

Mir'el craned his neck, trying to see if Alayne and Ger'alín were among those getting off the boat at Moa'ki Harbor. Jez'ral stood next to him, his arms folded over his chest, prodding at the ground with his toe. Neither man had been much for speaking to the other since their argument while in Azjol-Nerub. Even during their captivity with the vykrol, they'd barely said more than was absolutely necessary. Mir'el held his peace, reminding himself that Jez'ral was wrong and that Miris would come back from beyond and strangle both of them if he let Alayne get mixed up in politics. "She's mixed up enough in it as is, being married to Ger'alín and one of the leaders of that band of theirs."

Jez'ral quirked an eyebrow at Mir'el and pursed his lips. Mir'el clenched his jaws; he had not meant to speak aloud. "So, are you going to talk to me or are you going to sulk a while longer?" Jez'ral asked, his tone apprehensively sarcastic.

"I'll speak with you when you are ready to listen to good sense."

"That's rich coming from you, Mir'el Darkweaver."

"She's already mixed up enough in politics."

"I agree with you there," Jez'ral sighed, staring at the ground and letting his arms fall to his sides. He lifted his hands as if weighing his options upon them. "But anything is safer than this."

"I could spend the next three centuries disabusing you of that notion," Mir'el muttered. "Scams, frauds, and black suspicion are the only things you're allowed to have near you when you get mixed in with that sort of business. Let her have her freedom. Besides, if you think Miris would be angry, that's nothing compared to what Tal'ar would do."

"I just don't want her to stay out here," Jez'ral muttered sullenly. "I've got the strangest feeling that something terrible is going to happen and it's going to involve her. She's suffered enough and I had a hand in that suffering. I want her to go back and be safe and happy. We've stolen their childhoods, their innocence. They shouldn't be out here fighting this war."

"As much as I'm inclined to agree with you," Mir'el sighed, "the simple fact is..."

"There's no one else left, I know," Jez'ral said along with him. "Still, why does she have to be up here?"

"It's what she wants. Why did I have to get dragged into the Battle of Mount Hyjal? Because I felt like I had no choice. My family knew demons – knew how to control and destroy them. I'd done my best to teach you and a few others how to deal with them but I was the only one who could have stood in that battle. And even I didn't make it," he grimaced, recalling how the fear had gripped him, clouding his mind, until he passed out when Archimonde drew near. "She'll be fine. We're here; we'll both keep our eyes on her. And, when she feels that she's done enough, we'll help Ger'alín and Zerith get her back to Nagrand where she belongs."

"I miss that little house she had built for us all," Jez'ral grinned, lost in thought. "I wonder if we'll be seeing it again any time soon."

"Of course we will!" Mir'el snorted. "As soon as she feels she's done all she can up here, we'll see her back safe and sound in Nagrand. And, Light willing, we'll be staying there until her grandchildren have grandchildren. After all, we've seen the worst that the universe can throw at us, haven't we? Kil'jaeden, the Scourge..."

"Don't say that out loud," Jez'ral teased half-seriously. "I learned long ago that if you dare the universe like that, it will take you up on it and show you horrors you can't even imagine."

"Was that before or after you wound up having to explain why you'd punched my father?"

"After."

"I see."

“It was his own fault,” Jez’ral grumped. “I got tired of him taking his temper out on me when you skipped town three days after Miris and Tal’ar eloped. He shouldn’t have...no, she’s not on this boat,” he sighed, seeing the last of the passengers disembark.

“Let’s go into the inn and out of the cold,” Mir’el suggested, feeling more relaxed than he had in days. “I’m sure she’ll be on the next one.”

Jez’ral followed the other man out of the freezing wind. Before he ducked into the tuskarr’s underground inn, he cast a glance back over his shoulder. He was glad that he and Mir’el were back on speaking terms. He just wished he could do something about the sense of impending doom that had been weighing on him ever since shortly after he arrived in Northrend.

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Alayne sighed and leaned her head back into the hollow of Ger’alin’s shoulder, glad of the clean, salt breeze that blew over the boat. She wondered if they would be meeting with the legendary Alexstrasza today or if, given how long it had taken to transport their group from Howling Fjord back to Dragonblight, they would postpone the meeting until tomorrow. Mordenai had stressed the urgency of speaking with them, telling them bluntly that dragons of the different flights came together only rarely, especially since Deathwing’s machinations had come to light in the previous wars.

“They’ve seen too much,” he had explained. “They’ve seen races born, rise to greatness and power and then fall into corruption and death. An entire elven lifespan is a few moments to them. To us. That they’re asking for mortals to meet with them...that’s extraordinary.”

“Why do we always seem to get into so much trouble without even trying?” Ger’alin asked suddenly, pulling Alayne out of her thoughts.

“You’d die of boredom if we didn’t,” she said lightly.

“I was perfectly content working in the guard force for the naaru, woman.”

“You were itching for something to do.”

“I *was* doing something. I was guarding a city and training fighters.”

“We’ll be going home soon. I’m certain that it can’t be much longer before we unite and bring down Arthas. And, after that, there won’t be a reason to...”

“Don’t say it!” he growled. “The minute you start thinking there’s nothing left to pull us out of our normal lives, fate will set out to prove you dead wrong. The moment I thought I would be staying the rest of my life serving Lady Proudmoore was the moment that Mir’el showed up in Menethil looking for recruits to return to Quel’Thalas.”

“It was Mir’el who found you?”

“Me and half a dozen others,” Ger’alin replied. “How are you feeling? Not too tired, are you?”

“Ger’alin, I feel fine. I’m not the one who had something cut out of him not even a week ago.”

“I know,” he temporized. “I just can’t help but worry about you, sweetheart. You’re not feeling too bad about what happened in Utgarde, are you?”

“I feel bad about it, yes,” she replied. “I feel bad for those who were hurt or killed. But I don’t blame myself completely for it. I see how I could have done things better, done them differently, but still, people probably would have been hurt or killed.”

“It’s good that you feel bad. It’s better that you’re learning from it instead of beating yourself up over it.”

“I know,” she sighed. “Ever since that ceremony, I find it easier to let go of things and to look ahead instead of behind.”

“I’m very glad of that. I think we’ll hold a remembrance feast tonight in Mo’aki for those who fell. Chieftain Icemist seems to think it’s a good idea as well. Then, tomorrow morning, a few of us will set out for this temple to speak with the dragons. Light only knows what we’ll be doing after that. Oh, that reminds me,” he added suddenly, “we should check in at Vemonspite and see if the Alliance needs help with Naxxramas.”

“I’m sure that the Alliance has the situation under control. We took care of the nerubians without their help and they do have greater numbers than we.”

“All the same, I’d rather check in. We’ve not been exactly easy to reach the past week. If they needed our aid, we wouldn’t have heard about it.”

“I suppose you’re right. I just hope we don’t have to go in there for them. I’ve had enough dealing with the Scourge for now. I wish we could just press on against Arthas and be done with this. I miss home. I miss teaching those children. I wonder what Sar’la is up to.”

“She’s probably up to high-spirited hijinks. And driving her uncle up the wall. We’ll have plenty of stories to tell her when we get back there, Alayne. I know you’re tired and if you wanted to leave and go home, I would not stop you.”

“I’m not leaving you up here without me.”

“I’ve accepted that as well. Still, we’ve given our word. Even to the Alliance.”

“I know. I just wish we had a little more help.”

“Sometimes it’s best that we don’t. Do you have any idea what the dragons will want of us?” he asked, changing the subject.

“None whatsoever,” she admitted bluntly. “Why on earth would the Lifebinder herself need any help from mortals who don’t even have a hundredth of her power?”

“I was hoping you could answer that question,” he sighed, leaning his head back and closing his eyes again. “I suppose we’ll find out soon enough, though.”

