

“If you ever run off like that again,” Ger’alin was saying during one of the breaks he allowed the rogue to take in their sparring, “I will make you think that this is but a pleasant dream.”

“Duly noted,” Callie muttered as she hefted her sword once more. “I feel so off-balance.”

“You’re missing a good couple of pounds on one side that you used to balance yourself,” he muttered. “It will take you a while to get used to it and to learn how to control your movements again.”

“You never realize what you have until it’s gone,” she grimaced, waving the stump that was her left arm. Zerith had removed more of it, amputating it just above the elbow to prevent the infection from spreading through the rest of her body. Ger’alin grimaced as he watched her fumble through more stances. She was doing well with her right arm but she kept waving the stump of her left arm wildly, seeking a balance that she no longer possessed.

“It’s getting dark,” he said loudly, “and you’re getting tired. You need to rest.”

“I’ll rest when I’m dead.”

“You’ve already died once. You don’t seem to be getting much rest now.”

“I just can’t seem to get the knack of this!” she shouted after a few more minutes. She threw the sword down on the ground and began storming back into the house. At least in there, she could sit with Jez’ral and not feel completely useless.

Ger’alin grabbed her by her stump and jerked her around to face him. She trembled in his grasp, knowing that he was angry with her for running off. The result of her disappearance had been the loss of an arm and the deaths of several people he’d come to rely on in the Disorder of Azeroth. Guilt gnawed at her and she prepared herself for the worst, steeling her backbone and forcing herself to meet his stern gaze. Instead, she saw that he was looking at her with a mix of sympathy and concern. “You drive yourself too hard,” he said softly. “It’s been three days since you lost the rest of your arm. You shouldn’t be out of bed but you listen to that about as well as Alayne does. You are not going to relearn the sword – which, by the way, has never been your weapon of choice – in a few days. As it is, you’re still more competent with it than most of the recruits I’ve seen in Silvermoon and Shattrath. So, do yourself and me a favor and rest a bit. Recover your strength, learn how to move again without your arm and hand to balance you, and then start trying to relearn the sword.”

Callie nodded and Ger’alin released her bicep. She reached over and clutched it back against her body, wishing she knew why she had so much trouble moving it from the shoulder on its own. Then, the two entered the house where they had lived together in Silvermoon for a time. Mir’el was hurrying up the stairs to the bedroom where Jez’ral lay, still barely alive but beginning to show the first signs of recovering from the poison. Zerith’s snores could be heard from across the house. The priest had expended every bit of energy he’d possessed to clean the poison from Jez’ral’s bloodstream. Ger’alin had nearly passed out from the effort of removing it from internal organs and healing the damage left behind. Even then, Jez’ral was mere steps away from death and would be years recovering. “He’s not had much luck with us. First his memory and now his health,” Ger’alin muttered. Callie grunted in agreement before heading towards the living room where she had a cot made up. Ger’alin walked into the kitchen and prepared a tray with his and Alayne’s supper on it then carried it up the stairs, hoping she would feel like eating tonight. He found her propped up, her eyes open only a crack, and her breathing sounding as if she were being strangled. She still had large bruises beneath her eyes and he’d learned only to use the lightest touch he could manage when handling her. “I am an idiot,” she croaked. “A pure damned fool.”

“I’m not going to argue with you there,” he muttered. “Are you a hungry idiot, though?”

“I’m starving,” she grimaced as she closed her eyes against the light coming into the room behind him. The magi and warlocks who had examined her said she would be light sensitive for a while and that spell casting would drain her more than normal until she recovered.

“Why did you do it?” he asked as he lifted a fork with vegetables steamed near to mush to her mouth. “Mir’el says you’re damned lucky you didn’t splatter yourself all over the room.”

“It was the only thing I could think to do to shut off that last portal. I could sense something far more powerful drawing close to it.”

“Kil’jaeden?”

“I’m not sure. I certainly would not want to be in a room with him any time soon.”

“You’re not going to want to be in a room with Mir’el or Jez’ral once the old man gets well,” Ger’alin said softly. “I think once Mir’el can worry about something other than Jez’ral, he’s going to let you have it. And when Jez’ral has recovered enough to worry about anything other than drawing his next breath, he’s going to strangle you.”

“How is Jez’ral doing?”

“As well as can be expected. Zerith has been pouring his energies into the man ever since we managed to purge the poison. The bishop and Liadrin have been by and lent their own powers. The poison and the infections are gone. It’s up to Jez’ral and the Light as to whether he recovers. However, he will not be recovering in time to rejoin us in Northrend. I’m not even certain that I’m going to let you go back up there. I may ask Callie to remain behind as well. She’s still got a ways to go before she can hold her own in combat again and Sylvanas needs more Forsaken like her to help rebuild their city and regain their honor.”

