

Ger'alın pulled the dark woolen cloak around him more tightly. Dawn was still hours off and the night was darkening towards its darkest hours. He glanced over his shoulder to see Alayne standing with Mir'el and Jez'ral. He nodded in satisfaction when he saw that they were working on dividing the magi into ranks for the coming confrontation. In a short while, he would give them the order to position themselves along the cliff's edge. Then, he would lead the fighters down the path. He patted the mirror in his pouch; he would use it to reflect light from a candle – the signal that they were in position. Then, when he received the answering signal from the Alliance forces, they would rush in for the first wave of attack.

“I still think I could do well down there with you,” Callie complained softly.

“I want someone I can trust watching over those catapults. And you've got the sharpest eyes of the lot,” he replied.

“I hate standing in the back rows.”

“We've all had to take turns in the reserve,” he replied evenly. “It isn't as if you're doing nothing, Callie. You're going to make certain that those monstrosities atop the walls can't attack us. You may even be able to do enough damage to the gate that we can force it open down below.”

“Tau're could do much better than I at that.”

“No, he couldn't,” Ger'alın sighed, reminding himself to stay calm and not strangle the rogue. “His vision is obscured by the darkness much like yours would be if you were still alive. I'm not kidding about you having the best vision out of any of us.”

“Your vision is better.”

“I'm leading the attack. I can't be in both places at once.”

“I could lead the attack.”

“Callie, I had actually planned to put you there,” he lied smoothly. “I really had. But Saurfang and Garrosh like the idea of a paladin, one of the hated Blood Knights, coordinating the attack with the leader of the Alliance. And, I'm not truly leading the entire attack. Bolvar will be over me and then Saurfang once he gets the signal to ride.”

“This sounds much more complicated than anything we've done before.”

“Welcome to battle design by committee. The first rule is: who cares if the plan is effective? The important thing is that everyone gets to play.”

“Sounds as if you... Ger'alın, what's the matter?”

“Ride out!” he shouted, seeing movement in the valley below. “Ride out now!” He leapt from his seat on a rock overlooking the Wrath Gate and ran for his horse. Alayne and Zerith jogged over to him, looking confused. “Those fools,” he snarled as he threw back the cloak and hurled himself into Lucky's saddle. “They've moved too early.”

“What do you mean?” Alayne asked. Then, the sounds of battle began to rise up from the canyon. She groaned and closed her eyes. “Into positions!” her clear, bell-like voice rang through the night. “No arguing! Get there and be ready!”

“Callie, go over to the catapults,” Zerith said quickly. “I'll rally the healers and bring them down to you. I know, I know, the agreement,” he snarled when Ger'alın started to protest. “I'm not leaving you to their mercies if they've started the attack hours before we were to begin.”

“Send whoever you think would be best,” Ger'alın muttered, wheeling his horse and preparing to gallop. “But first rouse Saurfang and tell him to get his wolf-riders ready. Tell him the Alliance commenced the attack early. We'll sort out the differences after the gate has fallen.” With a last irritated look towards the canyon, Ger'alın rode off, hoping he could salvage something of their plans before the Alliance was overrun.

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Alayne lifted the cloth she'd draped over her eyes to block out the lightening rays of the sun and to try to soothe the pain in her head. Hours of spell casting while having mortars flung against metal walls had given her a pounding headache. Jez'ral was sitting next to where she had collapsed, his arms on his knees and his hands dangling. He stared blankly at the ground and gasped for breath. "I'm going..." he panted, "to hunt down...and beat...every human...I can find..."

"I'll help you when whoever it is quits using my head as an anvil," she muttered sourly.

"You two look horrible," Zerith muttered as he walked over to them. Alayne made a rather crude gesture at her brother and let the cloth drop back over her eyes. "Ger'alın just rode up a bit. He's passed a message on to Saurfang saying to hold until the trumpets sound."

"Hold what? Saurfang wanted to go down there and skin the Alliance alive and make them dance in their bones just a few hours ago. I don't think he's going to hold off on that much longer. I hope he doesn't, at least," Alayne grumbled.

