

Alayne drifted back to consciousness, feeling as if she were floating. She tried to stretch out, to waken herself further, but felt her arms and legs confined. Fearful, her eyes popped open and she found herself staring at familiar purple fabric. Turning her head, she looked up to see Zerith's face.

"So, the sleeping princess has finally awakened," he said, glancing down at her and then back up.

"Where are we?" she asked, trying to turn away and stand.

"Whoa, stop that!" he muttered in response to her struggles. "You don't want me to drop you now, do you?" Kneeling awkwardly, Zerith set her gently on the ground and helped her up to her feet. Once she was standing, Alayne looked around. Callie, Ger'alín, and several others were walking, clustered around Zerith, on the road in front of the Sepulcher.

"What happened?" Alayne demanded, confused.

"I'd like to know the same thing," Zerith returned, his voice and eyes flat. "But, to answer your question, my fine general, our forces defeated Arugal and took the Keep. While you were pretending to be Ysera, Deathguards arrived from Undercity and helped to secure southern Silverpine Forest. They also brought word that the Dark Lady is hosting a celebration in our honor tonight on the top side of the city. Lord Lor'themar will be there as well."

Alayne swayed unsteadily, taking in the news.

"And now," Zerith said, heat rising in his voice, "I'd like you to explain to me just what in the name of the Titans you thought you were doing launching the attack against Shadowfang Keep without even waking me up! Were you mad? You could have been killed!" he finished with a shout, grabbing Alayne by the shoulders and shaking her. The others looked away, trying to ignore what was going on. Callie motioned for them to continue on to Undercity while she headed towards the Sepulcher, leaving Alayne and Zerith alone with their argument.

"Zerith, stop," Alayne whispered weakly, lifting her hands to brace herself against his chest. "I didn't want to wake you because you looked so peaceful, lying there, asleep. It seemed a shame to disturb you..."

"And so you waltzed off, leaving me behind?" he retorted. "Did you think that wouldn't bother me at all?"

"Zerith, please, I'm sorry," Alayne whispered, leaning against his chest, trying to steady herself. "I just did not want to wake you so soon after you finally fell asleep. But, we had to press the attack because the scouts got careless and were spotted." Remaining as she was, her face in her hands, leaning against Zerith, Alayne began to weep. Exhaustion, fear, and horror at what she had seen during the battle had wrung her out; Zerith's anger drove her over the edge and she wept bitterly.

Zerith's anger melted away. His expression softened and he wrapped his arms around his sister, leaned his cheek against the crown of her head, and began rocking her gently. "Calm down, Alayne," he said softly. "Everything is fine now. I'm sorry I got so angry with you. But," he said, lifting his face and then lifting hers up to face him, "if you ever do anything like that again, I will chase you down and thump you from northern Lordaeron to Booty Bay."

Smiling through her slowing tears, Alayne nodded, accepting this punishment, and threw her arms around her brother.

“Everything alright?” Callie asked when she saw the pair walk up the road to the Sepulcher. The undead woman was sitting on a boulder just outside the village, grinning broadly.

“We’re fine,” Alayne said, smiling brightly. “Lord Commander General Zerith, however, has ordered us to never leave him behind again. Our punishment will be most dire, he assures me, should it happen in the future.”

Cackling a laugh, Callie joined the two as they headed back to the main road to Undercity. “It seems that the Dark Lady has forgiven you for whatever it was you did that made her so angry in the first place,” Callie announced, grinning at their expressions of surprise and curiosity. “While you two were talking, a Deathguard informed me that word came inviting the three of us to stay in the Dark Lady’s private abode this night after the feast.” Noting that the news had made their jaws drop, Callie airily added, “That’s a rare honor, in case you didn’t know.”

The three continued on, their laughter ringing through Silverpine Forest. Soon they reached Undercity where they were greeted by banshee attendants.

“Follow us,” the banshees requested, their voices wailing. “The Dark Lady has given orders that you are to be received in her quarters and helped to prepare for tonight’s feast.”