“You are not leaving me back here to wonder if you are well,” she growled softly. “I am coming with you if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Don’t talk like that,” he muttered sourly. “It very well could be the last thing you do. At any rate, we won’t be traveling back up there for another couple of weeks. Thrall is making overtures to the Alliance trying to keep the peace while sending forces to fortify Warsong Hold. Garrosh refuses to surrender the keep and Thrall is inclined to agree. There’s really nowhere else to go. Sylvanas will be sending what she can spare to Howling Fjord to replace the Apothecaries lost in the attack against Undercity. So, until the situation is more stable, the last thing they want is a group of adventurers up there discovering yet more trouble for everyone.”

“I’ll be fine in a couple of weeks. I was worse after we escaped the Twisting Nether. A few weeks and I’ll be back to normal.”

“Just don’t push yourself too hard,” he sighed as he lifted another bite to her mouth. “I seem to be reminding people of that far too much lately. I wish you’d listen to me.”

“You,” she grinned, her eyes still closed, “you’re telling others not to push themselves too hard? The man who stormed Utgarde the day after he’d had surgery? That’s a good one, sweetheart. I’d laugh if I had more energy. Stop worrying about me,” she continued, groping blindly to take his hand in her own. “I’ll be fine. I’ll even rest. But you are not leaving me behind. Not when there’s a chance that everything is going to come down on our heads the next time we set foot in Northrend.”

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“It’s a prosthesis,” Callie explained when Ger’alin quirked an eyebrow at the contraption hanging from her left arm. “I’ve been practicing with it the last few weeks since I went off to rally the Forsaken back to Undercity.”

“It’s the most interesting prosthesis I’ve ever seen,” he replied, sounding confused and scandalized. “It looks like you’ve welded a sword to your shoulder.”

“That’s because that is exactly what it is,” she grinned. “I’ll bet that I can beat you in a spar now.”

“We’ll test that theory later. If we’re late for this ceremony, I think my wife, Sylvanas, Thrall, and Lady Proudmoore will kill us.”

“I wish Jez’ral could have come,” the rogue sighed. “Is he even able to sit up, yet?”

“Not without Mir’el there to lift him. By the way,” Ger’alin said as a hasty afterthought while the pair made their way through the restored War Quarter and up to the ruined courtyard, “if you decide to drop by to visit in the next few days, do not mention that we’re returning to Northrend. Jez’ral thinks we’re going back to Shattrath to ask the naaru to intercede with the Alliance for us. He does not know that negotiations have completely broken down and that the state of affairs is one of an aggressively armed ‘you leave me alone and I’ll leave you alone’ cease-fire. If he found out that Alayne is planning to return to Northrend, he’d probably expend all the energy he needs just to stay alive and get better on worrying about her.”

“I won’t say anything to him,” the Forsaken promised. “And, yes, I will be dropping by tomorrow. Sylvanas is coming, too. She wants to present him with a medal for his help in fighting off the Apothecaries.”

“I’m glad you warned me,” Ger’alin breathed between clenched teeth.

“I’ve not seen you in weeks to warn you,” she pointed out.

“Alayne and Mir’el are both going to have hysterics. There may be a speck of dust somewhere.”

“I’ll handle that,” Callie offered. “I’ll just point out, quite reasonably, that Sylvanas saw her whole city get sacked, burned, and trashed by the Apothecaries. A little disarray in a house that has been home to two very sick sin’dorei isn’t going to bother her.”

“My wife is going to have kittens over it, Callie,” he groaned. “An entire litter.”

“If she’s having kittens and not little sin’dorei that look like you, you’re doing something very wrong, Ger’alin,” the rogue teased. Ger’alin smacked a hand to his forehead and began muttering in Thalassian. He kept his mouth shut about anything that could be used against him and followed Callie up the elevator and into the ruined courtyard. The rubble and broken stairs had been cleared away. He could still see pock-marks in the concrete of the balconies where the Apothecaries had positioned their catapults. What had once been the remains of a statue, only its booted legs there to attest that a monument existed, had been removed. In its place were the banners of the Forsaken and of the Horde. Sylvanas stood beneath them. Thrall stood next to her, his arms crossed over his chest as they waited for the crowd to settle down. Ger’alin hurried over to where Alayne was sitting and knelt down beside her. She wore a wide-brimmed hat to block the sun and had tied a dark-colored semi-translucent cloth around her eyes. He wondered how she could see anything at all but kept his mouth shut. They had already had this fight and he was not about to repeat it in the middle of the courtyard with Thrall and Sylvanas looking on.

“Have you seen Callie’s new arm?” he asked her. Alayne shot him a look of pure confusion. “Sylvanas is coming over tomorrow, by the way.” Her look turned to one of horror. “I’ll dust the high shelves if you’ll do the baking.”

“Ger’alin, has you always had such a dreadful sense of timing or am I just oversensitive of late?”

“Good question,” he muttered, grateful when the Warchief raised his arms for silence so that the ceremony could begin. The Forsaken looked expectantly at their queen, wondering what she would say. In the days since the battle, many had returned to their city and begun rebuilding. While everyone knew that this gathering would be to honor the fallen and

rededicate the Forsaken to the Horde, the air sparked with anxious anticipation. Rumors of war with the Alliance and a sharp increase in activity from the Scarlet Crusade had them all wondering if further disaster were waiting to drop on them all. Thrall gestured to Sylvanas and the Dark Lady took her place, lifted her head, and gazed over the crowds.