"They've managed to salvage the attack. Ger'alın wants the wolf-riders to wait and stay fresh for a while longer. The Alliance will be trading troops in shortly. Light, I wonder how long they're planning for this to last."

Alayne waved her hand. "Until Arthas is a dead, dead little bastard," she muttered sleepily. Zerith knelt down and pulled her head into his lap, massaging her temples until she was able to sit up without wanting to throw up. "What other news did he have? Did he say why they launched the attack almost six hours too early?"

"One of the squadrons of foot soldiers panicked. Thought they'd been seen. Decided to rush on in before they could be overrun and triggered the whole thing. Ger'alın says that the message from Bolvar is that the entire squadron will be stuck on latrine duty for the rest of their natural lives if they survive the battle. Ger'alın says he'll stand over them the entire time if it will impress upon them the importance of not panicking in the future."

"I should get back. Mir'el could probably use relieving by now," Alayne said glumly. Zerith patted her on the back, helped her to rise on unsteady feet, and watched her walk over to the edge of the cliff. She made a swift pass of her lines, prodding those who, incredibly, had fallen asleep with the battle raging. Those she sent back to the heart of the overlook to get some rest with strict orders to find others to relieve them. Mir'el she sent back as well despite his protests that he was good for hours yet. She could see the strain of exhaustion on his haggard face. "I need you fresh, not fumbling," she growled until he did as ordered. Then, she laid down on her stomach in the place where he had been and began focusing her magic on the Scourge down in the canyon. "At least it's easier to see them now with the sun coming up," she muttered to herself. A resounding boom and a splintering crack sent her looking over her shoulder to where Callie remained among the catapults.

The rogue had embraced her role in the battle with a vigor. The minute she'd seen that the guards manning the walls were flinging arrows, spells, and even pouring boil oil over the sides at the attackers on the ground, she'd whipped up the strong orcs and tauren set to manage the catapults. With five to use, she'd staggered the attacks so that one was fired every two minutes. She'd even made a few forays with some of the taunka, going down into the canyon to cart up sections of the wall, bodies of the Scourge, and rocks that they had dislodged, using them as ammunition. Alayne studied the destruction with satisfaction. They wouldn't have to worry much about attacks falling down from above at the rate the Forsaken was going.

Turning her attention back to the battle, she watched for an opening for her spells. The Scourge zombies and skeletons were too well mixed in with the Alliance and Horde forces for her to pick them out. Instead, she watched the gate. Whenever any creatures – Scourge, vykrul, even some she had never seen before – tried to come out to reinforce the others, she

hurled the strongest spells she could at them, thinning their numbers and giving some much-needed relief to the living forces. For several hours she worked her magic until Mir'el walked over to her and motioned for her to get up and take a break.

She staggered through the Vanguard, unable to muster a smile when she saw Ger'alín riding up the twisted road dug out of the hillside. He looked haggard. He hung limply in his saddle, his head drooping and his long brown hair matted with the same gore that stained his armor. Dents were evident in his breastplate and on his shield and he muttered something about wanting a bath and a vacation when Alayne made it over to him to help him find a place to rest. "This is taking far too long. They're on to us," he muttered. "It's too intelligent."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"They're wearing us down. They know we're not going to be able to keep up the fight indefinitely. They're only sending out enough of their own to harry us, keep us fighting. I should have reckoned with that when I came up with this fool plan," he growled. "Tell Callie to back it off with her attacks for a while. I want to see something."

Alayne walked as quickly as she could to pass the order along to the rogue. Callie grimaced, then shrugged and shouted for her forces to halt their efforts. "Go, find something to eat. You may be need in the valley later," she called out. "Ger'alín's back?" she asked Alayne.

"Yes, and he's even more exhausted than I am," Alayne replied wearily. "He said something about the Scourge just harrying us."

"I've been thinking the same thing. They're toying with us, holding their full strength back, keeping us from penetrating the gate but not really risking their own numbers more than necessary. It's going to take something more dramatic to get the Lich King's attention. I just wish I knew what," the rogue sighed.

"I've got a crazy idea..." Alayne began.