“Oh, we couldn’t impose on Her Dark Majesty,” Zerith began to object, cut off by Callie trodding hard on his foot and Alayne clapping a hand over his mouth.

“Please thank the Dark Lady for us and tell her we are at her service,” Callie said, bowing smoothly. Raising an eyebrow at Zerith, she shot him a look that begged him to remain quiet and then fell in behind the ghostly attendants. Alayne gave his ear a fond tweak as she removed her hand from his mouth and followed Callie. With a sigh, Zerith hurried after the two women.

The Dark Lady’s private quarters were nothing like the rest of Undercity. Stepping into her abode, one could almost believe they had been transported back to Quel’Thalas before the Scourge invasion. Her chambers were light, airy; more suited towards her former position as Ranger General of Quel’Thalas than her current station as leader of the Forsaken. Alayne and Callie looked around in open-mouthed wonder, prodding each other and pointing out things the other had not yet noticed, speaking in hushed whispers of awe. The banshee attendants glided and floated about, preparing rooms for the three, drawing water for baths, and presenting outfits for the celebration. The two women were beside themselves, overwhelmed at the honor being shown to them. Zerith just glanced around, confused. Yes, the rooms were nice, he thought to himself, but who cared if the decoration on the rug was an imitation of early or late Dath’Remar era?

Alayne and Callie glanced over at Zerith when he cleared his throat loudly enough to be heard in Durotar. “What now?” he asked.

Laughing, the women pointed to the room where the attendants had been hauling water for bathing. “You go first,” Callie giggled, “and we promise, we won’t look.”

Muttering under his breath, Zerith went to go clean up for the coming festivities.

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“You look much better,” Zerith said, his annoyance at being made to wait so long vanishing once Callie and Alayne finally left their shared room. The pair had washed up earlier that afternoon but had then disappeared into their room for hours, hissing at Zerith’s hourly inquiries as to whether or not they were ready. The pair preened, grinning and turning for Zerith’s inspection.

Callie had combed her wild hair down into a semblance of neatness and pulled it back, tying it away from her face in a complicated braid. The dress she had chosen was made of

dark red velvet with black embroidery and fit her well. Alayne likewise looked radiant; her hair combed out until it shone, the blood and dirt from the morning's battle a distant memory. Her dark blue robes flared out around her slightly as she twirled.

"You don't look so bad yourself," Callie said with a broad grin, pointing at Zerith. The sin'dorei man flushed, glancing down at his dark green robes. His jaw-length reddish-brown hair hung neatly and the two-days growth of stubble that had been dotting his chin was gone.

"Well, shall we?" Alayne asked, gesturing grandly towards the door. The three linked their arms together, Zerith in the middle, and went up to the top side of the city. The ruins of the once-great city had been decked out in ribbons and paper lanterns, giving them a festive air and, momentarily, allowing one to glimpse the splendor that had once made the capitol a city of renown. The walkways, usually strewn with rubble crumbling from the battlements, had been swept clean. The greenery that had not yet fallen to the plague was trimmed into a semblance of order and beauty.

"Ah, the guests of honor have arrived," Sylvanas said as the trio emerged from the throne room. Alayne and Callie quickly made their best curtsies, murmuring "You honor us too highly, my Lady." His eyes still adjusting to the light, Zerith quickly made his best leg and tried to hide his reddening visage. Sylvanas glided over to the three, waving off their formalities.

"Come now," the banshee queen said, her mournful voice sounding pleased, "the three of you have rid us of a threat to our southern flank. Your esteem with me has risen significantly. Besides," she sighed, reaching up to finger a pendant, "you have done much to make me remember brighter times."

Zerith and Alayne glanced at each other, then at the pendant the Dark Lady wore about her neck. Amazement painted their faces as they looked upon the very necklace that Zerith had found in the ruins of Windrunner Village. Seeing their expressions, the banshee queen gave them a rare smile.

"But I am keeping you from the festivities," she said after a brief pause. "Come, join in. There would be no feasting this night had not the three of you cleared Silverpine of the Alliance's foul threat."