“Comrades in arms,” she said, her eerie voice echoing across the courtyard, “we have suffered much of late. Our sufferings are partly my fault and I take responsibility for my blindness and shortsightedness. I was a fool to think Varimathras was tamed and I was a fool not to inquire more deeply into the workings of the Apothecaries. I focused too much on the war and not enough on the battles. And, because of that blindness, we have lost many who would be with us today. We lost our city and, though we have reclaimed it, we must continue to guard it against encroachments from the Alliance.”

“I had planned,” she sighed softly, “to give a speech naming those who had fallen and praising them for their sacrifice. I had planned to give a speech about how the darkest days were behind us. I had planned to speak of the dawning of a new era. I wish I could give the speech I had planned, but I cannot.”

“King Varian Wrynn of the Alliance lost one dear to him, a man whom even we admired and esteemed. Highlord Bolvar Fordragon was killed by Putress and the Apothecaries when they betrayed us all at the Wrath Gate. Because of this betrayal, and because of the machinations of the Lich King, we are no longer able to rely on the unsteady peace we had established with the Alliance. We will no longer be able to work together with them or count on them to provide any aid or covering for us as we both, Alliance and Horde, work to rid the world of the Lich King and the Scourge.”

“Lady Sylvanas says she has been blind,” Thrall cut in, his deep voice rumbling across her wispy echoing voice, “but I have also been blind. Some of those sent northward have taken the slightest provocation, have refused to look beyond the present to see the future, and are working against our cause in Northrend. Our cause there is the destruction of the Scourge – nothing more, nothing less. We are not there to wage war against the Alliance or to claim new lands for ourselves. We are there only to end the threat of undeath once and for all. In truth, some of the very commanders I raised and sent to secure our holdings do not understand this. And, as I have entrusted them with duties and given them permission to speak in my name, it will be up to me to correct the mistakes I have made. I will be traveling north to do this soon.”

“Dark days are upon us once again,” Thrall continued. Sylvanas nodded. “Dark days and I do not see how we can look for a dawn that may never come to light our eyes. But, my brothers, we must continue to fight on. Those of you who gave your energies to free Undercity from the usurpers must return to Northrend as soon as you are able. You number among you talented and creative leaders who, while being somewhat unorthodox, are men and women I am proud to be Warchief over. I will speak with them and, from this day forward, the group that calls itself the Disorder of Azeroth will be known as one of the most experienced and most trustworthy bands of the Horde. You carry with you our honor and our glory for you are what makes the Horde strong. You are the ones who have worked to bring us out of the past and into the future,” he finished, nodding to a sudden gathering.

“I had no idea he was going to say anything like that,” Ger’alin muttered.

“You’re definitely not going to talk Alayne out of returning with us now,” Zerith replied. “It would have been nice to have been consulted about all this privately, though.” The priest and the paladin stood together and met Thrall’s gaze evenly. “Warchief,” Zerith said loudly, “we will do whatever you ask and we will continue our fighting in Northrend to bring down the Scourge once and for all. On behalf of those who have followed me and my sister from Deatholme to the very gates of Icecrown itself, I thank you for your words. However, without the knowledge that the armies of the Horde guard our lands and that they

fight battles elsewhere so we can open new fronts, our band would be nothing. If we are great, it is because we have stood on the shoulders of giants.”

“I am glad you said that,” Thrall answered solemnly, “for it is those with the hearts of giants we will need in the days to come.”

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“He must be kidding,” Alayne muttered as they left the meeting with Thrall and Sylvanas. “It’s utter madness.”

“You’re the one who saw it first,” Ger’alin pointed out.

“How could they manage it, though?”

“It was a whole city full of magi. I’m sure they figured out a way.”

“Yes, but why float Dalaran to Northrend?”

“Didn’t Alexstrasza say something about Malygos?”

“Even if you got every mage on Azeroth, Outland, and any other worlds you could find, I doubt you’d have even a thousandth part of the power that Malygos has in one single scale.”

“Stop looking on the darker side,” Zerith muttered, growing tired of listening to the pair nip at each other. “Thrall has heard from the Sunreavers who claim that the Horde will be permitted entry into Dalaran. He wants us to base our operations out of there and to cooperate with the Sunreavers and with the Silver Covenant. Still, you do have a point, Sis,” he sighed. “The complete destruction of Naxxramas as our first order of business is a bit daunting.”

“A bit daunting?” Alayne huffed. “What happened to ‘let the Alliance take care of it. Otherwise, they’ll think we don’t trust them?’”

“Well, there was a bit of a betrayal at the Wrath Gate,” Zerith answered laconically. “And, maybe you weren’t paying attention when Thrall mentioned that the Alliance now only goes after the Scourge that come after them. Venomspite has been overrun. It was only because they had some stores left from when Putress was there that they managed to hang on at all. And, Thrall did also mention a bit about how the Scarlet Crusade, now calling itself the Scarlet Onslaught, has begun harassing the Forsaken in Venomspite. A presence of armed and seasoned fighters in Venomspite may encourage them to leave well enough alone.”