"It can't be any crazier than mine," Callie grinned. Alayne gathered her thoughts, checked to make certain she was sure it would work, and then outlined it to her friend. Callie doubled over laughing. She gasped for breath, grasped her sides with both hands, and had to wipe tears from her eyes. "If you could pull that off, I'd nominate you to be Warchief."

"I don't think Thrall would like that," Alayne said tartly but with a smile that took the sting out of her words.

"Ger'alín is going to hate it."

"He usually hates most of my ideas up until he realizes they'll work."

"Let's go find him and tell him this one. I want see the look on his face. Don't mention the bit about the succubi, though. I know you were joking but, just for future reference, the dead really don't care about that sort of thing."

"I know, I know," she grinned. "I told you I was kidding about that." Walking tiredly but with more spring than before, she wandered through the camp, looking for Ger'alín. Zerith pointed towards the cliff walls and the two made their way over to it. Ger'alín had pulled out and quickly pitched the small, low-to-the-ground tent he kept packed and had crawled into it. His armor lay stacked outside of it. The gore had been wiped away, leaving streaks in the metal that made Alayne's stomach clench. With a grimacing grin, Alayne shrugged when she heard Ger'alín's ragged snores coming from inside the tent. "He'd hate my idea even more if I woke him up to tell him," she whispered to the rogue. Callie nodded and patted Alayne on the shoulder.

"You could use some sleep yourself. You've been up as long as he has and you've been fighting just as hard. Go on," she gestured to the tent. "He won't mind if you crawl in there to nap with him."

Alayne nodded and promised to tell him about the idea she'd had when he woke up. Callie loped back over to the catapults while Alayne bent and crawled into the tent. She curled

up against Ger'alín who, in his sleep, reached out for her and drew her against him, muttering incoherently between his exhausted snores. She rested her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat, and was soon asleep as well.

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Callie wandered around the perimeter of the camp. The sun had moved through the sky a little. By its distance, she judged that just over an hour had passed since Alayne joined Ger'alín for a nap. She'd walked past the tent a few times, giggling when she heard them muttering to each other in their sleep. She decided to give them another hour's rest before rousing them. The forces who had relieved the fighters in the valley were still quite fresh. The battle raged on much as it had been since it began; the Scourge not taking any ground but neither did they give any. She thought idly about the crazy idea Alayne had proposed. Throwing everything they had at the Scourge might work; it might also get them all killed. At the very least, the sin'dorei woman was correct. They needed to find a way to break the Scourge's defenses before they wore out.

"I wonder if the dragons would help," the rogue muttered to herself as she began another circuit of the area. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw movement in the distance to the northeast. Watching intently, she saw a caravan making its way towards them. Covered wagons being pulled by what looked like diseased kudos were coming their way. Idly, she wondered if someone were sending supplies to them or to the Alliance. Casting back over the meetings they'd had, she tried to recall if Ger'alín had said anything about supplies. Deciding that he had mentioned them but wondering why they came from the northeast instead of the southwest, she hurried over to the tent to rouse him. She paused when she heard him and Alayne speaking quietly with each other.

"I should send a message to Garrosh..." Ger'alín was saying.

"I'm not going to ride away from here," Alayne interjected. "You wouldn't leave me in Howling Fjord even though we had the situation under control and you'd just had some kind of surgery..."

"I wasn't going to send you, woman," he growled. "I was thinking of sending one of Callie's forces. Garrosh should hear how bravely the Alliance is fighting. He's always muttering about how they're cowards at heart and he's chafing at the orders from Thrall to leave them be or to work with them as needed."

"Garrosh isn't going to change his mind anytime soon," Alayne sighed.

"Excuse me," Callie said loudly before Ger'alín could reply. "I'm seeing some kind of caravan coming our way from the northeast. Could it be supplies?"

"Supplies from the *northeast*?" Ger'alín sputtered, springing out of the tent so quickly that Callie yelped and leapt back. Alayne crawled out more slowly but still with no wasted time. "Garrosh wouldn't be resupplying us for another day or two; we've got plenty to hold out here for that long. And they'd be coming from the southwest, not the northeast." Without even stopping to comb his fingers through his hair, the paladin jogged over to the ramp that wound down to the canyon and covered his eyes with his hands as he gazed the direction Callie had indicated. "Could be Scourge make," he muttered. "Alayne, go down there and take as many fighters and magi as you can to hold them off if they are Scourge. I guess that Putress was overrun in Crystalsong Forest. I'll tell Saurfang to rally his wolfriders and take over the offense at the gate. We'll pull as much back from that as we can spare to hold that caravan from us."