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The temple of the dragons rose out of the barren wastes of Dragonblight like a bleached bone pointing towards the sky. For all its graceful domes and elegant columns, it was as out-of-place in the tundra as a palace would be in the slums. A broken road, far wider than any of the mortal races would ever consider practical, lead to the underbelly of the temple from the north face. As the mortals approached it, most hung back, reluctant to press further on towards territory the dragons had claimed for themselves.

Ger’alin, Alayne, Zerith, Dar’ja, and the chieftains of the tuskarr and taunka tribes rode on towards the temple, leaving the gathering behind them in charge of Tau’re and Callie. Ger’alin still had to stifle the occasional groan when he twisted in his saddle. Alayne studied him, wishing he had chosen to stay behind. She knew he and Zerith were both torn over this meeting. After arriving in Dragonblight, the pair had ridden over to Venomspite to learn that the Alliance had managed only a fragile hold-off with Naxxramas. It could neither move nor unleash troops in great numbers but neither could the Alliance re-enter it to make an end of the Scourge masters of the floating citadel for once and for all. Ger’alin had heard it from Bolvar himself that this stand-off was the best that could be accomplished unless the Horde united with the Alliance to clear it out.

“It’ll have to do for now,” he muttered to himself as he had been ever since he’d heard the news. Alayne rolled her eyes. “It’ll have to do but Light knows I hate the idea of having an enemy free to plunge his dagger in my back while I’m taking on a foe from the front.”

The six leaders shivered when they entered the shadow of the temple. Hulking dragonkin stood guard at either side of the high arched doorways, wicked spears clutched in their taloned hands. Grey-skinned, they could have been of any of the flights. They nodded coolly when Zerith explained their presence at the dragon’s holy temple. Moments later,

several red dragons swooped gracefully down from the temple's peak. Alayne's eyes bugged when she realized that the meeting with the dragonqueen would take place at the top of the temple. With a silent prayer, she climbed aboard one of the dragons' backs, Ger'alín hurrying to clamber on behind her and keep her from doing anything too foolish as a result of the flight.

Zerith and Dar'ja reached the open room at the peak of the temple first. The priest blinked, wondering how a room so small could hold the great Aspect of Life. He also wondered where the dragonqueen was. Her message had said she would be waiting to meet them at the temple. All Zerith could see were a few other sin'dorei, a gnome, several nasty-looking humans, and a strangely beautiful woman. He stared at her, his jaw dropping open and his heart skipping a few beats until Dar'ja smacked him hard between the shoulders. He walked over to where Ger'alín had leapt off his own escort and had promptly dropped Alayne on the ground when his eyes fell on the woman. With a sigh, Zerith bent down to help his sister back to her feet and grimaced in sympathy when she took hold of one of her husband's ears and wrenched his face in her direction.

"Be welcome to Wyrrest Temple, mortals," the woman said, her voice pitched low. Eyes like stars twinkled out of a face that was neither young nor old but inexplicably ancient and youthful. Her skin was the color of the sky at deepest sunset or faintest dawn. Dark hair that seemed to be red and black billowed back from her face and hung lightly down her back. "I am Alexstrasza. I welcome you to this holy place."

"The dragonqueen," Ger'alín said breathlessly.

"Young Mordenaku of the nether dragons speaks highly of you," a sin'dorei man said. The four had been so focused on Alexstrasza that they had not noticed him walking up beside her. He wrapped an arm around the dragonqueen's waist, holding her in a familiar, though slightly possessive, fashion. Ger'alín and Zerith both quickly looked away, studying the temple floor and the chisled columns intently. "You remind me of a woman I met once in my travels," he muttered, staring at Alayne.

"You are Krasus of the Kir Tor," Alayne gasped in shock. "My mother told me of you. I grew up on stories about you and Archmage Antodias."

"Mordenai said you needed mortals to help you with something," Ger'alín said, very carefully not looking at the dragonqueen. "As he has been a friend to us in the past, we'd like to help his...family, if we can."

"I have sensed a darkness threatening to fall over all life. It festers here in Northrend and its stench spreads from Lordaeron, Azeroth, and Kalimdor," Alexstrasza sighed. "And, at the same time, Malygos has begun his destruction of the mortals who wield magic – yes," she sighed, hearing a soft moan of surprise from Alayne, "the blue dragons loyal to him are out now, seeking to remove those who he fears would abuse the gift of magic from the mortal realm. My own children have forced Malygos back to his lair; they have managed to contain the worst of the blues after a fashion. And yet, we fear that if we divide our attentions at all, Malygos will slip through the cracks and will not rest until only dragons remain upon the world which the Titans bequeathed us."

"M...M...Malygos?" Alayne stammered. "You...us...Malygos?"

"Of course not, dear child!" Alexstrasza said, her face darkening with concern. She reached out and took Alayne's shoulders in her hands. A powerful sense of peace flowed over the woman and her knees buckled. She could close her eyes and imagine that she were back in Quel'Thalas in the days before the war, her mother in the kitchen baking bread while she sat on the floor, playing with her enchanted toys, safe and happy in the knowledge that nothing bad could possibly happen to anyone. "No, I would not ask you to go after an Aspect unless the need were truly dire. We will take care of our own. However, after the wars, our numbers

are few. The eggs will not hatch and the drakes will not mature for many, many mortal lifetimes.”

“What would you have us do then?” Zerith asked, wondering if he were supposed to bow to the queen of the dragons.

“Our energies are bent towards keeping Malygos from destroying the life I have sworn to protect,” she explained patiently. “We would have you search out the darkness I sense spreading across the world and report of it to me when you find more about it. I sense it most strongly among the Forsaken,” she sighed, her eyes filled with pity. “The life thrust upon them is most cruel and un-natural yet those who flock to the banshee queen’s banner are as much a mix of life as any other race. Cruel and kind; loving and hating. I will not destroy a people who can number even one good amongst the blackest of criminals.”

“Putress?” Ger’alin wondered aloud. “No, not even that garbage he was trying to get us to test for him would be that bad.”

“We’ll keep our eyes and ears open,” Dar’ja replied when both of the men began staring at each other. She recognized the looks on their faces; they were bursting to get some place quiet and pour over every idea flying through their minds. It was the look they got whenever a plan of battle was called for.

“I give you this,” Alexstrasza said, taking a bangle from her arm. “Should you have need of me or my children, simply use this bracelet. Press it against your heart and send your message; we will come to you as quickly as we can.”

Alayne took the bracelet and slipped it over her wrist. Instantly, it reshaped itself to fit comfortably on her arm. “We will do our best to be of aid to you, my queen,” she said, bowing deeply.

“That is all you can do,” Alexstrasza replied, an amused, maternal twinkle in her eyes. “And all that I would ask of you. Good luck, young ones.”

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“A darkness that threatens to wipe out all life?” Callie muttered, repeating what Ger’alin had just told her. “She couldn’t be clearer than that?”

“I wonder what it could be? The Scourge?”

“That seems too obvious, to me,” Ger’alin sighed. “It’s probably something more sinister. I think the best we can do is send word to Thrall about this new danger and ask him to have everyone on their guard for it. Perhaps he could pass reports to us and, if we manage to figure out what it is and what to do about it, we’ll tell the dragonqueen.”

“I think that is all we can do without more information,” Zerith agreed. “We’ll keep our eyes peeled here in Northrend for anything more threatening than the Scourge...”

“The faceless ones!” Alayne exclaimed suddenly, pounding her fist on the table and then wincing. “It’s probably them!”

“Care to explain that leap of logic?” Ger’alin teased gently.

“When we were in Ahn’Kahet, that faceless one we fought may have been the thing that was trying to invade our thoughts. Perhaps this new threat is them. For all we know, they could be spread over the world, their dark powers attracting cultists who are searching for something to serve since they are cut off from the Legion,” she explained.