“As if the Scourge sitting right there weren’t enough to...” she cut off when Ger’alin and Zerith stared at her, their eyes flat.

“No matter how many times we say it,” Ger’alin said slowly, “the Alliance isn’t going to listen for a good, long while. Yes, the Scourge is the primary threat. Yes, we are going to focus on them. But, if we don’t also work to keep the Alliance a bit off-balance and less desirous of attacking us, we’re going to be crushed between Arthas and the Alliance. So, we’ll go to Dalaran. We’ll head up operations in Northrend for the time. We’ll deal with Garrosh Hellscream getting angry at us and at Thrall. We’ll do what we’ve been asked to do because honestly, we’re the only ones I trust to do it right. Now, let’s keep this to ourselves,” he added. “No point in worrying Mir’el about it.”

“Worrying Mir’el about what?” the man asked as he rose from the shadows at the side of the house. Ger’alin nearly bit his tongue in half and Alayne quickly stopped her spellcasting. Zerith shook his head and snorted as if he were hardly surprised by this turn of events. “Worrying me about what?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” Alayne replied. “How is Jez’ral?”

“He’s been running a fever most of the afternoon. The bishop came by to see him and has managed to help him get some rest. I thought I’d better get outside and get some fresh air before I started fussing over him again and wound up waking him up. Now, what is it I’m not supposed to worry over?”

“It’s just the things Thrall wants us to take care of when we return to Northrend.”

“I’m not surprised you’re going back,” Mir’el muttered, “and I’m not surprised that Thrall has asked you to do something for him. Honestly, I wouldn’t be surprised if he gave you command of every Horde soldier in Northrend and told you you could ask for more as needed.”

Ger’alin scowled. For a man who had not been in the meeting, Mir’el was hitting dangerously close to the mark. Mir’el grimaced, “The Warchief hasn’t actually put you in charge of the forces in Northrend, has he?”

“He has,” Ger’alin sighed. “For the most part, at least.”

“I cannot return there with you,” Mir’el muttered. “Jez’ral is too ill to stand the trip. He needs constant care and supervision. Whatever it was that bastard Putress used on him has hidden itself well. It continually comes back, weakening him,” Mir’el sighed sadly. “If only I could get him to Shattrath...perhaps the naaru...but he’s too weak to survive even that trip.”

“And we cannot remain with you,” Ger’alin said softly. “We’ll be leaving again, heading back north in a few days. Thrall and Sylvanas have promised that they will arrange for the best healers and the wisest minds to come and help you find a cure for Jez’ral. Already, a dedicated band of alchemists, magi, and necromancers are poring over Putress’s works to find out what he may have done. I’m sure that soon, the answer will be found and Jez’ral will be restored to complete health.”

“What will you do in Northrend?” Mir’el asked quietly.

“We will put an end to the Scourge,” Ger’alin answered calmly. “And, for now, for your sake, that is all you need to know.”

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Ger’alin did not glance again in Garrosh’s direction while he waited for the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth, guarded by the Kor’kron who had come to relieve their brothers, exited the zeppelin. He pretended to be preoccupied by making certain Alayne was calming down. She had weathered this journey well. She had fainted only twice, been sick three times, and had managed not to break into near-hysterical tears until they’d been over the ocean – out of sight of land – for an hour. All in all, he thought he might make a flyer out of her yet.

As the forces of the Disorder of Azeroth descended the ramp, Garrosh glared at them. Ger’alin had been the first one out of the first zeppelin. Garrosh had met him at the ramp, demanding to know why Thrall was ordering a second force, this one under the sin’dorei paladin’s control, into Northrend. “Are we finally going to give those humans what they deserve, brother?” Garrosh had asked defiantly.

“No,” Ger’alin had answered firmly while Alayne hurried out of the line of fire and down to the stables where she could be as sick as she needed to be. “We are not going to war against the Alliance. Our target is the same as it has always been: the Scourge and the Lich King. We would break away from that goal only for servants of the Legion.”

“We may not be going to war with the Alliance,” Garrosh had shouted, the thick veins in his forehead throbbing with unspent rage, “but they sure as hell are going to war against us! I’ve lost fifty fighters to them! The taunka have retreated yet again; Taunka’le Village was attacked and burned to the ground. They lost close to a dozen of their own! Our supply lines have been cut. The Alliance has taken the beaches and will not let food or fodder in from there. They have fired on the zeppelins as well. In Dragonblight, we’ve had to retreat to the tunnels of Azjol-Nerub and ask the nerubians there for protection. Agmar’s Hammer has been destroyed. They leave the tuskarr alone only because those walrus-men don’t impede them. I’ve not heard from the men I dispatched to Howling Fjord. The ancestors alone know if they made it there! And still Thrall refuses to go to war with the Alliance?”