Alayne let out a yell that brought every magi and fighter not currently involved in fighting running to her. With quick words, she sent them trotting down to the end of the road with Callie in command while Alayne made a quick, running pass through the area to ensure

that she was bringing everyone. Only a handful of magi, warlocks, and hunters remained at the edge of the cliff, doing their best to provide covering fire for the fighters down in the valley. Satisfied that she had as much as they could spare, she whistled for her hawkstrider, leapt aboard its back, and hurried down to the end of the road. Ger'alın was already galloping ahead, traveling towards the canyon to pull back more fighters and to inform the Alliance that the command for the Horde was passing to Saurfang. Alayne could hear Saurfang rallying his wolfriders and preparing to head into the valley. "Let's get a little further ahead, shall we?" she called out to her forces. "Let's not let them get any closer to their friends than we need."

Moving forward in an orderly fashion, the group stopped short when Alayne raised a fist, signaling a halt. "What in the name of the nine hells and Sargeras himself are they doing here? Who's watching that damned wall to make sure the Scourge doesn't come through Crystalsong Forest and take us from behind?" she growled, every kind thought she'd had for Putress vanishing from her head. When Ger'alın saw this, he was going to do worse than say "I told you so," to her. Heeling her hawkstrider, she made for the caravan.

"What are you doing over here?" she shouted at Putress as she jumped off Leetha's back. "Your orders were to stay in Crystalsong Forest! Who's watching the gate? What is in those wagons?"

"My orders have changed," Putress growled. "I suggest you get out of my way. I will do what I must in order to fulfill my mission: the total eradication of the Scourge. You will not deny me my revenge, little elf maid!"

"Who changed your orders?" she demanded.

Before she had a chance to wonder at what was happening, Alayne crumpled to the ground. Callie roared and motioned for the others behind her to follow. "Kill that bastard!" she screamed, pointing at Putress. "But be careful of Alayne!"

The fighters never had a chance to close. The Apothecaries with Putress threw vials at them. When the glass beakers hit the ground and shattered, noxious smoke blossomed from them. Gagging, choking, Callie knew that this must have been what the last moments of those who died on the beach had been like. Her vision grew dark and she felt herself sliding into unconsciousness. She prayed that Ger'alın would see what had happened before he rushed in and got his own forces killed. Then, darkness overtook her.

"Let's keep moving," Putress said to his fellows. "These will wake in a few hours. They'll make excellent test subjects for us after the Scourge have been eradicated." Kicking, rolling, and pushing the limp bodies of the living out of their way, the Apothecaries continued on towards the Kor'kron Vanguard. Putress prayed that they would reach the ramp quickly enough that anyone who had seen them might be allayed, thinking they had been driven back or had retreated in the face of Alayne's thwarted confrontation. The kodos were hastened to as close to a gallop as they could manage so heavily burdened. Just as the caravan reached the ramp, Putress groaned. He could see the paladin, Ger'alın Sunrage, galloping towards them, the head of his mace shining in the afternoon sun and his shield held out to his side. When Ger'alın recognized the bird-masked man, his face changed from anger to pure outrage and he momentarily slowed his advance.

The mistake cost him. Putress and the others lifted yet more vials and beakers of their mixture and hurled them into the coming onslaught. Just as quickly as the others had been overtaken, Ger'alın and his fighters tumbled from their mounts. Most rolled or were thrown when the animals, sensing their riders no longer guiding them, became confused. Then the animals themselves toppled over, legs that would normally have stayed rigid for sleep turning watery and depositing the creatures on their bellies and sides.

"More specimens for our experiments," Putress muttered darkly. "Our master will be pleased. With enough of them, we should be able to discover how to create an army that is loyal without question. And, if they do not work out... we do know how to create an army

without that pesky free will. Next time, we will not make the same mistakes. Next time, the Lich King will be someone devoted to our cause. Now, come. We have a mistake to correct.”