“That could very well be the case,” Zerith mused.

“It sounds plausible to me,” Dar’ja added.

“So, we should ask Thrall to have a watch put on any cultist activity throughout the world?” Ger’alin said, his question more a statement than a query. The others nodded. “I’ll write it up to Garrosh, then. For now, we need to focus on doing something about that citadel floating over our flanks. No, I don’t care if the Alliance thinks they have it in check,” he said

irritably when Zerith made a noise to cut him off. “I do not like the idea of moving any further knowing it’s sitting there, watching our every move.”

“The problem is,” the priest managed to get in when Ger’alin paused to draw breath, “we don’t have the numbers to attack it head on. If the Alliance can only just keep it in check, then we don’t have a prayer of getting in and clearing it out with what we have.”

“What about the tuskarr and the taunka?”

“The taunka are needed in Howling Fjord. They will be insuring that the vykrul cannot retake Utgarde. A contingent of Horde forces will probably be joining them there from Vengeance Landing and from Warsong Hold. I imagine they’ll also take care of completely clearing out Gjalerborn. We should probably travel back to Warsong Hold ourselves to report in to Garrosh and hear of anything that has happened while we’ve been busy.”

“Saves me writing a report, then,” Ger’alin shrugged.

“For once, let’s trust the Alliance to just keep an eye on Naxxramas,” Zerith finished his thought. “I know, I know; you don’t like the idea of leaving an enemy behind. We made an agreement with them, though. They take care of Naxxramas and we would clear out the nerubians. We’ve upheld our end of the bargain. It’s on them to uphold theirs. If they don’t, we’ll worry about it then. But, we need something to help quell the tensions between our various races. If we step on their toes now and show that we don’t trust them, we could regret it in the long run.”

“Ever the diplomat,” Alayne grinned. “I agree, Ger’alin. Let’s leave Naxxramas for now. We’ll return to Warsong Hold, report in with Garrosh, hear the news, and then decide where to go.”

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Garrosh smiled brightly when he saw Ger’alin walk into the room. “Well done!” he cheered. “Very well done!”

“I take it things have been quiet here?” Ger’alin grinned.

“As quiet as can be,” the orc nodded. “The nerubian attacks have completely stopped. We’ve made an agreement with one tribe of the spiders who hate the Scourge as much as we do.”

“I know,” Ger’alin said. “We met them when we were coming out of Ahn’Kahet.”

“Good, good. And Naxxramas?”

“The Alliance is holding their end as well as they can. They’ve prevented the Scourge from being able to attack from Naxxramas.”

“But it’s not destroyed?” Garrosh asked, sighing when Ger’alin shook his head. “I suppose this is the best we can hope for.”

“For now. Naxxramas held in check is better than nothing.”

“I’ve also heard that you took care of the vykrul in Howling Fjord. The taunka came to me with a message that you wanted a troop stationed there. I’ve sent them over.”

“That’s good.”

“I’m glad you think that,” Garrosh said slyly, “because if you ask me for reinforcements, I’d have to pull them back.”

“Still undermanned?”

“Perpetually. The Warchief sends anyone he can spare to me but strange activities are on the rise to the south.”

“Really?” Ger’alin asked, his ears perking forward. The other elves snapped to attention as well, their gazes intent on Garrosh.

“Yes,” Garrosh said, dragging the word out uncertainly. “The Dark Lady suspects something as well. Cultist activity has increased and attacks are being made against both the

Alliance and the Horde across the world. A'dal has sent word that the naaru and the Sha'tari have seen an uptick in cult activity as well. They're working on getting spies in but this new society has ways of weeding out those without faith so very little information has come out from infiltrators."

"We should send word to Alexstrasza at once," Alayne said before she had a chance to consider the wisdom of the statement. Most of the orcs in the room tensed as if bracing for an attack. Even Garrosh looked around guiltily. "I don't think she holds a grudge..." Alayne said slowly.

"I would hope not," Garrosh whispered. "Why would you tell the queen and mother of the red dragons about our troubles?"

"She has sensed a growing darkness spreading over the world. We think that the cultists of the Twilight Hammer and the Burning Blade may have found a new evil to worship since the Legion is hidden, licking its wounds from the last failed invasion," Alayne answered. "We met with the dragonqueen at their holy shrine yesterday. She asked us to help with determining what was causing her to sense this latest threat."

"Cultists are crazy, Lady Alayne, but they are hardly a threat to life itself."

"They may not be a threat themselves but their new master could be."

"And who do you think that could be?"

"There are some strange creatures here in Northrend," she began. Garrosh snorted and stifled a laugh. He'd seen more 'strange creatures' since coming north than he could recount. "One kind in particular used to be worshipped by the nerubians. We found it in Ahn'Kahet. They call them the faceless ones. It was a creature of immense dark power. I suspect that it was the reason we were all nearly driven insane while wandering around in that underground empire."

"She exaggerates, a bit," Ger'alín sighed. "We did fight a creature that was able to manipulate our thoughts. If there are more like them, and if the cultists have discovered how to control or flatter them into using that power for their own ends, that could be the cause of the dragonqueen's distress."

"I see," Garrosh grimaced. "I will send that information on to Thrall and Lady Sylvanas at once. By the way, Theron has sent a contingent of blood elves under his orders to explore the continent. I believe they headed northward from here towards Sholozar Basin. They were muttering about strange ley-activity. One of them left a report for Mir'el Darkweaver filled with information that is well beyond my ability to understand. Is he still with you or has he returned to warmer climes?"

"He's still with us," Ger'alín replied. Garrosh nodded and walked back over to his desk. Digging through it, he pulled out the report that had been left for Mir'el and handed it to Alayne. The woman began reading through it immediately. Ger'alín sighed and smiled in bemusement when she wandered over to one of the chairs, sat down, pulled her legs under her, and began studying the missive intently. "I wonder if he'll ever see that report."

"As long as someone understands what it's about, I'm not picky," Garrosh chuckled. "I heard from the chieftain of the taunka. They wish to join the Horde."

"They do," Ger'alín nodded. "I think they would be a worthy addition to our ranks. But then, the choice is theirs and Thrall's, as I understand it. I recall hearing that negotiations for my own people to join the Horde took ages and it was only because Sylvanas Windrunner argued for us that we got in at all."

"I doubt they'd take that long for the taunka. I've sent a notice to the Warchief already about it. Apparently, Lady Sylvanas arguing for you is part of what kept the sin'dorei under suspicion. I don't think Thrall trusts her entirely even today. However, sin'dorei like you," he grinned, running a thick finger over his chin, "have done much to alleviate the early misgivings everyone had."

“Well, if my word carries any weight, I think the taunka should be welcomed.”

“I’m sure they will be. Now, why don’t you tell the others to go and get some rest and see if you can get your wife to explain what that letter says in terms that this orc can understand? With Azjol-Nerub cleared and Naxxramas held in check, I think the time has come to sit down with the Alliance and begin planning the next – and final – stage of our fight here in this frigid waste.”

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“Are the three of you going to keep staring at that or are you ever going to tell us what it says?” Zerith sighed. “You’ve missed supper, by the way.”

Alayne, Mir’el, and Jez’ral ignored him. Alayne and Mir’el sat at the table, the letter in her hands and Mir’el’s face close to hers while they read. Jez’ral stood over them, his long black hair falling in their faces so that they occasionally batted it away. “Hey, slow down,” he growled when Alayne set one of the parchments to the side. “I was only half-way through that one.”

Alayne grimaced, picked the other parchment back up, and held it so he could see it.

“I think that Kil’jaeden might turn to the Light before you’ll get an answer from that trio,” Ger’alin said good-naturedly.