"And I, for one, would like to hear that tale!" Lor'themar shouted as he approached the group. Glancing over his shoulder, he waved for servers to bring drinks. Passing them around, he then raised his glass high, "Your health!" he toasted, drinking deeply. All nearby did the same. Alayne, Callie, and Zerith squirmed in embarrassment, uncertain of what to do in the presence of so many of their heroes.

"And still modest as ever," Lor'themar laughed. "But now, tell us how you managed to clear out the forces to the south."

The three tried to master their blushes as they explained the events leading up to the attacks against Ambermill, Pyrewood, and Shadowfang Keep. Sylvanas, Lor'themar, and their assorted generals kept drawing the three out, asking for more details about their plan of attack, the disposition of their forces, and other military matters.

"It's amazing that so much could be accomplished with such an irregular force," Halduron Brightwing commented.

"Not so," Sylvanas demurred. "The Rangers and I accomplished much with our holding maneuvers against the Scourge invasion during the last war. Many of our forces were irregular and conscripts."

The three guests of honor tried to look as if they knew what was being discussed when the conversation moved from strategy to logistics. Seeing that they were in over their heads, Lor'themar smoothly gave them a way out.

“Yes, yes,” he said, nodding in agreement to a comment the banshee queen had made, “I agree with you about that. However, we should let these three mingle with the others instead of monopolizing their pleasurable company.” Bowing, he took Callie and Alayne’s hands in turn, raising them to his lips.

“I’m not sure if that last bit was a compliment or not,” Zerith confided once they were out of range of the leaders of the sin’dorei and Forsaken. Alayne and Callie giggled, nodding in agreement.

“He is a smooth one, though,” Callie said. “Good looking, too.”

“Ach,” Zerith groaned. “Should I just go find a hole to crawl into while you girls engage in girl-talk?”

“Poor Zerith,” Alayne said softly. “If you want, I can try to summon a succubus for you.”

“Thank you, no,” he sighed, admitting defeat. “I’ll just go hover by the food with the rest of the men,” he said, jerking a thumb towards a table laden with fare from Lordaeron and Quel’Thalas. “At least that we simple males understand.” With a bow, Zerith left the pair laughing in his wake.

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“There you are, Zerith,” Ger’alin said when he saw the priest heaping various kinds of food on a plate. “One thing I’ll say about these Forsaken; they sure can cook.”

“Mm-hmm,” Zerith agreed absently, trying to decide between a rice sampling and some kind of pudding tart. Postponing the issue until later, Zerith took his plate and left the table, looking around for a place to sit and sample his selections. Ger’alin followed him, sticking by his side like a shadow.

“Do you think you’ll be heading to Kalimdor next?” Ger’alin asked. Zerith shot him an annoyed look as he tried to hurry his chewing.

“I have no idea,” the sin’dorei priest answered. “Maybe.”

“If you do go, remember that you can always count on us. Those of us who helped in the Silverpine campaign will be more than glad to come to your call. Even in Kalimdor.”

“I thank you for the sentiment,” Zerith sighed, his appetite suddenly gone. “But your allegiance should be to our people and their allies. Not to me.”

“Oh, taste that,” Ger’alin said suddenly, pointing to a sampling of salad on Zerith’s plate. “It’s great. Anyway,” the man continued, squatting on his haunches beside Zerith, “you and Alayne are two of the best commanders I’ve seen in a while. I’d be happy to serve under your commands anywhere. No one had done a thing to clear out the Ghostlands until you two came along, put together a force, and rooted Dark’ahn out of his fortress. From what I hear, the situation was much the same in Silverpine. The humans were allowed to encroach further and further into Lordaeron until you, Alayne, and Callie decided to get a group together and force them out. Frankly, following you three is helping our people and their allies. At least mores than waiting around for orders that never seem to come.”

Zerith digested this information as he finished his meal. Just as he was about to open his mouth, Ger’alin added more.

“There are times I wonder what is going on with the leadership in Silvermoon. We were all told that Prince Kael’Thas would return from Outland and that our people would ascend to their rightful places as guardians of Lordaeron, Quel’Thalas, and leaders in the fight against the Scourge. So far, all we have to show for it is...”

