luxury of wallowing in self-pity and self-recriminations. I want you leading the first wave into the fortress and scouting ahead for the rest of us. I know you don't sleep, but you can damned well lay down and rest for a while or you'll be good for

nothing tonight,” she finished. Callie stared at her for a moment before Alayne sighed and began laying out her sleeping roll before climbing into it and closing her eyes.

“You sure have changed,” the rogue said dryly, her voice seeming to come from the ground near Alayne’s head. The sin’dorei opened her eyes a crack to see Callie laying on her back, her bony hands tucked behind her head and her eyes closed.

“If we all stayed the same,” Alayne muttered tiredly, “life would be incredibly dull.”

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“No,” Tau’re said forcing himself to stay calm. “I just never expected to hear that particular request from you.”

“So you won’t do it?” Tam’ara sighed.

“I’ll think about it. I certainly couldn’t start right now. I need to speak with your chieftain and then get some rest before tonight’s battle.”

“How long would it take me to gain any proficiency?”

“Lady, I spent a good two years practicing with weapons before I got anywhere close to ‘proficient.’ Ger’alin has been studying arms for about twelve years now – only half the time I’ve been studying them – and he can still knock me flat. Gaining skill with weaponry depends on talent, drive, and dedication,” he explained, ticking the points off with his fingers. “If you want to become ‘proficient,’ you will. But why the sudden interest? I thought you were content to remain at the hearth and care for the wounded.”

“I am for now,” she said cautiously. “But, perhaps I should do more than run. Perhaps if I’d known a little more, my intended wouldn’t have...”

“Learning to wield a sword or string a bow won’t bring him back,” Tau’re sighed heavily. “Throwing yourself into the thick of battle would not restore his spirit to his body.”

“I know that!” she snapped. “I just don’t want to see another person fall because I lacked the skills to save them.”

“I will consider your request,” Tau’re muttered after a lengthy pause. “I may not be the best person to teach you but I will consider it and give you whatever help I can. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to take care of business and then get some rest. Otherwise Alayne will singe my hide, skin me, carry the pelt back to Ger’alin, roast the rest of me for supper, and then she’ll stop being nice.”

“Do you really fear her? Ger’alin seems to be able to...”

“I don’t really fear her,” Tau’re laughed. “But I do know the lady’s temper and I do know how seriously she takes it when she’s put in command. And, I know that if I displease her, I’ll have to put up with her husband – one of the two men I’ve seen who can actually handle her without getting his hair set on fire – being upset with me for upsetting her. That I do fear because Ger’alin is quite capable of making me wish I’d never been born,” he grinned, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Is he truly so fierce?”

“What? No! Well, yes,” Tau’re roared with amusement. “He’s fierce if you threaten him, cross him, or are an enemy. I just have no desire to have him ask me to work the forms with him and not let me catch my breath for ten hours for annoying him by upsetting Alayne.”

“I see,” Tam’ara said in a tone that indicated she did not. Tau’re shook his head and walked off, searching for the taunka chieftain. He wanted to conclude that business quickly. Sleep threatened to roll him under every few minutes. How long had it been since he had let himself relax and truly get a good night’s rest? Sighing, he told himself that once this was over, he’d get all the rest he could. He wondered how Ger’alin and Zerith managed to put up with the strain that came from being the leaders of this band of fighters.

The taunka chieftain nodded in greeting when Tau're spotted him. Stomping over to him, the tauren smiled politely and sat by the fire when Icemist motioned for him to be seated. Pulling out the very maps that Tau're himself had drawn for Ger'alın, the taunka chieftain ran over the plan that Ger'alın had given him and the alterations he thought would be best. Tau're felt a slight thrill of pride hearing the plan. It was very close to the one he had come up with himself. Capturing the boats, though, and sneaking in at night had been Ger'alın's additions, as had the bit about keeping an eye on the town and destroying any fliers who attempted to escape to carry word of the attack. When the pair had finished going over the plan together, Tau're looked around again for Tam'ara and, not seeing her, decided to heed his own advice and catch a few hours' sleep in Davran's tent.

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The waters lapping against the sides of the boat relaxed Alayne, helping her to hold the nervousness she always felt before a battle at bay. She'd awoken after a refreshing few hours' nap and roused Callie. The Disorder of Azeroth and the taunka had quickly made their way south and descended the cliffs, climbing into the fishing boats and waiting in the shadows of the mountainous cliffs overlooking the river for the vykrul to return from their daily fishing trips. Along the shore, hiding behind the woody growth, those who could not fit in the boats waited. A thrill of anticipation shot through Alayne when she heard the splashing of oars to her south. Peeking up beneath the edge of the cloth covering the boat, she waited until the vykrul were strung out along the narrow strait. Then, with a fluid motion, she rose quickly to her feet and began flinging spells at the giant fishermen. She felt others doing the same around her, all careful to keep their spells from hitting the boats themselves. Archers fired arrows and Alayne heard the thudding splash of vykrul bodies tumbling into the waters. Those who could not join in the fight itself swam in the chilly river, dragging the bodies to shore where they could be dealt with and not washed away to give testimony of the coming attack.

Once the last vykrul were dead, the swimmers pulled the empty boats to shore. There were more than enough left to transport the entire group. Alayne directed the smaller members of both groups to hide themselves while the taunka and tauren sat upright. She prayed that from a distance, in the dark, the vykrul would mistake the two more massive races for their own. The illusion would not hold for long but perhaps it would give them just enough time to get landed on the island that held the base of the fortress. Once everyone was settled, the rowers took the oars and began to pull themselves through the river.

The night was dark and Alayne was glad that only a thin, pale sliver of the moon gave any light. It made it more difficult for the attackers to find their way in but it also made it less likely that they would be spotted until they were inside. She resisted the temptation to lift her head and see how much further they had to go. Ger'alın would never forgive her for doing something that foolish. Remembering his constant yammering that the most important part of soldiering was patience, she schooled herself to stillness and waited until she heard the front of the boat scrape the rocky sands of the shore. When she lifted her head, a familiar feeling washed over her. Glancing around, she saw the death knights and the Forsaken eyeing the shore warily. She wondered if this time he were truly here or if it were another projection of his being while the true Lich King stood safe behind his saronite walls in Icecrown. So intent was she on thinking about Arthas, she almost missed Tau're's whispered warning.

"There's no one here," she heard Tau're muttered uncomfortably. "This doesn't feel right."

"A trap?" she asked softly.

“They’d have to be stupid or insane to leave the docks and the lower entrance this unguarded. I think we should expect a nasty surprise once we’re inside.”

“I think we’re in for a nasty surprise even if they are stupid or insane,” Alayne sighed. “I sense the Lich King.”

“Light preserve us,” she heard more than one person pray as her warning spread through the gathering. “He’s here?”

“His presence is,” Callie answered for her. “Whether that means he is actually here or not is open for debate. I think we should proceed as if he is. Caution keeps us alive longer,” she muttered wistfully.

“We’ll live to see the sun rise over this keep,” Tau’re said firmly, not allowing for any doubt to enter into his voice. “And the new day will be the first dawn of many days without the vykrul and their Scourge masters polluting this area. Now, come on. We have a castle to storm.”