“I wonder what it says,” Callie muttered. “The way they keep studying it and then whispering about ‘ley-lines’ ‘culling’ ‘alteration of the natural order’ and ‘greater arcana’ makes me wish I spoke that language. What are they saying now?” she asked when the three magi slipped into Thalassian. “Any interesting words?”

“Well, Alayne just said that we’re annoying her. Mir’el muttered something about warming our bottoms. Jez’ral thinks he might cast a sleep spell on us soon if we don’t shut the hell up,” Dar’ja answered. “Oh, and Alayne’s just now noticing that they missed supper.”

“And she’s saying that she’s glad we’re not the ones who have to take care of Malygos and the blue dragons,” Mir’el added. “That anyone could do this is incredible.”

“Do what?” the others asked, exasperated with the magi.

“He’s managed to shift just about every ley-line in the world so that they form a nexus at his lair just to the north of here,” Alayne answered. “I’m glad that we’re not completely dependant on them any longer but the loss of natural arcane currents is going to be a blow to magi everywhere.”

“Why would he do that?” Zerith asked, feeling he was probably the only one in the group who had a chance of understanding what they were talking about.

“I don’t know,” Alayne admitted. “It could be that he’s trying to shore up an immense reservoir of power and doesn’t have the time or patience to use more traditional methods. Or, he could be trying to cut off every mage who’s not loyal to him. Or both. Or neither. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Any idea what it means for us?” Ger’alin asked.

“Just that there may be positive and negative spell surges,” Jez’ral sighed. “That means that sometimes spells will fail dramatically and sometimes they’ll blow up in our faces – also dramatically.”

“I know what a surge is, Cloudslasher. Anything else of interest in that report?”

“Well, some interesting theories on Sholozar Basin,” Mir’el said absently, fanning through the pages. “They seem to think that some kind of shielding is active there. What it holds out or keeps in is unknown. Perhaps we should make a note to investigate it?”

“I’m sure we’ll do that eventually,” Zerith sighed. “For now, we need to focus on helping Garrosh get ready for the next major thrust. He’s going to meet with the Alliance; I believe the plan is to propose an attack against Icecrown. The gate we saw in northern

Dragonblight would be one part of the attack. We may need to prepare to act as scouts for other routes into Icecrown.”

“Any route that puts me going past the Basin is fine with me,” Mir’el offered. Jez’ral rapped the top of his head with his knuckles and the man glared at him. “If there’s a naturally occurring shield there, I want to see what it is and why it’s there. Perhaps we could learn something from it that would come in useful later on.”

“Not curious about the strange things that have been seen through the mountain gaps in Crystalsong Forest?” Zerith muttered. “Garrosh has reports here that some of those trees have grown thousands of feet overnight!”

“That is curious,” Mir’el agreed. “And worth investigating.”

“Good. Because that’s where we’re going to be asked to go, more likely than not,” the priest sighed. “If something is happening to make trees grow so quickly, we need to find out what’s causing it and if it’s an agent for good or for ill. Mir’el, I promise, we will find time to scout northern Borean Tundra. I’ll even ask the taunka what they know about the Basin.”

“Actually, I was just trying to find a more comfortable seat,” the mage muttered. “But, I have no objections to your offers.”

Zerith rolled his eyes and tried to remember why, out of the three of them, Mir’el was the mage he was least likely to want to strangle. Usually. “I think we’ll be finished here soon,” the priest said. “I can’t wait to get back to Nagrand.”

“I look forward to returning home, as well,” Mir’el sighed. “More than anything else.”

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All things considered, Ger’alin thought to himself, *it had not been a total fiasco*. He forced his face to remain calm and neutral, struggling simultaneously not to burst into laughter while screaming at the top of his lungs in frustration. Alayne and Callie had stayed until the first hot words were exchanged and then Zerith, Garrosh, and Ger’alin had tossed them out of the room. The paladin regretted that. Alayne had rolled several feet down the hallway but had still managed to make it back to the door before they could slam it shut.

“I’m no diplomat,” Garrosh grunted, still in ill-humor. “I don’t use fancy words and flowery language to try to convince someone to do what is right and honorable.”

“You did well,” Ger’alin said carefully. “You managed to keep yourself from drawing your axe until well after they bared their own steel.”

“Perhaps I should not have asked if they were certain that Naxxramas was truly contained.”

“I think the mistake was to imply, rather bluntly, that Naxxramas was not contained and that they had made a pact with the Scourge. We were doing fairly well up to that point.”

“I let my tongue get away from me. I was still angry over how they acted towards your wife. ‘So this is the little elf maid who consorts with demons and tried to destroy the world. I’m glad she’s not on our side,’” Garrosh said, his voice pitched into a high falsetto.

“Alayne has answered for what she’s done and she’ll live with the consequences. She did manage to hold her temper until they kept digging at her. I think she kept calm for a whole five minutes before she slapped that human. I’m impressed.”

“Why didn’t Bolvar come?” Garrosh asked. “Out of all the humans, he’s been the only one I thought was worth anything.”

“I believe they said he was busy with overseeing the construction of Fordragon Hold. At least we managed to get an agreement from them that they would not attack or protest our building a keep in Dragonblight near Azjol-Nerub and an overlook on the opposite side of the gate from their own.”

“I think I’ll put Saurfang and his son in charge of those. Saurfang can run the keep. His son I think would be better over the gate. Ancestors have mercy, I just hope we can manage something once Bolvar gets back.”

“I believe that we’ll be able to make plans once he has returned to the negotiations. At the very least, none of that lot will come back for them,” Ger’alin grinned.

“You have a mean left hook,” Garrosh chuckled.

“They should not have insulted my wife after she’d been removed from the room.”

“I think they didn’t realize your hearing was so sharp.”

“With these ears?” Ger’alin laughed, pointing to his long pointed ears. “I can hear whispers clear across the Hold if I concentrate and if there is little other noise. They meant for me to hear,” he sighed sadly. “They didn’t want to enter into any discussions at all. Even here, where the Scourge is on our very doorstep, they want to consider us the enemy instead of those who would gladly kill and enslave us all.”

“I sometimes feel the same,” Garrosh muttered. “I think of the Alliance as my enemy instead of focusing on our common cause. I know, I know,” he said, waving his hand before Ger’alin could speak up. “I’m glad I have the Warchief, Saurfang, and you standing over me to remind me that the greater threat is the Scourge. But still, I wish that the three of you had counterparts in the Alliance. Maybe then this meeting wouldn’t have been such a disaster.”

Ger’alin sighed, rubbed a hand over his face, and then nodded dully. Garrosh had a point. It was difficult to think of those who had long been your foes as being allies. The only reason he and the others were able to do it was because, for most of their lives, they had grown up thinking of humans as allies. It was not until well after childhood faded into youth and they won their people a place in the Horde that the humans they had grown up with had gone from friends to foes. The humans who had come to discuss the next phase of operations had grown up with the orcs as their bitterest enemies. The defection – as they saw it – of Ger’alin’s own people also had its part in the tensions. Still, the paladin hoped that the next to come to these discussions would be both longer in tooth and cooler in head.

He said as much to Garrosh and the orc grunted in agreement. Then, with a sigh and a mutter that he had better go start apologizing to Alayne unless he wanted to sleep outside for the rest of his stay in Northrend, Ger’alin left the room. Alayne stood at the end of the hall, her arms folded under her breasts, one knee bent, and the most stubborn and angry look she could muster on her face. “I see it went much better after you threw me out,” she snarled.

“If I hadn’t thrown you out,” he said, forcing himself to speak mildly, the same way he would talk to a fractious horse, “I would have had to kill them for what they were saying about you. As I did not wish to begin negotiations over such a delicate matter that may decide the very course of our people’s lives with a trio of murders, I thought it best to take you out of the line of fire and not give them the chance to make me any angrier.”