“Two wrongs will not make a right,” Ger’alin said calmly. “My strong suggestion to you would be to move your forces into Dragonblight. Let the Alliance deal with the problem of maintaining supply-lines here. Let them have to cross our strongholds, knowing that they are in enemy territory the whole while, in order to strike out at Arthas. Our scouts have reported that Howling Fjord is largely clear of Alliance. A few outposts on the coasts. We still hold Utgarde. The taunka still hold Gjalerborn. We have an agreement with the trolls of Zul’Drak that will help us hold the Alliance out of the east entirely, giving us a safe base of operations. Lastly, we’ve been granted admittance into Dalaran. The city now floats above Crystalsong Forest and overlooks Icecrown Citadel.”

“We should crush the humans and their allies!” Garrosh screamed. Alayne returned and began staring at the zeppelin landing pad, willing the rest of the airships to hasten their descent so they could leave before Ger’alin and Garrosh came to blows. “Give up the beaches? When we have done all the work to clear them of vykrul? Give up this fortress when we have done all the work to build it and hold it against the nerubians? Give up everything to those back-stabbing humans and run to Utgarde?”

“You wouldn’t run to Utgarde at all, Garrosh Hellscream. You would advance on...”

“I will not leave my hold!” Garrosh roared. “I will stay here and defend it against the humans! I will fight the Alliance where ever they are! I will destroy them and then I will return to Orgrimmar and remind our Warchief of the glory of the Horde!”

“Sometimes, you sound like your father,” Ger’alin muttered, quoting Thrall, “when he was consumed with bloodlust and nearly led his people into complete and utter annihilation.” The two men had almost come to blows over that. Only Alayne launching a bolt of fire in the space between them had kept them from falling into an all-out brawl.

“If you two don’t stop it,” she had threatened. “I just took a trip in the air like a wingless bird! I’m not in the mood to put up with anything else. Especially not something this stupid.”

Ger’alin continued to watch her, thinking over her last words. She had a point; it was stupid to be dividing the Horde forces along these lines. Most were loyal above all to Thrall and would follow the Warchief’s commands. However, many sympathized with Garrosh – especially those who had suffered through several human attacks on their base. If only the Mag’har leader would listen to reason and evacuate to a more secure ground! Let the Alliance have their empty victory while the Horde moved into locations that could not be attacked easily. While the Alliance patted themselves on the back, the Horde could focus on destroying the Scourge. With the true enemy out of the way, perhaps the Alliance would see reason and would realize how wrong they had been. After all, everyone lost men to Putress’s betrayal. Everyone had suffered from the attempted take-over of Undercity. The Alliance hardly had a corner on that market.

“We should set the example and let them strive to follow it,” the paladin muttered to himself.

“Yes, set the example by turning tail and running,” Garrosh spat. Ger’alin ignored him and Alayne began whispering to herself in Thalassian. Ger’alin winced, tasting soap from when his mother would wash his mouth out for using language only a tenth as bad as his wife could come up with. “Thrall is more human than orc.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Ger’alin muttered through teeth clenched so tightly his jaws ached and ears rang. “Maybe one day you’ll believe it.” The sin’dorei heaved a sigh of relief when he saw Zerith and Dar’ja striding off the last zeppelin a few moments later. Waving them over, he made a sketchy bow to Garrosh and then stormed out of Warsong Hold.

“I take it things didn’t go so well,” Zerith sighed once they were outside and mounting up.

“Garrosh will have to stew in his own juices a while yet. Come on,” Ger’alin growled, “we’ve got a trip through hostile territory to make before we come to Dalaran.”

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“You’re kidding,” Rhonin said bluntly when he entered the room to see four blood elves who were barely out of youth sitting around the table. “These are the leaders of that band I’ve heard about?”

Four pairs of glowing, smoldering eyes met the leader of the Kirin Tor, their annoyance clear. “We are,” Zerith answered calmly. “If you’d rather we left and took our band with us...”

“Be welcome to Dalaran,” Rhonin said quickly. “The emissaries of the Horde mentioned that your band was led by four blood elves. Sunreaver says he’s heard of you and what he’s heard is good. Truth be told, it wouldn’t matter if it were good or ill. We need help from anyone willing to fight the Scourge.”

“That is what we’re here for,” Ger’alin said flatly. “Why else would anyone in their right mind travel this far north?”

The rest of the rulers of Dalaran stared at the sin’dorei paladin. Alayne wilted under their indirect gazes, recalling all the tales her mother had told her of the wise and puissant rulers of Dalaran. She was thrilled to be speaking with them but overcome with awe. Ger’alin glanced at his wife out of the corner of his eye and sighed. She certainly wasn’t going to be much help to him. Zerith seemed to be reaching the same conclusion. The priest stood and placed his hands flat on the table. Leaning over it, he met the others’ eyes one-by-one, betraying nothing but a faint trace of irritation. “We were sent to speak with you. We were told that the Horde would be welcome here. For many years, my people aided the cause of this city. For centuries, we were part of the Alliance until the Alliance broke faith with us, leaving us to die...”

“That is not true,” Verseea muttered in an undertone. Zerith ignored her. The division between elves who had joined the Horde and those who had remained with the Alliance ran deep and was not the reason he was here.

“Regardless,” he continued, “what is done is done. We are the ones Thrall chose to send here. If we are not good enough for you, we can take those who follow us and find sanctuary elsewhere.”