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Saurfang the Younger surveyed the field of battle. Ger'alain and the others had done better than he'd expected of elves. The Alliance was doing well, also, he thought somewhat grudgingly. Dismissing the thoughts from his mind with a firm reminder that the Warchief wanted no feuding with the humans, he worked his way to the front of the lines.

“I was wondering when you would show up,” the Alliance general, a man named Bolvar Fordragon, said.

“I couldn't let the Alliance have all the fun today,” Saurfang grunted. “Though, after this battle, you and I are going to speak at length about following the plan.”

“Sunrage has already had it out with the fools who triggered the attack early,” Bolvar replied. “And, when he's done salting their hides, I'm going to take over. You can go third if you want.”

“With pleasure,” the orc grinned. Out of all the humans on the field, Bolvar was the only one he truly respected.

“We're not going to be able to keep this up much longer,” Bolvar commented.

“I know.”

“Any idea on how we can force the Lich King out?”

“Sunrage and the others may be able to flush him out. They've just gone to attack a Scourge caravan that was coming to take us from behind. I have a feeling that the Lich King will make an appearance once it's clear that his plan to crush us between a rock and a wall isn't going to happen.”

“Good,” Bolvar nodded.

The battle raged on while the sun continued its journey across the northern sky. Bolvar watched Saurfang and his wolf-riders, observing that the Horde had many skilled and disciplined fighters. It was a pity that Garrosh could sometimes be so cutting and insulting. Bolvar was wise enough to know, though, that not all orcs were the same. In the few letters he'd exchanged with the Warchief since coming to Northrend, he knew that Garrosh probably nursed a grudge against humans for the way his people had been treated in the interment camps. Still, both sides would need to let go of the past in order to move into the future. It would be only for the best if the Alliance and the Horde could find a way past their differences and unite. It was an argument he'd thought over many times and one he prayed that his king would consider, come what may with Garrosh Hellscream. *Perhaps my report on Saurfang's cooperation and Sunrage's skills will help convince my king that the Horde are not barbarians*, he thought to himself during one of the short lulls in fighting.

“Bolvar,” Saurfang muttered, stalking over to the human. “I say this not to rile you but...the Lich King used to be one of your own. Did you know him?”

“I knew of him,” the man answered.

“What could we do to draw him out?”

“I have an idea,” Bolvar chuckled. “But wait, the gates are opening again.” Side by side, the human and the orc raced up the stairs to the gate, hoping that the Lich King himself had finally decided to join the battle. Instead, vykruul wearing icy blue plate and garish helms ran forth, their battlecries ringing through the valley. Bolvar and Saurfang were soon among the thick of the fray, axe and sword working to cut a swath through the Scourge fighters. “When this wave has passed,” Bolvar grunted, short of breath. Saurfang nodded and redoubled his efforts.

When the sun stood three-quarters of the way through its travels, Bolvar surveyed the field. For now, it was empty. Striding up to the gate with Saurfang at his side, the human drew a deep breath. "Arthas!" he shouted. "The blood of your father, of your people, demands justice! Come forth, coward, and answer for your crimes!"

Saurfang grunted, wondering if mere words would be enough to draw out the Lich King. When the gate began to open again, he tensed, expecting another wave of Scourge. Instead, a long figure wearing dread armor, a ghastly helm, and carrying a sword which struck fear into the hearts of even the bravest orcs and humans, stood in the shadows of the Wrath Gate.

"You speak of justice? Of cowardice? I will show you the justice of the grave and the true meaning of fear," the Lich King taunted, his icy blue gaze glowering with pure hatred upon the forces of the living arrayed against him.

"Enough talk!" Saurfang shouted, adrenaline surging through him, choking his breath and darkening his vision. "Let it be finished!" he screamed as he ran forward, his legs pumping, his heart pounding, and his axe at the ready. Leaping high into the air, he aimed for the Lich King's head, hoping to cleave the skull housing the evil brain in half. The Lich King waited, timing his blow. With a single sweep of his runeblade, the master of the Scourge cut Saurfang the Younger nearly in half, shattering the orc's great waraxe into mere shards. Bolvar gaped in horror as the Lich King calmly lowered his bloodied blade and pulled the brave soul of the orc warrior into it.

