

Zerith sighed as he led his hawkstrider back onto the broken stone road. The forces of the Argent Crusade and the Ebon Blade had done their best to contain the Scourge, keeping them pinned between the mountains and the once-great amphitheater where the trolls still held their seasonal competitions of strength. Yet, the loss of Drak'Tharon Keep was a mortal blow. There were not enough defenders left to hold the southern passes into the Grizzly Hills. Zerith had left most of the Disorder of Azeroth there, hoping to be able to convince the Scourge not to attack through the south while he and Ger'alín surveyed the situation throughout Zul'Drak.

"This is not going to be easy," Ger'alín muttered, rubbing his chin in thought.

"We've at least got them contained," the priest replied.

"Barely. They continually threaten to overwhelm the defenses in the east. One good shove and they could break through the southern passes. Holding the line is hard enough. Pushing them back? It's going to be nigh on impossible."

"I've been thinking about that."

"I have, too. If only the Drakkari would help us..."

"They're not going to. They're just as bad as Garrosh," Zerith sighed. "All they want to do is gather their strength and lash out at the Alliance. I can understand that. But, it does us no good to stay divided against the Scourge. Now is not the time for war among ourselves."

"You don't have to lecture me," Ger'alín grimaced. "I've heard you say it before and I agree with you. It doesn't change the fact that it's going to be us, the Argent Crusade, and the Ebon Blade handling this with what we have at hand. And what we have at hand is barely enough to keep the current stalemate."

"Still, we can't just hold them in check. If we try to keep things as they are, we'll be overwhelmed in short order."

"We should focus on the cauldron sites and then the ziggurats," Ger'alín interrupted.

"I agree. The cauldrons first, though. Ber'lon says that the necromancers there should have access keys to the ziggurats. Alayne can probably study them and figure out how to get all of us up there. With their leaders dead, the Scourge will revert to mindless zombies and we can clear them off the field with minimal effort. The only problem I see is..."

"Naxxramas," Ger'alín answered for him. "Yes, it will be damnably difficult to keep up the assault if Kel'Thuzad sends Naxxramas over here and begins pouring his forces and energies into the fight."

"We'll have to strike fast and hard. I have a few thoughts on how to do that," Zerith added, seeing the speculative look on his friend's face. The priest quickly outlined his plans. Ger'alín interrupted a few times to suggest an alteration or state that what the priest had in mind wouldn't work. Both men dismounted and squatted down, drawing crude maps in the dirt to emphasize their points. By the time they had come to an agreement over the next course of action, the sun was nearly down. "Should we try to make the trip over the pass?" the priest asked.

"We'll stay the night with the Argent Crusade," Ger'alín replied, shaking his head.

"I hope Alayne and Dar'ja don't take it into their heads to come looking for us," Zerith muttered half-wistfully. They had left their wives in charge of the Disorder of Azeroth in Grizzly Hills.

"You know," Ger'alín said suddenly, rubbing a finger along his beard, "it's not Alayne or Dar'ja I'm worried about. It's Callie."

"She has been more reluctant to lead since that disaster on the beach. And, she seems to have lost some of her love of battle since she lost her arm. Still, it is normal," the priest sighed. "A major change like that can disrupt a person's balance, physically and mentally. Why are you especially concerned about her now?"

“She and I traveled together for a long while,” Ger’alin replied. “She hauled me out of more bars than I care to try to count. She developed more ways of sobering me up than I care to describe. I say all that to explain that I know Callie fairly well. I’ve seen her angry. I’ve seen her upset. I’ve seen her grieving, sad, happy, and content. Alayne’s noticed that Callie’s more somber and subdued of late as well. I’ve said nothing to her about this but...I believe Callie may be losing her nerve.”

“Is there anything we can do to help her?”

“I don’t know. I’m tempted to give her one of the more risky assignments we’ve discussed. The only problem is...if she loses her nerve completely, she’d be right in the worst place on Azeroth for us to try to get her out of.”

“I’ll think it over. It may be the best thing to do for her. Certainly she’d be able to mingle in better than just about anyone else. For now, let’s get someplace safe. I’ll explain our plan to the Argents if you’ll handle the Ebons.”

“Agreed,” Ger’alin nodded. The two men mounted back up and began riding, hoping to beat the failing sun to safety.