“Oh,” she said, her own anger falling off her face.

“Next time I ask you to leave, I’ll thank you to actually do it instead of making me wrestle with you. While I love practicing hand-to-hand combat with my wife, I’d rather do it in a more private setting in the future.”

Alayne blushed but said nothing. “How did it go in the end?” she asked after a while.

“It wasn’t a complete fiasco,” he sighed. Walking over to one of the arrow slits, he leaned against it, glad to let the breeze cool the back of his neck. “We did manage to get an agreement that next time, we’ll meet on neutral ground. We’ll turn the deserters over to the Alliance for them to worry about instead of us having to keep feeding them and housing them here. And, they’ll bring people who actually know something about combat instead of having just heard vague rumors about it.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Well, considering that if they’d been serious, we could have had the entire thing planned out by now and could be starting preparations to put an end to the Scourge for once and for all, it is pretty damned bad!” he exploded. “Why can’t they just set aside their differences with the Forsaken and the orcs for just a few days? I can set aside my problems with most humans and night elves. Just don’t make me deal with ogres more than is necessary and I’ll be fine! But to dwell on such petty matters when we’re standing right here, toe to toe with the Lich King...”

“Maybe we should just come up with our own plan and see it through ourselves.”

“I wish we could. It would be so much easier to just light out on our own. But, we haven’t got the numbers, we don’t have the supplies, and we don’t have any knowledge of what lies ahead of that gate. The last, however, will soon be fixed. We’re not going to meet with the Alliance again for another several weeks. Their commanders are all busy over in Dragonblight. So, Garrosh wants us to take the opportunity to ride for Crystalsong and see what we can learn there. If there is another way into Icecrown, he wants to know it. The Alliance refused to provide any information on other means of entering the area. It will be up to us to figure it out and decide what to do with that information.”

“What if there is another way in? What would we do then?”

“Several things,” he said. “We could feint a move through another entrance or even make the feint at the gate in Dragonblight. A big enough distraction, we could draw enough Scourge there to let us in somewhere else without being detected. Of course, for it to work, we need to know...”

“Where and what the terrain is like,” she finished for him. “I’m not a complete moron, you know.”

“I know that,” he sighed. “I just wish that the people we’re going to have to work with would show us a little trust instead of acting as if we’re barely one step up from the Scourge. Come on,” he muttered, pushing himself away from the arrow slit. “I want to find something to eat and then we can resume our wrestling match behind closed doors.”

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“I think they needed some time away from us anyway,” Alayne muttered when Zerith began complaining about her sending Jez’ral, Mir’el, and Callie to explore the area around Sholazar Basin. “And it would be more practical to split up and find as many ways into Icecrown as we can instead of staying in one group. Besides, smaller groups are less likely to be detected than large ones.”

“I hate it when you’re reasonable,” Zerith grumped.

“You get used to it after a while,” Ger’alin sighed. “Still, you’re right, Alayne. Letting them go explore what Mir’el wanted to look into anyway is a better idea than all of us heading in the same direction. This way, we can escort Garrosh to the next meeting point and then leave straight from there to see if we can find a way into Arthas’s stronghold. And, I want to speak with Bolvar myself. I want to see if the Alliance has noticed an uptick in cult activities of late. If they have, we’ll stop by Wyrmmrest Temple on our way north to let the dragonqueen know.”

“Then it’s settled?” Zerith asked. The others nodded. “When do we set out?”

“Garrosh said he wanted to leave no later than an hour from now. I suggest we go get ready.”

The four quickly scattered to finish packing, gather rations and supplies, and load their mounts. By the time the hour had passed, they were waiting impatiently outside the entrance to Warsong Hold. Garrosh and an honor guard of a dozen Mag’har orcs rode out of the stables a few moments later. Ger’alin, Alayne, Zerith, and Dar’ja wove between them until the four

boxed Garrosh in. Then, together, they galloped through Borean Tundra to the meeting place set aside for this round of negotiations.

Near the Dragonblight border a pair of tents was set up just off the road. The taunka from Icemist stood guard around one while humans and dwarves stood around the other. A table was set between the tents, in the open. The orcs quickly took up position on one side of it, shifting to allow the four elves to move just behind the long bench. Garrosh sat and waited for the human representative, Bolvar Fordragon, to emerge from his own tent and take his place on the other side.

Bolvar appeared a few minutes later and quickly apologized for his tardiness, explaining that he had just received a report on Naxxramas. The humans of Wintergarde had attempted another invasion of the citadel and had lost nearly half their forces in the attempt. “We are grateful that the Forsaken have sent some aid our way until reinforcements arrive from Stormwind,” Bolvar added, bowing to Garrosh. Some of the humans and dwarves behind him shifted uncomfortably. “After all, we are united in our fight against the Scourge,” the human commander added loudly, reminding his own comrades to set aside their differences.

“Indeed we are,” Garrosh echoed. “I would like to thank you for the aid you gave us in dealing with the nerubian attacks against our base. Without your help, we certainly would have been overwhelmed. If you need our aid to continue to hold Naxxramas at bay, you will have it.”

“I believe that we will be able to maintain our siege without help once fresh troops arrive. But I thank you for the offer and would like to offer my own congratulations on your endeavors against the nerubians. Without having to worry about those blasted spiders pouring out of Azjol-Nerub, we were able to strip forces from Starmist Village and send them to the Wrath Gate.”

“I have ordered a keep built near Azjol-Nerub,” Garrosh said. “It will be manned by reinforcements from Orgrimmar and by the taunka, who have petitioned for entry into the Horde. We are also working on building a small outpost near the Wrath Gate on the cliffs opposite your own.”

“I have seen your workers there constructing it. It is good to cover both sides of the overlook. Perhaps, if we can lure the Scourge out of the Wrath Gate, we could take them from on high without risking much loss on our sides.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” Garrosh nodded. “Let us speak of the details...”

For the next several hours, Garrosh and Bolvar pored over maps together, speaking of strategies and tactics that might serve them. Zerith and Ger’alin bent over to study the maps, offering their own advice and occasionally turning to Alayne to get some clarification on what magi of various talents could do in certain situations they envisioned. Once a plan was decided upon, much discussion went into who would provide what forces. The Alliance had mostly close-combat forces available while the Horde had a good mix of both ranged and melee specialists. Neither side wanted to be out-shone by the other but nor did Garrosh want to see the Horde providing only ranged fighters while the Alliance provided the front line forces. “After all,” the orc grinned, “if we let you do that, then your people would say we feared to fight the Scourge and preferred to hide in the back rows.”

As a compromise, the Alliance agreed to furnish half of the front-line troops and all of the healers. Zerith and Dar’ja sighed, knowing that this would leave them standing at the overlook but unwilling to force the issue. In return, the Horde would provide all the ranged fighters and the other half of the front-line forces. They would attack simultaneously, doing their best to draw as much of the Scourge out as they could. Once the battle was truly engaged, if they could taunt Arthas himself out, then the front-lines would fall back and, using weapons staged on the edges of the cliffs, they would destroy the Lich King. “After he’s just a

bitter memory,” Bolvar said cheerfully, “we will lead twin expeditions into Icecrown to pull down the rest of the Scourge there. It should go easy once he’s defeated.”

“It should,” Alayne agreed. “However, we would still need to keep an eye out for his generals. Has anyone sent word to Morgraine? He may know more about who is charge here in Northrend. His information could be very useful should we manage to penetrate the Wrath Gate.”

“I believe that Tirion Fordring has taken care of that, milady,” Bolvar said politely. “He is really the only one of us on good terms with the Knights of the Ebon Blade.”

“He is here?” Ger’alin asked.