"You will pay for all the lives you've stolen, traitor!" Bolvar shouted.

Meanwhile, a shadow passed unnoticed over the valley.

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"They have drawn out the Lich King, my queen," the young red drake reported when he returned to the Temple. "But, fully half their forces are unconscious, spread out around the area beneath Kor'kron Vanguard. Perhaps that is why we've received no reports for several hours."

"I have a bad feeling about this," Krasus muttered. "Let us fly over the area ourselves. If we can be of any aid, we should lend these mortals our strength."

"I agree," Alexstrasza sighed. "Come, let us go. Something tells me that now is the time for the dragons of Azeroth to join in the battle before all life is overwhelmed and destroyed, swallowed by death, slavery, and darkness."

With words that most magi would trade their souls to learn, the dragons changed their forms, lifted their wings, and began flying towards the Wrath Gate.

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"Boldly stated," the Lich King chuckled, "but there is nothing you can..."

A sudden explosion of naeous green smoke tore him from his taunt.

"What?" the Lich King demanded, looking around in confusion. He could sense terror flaring briefly in his own forces before their minds disintegrated. Glancing up to the side of the cliff that the Horde had claimed as their own, he saw a strange man, a Forsaken in a wooden bird-mask, staring down at the battle. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that the Alliance and the Horde were just as confused as he was. Eerie, deep mocking laughter filled the now-silent valley.

"Did you think we had forgotten?" the Forsaken taunted. "Did you think we had forgiven? Behold now the terrible vengeance of the Forsaken!"

“Sylvanas,” the Lich King muttered, recalling that the banshee would do anything to get her revenge. More explosions rang through the valley until the green smoke was thick in the air.

“Death to the Scourge!” the Forsaken screamed in triumph, “and death to the living!”

“Fall back!” Bolvar screamed, hearing his cry taken up by others. “Fall back! For the love of the Light, fall back!”

Racing to the front of the valley, Bolvar was sickened by the sights. All around him, orcs, trolls, tauren, Forsaken – evidently those on the hill cared little about friendly fire – and elves were gasping for air, coughing and choking until blood ran down their chins. Some even had the flesh falling from their skulls as the foul mixture melted them. Humans, dwarves, night elves, draenei, and gnomes likewise suffered, their screams of agony ringing through the valley. The Scourge were dropping where ever they stood. Glancing back over his shoulder as he ran, Bolvar saw that even the Lich King was being hurt by this strange new weapon. Then, Bolvar collapsed.

“This...isn't...over!” the Lich King groaned as he forced himself back to his feet and marched slowly through the Wrath Gate. It slammed shut behind him.

“Now, all can see that this is the hour of the Forsaken,” Putress cheered.

Bolvar gasped, choking on the noxious fumes. Who had betrayed them? And why? He couldn't believe that the entire Horde or even all of the Forsaken had been behind this. Too many of them lay dead and dying around him. He just prayed that his king would understand and would help put an end to those – and only those – responsible for this atrocity. Sighing, he closed his eyes and let the darkness take him.

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“This doesn't feel right,” Krasus said telepathically to the other dragons flying with him. In the distance, he could see some kind of missiles being fired into the valley in front of the Wrath Gate. They exploded, spreading green smoke through the air. “I don't recall that their plan involved anything like this.”

“Something has gone terribly wrong,” Alexstrasza replied to her consort's thoughts. “That gas...it carries death. A powerful form of death.”

“Is this the hidden danger you've been sensing, my Queen?” Krasus asked.

“No,” she said after a pause for thought. “This is something else. Look, it spreads,” she said, her fear and disgust clear in her thoughts.

“Is there any chance of saving those trapped in it?”

“I sense no life in them,” she sighed sadly. “Let us destroy the weapons and cleanse the valley with fire.”