“The rebirth of Silvermoon, the secrets of siphoning off fel energies to help us deal with our arcane addictions, the recapturing of Eversong and Ghostlands, and the recruitment of our people back to their rightful homeland,” Zerith completed for him. “What did you expect, Ger’alin? That Prince Kael’Thas would stride out of the Dark Portal and the entire

world would bow down before every last elf with no struggle? I'm sure that the leaders of the sin'dorei are doing all that they can to help our people. We just don't have all of the pieces of the puzzle like they do."

"That's true," Ger'alín muttered thoughtfully. "I just get so frustrated sometimes."

"That's bureaucracy. To be fair, though, I'm sure that Lord Lor'themar and the others were planning to clean out the Ghostlands. They were probably waiting for more of their forces to be prepared, were working out things with supply lines and other military issues. What we did was just lead a strike force in to kill as many things as we could," Zerith explained. "In a way, we were lucky that it worked at all. But, our small force could not have held Deatholme against reinforcements. Nor could our forces here have held Silverpine against reinforcements from the Alliance. Our force was designed to be a quick-strike force, not an occupying force. Trust me, if Alayne or I started ordering you to do things to hold territory or maintain law and order, you'd be just as frustrated at us as you are at our leaders."

Ger'alín stared at Zerith for a moment. "Tell me, Brother," he said formally, "does the priesthood require that you pass a test of wisdom before your initiation, or does the Light itself whisper such sentiments in your ears?"

Zerith's brow furrowed in annoyance and he glared at Ger'alín. Unable to keep a straight face, the sin'dorei fighter began to chuckle.

"Well, to be honest, my son," Zerith replied, affecting the air of an archbishop, "I cannot reveal the secrets required for initiation unless, of course, you consent to a ritual death immediately following their revelation."

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"I still cannot believe how much they did for us," Alayne whispered to Callie. The two women stood off from the crowds a bit, watching the festivities.

"I know. I never dreamed that I would ever be so honored by the Dark Lady," Callie replied, awe plain in her voice.

"Callie," Alayne began awkwardly, turning to face the Forsaken, "forgive me for prying, but I've been wondering this ever since I heard about what happened with the Lady Sylvanas. How did you, um, break free?"

"Of the Lich King, you mean?" Callie finished with a sad smile. "I don't mind talking about it. Provided, of course, that you will honestly listen. Most of us Forsaken have a hard time talking about our condition with outsiders. In the early days, some of our number did try to explain it to our former allies and families. However, for most of us, it's once burnt, twice learnt."

"I will respect your confidence completely."

"Very well. First, understand that I can speak only of my condition. What I tell you about what I went through may not be the same thing that another went through. Our experiences are as many as our number," Callie began. Alayne nodded in understanding and the Forsaken woman continued. "For me, it began shortly after Prince Arthas returned from Northrend..."

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"He's back!" Callie squealed, clapping her hands and hopping up, trying to see over the heads of the crowd in front of her. "He's been gone so long; I hope that his return means that this strange plague is over."

"Of course it's over, silly," Mara sighed. "Prince Arthas would not be returning if there was any threat to Lordaeron."

“I know, I know,” Callie answered by rote, “but he’s finally, really back! I’ve heard that the whole city will be turning out for the celebration tonight.”

“No, Callie,” Mara teased, “the whole city will be staying home tonight. There’s absolutely nothing going on.”

“I get it, I get it,” Callie temporized. “Oh, look, there he is now!” she shrieked, grabbing Mara’s hand while pointing with her other. The guards of the city had just lowered the drawbridge. Arthas and two of his advisers were crossing the bridge, entering the courtyard that led to the palace. Ignoring the grunts and complaints of the people around her, Callie dragged Mara through the crowd until the two were in the front row. As the prince of Lordaeron passed beneath her, Callie cast down the rose petals she had been keeping for this moment. Others were doing the same so that the king’s son marched through a steady sprinkling of petals.