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Tau’re grimaced as he glanced back over the long hallway. Vyrkul bodies were mixed with Scourge skeletons. Gore coated the stone floor and made the bile rise in his throat. It had been a vicious taking but the Disorder of Azeroth had pushed through to this seemingly safe spot. Only the Forsaken and the death knights seemed to be able to take the horrors of the Scourge in stride. Tau’re knew that until he died, he would see those twisted, wickedly grinning skulls and the un-natural blue eyes that lacked any hint of intelligence. At least the vykrul had been a clean, honest, living opponent. They were worthy of some measure of honor, even if they had turned their backs on the other mortal races to serve the Lich King.

“It’s going well since we got out of the catacombs,” Alayne sighed, pulling the tauren from his thoughts. “Light, I’m so glad to be out of tunnels. If I never have to go underground until the time comes for my burial, I’ll be happy,” she muttered.

Tau’re nodded blankly, his attention focused ahead. For the moment, no vykrul were rushing towards them. They could take a few minutes to gather their wits, catch their breaths, and then press on. He groaned when he saw Alayne’s ears go on point and her face stiffen. He’d seen that expression on Ger’alin’s face before and it rarely boded well. “What is it?”

“Necromancy,” she growled stiffly. “There’s a raising going on not far from here. Let’s get going. The sooner we can find and neutralize any vykrul necromancers, the less we’ll have to face.”

Tau’re clomped back down the hallway, passing along the sin’dorei woman’s message to anyone he saw. Soon, the entire gathering was back on their feet and awaiting the signal to move on. Alayne stood where Tau’re had left her, leaning forward so that her head was about a foot in front of the rest of her, looking like a hunting dog who had scented prey. As Tau’re was about to walk back towards her, she whirled around and began pointing at people gathered around. She jerked her thumb up the empty passageway and then hiked her skirts and began running. Tau’re was glad he was one of the few she’d pointed at. The worry that she would get herself hurt and he’d have to explain it to her ailing husband made him not want to let her out of his sight.

Alayne led them through a few twists, stopping at any crossroads in the halls to cock her head as if listening for a distant calling. After a while, the corridors opened up into a massive forge. Skulls spit fire out of an enormous central burner and anvils easily three times the size of those belonging to tauren smiths stood at regular intervals near the fires. Racks of well-made weapons, their size declaring for whom they had been made, stood all along the edges of the rooms. Spying them, Alayne lifted her hands and balls of fire flew from her palms. The other magi she’d picked out followed her example so that soon only a few lumps

of ruined metal attested that weapons had been there at all. Nodding to herself in satisfaction, Alayne jogged through the empty forge, leaving the others to rush to catch up to her. Climbing wooden stairs, she stopped on a landing halfway to the entrance of another room. She flung out a hand to signal the others to stop next to her and cocked her head again, cupping the other hand to her ear as if she were trying to catch the sound better. She pursed her lips and glared up at the wooden doorway at the top of the stairs. Tau're moved towards her, ready to ask what she sensed. She hiked her skirts nearly to her hips and ran up the stairs faster than Tau're thought possible or wise. The others followed after her, nearly dogging her heels in their haste to keep up. They skidded to a halt inside the room, nearly bowling Alayne over when they ran into her.

A mottled-skin blood elf, his visage so dark he could be mistaken for a night elf, stood on the other side of the room, his fists pressed to the top of a large circular table in the center of the room. Long white hair framed a face that was twisted by brutality and contemptuous rage. The undead elf raised his hands and shouted words that Tau're did not understand. Alayne blanched and the Forsaken looked as if they were going to be sick. Skeletons appeared from the hallway on the opposite side of the room and Alayne began growling. With a gesture of her own, she called in the chill of the Northrend air and flung it down on the skeletons, slowing them down and the hail chipping away at their bones. The other elf glared at her. "Your blood is mine!" he shouted, rushing towards her, a knife in his hand.

Tau're leapt in front of her and hefted one of his axes. The undead elf scrambled to a hasty halt, eyeing the tauren with a mix of hatred and respect. Reaching back to unsling his other axe, the tauren let loose a room-shaking bellow and rushed his enemy. Tau're stumbled when the dark-skinned elf vanished from where he had been standing, reappearing several yards away. Alayne threw her hands towards him and bolts of magic flew from her fingertips. However, the energy of the small snowstorm she had conjured was lessened by her divided attention and the skeletons began to move more swiftly.

Callie put an end to it by rushing towards the skeletons. Several other fighters followed her and focused their attention on them, leaving Tau're and Alayne free to deal with the elven man. Whenever he teleported away from Tau're, Alayne was ready for him, throwing spells that he could not dodge. When he paused to try to focus his attentions on her, Tau're was there, his axes cutting away at the undead flesh. The battle was short but brutal before the undead elf collapsed in a bloody, broken heap. "I join... the night," he gasped as he made one last attempt to summon more skeletons.

Alayne hunched over and vomited noisily. Tau're swallowed hard, wishing he could join her. The others began dragging the skeletons towards the mess that had been their master, muttering about putting them all to pyre quickly. "I'll see to that," Alayne croaked. "Go, get the others. Tau're, watch that door," she said, pointing to where the skeletons had come from. "I think he killed and revived all of them but..."

The tauren nodded and managed to surpress the urge to shudder. Fighting their way through enemies who would kill their own to make use of the corpses was not going to be clean or easy. With a growl, he placed himself in front of the door, determined to let no one pass.

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Ger'alín woke up and wished he hadn't. His mouth tasted foul and his side felt as if someone had stabbed him with a molten sword. Smacking his lips and scraping his tongue against his teeth, he let his head loll to one side. "Alayne?" he tried to shout, the sound coming out more like a moan than a call. When he heard no response, he tried to pull himself up. Screaming as he collapsed back onto the bed, his hands flew to his side where he felt thick

bandages. “What in the name of the Pantheon?” he wondered, considering whether or not he should pull aside the linen to see what had happened to his side.

“You’re awake,” he heard Zerith say from the doorway. Turning his head the other direction, he realized that the room he was in looked nothing like the one he recalled from the inn. “You’ve been asleep all day and all night. I was starting to worry.”

“Zerith? What is going on?”

“You’re damned lucky to be alive and I’m seriously considering killing Putress the next time I see him.”

“What happened?”

“The spider, you remember being poisoned, right?”

“Vaguely. We attacked Azjol-Nerub. I remember that much. It is rather fuzzy, though,” he sighed, running a hand through his hair

“We attacked Azjol-Nerub,” Zerith repeated. “You fought a huge spider. It poisoned you and you were fairly ill for several hours until Callie fetched Putress. He gave you something that got most of the poison out of you...”

“If he saved my life, why do you want to kill him?” Ger’alin asked, confused.

“I’m getting to that,” Zerith sighed. “What he gave you forced most of the poison out through your mouth,” the priest said, his own mouth twisting in distaste. “Alayne described your reaction to me. It wasn’t pretty. Then one of his assistants who has some faith healed you enough for you to participate in the fight against Ahn’Kahet.”

“Against what?”

“The nerubian old kingdom. You probably won’t recall it for another few days. If Putress had any sympathy or compassion, he would have refused to let you move after his treatment...”

“I can be fairly intimidating and stubborn...”

“He could have told Alayne it could have killed you. Think you could get around *her* when she sets her mind on something?”

“Ah. True enough.”