The dragons swooped down and, breathing the cleansing fire, destroyed and killed the Forsaken high on the ridge. The fire consumed the green clouds, destroying whatever it was and whatever foulness it carried. Making several passes over the valley, they observed that little but ashes remained. Alexstrasza ordered most of the red drakes to return to the Temple and report to the other flights what had happened. She, Krasus, and a few others landed at the foot of the valley. “Shift into your mortal forms,” she ordered the drakes with her. “Korialstrasz and I will wait here and watch the gate. I believe that even the Lich King would hesitate to attack us,” she added when it seemed that the others would argue with her. “Scatter and report to me when you have found any survivors.”

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Ger'alın blinked groggily and moaned. His head felt as if it were stuffed tight full of cotton. His skull seemed to be trying to collapse in on itself. A foul odor clung to him, coating his mouth and nose and making him retch and gag. He blinked and then pulled his hand over his eyes. The day seemed impossibly bright as the sun reflected off the snow.

"You are one of the leaders of this band, are you not?" a strange elf asked him.

"I...who...what...the caravan!" he shouted, sitting up and then falling back against the ground, his head rebounding off the rock with a thud. He squeezed his eyes shut and stifled a whimper.

"What caravan?" the same voice demanded gently but insistently.

"We...we saw a caravan. Scourge, we thought. Alayne...where is Alayne?" he managed to get out, forcing his eyes open and pushing against the ground with his hands.

"She was leading the first attack against it. Where is she? What happened?"

"Peace, young one," the elf said. "We are still looking for survivors..."

That was all Ger'alın needed to hear. Ignoring the pain in his head, the pain that lanced through his body – pain that would ordinarily have stopped him – he fought to regain his footing and stumbled through the snow. Alayne and the others had been just around the bend. He stopped to look around for Lucky and, seeing the horse laying on the ground, staggered on. Unsteady feet and wobbly, watery legs led him to a sight he had seen only in nightmares. The forces he'd sent with Alayne and Callie lay sprawled on the ground. He could see other elves making their way through the carnage, bending over and checking the fallen for signs of life. Tears blurred his vision as he scrambled over to them, sobs rising in his throat when he saw Callie laying not far from Alayne. He collapsed, crawling the last few feet, and gathered his wife into his arms. Placing a hand over her lips, he nearly yelped when he felt breath blow slowly past them. "What in the name of the dark titan...?" he wondered. Blinking back the tears and swallowing the sobs, he stared around him. "Asleep?"

"That's what seems to be the case, young one," the elf from earlier said, sounding somewhat amused and scandalized. "Your band is the only group of survivors we've found in the field. I am afraid that none in the valley and none in the Kor'kron Vanguard survived. The Alliance settlement seems to be safe; the attack came from up there," he pointed to the Horde camp. "Can you tell us what happened? When we stopped receiving your hourly reports, my queen grew worried. We flew up here to see some kind of Plague-filled missiles being fired from your camp. It killed everyone in the valley; we had to destroy them with fire and purge the valley of the Wrath Gate so that it would not spread further."

"Putress," Ger'alın growled, his hands closing into fists. "It was Putress and his Legion-be-damned Apothecaries!" Memory washed over him; he'd hesitated because he'd seen the strange masked Forsaken and had wondered if the man were coming to warn of an impending attack from Crystalsong. Then, he'd been staring up into a sky that seemed blindingly bright and wondering why he was laying on the ground. He smoothed Alayne's hair back from her face; she looked so tired. She'd been arguing that Putress was after the same goal they were after and that his methods, while dangerous, made her think that his intentions were pure. She'd tried so hard to see good in that man and now he had betrayed her; had betrayed them all. Ger'alın's heart shrank as he wondered if this would be the event that pushed her over the edge again. She'd never handled failure well and this, he thought as he glanced around, seeing the sleeping forms of his friends, comrades, and smelling the stench of burning wood, oil, and bodies wafting from the canyon, this was the ultimate betrayal.

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Ger'alın surveyed the carnage in the valley. Zerith stood next to him and sighed. "What on earth did they do?" the priest wondered aloud.