Mara and Callie gasped as the prince stopped briefly and caught one of the many petals floating down through the air. The pair could scarcely breathe when he looked up, his gaze passing near where they were. Then, just as quickly as he had stopped, Arthas continued on, his advisers flanking him.

“He looked at us!” Mara exclaimed, once her breath had returned. “Come on, Callie. Let’s hurry back and get ready for the parties tonight! Wait until we tell everyone that Prince Arthas saw us!”

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“I, of course, was content to let her tell her version,” Callie said, a half-grin pulling her lips up at the memory. “All of our other friends, the ones who had been discouraged by the crowds, were so jealous.”

“And then what happened?”

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“He did what?” Callie shouted in disbelief. Mara had collapsed on the floor, her legs losing all of their strength at the news.

“It’s all over the city. Arthas killed the king. Just walked up to the throne and ran his sword through his father’s chest. The guards are paralyzed. Arthas’s forces moved shortly after the assassination and hold the city,” Callie’s father explained. “I hate to say this about the prince, but I think he’s lost his mind.”

“That’s the understatement of the century!” Callie huffed. “I can’t believe that Prince Arthas would kill his own father! This has to be some kind of nasty rumor.”

“Callie,” her father said, trying to pre-empt the stubborn look he saw in his daughter’s eyes. “He did it. Face the facts for once. Why would the guards lie about this? If I could, I would take you to the throne room where, if what I was told is true, you can still see the king’s blood staining the floor before the throne.”

“I don’t believe you!” she shouted in a rush. The room spun around her as the blood that had heated her cheeks drained from her face. Before her father could reach her, Callie had collapsed on the floor, overcome with dizziness.

“Yes, you do,” he whispered, smoothing her hair back from her face. “That’s why you and Mara are so upset. But, please, sweetheart, stay away from Arthas. Promise me?”

“I promise,” Callie muttered weakly. Taking a deep breath, she drew herself upright. “Mara can still stay here tonight, right? We won’t be going to any parties, it seems, but she can still stay over?”

"I suppose so," Callie's father answered, standing up. "I'll go down and check with Tavor about that now. You two girls pack up a few things -- clothes, food, and the like -- in case we have to get out of the city fast. Hopefully, though, within a few days the guards will have re-established order and locked Arthas away. He can beg mercy from his sister."

Callie stood up and helped the still shell-shocked Mara to her feet. "You're not..." Mara started to say once she came back to herself.

"Of course not," Callie sighed. "I did promise him I wouldn't. And, this time, it's probably important to not try to find any creative loopholes to get around it. If the prince really did kill the king...well...let's just go down and see if Mother needs any help with getting supper on the table."

The two girls straightened their clothes, smoothed their hair, and then walked downstairs to the kitchen.

"No going out," Callie's mother said without even turning around. "I know what you're thinking and it's not going to happen."

"I wasn't..." Callie began, trying to defend herself.

"Of course you weren't," her mother laughed. "Now, why don't the two of you get to work kneading the dough for tonight's bread? I've got enough to do what with having to throw together a meal for all of us on such short notice." With that, Callie's mother dusted her hands somewhat free of flour and began knotting cheese, hard bread, and fruits into bundles. With a sigh, Callie began punching down the dough her mother had been kneading while Mara went over to stir the soup cooking over the stove.

"This dough smells funny, Mother," Callie muttered. "It smells like you put way too much yeast in it."

"Tsk, tsk. Poor Callie," her mother teased, "having to knead smelly dough. Complaining in front of Mara won't get you out of chores, my dear. There's nothing wrong with that dough. The eggs were laid today, the milk is straight from the heifer, and the flour is straight from the mills of Andorhal, not even three days old."

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"I'll never forget the last meal I ever ate," Callie sighed, closing her eyes at the painful memories. "My mother's best beef stew with carrots and potatoes and fresh-baked bread...bread baked with flour from the tainted mills of Andorhal!"

"You don't have to..." Alayne tried to edge in before Callie cut her off.

"Oh yes, I do."