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Alayne sat calmly while Ger’alin and Zerith explained the plan they had devised to her and the other leaders of the Disorder of Azeroth. She wondered if she were being held in reserve again out of fear but decided to say nothing until the others were gone. Tau’re, Dar’ja, and Diami all seemed content with their assignments. Callie was fidgeting nervously. Alayne could understand that. She wouldn’t have minded trading places with the rogue but then, she didn’t know if she would be able to pull off what Zerith and Ger’alin seemed to expect from Callie. She wondered if it was wise to put the Forsaken under so much pressure so soon. Once Tau’re and Diami had left, Alayne glanced at Ger’alin. Her husband gave her a glare that warned her not to start arguing and then glanced at Callie meaningfully. She sighed and nodded. She would keep quiet, for now.

“Ger’alin,” Callie said slowly, softly, “I don’t think that sending me to infiltrate the ziggurat is a good idea.”

“It was either you or Diami,” Ger’alin said evenly. “We need her for what we’re planning to do with the cauldrons. That left you. Frankly, we don’t have anyone else to send on this assignment.”

“I know,” she sighed. “And that’s partly my fault.”

“Callie, even if none of you had gone to Undercity, there’s still no one else I would trust to do this,” Ger’alin said gently. “You’re the best we have. You always have been. You always will be. If you can’t believe in yourself, then trust me and my judgement, Callie.”

“What will you do if I fail?”

“You won’t fail,” Zerith said firmly. “You’ve never let us down in the past. You won’t let us down now.”

Callie nodded glumly, accepting the assignment and then left the tent. “Don’t start,” Ger’alin warned his wife. “I’ll be frank, it would have been you sneaking in there pretending to be a necromancer if she’d flatly refused to do it. You’re staying behind because you’re the only one we can trust to help Tau’re hold the line if the Scourge attempt a break-out through the south.”

“I see,” Alayne sighed. “I won’t argue, then. But, what of the Drakkari?”

“They refuse to join in. They’re hiding in the thickets near Gundrak, licking their wounds. How they expect to beat the Scourge and have vengeance doing that is beyond me, but there you have it.”

“The truth of the matter is, sis,” Zerith sighed, “we’re leaving you to hold the southern pass and we’re not leaving you enough fighters and magi to do it. One good push and we could return to bury you.” Ger’alin glared at the priest and Alayne nodded.

“What do you mean we’re not leaving her enough…” Ger’alin began.

“We can’t leave half our force here,” Zerith muttered. “I don’t care how much you want to; we can’t. Alayne is worth a squadron of magi when she gets riled. So, she’ll have herself and two others to work the magic. Dar’ja will stay behind to do any healing that needs to be done. Ber’lon will come and that will leave them ten solid fighters.”

“You want her to hold the southern pass with fourteen fighters?” Ger’alin demanded, his eyes bulging and his voice strangled. “You want her to hold it against the might of the Scourge with just over a dozen people?”

“A dozen people and as much creativity as she can muster,” the priest replied. “We can’t spare any more than that. We’re sending Callie alone into the ziggurat. We’ve got to cause enough of a disruption at the cauldrons to draw the Scourge down on us. Now, would you want to face that with only fourteen so we can leave thirty to hold the southern pass? Do you want to call back the forces we’re sending to help secure the eastern gates?”

Ger’alin’s face reflected the war within him. He knew, in his head, that Zerith was right. They didn’t have the men to spare. Still, the thought of leaving his wife to try to stave off any attack coming out of the south with a relative handful of fighters made him sick to his stomach. Alayne broke the impasse with a sigh. “I’ll gather the reserve and set them to cutting down trees right away.”

“Cutting down trees?” Ger’alin demanded, confused.

“Pikes and fires,” his wife smiled. “You know, sometimes I read *your* books.”

Ger’alin thought it over, seeing the plan his wife had forming in his own mind. It was risky but it might work. With a shake of his head, he exhaled and nodded. “Fine,” he said flatly. “We’ll leave fourteen behind. May the Light have mercy on us if we’re wrong, though.”

“It’s not the Light I’m worried about,” Zerith said, his eyes pinched. “It’s the Scourge.”