“At any rate, I think I’ve puzzled out what it was he gave you and, by rights, you should be dead. It not only forced the poison out of you, it began attacking any ‘toxins’ left inside of you. However, it also began attacking organs that contain toxins, holding them away from the rest of your body until they can be neutralized naturally or processed. If Grognak hadn’t figured it out and cut in to remove the worst of it, you’d be dead. His note to me explains that the ‘cure’ interfered with normal healing. He had no choice,” Zerith finished, seeing the anger and confusion contorting the paladin’s face.

“He took out my appendix?”

“So you do remember all that studying you did trying to help Alayne,” Zerith sighed.

“Does Alayne know?”

“Alayne wouldn’t know or understand. Her studies went other directions. Grognak didn’t try to explain it to her because you *know* how her temper can get when she gets scared and confused and it involves you or me.”

“Where is she?”

“Howling Fjord.”

“What?!”

“Someone had to lead our forces over there and help Tau’re out of whatever trouble he’s in. She and Callie were the only ones who could do it.”

“Why not you?”

“Dar’ja’s still not recovered from the attack she took when we were in Ahn’Kahet.”

“Why can’t I remember any of this?”

“Because you were extremely ill this morning and because of the sedative Grogna fed you. You’re doing good to remember your own name right now. I’m guessing that you don’t recall the first conversation we had along these lines not even an hour ago.”

Ger’alin shook his head and closed his eyes, feeling more exhausted than he could remember feeling ever before in his life. “Just let me get some more rest and I’ll head over to Howling Fjord. I can’t let the others down...”

The priest watched as Ger’alin dozed back off, the sedative taking hold of him again. Shaking his head and then pushing his reddish brown hair out of his face, Zerith wondered if he’d need to repeat himself for a third time when Ger’alin awoke again. Keeping his anger in check, he left Ger’alin to his rest and went to check on Dar’ja. “I’m still going to kill that bastard Putress as soon as I can,” he growled to himself. “Half-assed solutions that kill the patient are no solutions at all!”

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Tau’re was glad when they left the stuffy, wooden confines of the castle and began making their silent way along the airy walks. Watchfires burned at the far ends of the overlooks, giving warmth in the icy winds and acting as signal fires to call for aid from a distance. The tauren was glad that the ruckus they had raised earlier had drawn even the look-outs into the fighting, preventing them from using the fires to send messages. Chafing his hands near one of the blazes, he wondered what was keeping Callie and the others who had scouted ahead from returning to report. He glanced down the long walkway to see Alayne staring into the room ahead, a look of confused horror on her face. When Callie rushed out of the room and made a hurried report to the sin’dorei woman, he began jogging up to them, seeing that Alayne’s legs were about to give out. He did not reach them in time; Alayne hit the ground and stared up at Callie, both women’s jaws dropped in shock while the elf-maid rubbed her rump where she had hit the hard, stone ground.

“What is it?” he asked, glancing at the room and seeing nothing.

“He was in there,” Callie shuddered. “He was in there and some vykrul woman was holding what looked like a service where they were all worshipping him.”

“Arthas?” Tau’re said quietly, the fur on his shoulders and neck standing on end.

“Then, he did something... I’m not sure what,” the rogue continued. “She transformed into some kind of still-living banshee and the other vykrul worshipping all tried to flee. He killed them all with some kind of magic I’ve never seen before!”

“Is he still in there?”

“Yes and no,” Alayne said, her voice empty of any expression. “I can sense his presence still but not as strongly as before.”

“If we go in there and he’s in there, he could do the same to us,” Callie shivered. “And she’s still in there. Light, she’s got to know we’re here. Why are they waiting? Why aren’t they coming out here to attack us?”

“Why do you believe they know we’re here? We’ve been fairly quiet,” Tau’re muttered.

“Banshees,” Alayne answered for her, “can sense the living. Most undead can to some extent but banshees can smell warm blood. In the Scourge, the senses of the undead are generally fed back to the necromancers, some of whom are living and some who are dead. It’s a complicated command structure but then, their ‘troops’ don’t really matter much. They can lose half their force and bring them back with those they manage to kill. Banshees, though... they’re the worst. The Lich King uses them as his advance forces. To have one who is in there, with her own mind, and the Lich King right behind her...”

“Should we retreat?”

“I don’t know if we can at this point. If we try to run, they may just take us from behind. Light, why did Arthas have to come here? And now?” Alayne moaned softly.

“If we can’t retreat, then we press ahead.”

“Tau’re, no!” Callie began. The tauren was already trotting back, rallying the others who were taking a few moments to warm themselves and rest from the previous skirmishes. Before Alayne could gather her wits to put an end to it, he had the entire Disorder of Azeroth and the taunka under their chieftain following him down the walkway, their steps making a steady, foreboding noise on the chill greystone floor.

“Come, enemies of the Scourge! I will show you the might of the Lich King!” they heard the banshee’s wailing voice shout at them from within the room. Alayne shuddered, forced herself to her feet, and followed the others into the room. She stared in amazement at the creature waiting for them.

“This is no ordinary banshee,” she thought to herself. Hovering high over the ground was a creature that looked like a twisted mockery of the angelic beings of story. Her ethereal body was girded in dark armor and a wicked sword was clutched in one hand. Wings beat steadily, stirring the dust in the room. Alayne shivered and fought not to vomit at the hatred she felt pouring out of the creature: a hatred for everything that lived. The banshee glared at the intruders and, with a whirl of her blade, dove towards them, a look of twisted triumph contorting her face.

Tau’re hefted his axes and jumped at the creature, his blades biting deep into the undead flesh. Living blood coated them as he attacked again and again. Alayne took deep breaths and reached within to call up the power that would let her throw fire and ice at this strange being. The others quickly ran after Tau’re, steel and spells slamming into the unnatural thing. She shrieked and everyone scattered, covering their ears with their hands to block out the horrific sound of a banshee’s wailing cry. The bruised and bleeding banshee continued her scream as she wafted higher and higher into the air. With a cruel gesture, the room was flooded with blinding light. When it cleared, Alayne gasped, seeing Callie standing in the center of a platform beneath the banshee, three undead spirits channeling to hold her in place while a huge runeblade descended from the ceiling. The banshee laughed, her cackling awful to hear. Callie thrashed against the chains holding her in place, her gaze focused on the enormous sword dropping slowly down towards where she stood.

Tau’re and the other close-combat fighters surged forward through the room, their blades cutting at the spirits holding one of their own in check. Alayne and the other magi continued to cast magic at the banshee, their spells whistling through the air while the blade continued to drop. As one by one, the three tormented spirits fell, the chains holding Callie in place lightened until she was able to throw herself off the platform, rolling to her feet in time to see the enormous blade burying itself in the very ground where she had stood captive.

The banshee dove back towards the group, rage shining in her pallid face. Ignoring Tau’re and the other fighters, she headed straight towards Alayne, her sword at the ready. Alayne nodded to herself and began readying the most powerful spell she could conjure. When the creature came close enough that Alayne could feel the chill of the blade, the *sin’dorei* unleashed the power she’d been holding.

Moments later, Alayne wondered why Callie and Tau’re were standing over her, expressions of awe on their faces. Callie held out a hand for Alayne to take to pull herself up. “Whatever it was you did,” the rogue said, “it worked. The banshee is dead and the Lich King’s presence has vanished.”