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"I don't feel so good, Callie," Mara whispered. The two girls had given up trying to sleep and just lay in Callie's bed, alternately shivering and sweating by turn.

"Too much yeast," Callie muttered fervently. "She used too...much...yeast..." Turning on her side, Callie yelped when she caught a glimpse of her best friend. Mara's skin, normally olive-complexioned to match her dark hair and eyes, was dead-white. Her dark brown irises were a milky grey-blue and purple bags ringed her eyes. Mara's own eyes shot open wide as she studied Callie in horror.

"What's happening to us?" Mara moaned as her body was wracked with convulsions.

"Too much yeast," Callie prayed, closing her eyes as she felt the final darkness closing in around her. Mara's seizures were felt only distantly. "Please, Light, let it be too much yeast..."

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“I suppose you can guess what happened next,” Callie said, drawing a shuddering breath. “I don’t recall it myself, of course, but I woke up a zombie, my will completely gone, enslaved to the Lich King. There are times, when I allow myself to fall asleep, that I have strange dreams of that time period. Dreams of constructing buildings under the direction of a necromancer. Dreams of tearing apart humans, some of whom I almost recognized, who came against us. I don’t really remember anything of this period on my own; the next memory I have after my death is one of being in the middle of a forest, carrying some wood. I glanced around, confused, wondering how I got there and what I was doing with this load of lumber. Looking around me, I saw that I was surrounded by the undead. I was, of course, terrified, not quite understanding that I myself was undead. I dropped my load of lumber and ran through the forest. It sounds so cliché, but I tripped and fell near a brook. I did scream, then, when I saw my reflection in the water.”

Alayne lifted a hand and put it on Callie’s shoulder in support of her friend. “I wish I had the words to express the sorrow I feel for you,” the sin’dorei woman said softly.

“Sorrow? Don’t feel sorrow or pity for me,” Callie rasped irritably. “Yes, I lost much in my harrowing rebirth. I once was as golden and beautiful as you. Now, I am a pallid, pale mockery of the woman I had hoped to become. I don’t need or want your pity, elf,” she spat.

“I’m sorry,” Alayne sighed, her visage fallen, “I always seem to put my foot in my mouth with you.”

The Forsaken grunted, whether in acceptance or mere acknowledgement was unclear to Alayne. The two stood in silence long enough that Alayne began to wonder if she should leave or introduce a new topic. Finally, Callie spoke.

“I guess I shouldn’t be so hard on you, Alayne,” she said with a sigh. “I know you mean well, but every time someone pities me, I remember the last time I saw Raul and how I felt after.”

“Raul?”

“The man I probably would have married had I not been struck down with the Plague. He was an acolyte and was out of the city when Arthas returned. The last time I saw him was when he was traveling through Lordaeron, heading towards the Scarlet Monastery. I tried to speak with him, but he ran off in disgust. I can’t see why,” she snorted derisively. After a brief pause, Callie sighed tiredly and turned to Alayne. “I’m going back down to our room. I’m a little worn-out from the battle.”

“Of course. I’m sorry, I forgot that you and Zerith haven’t gotten any rest since we took the Keep. Please, go on ahead. I’ll try not to disturb you when I come in.”

Callie nodded graciously and walked off. Once she was out of earshot of Alayne, she turned and whispered to the elven woman, even though she would never hear, “That’s not the battle I was referring to.”

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“Where’d Callie go?” Zerith asked when he saw Alayne standing off in a darkened corner alone. Before she could answer, Zerith interrupted her with a jaw-cracking yawn.

“That’s where she went,” Alayne giggled. “She said she was worn out from all the fighting. Looks like you could use some sleep, too.”

“I could, I could,” Zerith sighed, letting his shoulders slump with weariness. “But I don’t want to leave you here alone.”

“Oh, go on to bed, Zerith,” Alayne smiled. “I’ll be fine. There’s no big bad monster waiting in the shadows to snatch me away to their castle in the sky.”

“I suppose not,” he laughed. “I will take you up on your kind offer, milady. I’m going on to bed. I’ll try not to bother you and Callie with my snoring.”