“No,” Rhonin sighed. “You and the Horde are welcome here. Any who fight the Scourge are welcome in Dalaran so long as they keep the peace of the city. To tell the truth, I expected other than you. Orcs or trolls. Even tauren.”

“We left plenty of those down below,” Ger’alin replied.

“I must ask,” Verseea cut in, “why would anyone follow you? Is this some plot to...”

“They follow us because one day, several years ago, my sister and I,” Zerith said, gesturing to Alayne, “decided that sitting around and waiting for someone else to drive the Scourge out of the Ghostlands wasn’t a good idea. We gathered up a band of like-minded people,” his gaze fell on Ger’alin, “and we came up with a plan that would work. We stormed Deatholme, killed Dark’han, and brought his head as a gift to Lord Theron. After that, we pulled down Arugal...”

“I recall hearing it was band of young elves and Forsaken who took care of that menace,” Rhonin muttered into his beard.

“They follow us because Alayne and Zerith had the vision to look further ahead than next week,” Ger’alin finished. “They follow us because we’ve earned their respect. That’s all you need to know. Whether you like us or not, whether you trust us or not is irrelevant. We’ll

prove ourselves in the long run or we won't. Now, do you have any information that might aid us in our next assignment?"

"You mean Naxxramas?" the red-headed human asked. Ger'alain nodded. "I can show you the records we have of Kel'Thuzad when he was one of our number. I can even show you a few of his personal journals and notes. All that will do is tell you what he was like before his rebirth as a lich. I'm not sure how useful it will be..."

"Any knowledge is better than none at all," Alayne ventured, her voice low. "We can't leave Naxxramas to fester behind us while we press ahead. And, with the Alliance holding the siege, we can't be certain that they'll continue to safeguard our lives as closely as they guard their own."

"She's got a point," Rhonin whispered to Versea. "You know what King Wrynn's orders were. He considers us traitors. Only Jaina Proudmoore convincing him that an attack against Dalaran would be futile has held his hand thus far. And, for all that he may be an orc, Thrall is right. The true battle is against the Scourge, not against other living creatures. Once the Scourge threat is gone, the Horde and the Alliance can fight it out if need be. We must remain neutral in that fight, though."

"But they're our people..."

"Our people are those who take seriously the threat of the Scourge." Turning back to the others, Rhonin rose from his chair and gestured for them to follow him. "I will show you Dalaran. I'm certain that the Sunreavers have a place for you to stay. Any information we have is yours to peruse. If we can be of any assistance, you have but to ask. However, know this: we will be permitting the Alliance into the city as well. They'll be under the same terms as you are; to keep the peace."

"We'll provoke no attacks," Ger'alain promised. "But, we will not stand defenseless."

"I wouldn't ask that of anyone. Still, tensions may run high until everyone understands that some battles can wait."

"That day may never come," Ger'alain whispered to himself as he and the others followed Rhonin out of the council chamber. "Or, if it does, it may arrive a week too late."

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Zerith and Ger'alain spent weeks going over the notes the Kirin Tor had gathered on Naxxramas, the Scourge, and Kel'Thuzad. Alayne and Callie helped as well, the former providing all the information she could about magic and translating the more esoteric works into plain language. Callie and the other Forsaken explained what they knew of necromancy and the workings of the Scourge. Soon, the priest thought, they would be ready to launch their attack.

Reports from Zul'Drak began trickling in to Dalaran. At first, Zerith and Ger'alain couldn't believe what they were hearing. When the priest had met with the Drakkari trolls, he had found them to be a fiercely proud and independent people. They had stated plainly that they had no interest in joining their Darkspear cousins in the Horde. But, the same disdain they felt for the Horde, they held a hundredfold for the Scourge. "How?" Zerith demanded, his dark emerald stare flat and dull, "how did Drak'Tharon fall?"

Ber'lon under his gaze shifted uncomfortably. "It was the Alliance," he muttered sourly.

"The Alliance attacked Drak'Tharon?" Ger'alain asked, his voice as warm as Icecrown.

"That's the story I've heard. A band of Alliance captured some of the Drakkari. One of the captives offered to betray his people and help the Alliance take control of Zul'Drak. By the time Morgraine and Fordring found out, it was too late. Most of the Drakkari lay dead in their great keep and the traitor had been granted power by the Lich King. The trolls that came

to us spoke of hearing the Lich King's voice and seeing their dead brothers rise again, mindless minions of the Scourge."

"Why would the Alliance want Zul'Drak?" the priest pressed.

"Why would they want anything?" Ber'lon grimaced. "I don't know. I can arrange for you to interview some of the survivors. We sent a good many this direction hoping that the Kirin Tor would take them in or that, at the very least, they would help us march against Icecrown if Dalaran had no room or use for them."

"I'd like to speak with them," Ger'alín replied. "At length. Now, can the Knights of the Ebon Blade spare forces to move against Naxxramas? That is the original reason we sent that message to you, after all."