“He has been through here. He’s taken a contingent of his own Argent Crusade through Zul’Drak. While it is unlikely that any Scourge forces from there could reach us here, he wanted to scout it himself before traveling on to Icecrown.”

“So, he’ll be joining us in the assault on the Wrath Gate?” Zerith asked. Bolvar nodded.

“He hopes that we are able to lure Arthas out and capture him,” Bolvar explained. “In his heart of hearts, I believe General Fordring thinks Arthas can be redeemed.”

“If he repents, he can be,” Ger’alin replied firmly. “The question is whether he is human enough to repent.”

“That is a question we may never have the answer to,” Bolvar sighed. “Myself, I do not know. Even if he did repent, so many would want vengeance for what he has taken from them that he would be more loathed than even the most hated death knight. Not even a request from King Varian Wrynn backed by A’dal of the naaru would change that.”

“I can’t think of anyone who would forgive him,” Alayne shivered, recalling the time she’d spent among the Scourge. “He once used my own love for my father as a weapon to pull me into the Scourge for a short time. I’d kill him if I had the chance.”

“After he cost me my entire family, death’s too good for him,” Zerith nodded.

“I’d stay my hand but it would cost me my arm, I think,” Ger’alin grimaced. “I’m not sure I could forgive him no matter my vows to serve redemption. Every time I saw him, I’d remember that desperate flight through Quel’Thalas with his army dogging our heels. I’d recall the way my mother screamed. And, I’d remember the time I tore a helm from a death knight to see the woman I loved staring at me, recognition gone from her eyes.”

“It would take more than a miracle to see him redeemed,” Bolvar agreed. “See?” he said, turning to his own peoples. “All have lost much to the Scourge and the Lich King. All peoples want to see them destroyed and the world made safe from their evil. If these sin’dorei and orcs who should have more reason to hate us than anyone else can set aside their differences, we should follow their example.”

The dwarves and humans nodded though stubborn defiance still painted a few faces here and there. Zerith was glad to see that most were at least willing to work with them, moreso than they had been before. Bolvar rose and bowed courteously to Garrosh. The orc stuck his hand out and the human general took it, grasping it firmly with his own. “We will meet again at the Wrath Gate.” Bolvar said in parting. “I look forward to having your people at my side for that battle.”

“I wish I could be there,” Garrosh grunted, sounding regretful that he would not be able to fight alongside this human. “I will send Saurfang the Younger in my place. The Warchief has decreed that I must remain in Borean Tundra and oversee his forces; he has forbidden me to ride into battle unless there is no one else to send.”

“A wise order,” Bolvar nodded. “One that I am glad my king has not thought to give,” he added with a sparkle in his eye.

Mir'el sighed as he clung to the rope. Jez'ral had taken one look at the cliffs they must scale down and had promptly refused to have anything to do with the matter. "Pull me back up," Mir'el called out, using magic to enhance the volume of his speech. "The rope is not long enough."

Long moments later, he gripped the top of the cliff and, with Callie's help, hauled himself back atop it. Jez'ral paced several feet away, shuddering whenever he looked at the pair of them. "The ropes would need to be four times as long for us to reach the bottom," Mir'el sighed. "Or, we would have to find dragons who would not mind transporting us."

"I could make it," Callie muttered. "If only that damned shield would let me through."

"We're not going to try that again," Jez'ral said, his voice tight with strain. "Alayne and the others would kill us if we let anything happen to you. As it is, you did manage to recover from it so I see no need to mention it to them."

"And if they decided to try it themselves?" Mir'el pointed out blandly, rolling on his back and tilting his head so that he could watch Jez'ral upside down. "It might be worth mentioning that the field seems to affect either non-magi or Forsaken."

"Why would a shield be targeted so specifically, though? And who put it there?"

"We'd probably need to make our way into the Basin to find the answers to those questions," Mir'el replied. "For now, we can only surmise that it's probably been put there by the Scourge. Why else would it block out the Forsaken?"

"Mir'el," Jez'ral said, his tone far too reasonable, "think. For all intents and purposes, there is no physical or magical difference between the Forsaken and the Scourge. My apologies if that offends you, Callie," he added, bowing politely to the rogue. Callie snorted, shook her head, and waved her hands as if to say it did not bother her. "The only difference between them is that the Forsaken possess free will while the Scourge do not. But then, we who are living possess the same free will. If the shield operates to block that, then we should not be able to penetrate it either."

"I can't think of any power that would be able to create such a thing other than the Scourge," Mir'el admitted. He stretched out a hand and Jez'ral walked over and pulled him to his feet.

"Maybe it's something to do with those cultists we ran into in Ahn'Kahet," Callie volunteered.

"I don't think so," Jez'ral replied. "I've thought long and hard about the magic they used. It was a mix of magic used by shaman and druids and the kind used by warlocks. It's not something I've come across before but it is made of magics I'm familiar with. That shield," he continued, glaring at the greenish-blue dome that seemed to cover the entire area, "is something I wouldn't believe could exist if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"The same could be said of those faceless ones," Callie pressed.

"No," Jez'ral argued. "I don't think so. It just does not seem as if it were something the Scourge or their allies would do. Why allow *anything* through at all?"

"Just what we need," Callie sighed. "Another mystery."

"It will have to wait until after we've returned to the others," Mir'el decided. "We'll report it to Alayne and Zerith. Then they can decide if it's worth coming out here to explore further or if it will have to wait until a later date."

Callie nodded and went to go retrieve their mounts. Mir'el dusted himself off and then stood staring over the edge of the cliff, wishing he could find a way down into that Basin. It looked more lush and fertile than any land he'd seen before. If they could manage to get down there, the issues of supplies from the other continents might well vanish. He rubbed his ear with a thumb as he pondered various ways they could try to get into the Basin. Jez'ral snorted

and took a few steps closer to Mir'el. "What fascinates you so much about this area?" the younger man asked softly.

"It's too clean and pure to be so close to the heart of the Scourge homeland," Mir'el replied absently. "Jez'ral, if you'd seen it, you'd know what I mean. It's practically Quel'Thalas at her height down there. Green grass, tall trees, clean air. And it's warm there. Warmer than I would have thought possible this far north. Something is making that place more than habitable; something that seems intent on keeping some of us out."

"Mir'el, I don't think anything has ever been in there. The taunka said they'd never been further than we are now. They say that the whole area is sacred to some god or spirit or some such thing and that they wouldn't trespass."

"That's another reason to wonder," Mir'el said, jerking his hand from his ear and pounding one fist in his palm. "Why would they consider it sacred? If it's the Scourge that hold it, they'd consider it a battlefield. It just doesn't fit. Something is down there and I intend to discover what it is. What if it turns out to be something we could use to destroy the Scourge utterly?"

"If it were that, then the Scourge would be gone already," Jez'ral pointed out. "It's practically next door to them." He lifted his hands and rubbed the other man's shoulders fondly. "But, whatever it is, I'm sure you'll get to the bottom of it."

"At least we can return and tell Alayne that there's no way into Icecrown from here. Mostly because there is no way in to the Basin from here."

"At least we can do that," Jez'ral agreed.

"I just wish I knew how that shield works... Something about it seems important," Mir'el sighed, running a hand over his face. "Something tells me it could save our lives."

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Ger'alín nodded impatiently. He fought to mask the irritation he felt while Mir'el and Alayne explained what they had discovered about Sholozar Basin. It was precious little but still, the paladin was chafing at his own forced inaction. In the days that had followed their meeting with Bolvar, he and the others had been too busy helping Garrosh coordinate, plan, and pore over reports from around the world to follow their own desire to scout through Crystalsong Forest. All they had to go on was a sketchy report from the Alliance that the northern mountains were impenetrable and that a gate leading into Icecrown barred the northwestern pass. Some strange rock floated high overhead and the humans claimed they had seen spires in the clouds. The dragons had their own concerns for the moment; Malygos had launched an attack against Wyrmmrest Temple. Ger'alín had offered to send half of the Disorder of Azeroth to help in the defense of the temple but the dragons had politely declined, stating that they had no desire to risk mortal lives in their own internal affairs.