With a fond embrace, Zerith left the fest. Alayne watched him go fondly. Un-noticed by either of the two sin’dorei, another group was observing them from a distance.

“Could you tell me who, exactly, he is?” Sylvanas whispered to Lor’themar.

“Zerith, a low-level priest. I think his family managed to flee most of the destruction of Quel’Thalas, thanks to your heroics, my Lady,” he finished with a bow. “He looks familiar to me. I may have known his family. I would have to ask him what his family name is to be certain.”

“He does put me in mind of Rani’mar, the priest who maintained the school in Goldenmist Village,” Sylvanas remarked. Lor’themar’s eyes narrowed.

“He does favor Rani’mar quite strongly. And, unless my memory fails me, Rani’mar did manage to escape the Scourge invasion with his family. They were among the last ones out of Quel’Thalas, but they did make it out. I wonder if he has any connection to the girl, Alayne.”

“You shouldn’t even need to ask that question,” Sylvanas hissed. “Of course he doesn’t. That girl is Tal’ar’s daughter.”

“She’s Tal’ar’s daughter?” Lor’themar gasped, his eyes widening in shock. “Light preserve us, does she *know*?”

“No, she doesn’t,” the banshee queen said with finality.

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“I see you’re still hanging around,” Ger’alin said amiably as he walked over to Alayne. Almost all of the other gatherers had descended to their beds. Only a few partiers and servers remained, most looking as if they would be going down themselves soon.

“I got to take a little nap this morning,” Alayne laughed.

“I’d heard about that,” he chuckled. “I wish I’d gotten a little nap myself. I was just about to head down now. Would you like an escort?”

“Thank you, no. I’ll be going down soon, but I just want to linger here a while longer, thinking.”

“Thinking about?”

“Different things,” she replied coyly. “Mostly just decompressing. So much has happened so quickly that my mind hasn’t quite grasped it all. A few months ago, I was living in Menethil Harbor, wondering if I would ever find something to fill the emptiness left by the Sunwell’s destruction. Now, I’m standing at a feast, held in my honor, and I just got to speak with Sylvanas Windrunner, my childhood heroine. It’s all a bit much.”

“Well, when you put it that way...” Ger’alin laughed. “I’ll leave you with your thoughts, Alayne. Good night,” he said warmly before he turned to leave.

Once she was comfortably alone, Alayne sighed luxuriously, stretching her arms out in front of her and arching her back. She felt exhausted, but a warm, happy kind of exhausted. With a smile, she thought to herself that the real problem was she was afraid to go to sleep, lest she wake up to find that all of this had been but a pleasant dream. As she mulled over the events of the past days, she felt her cheeks heat with shame, embarrassment, and amusement by turn.

“I wish you were here to see this, Papa,” she said softly, praying that her words would be carried to where ever his spirit was. “I wish I could introduce you to Zerith; you’d like him. I did finally get to talk to the Lady Sylvanas, just like I’d always dreamed of doing so long ago.” Biting her lip to hold back the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes, she sighed, “I miss you,” she said, finally. “Oh, listen to me,” Alayne muttered to herself, “out

here alone, in the dark, whispering to a spirit that must have passed on well over ten years ago.” Turning purposefully, she strode back into the throne room, intent on going to her bed. As she was leaving the throne room, she heard a soft susurration behind her, a tingling whisper that sent a thrill from the base of her spine to the top of her neck. Turning her head slowly, Alayne cast a glance over her shoulder. With a huff, she turned around completely, glaring at the throne room.

“Whoever is there, this is not funny,” she muttered in an undertone. As she turned back around, she thought she caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure sitting on the throne out of the corner of her eye.

“I’m just tired,” she muttered to herself. “I’m just tired,” she said again, louder, “and I’m going to bed.”

With an effort of will, Alayne marched down to the Royal Quarter, deafening herself to the indecipherable sighs that assailed her ears.

“This place is creepy,” she sighed to herself, leaning against the door to her and Callie’s room. Wiping nervous sweat from her brow, Alayne squared her shoulders and began undressing for bed.