“It was impressive,” Tau’re agreed as he helped his friend’s wife get steady on her feet again. “However, could you refrain from casting spells that throw you and everyone else halfway across the room? I really do not look forward to having to explain how you flung

yourself into a wall to Ger'alín. He'll make me wish that getting knocked off my feet were the worst that could happen to me."

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Alayne and Tau're shook their heads in agreement. "It's ugly," they both said, staring at the stuffed statues lining the room.

"A hunter would be proud to have so many trophies but I cannot see the use in any of these creatures. They are predators, not prey," Tau're muttered.

"It's like a prison-house more than a trophy hall," Alayne sighed. "The more I see of these vykruł, the more I want to destroy them all."

"It's too quiet," Callie complained. "After killing that banshee, I expected to have to fight most of the keep. Where is everyone?"

"Maybe we've killed most of them and the rest are trying to find a way to escape? Not likely," Alayne sighed. "We left guards posted at all of the exits once we'd taken the ground floor."

"Callie's right. It is too quiet," Tau're sighed. "Still, there's nothing to do except press forward, ready for an attack at any moment."

Alayne nodded and sighed. Something did not feel right about this room. She let her senses stretch out, trying to determine where the wrong-ness was coming from. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth and the taunka were milling around the back of the room while she, Callie, and Tau're stood in the center, discussing their options. The other two fell silent, letting Alayne focus her concentration while she searched for the cause of what bothered her. When she felt a current of magic slip into place, her eyes flew open and then she herself flew halfway across the room when Tau're shoved her out of the way. The strange worgen they'd been studying was glowing red and shaking as if coming out of a long hibernation. The fighters surged from the back of the room, quickly taking it down. One by one, the other "statues" woke up, each one pounding the group harder and harder until, at last, the final trophy, a half-man, half-mammoth charged down the room, hurling spears and thrusting at those closest to him with a wicked polearm. Alayne winced when she saw the spear jab through Tau're's arm. She hurled her most lethal spells from where she stood, her back against the wall, while the other fighters cut at the creature. Callie managed to grab a handful of its shaggy hide and pull herself on to its back. The creature began bucking and rearing, trying to throw her off. Its gyrations exposed its underbelly and, with one quick thrust with his good arm, Tau're dealt the creature a deathblow to its belly.

Once the strange creatures were down, Alayne jogged to the back of the room and glanced out into the next corridor. She leapt back behind the door when she saw moonlight glinting off an armored dragon. A lone vykruł flew, patrolling the corridor. In the darkness, it was almost impossible to see him unless starlight or moonlight reflected off his armor. Chewing her lower lip worriedly, Alayne wondered how they would make it down the open walkway.

Tau're, his arm wrapped in bandages until the healers could deal with it, walked over towards the door. When she heard his hoof-beats, she motioned for him to stay where he was. Glancing back out into the night, she ran across the space of the open door only when she was certain the patroller could not see her.

"There's a vykruł flying around out there," she explained to him when she saw his brows raised in a silent question. "In the dark, you can barely see him. If we had a full moon, I'd say we could risk going out there. But..."

"But we're exhausted, we're not certain if there's cover after this, and we need time to heal those who were slashed or trampled by those statues," he finished for her. "We'll sleep in

here tonight,” he sighed. “Put guards on the doors and everyone keep their weapons close to hand.”

“That’s what I was going to suggest,” she agreed. “I hate leaving a battle half-finished so we can sleep in the enemy’s lair.”

“We can’t go back. We can only go forward. At dawn.”

“At dawn,” she repeated.

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Zerith swore beneath his breath when he walked into Ger’alin’s room just before the sky began lightening for the new day. He and the paladin had repeated their last conversation twice more before Ger’alin began to remember it. Now, when the priest peaked in on him, he found the other man shoving his feet into his boots and walking, half-hunched over from pain, to search for his armor and weapons.

“You are not going anywhere except back to bed,” Zerith growled. He’d just had this fight with Dar’ja once he’d been forced to tell her that the others had all gone to Howling Fjord. “You are getting back in that bed if I have to wrestle you there myself.”

“Zerith, I doubt you could do it even if I’m not at my best,” Ger’alin replied in an extremely reasonable tone. “I just had one of the taunka in here; they’ve received word that the battle is halted for now. Our forces have penetrated most of Utgarde and are unable to move forward in the dark. They’re being besieged now, even as they try to rest and regather their strength. I’m not leaving my wife and my friends to face that alone. I’m going to be there with them.”

“You can barely walk across a room, let alone sit a saddle or wield a weapon,” Zerith pointed out, wondering if all paladins were crazy or if it were confined only to Dar’ja and Ger’alin. Dar’ja had nearly passed out trying to dress herself and Zerith had been forced to restrain himself from throttling the messenger who blurted out his report before the priest could drag him into the hallway.

“You’re not stopping me. I am not leaving them there to face a siege while I lay around. All things considered, it was a pretty minor operation. Nothing like having a bone set or anything like that.”

“Ger’alin, you can’t...”

“I damned well will,” he said, glaring at the priest. “Now, you can either help me or not.” Disdaining his heavy plate, Ger’alin settled his chain vest over his shirt. Strapping on his gauntlets, he belted on his mace, slung his shield over his back, and then collapsed on the bed, gasping for air while his hands flew to his still-healing abdomen.

“Still think you can make it over to Howling Fjord when just getting dressed takes this much out of you?” Zerith asked mildly.

“Just watch...and learn...” Ger’alin panted angrily.

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Alayne banged her fist against the wall and then wished she hadn’t. Death knights still loyal to the Lich King had placed an anti-magic barrier around the entire prison area. It permeated the walls, making her feel ill. She recalled the days after the Sunwell’s destruction, trying to remember how she and her mother had coped with the sudden loss of magic. The disorientation she felt now was eerily similar to that only now she knew that death probably waited for her instead of the hope of a new power.

“I don’t know how they got around us,” Tau’re whispered glumly.

“No one does,” Callie muttered. “Damned Scourge.”

“Are you feeling any better?” Andeo asked quietly. “You had quite a concussion.”

“I’m fine as long as you don’t talk too loudly,” Tau’re said softly. “I’ll be better if Alayne will quit slamming the walls.”

“I’m not slamming the walls,” she huffed. “I’m looking for a way out of here.”

“There isn’t one,” Callie sighed mournfully. “This is a Scourge prison. Magic won’t work. Healing isn’t possible. We’re trapped. The only thing we can do is try to fight our way out when they come to open the doors and take us for our executions.”

“I’m not going down without a fight,” Alayne agreed. The others in the cell with them added their agreement and Alayne recommenced her pacing. “Light, I hope Zerith doesn’t decide to come check on us. I never should have let the taunka send that runner. No news is good news.”

“They had to alert the tuskarr and why shouldn’t they have heard that things were going fairly well?” Tau’re asked blandly. “We were holding off the waves of Scourge until they managed to come in from behind us.”

“Tau’re, every time I’ve heard my husband talk about ‘sieges’ he has said it as if it is something he never wants me to see and he never wants to see again. I’m just praying that he’s still unconscious from whatever it was Grogna did. Light, let him sleep another month to keep him from mounting a rescue attempt.”

“Do you think we’ll get out of here?” Andeo asked.

“Of course we will!” Alayne exploded. “We’ll get out of here before anyone knows we were ever captured!”