"The Knights are spread thin," Ber'lon sighed. "With the fall of Drak'Tharon, the Scourge are pouring out of Zul'Drak. Every day, they kill more and more of the Drakkari hold-outs. Those killed are quickly added to the Scourge's armies. We and the Argent Crusade have done all we can to try to ensure the safety of the survivors and put a dent in the Scourge but...no," he finished, "we cannot spare the numbers."

Ger'alín smacked a fist against the table in irritation. His last request to Thrall for reinforcements for Venomspite had been met with silence. "Then we'll have to march with what we have."

"What do you have?" Ber'lon asked.

"Precious little," Zerith snorted. "About a dozen priests, druids, and shaman who can heal, about twenty magi and warlocks. Only a few hunters and rogues. Enough warriors to keep things interesting, and five Blood Knights. We lost many when the Forsaken went back to Undercity and we've lost more to guarding against Alliance attacks. Where we once numbered almost two hundred, we're down to barely over one hundred. We've put out a call for anyone brave enough to join us but most are divided between those who would rather go fight the Alliance and those who would rather hide and hope that the Lich King dies of natural causes. As it is, most of our force is bound up guarding Venomspite, helping reinforce the Horde guards at Utgarde, and keeping an eye on the Alliance. If the dragons weren't watching the Wrath Gate, we'd have to put men doing that as well. If Garrosh wasn't as stubborn as a mule, we could call back those we've assigned to Borean Tundra and to Utgarde but..."

"He's as hot-headed as Grom could be," Ger'alín muttered. "He comes by that honestly enough. What of the Knights of the Ebon Blade? How do your numbers stand?"

"About the same as yours," Ber'lon admitted slowly. "We've lost a good many to the scouting expeditions we've launched against Icecrown. They traveled through the Storm Peaks and just vanished. Lord Fordring and Morgraine have decided to try it from another angle; they're scouting the northern part of Crystalsong Forest to see if they can find or create a pass into Icecrown. We have more of our knights tied down in Zul'Drak trying to disrupt the Scourge operations launching there and to try to help safeguard the Drakkari. The Drakkari, though, don't seem to want us there at all which may be to the good. If they decide to kick us out, those forces could be used to guard your backtrail while you take the rest into Naxxramas."

"We'll take whatever we can get," Zerith sighed. A pounding knock on the door made all three men jump. "Come in!" Zerith shouted wearily, wondering who was interrupting their meeting.

Alayne poked her head into the door. Zerith started to grind his teeth and prepare to shout at her for startling them. Seeing something in Ger'alín's expression, the priest studied his sister more closely, swallowing the words that had been on the tip of his tongue. Alayne's face was pale, her lips tinged white with fright. Her eyes were open as wide as they would go and her ears were twitching back and forth wildly. "I'm sorry to interrupt," she stuttered, "but...I've just been down and have spoken with some of the Drakkari survivors. Zerith, it's

bad. Drakuru – he’s the one who betrayed the Drakkari Empire and used the Alliance to destroy it – has begun sending out necromancers to ransack the burial vaults. Thousands of Scourge could be created and sent against us.”

“We can’t ignore Naxxramas,” the priest sighed.

“We don’t dare ignore Zul’Drak, either,” Alayne snapped. “Thousands of them, Zerith. Thousands.”

“Well what do you suggest we do, Alayne?” the priest asked, his temper beginning to fray.

“We should evacuate Venomspite.”

“To where?”

“Send them to Utgarde.”

“Alright. Let’s say we do that. Then we lose our entry point into Naxxramas.”

“Temporarily, yes,” she conceded. “But, we would be able to recall the forces we’ve assigned to guard Venomspite against the Scourge and the Scarlets and take them to Zul’Drak. If we’re able to destroy the Scourge bases there, we should be able to convince the Drakkari to join us in a partnership against Naxxramas. We could retake Venomspite, remove the Scarlets entirely, and then march against Icecrown with all our flanks secure.”

Ber’lon appraised the woman openly. It was a good plan. It would also give him enough arguments to persuade the rest of the Knights of the Ebon Blade to join with the Disorder of Azeroth. Ger’alin seemed to reach the same conclusion. He stared at Zerith and sighed, rolling his eyes in exaggerated frustration, “Don’t you just hate it, Zerith,” he muttered loudly enough to be heard across Dalaran, “when she comes up with something that will actually work? If she’s going to keep doing our jobs for us, I may take an early retirement.”

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Zerith was glad that he had let Ger’alin convince him to take the larger tent. Thrall and Sylvanas had given them both large command tents to use while out in the north. He could hear Dar’ja’s deep, even breaths and was glad she had managed to sleep. He rubbed his eyes and blinked to clear them. He should sleep as well; the maps he was studying were blurring before him. Instead he slapped his cheeks, bit his lips, and continued on.

Ger’alin had indicated a few places in the Storm Peaks that were remote and nearly inaccessible without dragons to help with transport. A few smaller zeppelins would be able to carry supplies, lumber, and whatever else would be needed to build a base. The mountains themselves would supply a goodly amount of stone and the snow could be used to build and insulate a base as well. Zerith made a few notes on the map, selecting locations he thought should be explored further for their possibilities. Then, he set the map aside and picked up a parchment, intending to write a quick report to Thrall explaining the situation they found themselves in with Zul’Drak. Weariness overcame him and he leaned forward, intending to rest his eyes for a few moments until his vision cleared.