"It looks like the only way in or out is through the Wrath Gate," he sighed. "Unless, of course, you fly."

"I would think so. At any rate, I think that, if we can find a way to lower ourselves into Sholozar Basin, we could possibly find a route in through there. Perhaps a mountain pass or cave network," Mir'el added.

"It's a possibility," Ger'alín agreed. "I'm glad you went, at least. We're going to station some of the taunka and tuskarr in northern Borean Tundra, just to keep an eye on things there. Tam'ara has, oddly enough, volunteered for that. She was also carrying a spear and a shield when she asked. Remind me," he said, turning to Alayne, "to ask Tau're what in the name of the Legion that's about." Alayne nodded, looking amused. "The Apothecaries have volunteered to take care of watching the gate in Crystalsong Forest while we launch our attack. They'll take enough guards from Vengeance Landing to hold off any attackers that

come through there. Putress said that they could try contaminating the river that the wall overlooks but I've asked him not to."

"Why not?" Alayne asked.

"Because the river flows out of Icecrown, not into it," her husband replied.

"Contaminating it would do no good whatsoever unless he did it in high enough concentrations to ensure the immediate death of anything and everything that drinks from it downstream. If we have poison, I'd rather not see it wasted that way. Still, that at least gets them out of our hair and we've promised to continue to aid them once we're in Icecrown. Putress mentioned the possibility of using airships that the Horde is ordering from the goblins to bomb the area. The only issue is, we need to get in there first and make certain those airships aren't just large floating targets," he sighed.

"I wondered why we were in such a rush to attack," Mir'el muttered.

"There's not much point in waiting in this case. Arthas knows we're here. We've taken out his vykrul allies in Howling Fjord and have managed to hold the coast clear in Borean Tundra. According to you, the Forsaken can't enter Sholozar Basin which probably means the Scourge can't either. We're fairly certain we can stop him from entering Crystalsong Forest and taking us that direction. Garrosh is sending representatives to the trolls over in Zul'Drak just to make certain they don't move against us while we're fighting the Scourge. He also wants to know if they need reinforcements to hold the line there while we're fighting."

"You think the Scourge would come through all directions at once? Wouldn't that require an immense amount of planning and coordination?"

"In a normal situation, yes," Ger'alain snapped. "But, this is the Scourge we're talking about. We've seen that Arthas can project himself just about anywhere. We need to make certain that if he does do that and does manage to rally his far-flung allies to his banner, we can delay them long enough to keep them divided. Then, we can defeat them in turn instead of having the whole lot drop directly on our heads. The attack will begin once we've heard from the trolls and the dragons that they are ready."

"Who was sent to the trolls?" Mir'el asked.

"Zerith. Oh, he hated it; he's got no love for most trolls. But, he went because he's known as the leader of our little band and evidently, from what General Fordring's report says, the trolls know of him and respect him. Garrosh also sent an honor guard of Darkspears with Zerith. Dar'ja's gone with him as well."

"How long do you think they'll be gone?"

"They left two days ago," Alayne answered. "We think they'll be back before the end of the week."

"When are you planning to attack?"

"Fourteen days," Ger'alain sighed. "The first night neither of the moons appears in the sky. We're hoping to be able to move any forces that need it under the cover of darkness and surprise Arthas with our numbers in the early hours of the morning. I'm glad the nerubians have been willing to aid us in building up Agmar's Hammer. We've been able to mask just how many troops we have there. The Alliance will ride in from Un'pe with the tuskarr. That lets them stay in Valgarde Keep. It's going to be a close run affair," the paladin grimaced. "It's going to come down to timing. That's why I'm glad you've returned. I know Callie can ride hard and fast and she may need to in order to deliver messages if we have to delay our attack. How is she, by the way?"

"She seems rather...not nearly as spirited as she used to be. She shuddered when we reached the fork in the road to go north. She kept looking back over her shoulder at the beach. I know what happened there. Jez'ral managed to cheer her a bit, though. Well, it involved him telling her a story I wish she didn't know now," Mir'el muttered, his face carrying an

expression that said the two in front of him had best not ask. “But, she’s been subdued of late.”

“Do you think it’s affecting her judgement in any way?” Alayne rolled her eyes when Ger’alin asked this but he needed to know. Alayne had full confidence that Callie would pull through with whatever was needed but from things Tau’re had said about the way she’d handled leading and then being captured by the vykrol in Howling Fjord, Ger’alin was concerned that the incident on the beach was going to be a turning point for the rogue.

“Yes and no. I think that, if you give her some time, she’ll get over it. The best commanders in our armies and under whom I worked were those who had enough empathy to feel as badly as she does...”

“But enough distance to be able to hold those feelings at bay,” Ger’alin finished for him. “I’ve known commanders who were like that. I pattern myself after them as best I can.”

“For one of your age, you do a good job,” Mir’el said. Ger’alin rolled his eyes but said nothing. Mir’el was, after all, old enough to be his father. “I know you’re worried about Callie. And yes, she has been more subdued of late. But, I remember when Alayne was much the same. And that, my dear,” he said, staring at the woman, “was a matter of not even a few months ago. If you want my advice,” he continued, turning back to Ger’alin, “I would say give the rogue her distance for a while longer. Continue to entrust her with leading endeavors that carry some risk but aren’t likely to turn into a fiasco. That will help her regain her confidence.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve told him,” Alayne muttered sourly. “Why doesn’t anyone listen to me anymore?”

“We do,” Ger’alin sighed. “Trust me, we do. When it makes sense,” he added softly. Mir’el, having lived long enough to recognize that tone, wisely kept his mouth shut and excused himself, not wanting to get in the middle of an argument between a man and his wife.

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Alayne sat on the edge of the cot in her and Ger’alin’s tent, glad of the fire burning in the brazier. It took the chilly edge off the night’s air. She wished she had thicker nightgowns to wear but put the thought out of her mind. She would continue to make do with what she had brought with her. Glancing back over her shoulder at the bed, she resisted the temptation to lay down, knowing that she would fall asleep before Ger’alin entered the tent if she did. Instead, she thought back over the course of the day. Zerith had returned that morning, much to everyone’s relief. He was only ten days late. Had it not been for him thinking to send some of the trolls back with a message that negotiations would take longer than expected, they might have feared for the worst.

Her brother’s return had been like a spark set to a line of gunpowder that led to a warehouse filled with crates of explosions. The trolls in Drak’theron had promised that they would be able to hold back any Scourge attacks coming from the rest of Zul’Drak. They had initially demanded a hefty ransom for their services but were soon talked down to an agreement from the Horde to render aid to any of their brethren who needed it. The trolls with Zerith had assured him that this was typical of their kind. “Ask a leg to get a foot,” he’d summed it up. “They didn’t really want all of the gold the Horde has in its coffers. They wanted to see if we were weak enough to cave in to their demands. When I told them they had been hitting the hooka too hard and that if they valued gold over their lives, they could all go to hell for all I cared, that caught their attention. It impressed them,” he’d laughed. “That preempted the traditional wrestling contest which I believe I would have lost.”

“So, the trolls are settled,” Ger’alin had said, sounding satisfied. “Well, I’ll mention their pecuniary request to Garrosh and see if we can give them some after Icecrown is overrun. It’d be a nice reminder that they’ll get more than they bargained for by aiding us.”

“And would remind them that they’ll get more than they bargained for if they double-cross us,” Zerith had laughed. Ger’alin had nodded, grinning wickedly.