Tau’re winced in pain from the volume of her voice. He wanted to agree with her but he couldn’t think of a way out. He only hoped that some of the taunka and the Disorder of Azeroth left to guard the gates had survived to escape and carry the tale that they may be in trouble. While Alayne didn’t want Ger’alin to come to their rescue – and, considering what had happened to him, Tau’re was inclined to think the same – he wished that Zerith would at least come. Alayne and Callie were not bad when it came to strategizing but the two men who led their band out-shone them both.

Alayne continued pacing the room. The rest stared at her in silence. Had she been a cat, her fur would have been bristling and her tail lashing the air. She continued to pace, sinking deeper and deeper into her anger until she could see nothing but red-tinged walls and a black void where the floor had been. The others left her in peace, wondering what she was planning. She was glad of that. She would have hated to admit that she was planning nothing but to take as many vykrul with her as she could.

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“Brilliant idea, Zerith,” the priest growled to himself. “Let’s take a man who can barely walk, a woman who still trembles with spasms, and a bunch of elder taunka and go fight some vykrul! For an encore, we’ll grab up every toddler we can find and march on Icecrown!”

“Oh shut the hell up, Zerith,” Dar’ja groaned. “Shut up and come hold my hair.”

Ger’alin just glared at him, too tired from the trip to do anything else.

Zerith continued muttering under his breath but held Dar’ja’s hair away from her face and placed a cool hand on the back of her neck. He wondered why she insisted on making a trip by boat when they made her so violently ill. “One of these days, the pair of you will listen to me,” he said aloud. “One day, I’m sure it will happen. I just hope I don’t keel over dead from the shock. I swear by the Light, you’re both worse than Alayne sometimes.”

That being patently true, neither paladin argued with him. Instead, Dar’ja continued retching over the side of the boat and Ger’alin began wondering if it would go against his

vows to defend and protect if he threw something at the priest. His thoughts were interrupted by the boat rocking violently as it came to a halt at the Kagamua dock. Gritting his teeth against the searing pain, Ger'alın pulled himself to his feet and hobbled down the ramp, telling himself that the pain would lessen. He'd been telling himself that ever since he managed to get out of the bed. Zerith let Dar'ja proceed him down the ramp, glaring at her long black hair so hard his gaze could have cut another part in it. His glare changed to a stare of confusion when he saw a few fighters from the Disorder of Azeroth standing in the center of the town with several taunka. They were engaged in a rather animated discussion with several of the tuskarr. Jogging over to them, ignoring the irritated stares from Dar'ja and Ger'alın, he asked them what had happened.

"All was going well," Ber'lon sighed tiredly. "We knew they were unable to push forward and that they were being attacked from further inside the castle. Then, my position was overrun. I don't know how; I swear we had every exit under watch. They managed to kill several of the others with me and left me for dead myself. If it hadn't been for Tam'ara," he pointed to the woman, "I wouldn't have made it to report. The same thing happened in three other locations. My guess is that they poured through and have the others trapped on both sides. We've received no further word on them since."

Ger'alın looked as if he could chew iron and spit out nails. "Where was Alayne?"

"With them."

"Are you having the castle watched?"

"As we were before," Ber'lon said tersely.

"You've heard nothing?"

"Not a word."

"Then why are you standing around here like a lump on a log?!"

"Because when we rallied and went up to try to break through the attack, no one was there. We were even able to pass through the corridor they'd been waiting to clear out."

"What happened in that room?" Zerith asked, fearing the worst yet hoping for the best.

"A lot of vykrul died. Several corpses were left where they lay. Most of the weapons on the ground would have belonged to our own forces."

"They've been captured," Ger'alın said. It was not a question.

"That would be my guess."

"Where would they be held?"

"That, I don't know," Ber'lon sighed. "Further in the castle would be my guess. The vykrul seem to have given over the parts we cleared out. We found no scouts and no fighters trying to reclaim them when we made our brief run-through. Of course, that was before dawn."

Ger'alın growled and Zerith placed a hand on his arm to keep him from exploding on the death knight. Dar'ja began trembling from anxiety, fatigue, and the remnants of the attack she was still recovering from. "We're going to go get them out," Zerith said simply.

"We will come with you," the taunka and the tuskarr said.

"We have boats that can put you under the castle in the catacombs. That is how your friends entered," one of the tuskarr explained.

"Our own tribal brothers and sisters are in there. If your friends are prisoners, our people are prisoners too. We will go with you to free them from the servants of the Scourge."

"We will be glad of your cooperation," Zerith said firmly. "But you will follow my orders until this is over. Now, let me think," he asked. "Does anyone here have a map or can anyone describe the layout of the keep?" Ber'lon and several others volunteered to provide that information. The priest and the paladin walked and mince-stepped towards the town's inn. For long moments, they listened while those who had been there provided the reports.

When they had all the information they could get, they dismissed them and began working out a plan. Within an hour, they were ready to go.

“You have a plan?” Tam’ara asked when she saw the two elves walking out of the inn.

“Yes,” Zerith said. “We have a plan.” Glancing at Ger’alin and seeing the man still hunched over from pain, he sighed. He did not like this part of the plan at all. “Do you have any whiskey?” he groaned, ignoring the startled look on her face.

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Alayne shivered with anger and fatigue. Her stomach had long since ceased growling in hunger. She wished she knew how much time had passed. Tau’re slept peacefully, his headache finally clearing enough to let him rest. The others were dozing or laying lethargically throughout the cell, the fatigue of anxiety catching up to them. Only Callie was still fully conscious and she was lost in her own thoughts. With a sigh, Alayne resumed her restless pacing, her steps taking her close to the wooden door. She stopped when she heard the bolt slide open. Stepping back, she saw that the others, even those who had been asleep just seconds before, were scrambling to their feet. She waited, watching the door open and nearly overcome with despair when a vykrul stood in the entrance. Several others stood behind him. Alayne wanted to laugh. The only thing they could do at this point would be to grapple with their captors and Tau’re’s concussion and the impressive bruises Andeo sported on his chest had taught them the futility of wrestling with men twice their size.

“Come,” the vykrul said, his voice as lively as cold lead. “It is time.”

Alayne lifted her head haughtily and strode out of the cell as if the vykrul were an honor guard and not her captors. She could not even see them for the sudden, red-tinged darkness that clouded her vision. All she could think of was that the moment they were beyond the magical barriers, she was going to unleash a spell that would shake the foundations of the keep itself. She wondered, idly, if she or anyone else would survive it but discarded the thoughts. At this point, all that mattered was that as many of these Scourglings die as she could manage and that Ger’alin and Zerith not waste themselves or any survivors trying to rescue them.

As the vykrul led them through the rest of the prison, Alayne could feel the other magi readying themselves as she had been. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw twin expressions of grim determination on Jez’ral and Mir’el’s faces. She longed to fall back to where they were in the crowd but knew that their captors would not give them a moment to plot.

They were herded through narrow corridors and twisting stairwells towards the heart of the keep. Alayne shuddered when she recognized the ruined remains of several of the vykrul they had already killed. The necromancers must have worked all day and night to reanimate so many. She forced her thoughts to her surroundings, searching for the end of the anti-magic field that had surrounded them in the prison and continued to prevent her from being able to pull arcane currents into her being for a simple fire spell. When one of the vykrul near her growled and turned to cuff her, she realized that they were maintaining the shield even now. Her heart sank to her feet as she realized that they were not going to be stupid enough to let themselves be attacked. She and the other magi were as disarmed as their fighters. Even the warlocks were spellbound; their hands, eyes, and mouths bound with cloth to keep them from being able to pull anything out of the Nether. Andeo growled as he walked near Alayne, muttering that whatever unholy magic they were working kept him from being able to heal anything.