The light from the sun reflecting on the pure snow nearly blinded him. He held up a hand to block the shining rays out, wondering where he was and what he was doing there. He could hear the sounds of battle in the distance beneath him. Ger’alin fought against a platoon of death knights, their commander standing in the rear, ordering her soldiers on, careless of whether they lived or died. The snow in the field of battle was churned up, muddy, and red-stained. The priest could see Alayne standing near the edge of the battle, casting her spells and aiming them at the enemy commander.

She doesn’t realize, a chill and familiar voice whispered in his ear, that this battle was over before it began. Even if I am defeated, even if my armies are cast down into the final

grave, you will still lose. Whether you fall to the Legion, to the ancient evil sleeping beneath Northrend, or to the oldest enemy of life – Time itself, you **will** lose.

“We will not,” Zerith protested.

Death will take you in the end, priest of the sin’dorei. Not a peaceful death, lying in your bed, your children and grandchildren gathered around you while the spirits of your friends and loved ones who have passed wait to journey on with you. I am the only thing standing between you and horrors you have yet to imagine. Defeat my armies and that shield is gone. Join with me and you will defeat all your enemies; even Death itself.

“Join with you? Become mindless slaves with no will, no joy, no hope of freedom?” Zerith snorted. “No. Better that we all die on the fields of battle facing whatever horror it is that even you fear than we live on as slaves.”

See then the results of your choice, priest.

The scene shifted. Instead of standing on a snowy plain, they were gathered in a hall whose dimensions were so vast they made Zerith dizzy. In front of them stood an army of faceless ones, creatures Zerith had heard of only by the descriptions Alayne and Ger’alin had given him. Arrayed between them and the faceless ones were red-eyed versions of themselves. The army that had beaten back the Scourge clutched its head, screaming in madness. Only Alayne seemed able to keep her wits about her as she flung spells at the shadows, screaming that they were not real.

“But I am,” one of them said slyly, a shadow that looked exactly like Alayne. “I am what you cast out and ignored.”

“Zerith? Come to bed if you’re that tired,” Dar’ja muttered softly as she shook her husband awake. The priest sat up with a start, looking around and wondering where he was. His head pounded and his heart was racing, each pulse sending fresh pain through his temples. “Should I get you something, sweetheart?” she asked, concerned.

“No,” he said, trailing off while he got his bearings. “It was just a strange dream...”

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Ger’alin woke with a shivering gasp and reached out, careless of whether or not he woke Alayne, and grasped her tightly. He pressed her against his chest, muttering over and over again, “If you ever do something that foolish and get yourself killed, I’ll never forgive you.”

“Mer’in, mhut ahr moo malmin amout?” she demanded, struggling to push herself far enough away so that she could breathe. “Met me ump! Meye man’t mreathe!”

“Ouch!” he shouted, his arms springing open. Alayne leapt out of the bed and stood next to it, her eyes glittering dangerously as she gasped for breath.

“Ger’alin, what are you talking about?” she repeated as she gulped air. “Don’t glare at me like that! I told you I couldn’t breathe.”

“You *bit* me,” he muttered, rubbing his chest.

“I’ll bite you again if you don’t tell me what that was about,” she promised.

“I just had the strangest dream is all,” he said sulkily. “I dreamed you ran off like a fool and got yourself killed by the faceless ones. It seemed so real,” he shuddered. His wife’s expression softened and she sat back down on the bed and began stroking his sweat-soaked hair from his face. “I woke up, relieved you were still here, and you *bit* me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said contritely. “You were smothering me. Ger’alin,” she sighed, her voice serious, “you know that I’m not going to run off again. Every time I’ve struck out on my own without letting you know, it’s caused nothing but more trouble and misery than if I had told you beforehand. I’m not going to keep repeating my mistakes. The part of me that saw the world through the lens of suspicion, paranoia, and overprotectiveness is gone. Instead

of fearing that any danger will lead to everyone's death and destruction, I accept that there are risks we must all take. I still worry, but it doesn't control and consume me any longer. So, you can stop thinking I'm going to run off," she huffed irritably. "If anyone is going to run off, it'll be Callie."

"Callie?"

"Ger'alın, she's not been herself since that day on the beach. She blames herself even more for the deaths of the Forsaken she accompanied into Undercity. If anything happens to Jez'ral, she'll blame herself for that as well. I've talked with her and talked with her until I'm hoarse and she doesn't seem to see that she can't let it overwhelm her."

"I thought she was starting to do better," he muttered. "She's been in higher spirits since we returned."

"She is and she isn't."

"Well, just so long as you're not going to run off after her if she does run off," he said sullenly. Alayne sighed and laid back down, pulling the covers over her.

"I might run off," she grimaced when Ger'alın rubbed his cheek against hers, "if you don't shave that damned thing off."

"I will when it's warmer," he promised sleepily. "When it's warmer..."