Wondering if Ger’alin were going to enter the tent before she fell asleep sitting up, Alayne stood and began pacing. The attack would take place the next night. This would be the last night they would sleep before the assault against Icecrown began in earnest. She would have thought that nervous energy would make it difficult for her to think of anything else but all she could focus on was the argument she and Ger’alin had been having ever since her last meeting with Putress in the days that Mir’el, Jez’ral, and Callie had been scouting Sholozar Basin.

He’d shown up suddenly at Agmar’s Hammer. The fortress had been only a rough building meant to hide the basements the nerubians were digging out. Garrosh had been there, handing over control of the fortress to the Kor’kron guards sent by Thrall and led by Agmar himself. Alayne and Ger’alin had happened to be there only because they were on their way to the Kor’kron Vanguard overlooking the Wrath Gate. Putress had walked straight up to her and, with a crook of his finger, requested that she speak with him alone. When Ger’alin had tried to follow, the sense of impatience that reeked through his wooden mask sent the paladin off muttering beneath his breath.

“The attack against the Wrath Gate must involve us,” Putress had said without preliminaries. “We have devised a means to deliver our poisons that will not risk anyone’s lives if you let us plan around it. It would mean distancing yourself from the area we will drop them. That is all.”

“I’m not the one devising the attack,” Alayne had explained. “Ger’alin, Garrosh, Bolvar, and his commanders have been in charge of that.”

“Your husband doesn’t think much of me. None of you do. All I’m asking is that my Apothecaries be involved in the planning. We have the means to make the battle a certain success without risking any lives!”

“I will do what I can,” she sighed, still not certain where she stood on whether or not Putress and the Apothecaries could be trusted. When she’d whispered his words to Ger’alin, her husband had flatly refused.

“If they want to help, they can help with rolling bandages and brewing potions under our eyes,” Ger’alin had said, his tone final. Nothing Alayne had said would change his mind. The more she had pressed for Ger’alin to at least consider what Putress was offering, the more firmly he had refused to discuss the matter until, at last, he told her the only way he would discuss it with her was if she could best him in a duel. She found herself staring at his weapons while she thought over his offer, waiting for him to enter the tent.

“Going to take me up on it?” she heard him ask, sounding half-amused, half-irritated.

“No,” she sighed, turning to face him. “I was just waiting on you to get here.”

Ger’alin grunted and sat on the other edge of the bed. He lifted his feet and began tugging his boots off while she stared at him, her hands on her hips. “Well then, woman,” he sighed, letting one of his boots drop on the floor, “what do you want?”

“You don’t listen to me,” she started.

“I do listen to you. I’m just not going to listen to you about Putress and his Legion-damned Apothecaries!”

Alayne remained silent. She looked down at her hands and sighed.

“You know I’m right, Alayne Sunrage,” he growled, standing up and walking over towards her. He grabbed her arms with his hands and shook her until her face met his.

“You’re of two or three minds about Putress. Okay, perhaps he does have a way to deliver

that poison of his without risking any of us. Perhaps he could turn the battle in our favor with no risk. I'm still not altering our plans, though. We've worked too hard to ensure good feelings with the Alliance, to achieve a temporary working relationship with them, to throw that all away for Putress and his need to be in control and be the hero. I've had letters from Sylvanas herself telling us not to trust him too far. She suspects he may be up to something; perhaps trying to wrest control of the Forsaken away from her if he's able to set himself up as some kind of savior. We risk too much and stand to gain too little if we go your way in this."

"Why didn't you tell me any of that?" Alayne asked softly.

"Because I didn't want to burden you with it," he sighed, letting his hands and face drop. "Because it's damned irritating to find yourself the receptacle of three different race's secrets and ambitions. I long for the days when all I did was go where you pointed and hit what you ordered. But, I've assumed this burden and I'll carry it to the end."

"Why do you keep trying to protect me?"

"Ask 'why did I marry you?'" he snorted. "I do it because it's what I feel is right."

"Ger'alain," she sighed, "I know that you fear I'm going to return to the way I was. I fear it too, sometimes. But, of late, I've been able to learn from my mistakes instead of flogging myself about them. Yes, I still wake up at night wondering what I could have done differently to save more lives or to keep us from being captured by the vykrul. But, I don't hold myself to an impossible standard on it. My mistakes were to let the mages exhaust themselves too early and to not set up traps on our rear guard. I know that and, the next time I'm in a situation like that, I will apply those lessons. I mourn for those who fell and those who were injured but it's not overwhelming me like it would have months ago. Can't you see that?"

"I can," he admitted, sounding as if the words were being dragged out of him, "but still...for the entire time I've known you..."

"If you feel this is what you must do," she whispered, "then do it. But try to understand that I am changing and I hope it's in a positive direction. So, you might want to consider changing yourself and not keeping me in the dark on things because I'm arguing from a new position."

He turned and walked back to the bed, thoughts flying through his mind. Alayne said nothing more but let him have his space and quiet. In the end, she knew that time was her best ally and that patience would come out to serve her better than arguing but she couldn't help it. She was tired of trying to press a point and being ignored because of how she used to be instead of how she was becoming. She watched as he tugged off his other boot and let it drop. He pulled his woolen socks off and threw them into the corner. She forebore reminding him that they did have a hamper, walking over and picking them up herself to carry them to it. He pulled his legs up on the bed, crossed his ankles, and stared ahead in thought. "Very well," he said just as she was turning back around. "I'll hear you out about Putress and about other matters later. But, I need you to understand something; he's dangerous."

"I know," she said, warmth lighting her face until it glowed and her eyes shone. "I'm still not certain if he can be trusted at all. You're right; I'm of three minds about him. Sometimes I think he's just trying to prove himself and going about it the wrong way. Sometimes I think he doesn't give a damn for anyone other than himself. And, sometimes I think that if I could just figure out a way, he'd turn out to be a valuable ally. You may be right not to trust him. I may be wrong to argue for giving him any kind of chance. Still, time will tell, won't it?"

"Time alone will tell," he agreed with a smile. "Now, let's get some sleep, shall we? Tomorrow is going to be busy and I don't think either of us will rest much that night or the day after."

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Putress paced, glancing to stare at the gate that led into Icecrown as he wandered restlessly by the river. He'd done his best but he'd been ordered not to contaminate the waters. While his true master wanted them poisoned, now was not the time to go against the Horde directly. The Forsaken knew he was being watched too closely to get away with disobeying direct orders. He gnashed his teeth, wishing that he'd been better able to convince that foolish sin'dorei woman of his sincerity. She was both confident and naïve; a mix that worked in his favor. It had been a mistake to try the slow poison on her husband when called to treat him. Still, orders were orders and the leaders of that damnable band, the Disorder of Azeroth, were a true threat to his master's plan.

"They won't budge," he muttered to himself. He'd just heard from one of the Apothecaries he'd left at Kor'kron Vanguard to try to convince Garrosh to give them a hearing. "Their ties with the Alliance," he spat, "are too precious to them to risk losing now that they are going up against the Wrath Gate. How can this be turned to our advantage?" he wondered aloud.

"Putress," he heard a dark voice whisper. "Putress!" it demanded when he glanced around for the speaker. Realizing that his master had not materialized before him, he sent his reply quickly along the same channels. "Why are you not where I told you to be?"

"Matters have changed, master," he replied coolly. "I have tried to become involved in the current plans against the Wrath Gate but those in charge of the planning do not trust me. I have been left out of the designs."

"That does not matter," the Forsaken's master growled mentally. "Here is what you shall do and when you shall do it..."

Putress stood silently, receiving his instructions. He smiled beneath his mask. Soon, those fools would pay. He only hoped that the Lich King paid as well.