Through the keep they were lead until they came to a massive throne room. Four boats carved from the same heavy, dark wood that paneled the room stood in pairs before the throne. Vyrkul warriors were carved on top of them, laying with their swords and shields

gripped in their hands. Alayne shivered, wondering if they had ever lived. The carvings were old and very life-like. The throne itself was lost in shadow but they could see dark boots, indicating that someone sat there.

“You,” a dark, decrepit baritone voice intoned from the throne. The vykrul captors began forcing the Disorder of Azeroth and the taunka to their knees, and then prostrated themselves on the floor. “You killed Angerboda. I remember you. My queen called me out of sleep to serve the Lich King and you slew her. Though she fought honorably, you went against her as a rabble and overwhelmed her. How do you feel now that we have used the same tactic against you?”

Alayne shivered and wished that someone else would speak.

“King Ymiron asked you a question!” one of the vykrul, an enormous blue-skinned giant, roared.

“What would the Scourge know of honor?” Alayne sneered, faking a bravery she did not feel. “The entire time we forced our way through your pathetic warriors and your mindless dead fighters, I wondered why men who could be so much stronger and so much fiercer would bind themselves to someone like Arthas Menethil. But I see the answer now. It’s because for all your size and strength, you are cowards! Afraid of death, afraid of dying, you’re willing to sell yourselves into slavery eternal out of that fear! You speak of honor, Ymiron?” she spat. “You have none!”

The vykrul rose up from the floor to glare at the impertinent sin’dorei. Alayne held her ground, staring them down arrogantly. “You are cowards. Only cowards and fools serve the Scourge willingly. The rest must be killed and enslaved, their minds controlled by the necromancers. Is that what you aspire to? Eternal life and eternal mindlessness? If so, I could give you *that!*”

“Pathetic mortal,” the vykrul king growled. “You know nothing. The death god – the one you call the ‘Lich King’ – is mightier than you can imagine. Your weak and sniveling race will serve him with slavery. We serve him because he has might beyond questioning. We serve him with glory and honor, hewing down the lesser beings...”

“Lesser beings who have done a good job of smashing your stronghold!” Callie shouted from the middle of the room.

“You have merely weeded out the unworthy for me,” the king said, sounding almost pleasant. “If they fall to you, they would have fallen in Ymirheim and been raised to give their mite to the death god. You...who goes there? Who else would invade my house?” he roared, hearing a commotion from outside the doors.

Alayne turned and cupped a hand to her ears, catching the sounds of a scuffle outside. Then came a mighty pounding on the door that the guards had closed behind them. Ymiron lifted a hand and the wooden door flew open, a staggering Ger’alin nearly falling on his face as he brought his hammer forward to bang against an impediment removed. Zerith caught him and helped him stay upright. Both men glared at the vykrul and then shivered as the shield that kept Alayne and the others helpless closed over them.

“What in the name of the Titans...” Zerith muttered.

“Titans?” Ymiron said, tasting the word and finding it unpleasant. “You would call out to the very ones who cursed us and abandoned us because they feared our power? I always suspected that some held back; that some did not obey my decree concerning those runts unworthy of life. The existence of your tiny and insignificant races proves it. I will lead my armies against you all and cleanse the world of your feeble blood...”

“He likes to hear himself talk, eh?” Ger’alin slurred, feeling giddy from the amount of alcohol in his bloodstream. “Why don’t you come down here and say that to my face? Light of heaven, you look worse than I do the morning after a good brawl! Well, that’s fine, too,” he swaggered when Ymiron made no move towards the door. “You’re probably too old and

fragile to fight much. We'll just clear the rabble out of here. Attack!" he shouted, seeming more sober than possible and pointing at the vykrul who were maintaining the spell that shielded them all.

Alayne watched in amazement as tuskarr, taunka, and the battered survivors, joined by the prisoners who were proficient in melee combat, surged against the vykrul. Ger'alín, walking oddly, half-hunched over and hidden behind his shield, laid into as many as he could reach, his hammer smashing vykrul kneecaps and then skulls as he made his way into the room. Ymiron made no move to help his people. When another vykrul near the throne, this one blue and wearing blue plate armor, stepped forward, Ymiron halted him with a gesture, watching the fight with pleasure. Alayne wondered if the vykrul king were entirely sane; he seemed almost happy to see his warriors being overcome. "More," he laughed. "More to serve the death god!" When the last vykrul maintaining the shield fell, Alayne gathered as much power as she could and began flinging it at any vykrul still standing. Within moments, the throne room was crowded with living fighters; the corpses of the vykrul were trampled underfoot.

"Come down here, you coward," Alayne shouted before Ger'alín could make a move towards the throne. She did not like the way her husband seemed to favor his right side as if it pained him. She also did not like the smell of strong liquor that clung to his breath when he stood near her. "Come down here and face us 'lesser creatures.' Or are you afraid that we are more powerful than the death god?"

"I will tear your hearts from your chests and offer them to the death god! Rualg nja gaborr!" he shouted, standing slowly from his throne and marching down the steps. He unsheathed a massive sword, its blade twice as long as Alayne was tall, and raised it above his head. The other vykrul lifted a heavy warhammer from his own belt and, following a step behind his king, made his way into the crowd of "lesser beings." Alayne waited until both men were nearly down the stairs before gesturing for Tau're to go after the blue giant while she focused her most powerful spell at Ymiron. Calling in the arcane currents, she channeled and bolts of pure magic flew faster than arrows at the vykrul king. Ymiron lifted his shield easily, blocking them and then smiling at her contemptuously. Ger'alín seemed torn between going over to help Tau're fight the other vykrul or placing himself between his wife and Ymiron. Zerith wondered how much longer Ger'alín would be able to stand up. Tam'ara put an end to it. Rushing the vykrul king, she leapt up and knocked him to the floor, pinning his arms at the shoulders with her knees. Others near him reached down and, using hands, feet, or bodies, kept his arms from flailing while they swarmed over him. "Skadi!" he shouted, turning his head towards the other vykrul.

"He's dead," Tau're laughed, lifting the blue vykrul's shield to his own arm.

Ymiron roared and with all of his might, flung his captors away from him. Ger'alín rolled into one of the four boats, groaning as he forced himself back to his feet, his side feeling as if someone were sawing him in half with a dull, hot blade. Tau're got to Ymiron first and, with one of the axes he'd taken from a dead vykrul warrior, bore in, hoping to make this a short fight. Alayne danced backwards and the others did as well, giving the tauren and the king space to fight. She felt the others call in their powers and joined her efforts to theirs, throwing every spell she could think of at the vykrul king. He ignored them the way she would have ignored gnats, his attention focused on the tauren who had killed Skadi.

"Still think we're lesser, Ymiron?" Alayne taunted, keeping the king off balance. "We've killed just about every vykrul in Northrend! Do you still think you're better than us? Still think that serving the Lich King gives you access to a power greater than our own?"