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Ger’alin glanced southwards over his shoulder. He scrubbed at his beard irritably, wishing that he’d shaved it off. Reminding himself that it was cold and that he could grow a beard or not as he chose, he tried not to think about the slight tinge of fear that had shone in Alayne’s eyes when the main force set out just before dawn. He prayed that their attack would hit so hard and so fast that the Scourge wouldn’t have a chance to escape southward. After conceding the need to Zerith, he’d spent the night laying awake, Alayne curled up next to him, revising their strategy. To be sure, the cauldrons had to be destroyed. Their noxious poison tainted the land, spreading the contagion of undeath through the soil. In mere days, it had spread through most of western Zul’Drak. Left unchecked, it would creep into Crystalsong, Dragonblight, and Grizzly Hills. Where it found warm blood and living flesh, it would consume them, twisting the life into unlife until few were left to fight the Scourge. It was a potent weapon, one that had been used before in Lordaeron.

“Too bad the soil of Zul’Drak couldn’t be less fertile,” Ger’alin thought to himself. “If it were barren rock and snow like Icecrown must be and like the Storm Peaks are, we wouldn’t be in half as much trouble as we are right now.”

Ahead of him, he could see the giant Scourge cauldrons belching their brew into the chilly air. The area around them held unnatural heat and dampness, reminding the paladin uncomfortably of the swamps of Dustwallow where he had come into manhood. Standing

beside him, he could hear Zerith swallow hard, forcing himself to hold down the gorge rising in his throat. "Callie will be fine," the priest muttered to himself, as if by telling himself that, it would become reality. "She'll do just fine."

"She will or she won't," Ger'alın grimaced, hating the way the putrid poison seemed to coat his tongue and throat. "It's too late to back out now."

"Diāmi should be in position soon. As soon as we see the signal flare, we ride."

The pair split up, Ger'alın moving back to the front lines while Zerith headed to the rear. In the pearly grey pre-dawn haze, they waited. The morning should have been cool, dew just beginning to form on the grasses. Instead, the putrid humidity made the plants hang limp, rotting from within and without. Squinting, Ger'alın could see the necromancers changing shifts. The mindless Scourge skeletons, abominations, and geists continued gathering crystals and ooze scraped from the brutalized soil, carrying it to the cauldron. Then, in the distance, a flare pierced the sky. Diāmi had her magi in position. The first spells should be falling right about now.

The two necromancers glanced northward in confusion as a sudden wind sprang up. Ice began pelting them as hail and snow conjured by the magi blew into a small blizzard. With quick directions, the necromancers ordered the undead northward and began casting spells to protect the cauldron from the wrath of the elements being flung against them. Ger'alın spurred Lucky to a gallop and his fighters sprang out of the woods to the west of the cauldron, riding down the necromancers before they had a chance to finish casting their dark spells of protection over the cauldron. The servants of the Lich King turned their spells on their attackers, the words dying on their lips as fear chilled their hearts. One necromancer began running, trying to make it to the teleportation field that would transport him into the ziggurat and safety. Without missing a beat, Ger'alın hurled the outrage of the Light at the escaping Scourging, feeling a grim satisfaction when the necromancer dropped to the ground, writhing in agony as holy energy danced over him. The warriors and rogues smashed into the undead forces now milling about in confusion, one of their masters no longer sending them clear commands. Before the other necromancer had a chance to regain control, the unliving slaves still standing near the cauldron were cut down. He shrieked in rage as the Disorder of Azeroth continued their assault, half the force wheeling to head further to the north of the field, chasing down the undead who had been sent there before they could reach the magic users. The snowy assault on the cauldron continued unabated and the swampy ground near it began to freeze, ice forming in the noxious orange pools of melted sand and dirt. The Disorder of Azeroth was able to flank the remaining Scourge and drive them back into the blizzard, pressing them from all sides. Ger'alın hurried down from Lucky's back before their force crowded in too closely and laid about with his hammer, smashing the bones of skeletons. Tau're was beside him, his axe and sword dancing through the air as he cut a swath through the undead. The pair sought out the necromancer; with him down, the rest of the Scourge in the nearby area should be rendered mindless. The fighters winced but pressed on, even when the rotting slush washed over their feet. They shivered in the cold that their allies called down to cleanse the air and destroy the cauldron. Not even the battle raging around them could warm the chill in their bones. Finally, when the necromancer lay dead and the rest of the Scourge were being quickly dispatched, Ger'alın wiped melting snow from his forehead and brushed ice crystals from his beard. The magi moved in, assaulting the cauldron directly while the melee forces moved back away from it, not wanting to risk being sprayed by the plague-filled liquid.