Ger'alín ignored him and began checking the bodies. Most were burned beyond recognition but, on a few, he could see the horrible scars that Alayne had once described from the vykrul she'd tested the compound on. Living tissue had melted away, turning into liquid that had been boiled in the heat of the dragons' breath. None had been alive by the time the dragons arrived; the bodies were all prone or curled up with hands gripping their stomachs or faces. In his time, Ger'alín had seen enough deaths from buildings set on fire to tell the difference. "I hope like hell," the paladin swore, his voice thick with anger, "that Putress died up there. If he didn't, I'm going to hunt that bastard down to the ends of the earth and make sure he's decades in the dying!"

"Calm down," Zerith said, placing a hand on Ger'alín's shoulder. "I agree, Putress will pay if he managed to escape justice up there. But torturing him will not bring anyone back. Besides," he added, casting a glance back at Fordragon Hold, "I think the Alliance will want a say in his death. He killed a fair number of their forces. We only escaped by pure luck."

"Saurfang is dead. All of his wolf-riders are gone. Fifty percent of the forces Garrosh had to spare were here," Ger'alín said in a leaden voice. "All the Lich King has to do is to glance our direction and we're in his hands!"

"We should go back. Most of the others are still out cold. I wish the dragons had left me to sleep," Zerith sighed tiredly. "I'm not going to let them wake the others. Let the effects of whatever it is wear off on their own."

"I'll be back in a bit," Ger'alín said softly. "There's something I need to do."

Zerith nodded and left the field. He passed by the two great red dragons standing guard over the Wrath Gate. Alexstrasza had promised that she would keep a watch over the entrance from Icecrown. It seemed she meant to do it herself – for now, at least. Once Zerith had disappeared around the bend towards Kor'kron Village, Ger'alín began rummaging through the bodies again. This time, he looked for Saurfang and for Bolvar. The leaders of the last fighters to stand against the Scourge in this place should be entombed properly. The rest of the bodies of the fallen would be put to rest alongside them. The paladin's mind scanned through the possibilities. He would need to suggest his idea to Garrosh and to whomever was leading the Alliance in Northrend with Bolvar's death. He envisioned a tomb where Bolvar and Saurfang would lay side-by-side, their forces spread out around them, a tribute to the united effort they had led. Putress, if his body could be found, would lay at their feet, flat on his face, as a sign that betrayal would not be tolerated. He found Saurfang and gasped at the grisly sight. The orc had been cut nearly in half and his greataxe had been shattered. The heat of the dragons' flames had melted pieces of it into a lump that was fused with his gauntlets. Brown flesh had been blackened in the searing heat. Ger'alín fought not to be ill. He removed his cloak and laid it over the orc. Then, he began searching for Bolvar.

"What are you doing?" he heard a human demand. "Get away from here! Haven't you and your friends done enough?"

"This was none of our doing," Ger'alín protested as he continued to look for Bolvar. "We were betrayed as well. We lost many of our own. If the bastards who did this still live, we're going to hunt them down and make them beg for death!"

"Sure," the human sneered. "As if I'm just going to take the word of an elf who sides with the Scourge. We all heard what they said: 'this is the hour of the Forsaken.' Messengers have gone out to King Varian Wrynn already."

Ger'alín gaped, his mind flashing through the images of the coming carnage. From off-hand comments Bolvar had made and from hints dropped by Garrosh, the king of Stormwind was not going to give them a hearing about what really happened unless they could prove that the Forsaken as a whole were not behind it. The human forces began spreading through the field again, their weapons drawn and ready. Ger'alín lifted his hands in surrender and stood next to Saurfang's corpse. His suggestion about a common tomb for all

who had fallen in battle would have to wait, he thought to himself as he flinched under the absolute hatred he felt from the humans. "A truce while we each gather our own dead and entomb them?" he sighed, speaking just loudly enough to be heard.

"No truce," the humans growled, clanging their weapons against their shields. "No truce with those who murdered Highlord Bolvar Fordragon! Get out of here while you still can, elf," one of them shouted, bending down to pick up a rock and throw at Ger'alín.

Ger'alín bent quickly, tore the haft of the axe out of Saurfang's hand, wincing at the disrespect to the dead, and ran out of the valley. "I'm going to kill Putress," he muttered to himself. "I'm going to kill him because he may just as well have killed us all."