The vykrul king glared at her, his gaze icy with hatred. Lifting a hand, he cried out and the boats around the room began to tremble as the bodies atop them awoke at the king's command. "Bjorn of the Black Storm! Honor me now with your presence! Haldor of the

Rocky Cliffs, grant me your strength! Ranulf of the Screaming Abyss, snuff these maggots with darkest night! Tor of the Brutal Siege! Bestow your might upon me!” Waves of magic washed over him and Ymiron seemed to grow stronger, his body becoming heartier as the spirits poured their power into him. Alayne could feel the energy coursing through the room and reaching out, wrested some of it away from Ymiron. She felt others doing the same and their spells began to land against the vykruk king with a force that he could not ignore. Glancing around, his jaw slightly agape at what the lesser beings were doing, he took a step towards Alayne, eager to smash down the woman who would defy him in his own home. Tau’re and Ger’alin were upon him at almost the same time, axe and mace slamming into arm and knee, staggering but not felling the servant of the Scourge.

“You leave my wife alone,” Ger’alin growled.

“Like you did mine?” Ymiron roared, throwing his bad arm back and pushing Ger’alin away as the limp limb jerked feebly. Ger’alin lifted his shield to take the blows the enraged king rained down upon him, glad to be the punching-bag while Tau’re hefted the axe again and brought it down. Ymiron seemed to ignore the blows that would have killed a lesser man, intent on killing Ger’alin. One by one, the spirits on the boats were drained of their power and Ymiron began to shrink and age. Blood, dark, like old blood on an untended wound, flowed from the many cuts and slashes Tau’re had made with his axe. Ymiron staggered, seemingly surprised to feel pain. When Ger’alin sensed the onslaught lessening, he moved his shield aside and brought his hammer down on Ymiron’s head just as Tau’re landed his axe in the giant’s back.

Before Ymiron’s body hit the floor, Ger’alin collapsed and rolled on his side, wishing he was still drunk as the pain washed over him. “That,” he growled, “what not what I had planned. Not at all. But, at least it worked. At least you’re safe,” he whispered when Alayne bent over him.

“And at least you’re going back to bed,” she muttered, masking her concern. “Yes, we’re safe. For now.”

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“How is Ger’alin?” Putress asked politely. Zerith had stormed into his room and slammed the door when he’d seen the Apothecaries entering the tuskarr village. Alayne wondered if she could or should deal with Putress. Zerith and Grogna had explained to her what had ailed Ger’alin when she’d been forced to leave him and how close he had come to dying. Anger flared in her as she thought about what Putress’s potions had done to her husband and how long it might be before he recovered fully.

“He’s fine. He’s resting,” she answered, her sentences short and choppy.

“I’m surprised he traveled this far. I would have thought he would need another few days off his feet.”

“He came because he feared we were in danger. And he was right.”

“I’ve heard,” Putress said sympathetically. “The vykruk took you prisoner. Not a fate I would envy. I’d rather face nerubians than those foul giants and their strange worship of the Lich King. Were any of you harmed during your captivity?”

“A few bruises and cuts. Nothing Zerith and Dar’ja couldn’t take care of once the battle was over.”

“I see. What of the disposition of the fortress?” he asked, his tone carefully neutral and disinterested but his body tensing like a hunting dog who has scented his prey. Alayne stared at him, wondering what he wanted.

“I suppose that whoever wants it can have it. The tuskarr and taunka are planning to guard it and make certain it won’t be used against us ever again. Zerith plans to send to ask

for a contingent of the Horde forces to come and occupy it. It is in a strategic location,” she replied, trying to think of what Ger’alin or Zerith would say to such a question. Putress just looked at her, polite interest clear in his pose. She felt heat flooding her cheeks.

“You were lucky to escape your imprisonment unscathed,” Putress continued, ignoring the topic of the keep entirely now that his question had been answered. Alayne studied his masked face, trying to figure out what he was driving at. She wished she knew what to make of this Forsaken.

“How do you recall so much of your time with the Scourge?” she wondered aloud, flushing nearly purple when she realized she’d spoken. Putress stared at her. She wished she could see his face. “I’m just curious. Most of the Forsaken I know recall very little...”

“I recall my time with them because I studied necromancy after I regained my freedom. I learned the very spells used to control us. I learned how to counter them and how to lift the effects they placed on us. Lady Sylvanas felt it was a wise use of my talents; of all the Forsaken, she and I know the Scourge the best. It is a weapon we will use to destroy them.”

“I see.”

“As I was saying, you were lucky to escape so lightly. And your husband was lucky Grognak was there to help him. Pass my concerns on to him for me, please. I had no idea that there would be any toxins left to continue their foul work. I thought, if anything, it would purge him more than was necessary. That is why I lightened the dosage. I will not make that mistake again.”

Alayne stared at him for a long moment, not certain of what to say. She felt torn again. Everyone said he could not be trusted; everyone said he did not care what happened to the others so long as he got what he wanted. And yet, many had said the same about her, Mir’el, and Jez’ral when they had followed the fel arts. When she did not respond, Putress gave the ghost of a shrug and walked away, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Tau’re saw the exchange and wondered why Alayne tolerated the man near her. As much as he tried, the tauren could not bring himself to trust the Apothecaries much further than he could have hurled a full-grown kodo bull. He had seen enough of them lurking around the caves beneath Spirit Rise in Thunder Bluff, furtive and secretive. The druids had eyed them with distrust for all that Magatha Grimtotem had spoken of giving all the Forsaken a chance to redeem themselves. Tau’re knew there were honorable men and women among the undead. He also knew there were dishonorable sons of bitches among them too. He wondered why Alayne seemed so puzzled over which Putress was.

“Alayne?” he asked softly, walking up to her and startling her out of her thoughts.

“Tau’re, how are you? Feeling better? I can’t believe you were able to fight so well after that concussion. Zerith says that you’re as stubborn as Ger’alin sometime.”

“I’m fine. I need rest – and tell Ger’alin he needs it as well,” the tauren grinned.

“He’s resting now. I told him I was just coming up to fetch something to eat. I promised him supper and breakfast in bed if he’d stay in there a while and recover. How could he fight when he must have been in such pain?”

“I think Ger’alin would fight with both legs cut off, both arms hacked away at the shoulder, his head half-chopped off, and burned to a cinder if he was out to protect you,” Tau’re said softly. “He’d force himself to. And you’d do the same for him.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But he had just had his index or something cut out of him.”

“Appendix,” the tauren corrected. Alayne shrugged, not really knowing what that was. “It’s not magical. Only those of us who can’t rely on magic all the time for healing and those who study healing know much about it.”

The two stood silent for a long moment before Alayne moved, muttering that she needed to find something to eat before Ger’alin came looking for her. Tau’re stepped aside,

then followed behind her, offering to help her carry the food back to her room. He hinted several times that she needed rest almost as much as Ger'alín did. He wanted to ask her what Putress had said to her but sensed that it was an issue best left to the side, for now. As Alayne walked past several tables laden high with food from the festivities, selecting tidbits for herself and Ger'alín, he glanced around the camp. The celebrations would last for weeks, he thought. At long last, the one thing that held the vykrol together was removed.

"I wonder if any of them will join the fight against the Scourge now that we've proven that there is a power mightier than their 'death-god?'" he sighed. Alayne murmured something but he did not hear it in the clatter of plates that was followed by fluid cursing so intense that he blushed at the words coming out of the woman's mouth.

"What are you doing here?" she asked a strange sin'dorei who walked through the center of the village, his eyes focused on her. "I thought you were still in Outland."