"There must be a way to neutralize it," Diāmi muttered as she pointed at the cauldron. She called upon the Nether and forced it into the thick liquid, superheating it with an unnatural fire until it boiled away completely, its foul fumes dissipated by the winds the magi called to cool the ground and clear the air.

“There must be,” Zerith agreed, “and we’ll find it, one day. For now, we need to rest and move on. We have two other cauldrons to assault.”

“Andeo and Siah will remain here,” Ger’alin said firmly. “See what you two can do about cleansing and healing this ground once the ice has melted. The rest of you, mount up. We’ve lost the element of surprise for the rest of the day but we still have speed in our favor. Let’s hit them hard before they have a chance to regroup and uncover our weak spot,” he finished, his gaze flying southward.

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Callie relaxed slightly once she was able to sneak onto the teleporter and found herself in the ziggurat. She assumed her most blank expression, looking around as if she were being given orders, and shuffling through the room into the main corridor. She could see the orange, spongy ground through openings in the lower part of the ziggurat and wondered when the attack would begin. She prayed that Ger’alin and the others would be able to keep the necromancers from calling for aid. If word reached the ziggurat that the cauldrons were under attack, her position would become much more precarious than it was. She rebalanced the orange crystals she carried awkwardly with her one arm and glanced around as if looking for where to set them.

“You!” the yell from one of the Scourge guardians startled her. She barely remembered to keep her face blank and turn calmly to face him. “Those don’t go there you witless fool. Take them around to the other side.”

Callie nodded and walked around the corridor to where the guardian had pointed. She could feel his eyes on her the entire time and she hoped that she would not give herself away. She let the crystals fall in a pile of others and then shambled back the way she had come, her face completely blank and her eyes dull. She could see other geists and ghouls gathering crystals, dropping them off, and then scrambling about on orders. She followed them, sighing with relief when the guardian’s eyes latched on to another ghoul and he shouted the same thing as he had at Callie. The necromancers must have posted him there to make certain the ghouls didn’t wander off.

Creeping through the shadows of the floating necropolis, Callie repressed a shiver of memory. She had but few remembrances of her time among the Scourge but the sights, sounds, and smells of the ziggurat seemed to be bringing them to the fore. She knew that if she waited, standing perfectly still, she would not be seen in the shadows. At least, the Scourge wouldn’t see her. Necromancers and the few Scourgelings set to look specifically for lost ghouls might spot her. She watched the activity in the ziggurat, satisfied that nothing was amiss. Then, stepping out of the shadows, she shambled up the walkway to the teleporter that would transport her to the upper levels.

The upper levels were chill, the air icy even to her. She could hear the coarse cursing of living creatures as they worked their way through the necromantic healing required on corpses before they could be resurrected into the ranks of the undead. Liches floated over the mutilated bodies of dead trolls, preparing themselves for the casting that would call the dead back to a twisted mockery of life. Standing in the center of the room was a living troll, his flesh mottled and dull and his eyes blazing with unnatural fire. He sniffed the air as if scenting living creatures not of his command. Glancing around, his eyes passed over Callie as she shuffled around the edge of the room, looking as if she were merely another corpse on orders.

“How many more can you have ready by the end of the week?” she heard a deep, trollish voice ask.

“If our plans against the Argents and the trolls near Gundrak succeed, we’ll have another five hundred more at least,” one of the necromancers answered.

“Good, good. Maybe you should be going down to check how our reserve be holding up.”

“I will be doing that as soon as this batch is prepared for reanimation,” the necromancer said, bowing to his unseen master. “I should be ready in another hour.”

“I want the first wave to begin their attack against the Drakkari cowards hiding out in the woods before the sun begins to set.”

“My liege, we do not have the...”

“Just see to it! Zul’Drak will be mine, as was promised by the Lich King!”

Callie’s blood was surging with excitement. Drakuru, the betrayer of the Drakkari trolls, was going to launch an attack before he had the corpse-power to pull it off. Her mind raced; he was obviously counting on being able to gather enough dead from the battle to supplement his force. Such tactics were common among the Scourge. She struggled to keep an even expression as she began walking out of the room.