"When the Queen calls, even those of us who are considered 'bastards' come," the elf said politely. "I've been over half this continent looking for you the last few days."

"We've been busy."

Tau're stared at the new elf, trying to recall where he knew him from. He looked familiar, his blue mail shining in the late evening sun and his white hair pulled up in a top-knot that flowed down his back and shoulders.

"Mordenai," she sighed, "what do you want? Why are you here?"

"Krasus asked if any of us knew mortals willing to risk their lives to aid our cause. I told him I knew several."

"Krasus? I figured he would be dead just like the other mages of Dalaran," she said. She sounded as if something were sticking in her throat. "Wasn't he killed when Archimonde destroyed the city?"

"No," Mordenai grinned.

"Why...why would he ask you...about mortals...?" she panted, fearing to hear the answer. She'd heard stories of Krasus and the other members of the high-ranking magocracy of Dalaran from her mother as a child. She'd dreamed of seeing the city as it had been before the Legion destroyed it. She could recall Mir'el and Jez'ral talking about the time when, as youths on the run from Mir'el's angry father, they had bumped into the member of the Kirin Tor while trying to stay out of trouble in Dalaran.

"Krasus is the Queen's consort. He's a red dragon. That's why he asked after mortals who might be willing to...where is she staying?" he groaned as he caught Alayne before she could hit the ground. "Tell her that this is the last time I'm carrying her around like this," he muttered when a shocked Tau're pointed towards the inn. "I thought she'd have a more practical attitude about this whole thing..."

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Ger'alín lay staring at the ceiling, watching the sun lightening the room. He felt as if he'd barely survived a no-holds-barred-fight-for-his-life brawl. Or rather, that he hadn't. Every inch of him felt bruised and battered; especially his tender right side. He groaned softly as he stretched his left arm over and around his sleeping wife. Alayne lay huddled, pressed against his left side. She'd barely moved all night. When Mordenai had carried her into the room, Ger'alín had wondered what had brought the dragon to Northrend. When he'd mentioned that Krasus and the dragonqueen, the legendary Alexstrazsa herself, were seeking mortals to aid them, he'd nearly fainted himself. The name Alexstrazsa still held a tinge of fear and revulsion for him even though he'd come to learn that she had been imprisoned by the orcs and that her dragons were enslaved by them. Being raised among humans, he'd

grown up hearing tales of the fearsome red dragonflight that were topped only by stories of Deathwing himself.

“We always find ourselves in interesting situations, don’t we?” he whispered, turning and pressing his lips against the crown of Alayne’s head. She stirred slightly in her sleep and then settled down, snoring softly. “It’s all your fault, you know,” he teased her. “You and Zerith started this whole mess.”

“I distinctly recall,” Zerith said softly from the door, “that you were one of the first to join in our hare-brained schemes. You were one of the ones who killed Dar’khan. You were one of the ones who came again to Silverpine Forest, then Stromgarde, then Desolace. It’s as much your fault we’re here as it is ours.”

“I’ll do my penance for that eventually,” Ger’alin laughed, careful not to wake Alayne. “Any chance of something to eat? She was going to bring me supper last night but Mordenai mentioned to her, rather clumsily, that some mage she heard tales of from her mother is actually a red dragon who’s the consort of the dragonqueen. Mordenai says she broke every dish on her way to the ground after hearing that.”

“I’ll see what I can do for you on that note. How do you feel after damned near killing yourself by getting drunk and fighting a bare day after having surgery?”

“Like an idiot so ‘normal.’ I can’t help it, Zerith. I get so worried about her when she’s out of my sight that I’ll do stupid things to make certain she’s safe.”

“As long as you know it was stupid.”

“What was stupid?” Alayne muttered sleepily. “I had the strangest dream, Ger’alin. I dreamed that Mordenai told me the red dragons want us to help them.”

“That wasn’t a dream, woman,” he said softly, restraining himself from giggling when he saw his own amusement reflected in Zerith’s eyes.

“It had to be,” she sighed as she snuggled up against Ger’alin’s side and pulled the covers over her head. “Just a strange dream,” she trailed off, falling back asleep.

“So no chance of breakfast, eh?” he asked. Alayne muttered something incoherent followed by more snoring. “Want to help me get up, Zerith? I feel like death warmed-over but I’m starving.”

The priest shook his head ruefully, knowing better than to point out that he could quite easily fetch something to eat. Walking around to the other side of the bed, he helped Ger’alin climb out without waking Alayne. He waited by the door while Ger’alin dressed and then helped the paladin out of the room. The pair made it to the common room where Zerith left Ger’alin sitting at a table and leaning against the wall, gasping and rubbing his side. Ger’alin let his head rest against the cool stone of the wall and tried to focus on something other than the pain radiating through his side. Some of the others had offered to mix something for him but after having forced himself to get drunk in order to be able to walk, he thought he would rather have the pain than the numbness in his mind that came from painkillers.

“You were either very brave or very foolish to follow us when you were so gravely hurt,” he heard a familiar voice say. It sounded amused. Opening his eyes a crack, he saw the taunka chieftain standing by the table, his face blank but his eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Chieftain,” he said, trying to rise. The taunka motioned for him to remain sitting and sat down himself. “I apologize if my plan endangered any of your...”

“Your plan was brilliant. But, the best-laid plan rarely survives contact with the enemy,” the chieftain said dismissively. “Those who were injured or killed knew they ran the risk of not returning from the battle. They fought to free our people from the threat of the Scourge and their willing slaves. I was only sorry that you fell ill and were unable to join us in the battle until the end. I see now why so many follow you. I see why even Tam’ara has begun to change her ways.”

“You are too generous, chieftain,” Ger’alin said, a light blush heating his cheeks. “They follow Alayne and Zerith more than they follow me.”

“A remarkable woman, your wife,” Icemist said, nodding in approval. “She could hold her own against an army of taunka and tuskarr. She was the one who worked out the adaptations to your plan that almost kept us out of the vykruls’ hands. Had we been fighting anyone other than the Scourge, we would never have been captured.”

“She can still surprise even me,” Ger’alin smiled. “What will your people do now that the vykrul threat has been lifted?”

“We will begin to reclaim our homes and will work to purge any remaining vykrul from our lands,” the chieftain answered. “We will also follow you. Never before have any people who ventured this far north offered us aid so freely. If we could, we would join with your people as others have done.”

“Join with our people? You mean join the Horde?”

“If they would have us. We can offer much to them if they wish. And our debt to them can never be repaid.”

“I will speak to Garrosh about that,” Ger’alin said. Zerith walked over and set a plate in front of the paladin and muttered that he was returning with his own breakfast to his room. Ger’alin nodded absently as the priest left. “It’s not a thing to do lightly,” he said to the chieftain. “My own people were not certain about joining the Horde. We had been members of the Alliance until we were betrayed and our homelands laid to waste. Even now, some of our number cling to the Alliance.”

“The Alliance offered us no aid,” the taunka chieftain said firmly. “They arrived first, established their bases, and left us to fend for ourselves. If they are your enemies, they will be ours, too. As I said, we have many debts to you.”

“I’ll speak with Garrosh,” Ger’alin repeated.

“That is all I ask,” Icemist said. “I will leave you to finish your meal now. Should you, perhaps, need help getting back to your room,” he continued, a faint twinkle in his eyes, “I will be at the next table.”