“He probably intends to take the big ones with him,” one of the necromancers muttered, catching her attention. She ducked out of the room and pressed herself against a wall, listening carefully. “Some of our best work went into salvaging those bodies and calling them back and he’s going to throw it away. I thought the dres would be held for use against that blasted Disorder of Azeroth that is giving the Master such a headache.”

“I hate to see good corpses wasted as much as you,” the other necromancer muttered in reply, “but if he’s got a mind to use the dres against their brothers, then he’s going to do it. You should know that about him by now. Besides, we’ve still got plenty of skeletal forces to reanimate from the crypts over in Grizzly Hills. Not to mention all those bear-men once the work here in Zul’Drak is done.”

Callie stopped listening and began to shuffle around. She could return to the others now; she could report to them what she had learned. But, she wanted to know more about these particular Scourge the necromancers had mentioned. “Dres” they had called them. And, she wished she could stay and hear about what they had planned for Grizzly Hills – she prayed that attack wouldn’t begin soon. Alayne would be overwhelmed if it did. Dragging through the Scourge base, she looked around for any undead who might fit the description of “dres.” So intent on her spying was she that she did not hear the necromancers padding up quietly behind her. Only when a shadow fell over her did she turn to see them standing there, twin smiles of amusement on their faces. “You know, traitor,” one said, sounding almost jovial, “it’s hard to fool one of us when we send you an order to get out of the room and you stand around like a bump on a log.”

Callie shoved the necromancers, hoping to get past them and back to the teleporter. If she could make her way down to the ground below, she could join with Ger’alin and the others and report what she’d learned. She scrambled through the hallway, searching desperately for the teleporter. Spotting the path that led to it, she ran up the ramp and then flew backwards into the wall. Waiting for her was a giant abomination. Just as she rose to her feet and began praying for a way out, the necromancers caught up with her.

“We’ve had little practice getting one of your kind back under our wings,” the second one said, his voice thin and reedy from running. “So, we’ll just have to hang on to you and keep practicing. Otherwise, that banshee bitch Sylvanas might think she’s safe. Bring her,” he ordered the abomination. “And, if you think of fighting,” he said, turning back to Callie, “we have ways of making you regret it.”

Callie shuddered as she felt his foul necromantic magics settling on her bones. She bit her lips to keep from crying out as the same magic that kept her dead body together and functioning began to twist it, pulling her bones and muscles into contorted postures nature

had never intended. "I will not cry out," she promised herself. "I will not give in. I will not betray my friends. I will not fail them this time! I will not!"

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The sun was just beginning to fall from its noonday height when Alayne, out of boredom more than curiosity, began another inspection of the pike lines. The few fighters she had with her had been busy all morning carving the trees that she had the magi burning down. She felt a tremor of sorrow and guilt whenever one of the trees fell. She reminded herself that it was for a good cause and that the ancient guardians of the forest would see that the younger trees were replenished. As she began mounting the stairs, a stray sound caught her attention. Ger'alin and the others were not due to return until the next day.

"Behind the pike lines!" she heard Dar'ja shout. "Scourge!"

Alayne hiked her skirts and ran, ducking behind the row of pointed sticks they had wedged on a platform over the stairs. Rocks broken, again using magic, filled the gap between platform and stairs, preventing anyone from being able to get under the platform. The only way past it was over it and the points should cause enough damage to slow their attackers down. Rolling on her back and letting Dar'ja pull her to her feet, Alayne glanced up, shuddering to see her husband's worst fears confirmed. A full five times their number was pouring out of the ruins of Drak'Tharon Keep. Most of her magi were tired, their strength sapped from the morning's work. Alayne began hurling her spells almost as soon as the first fiery arrows flew from the fighters' bows. Next to her, she could feel Dar'ja casting her divine spells at the Scourge. "Why are they attacking us now?" Alayne whispered.

Next to her, Dar'ja shrugged and continued casting.

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Ger'alin felt uneasy. After the destruction of the first two Scourge cauldrons, he'd expected more resistance. The way the Scourge had seemed to melt away just as the force came in range disturbed him. He glanced around, wondering where Callie was and how she was faring. She must be doing well if she had managed to remain in the ziggurat this long without being found out. Either that, or she had been captured. "If she had been found out," he reminded himself, "we'd be facing much stiffer opposition at these cauldrons."

"That's done," he heard Nishi shout. "Where in the name of the nine hells did they all go, I wonder?"

"We'll track them down," Ger'alin muttered. "You and Grognak remain here and see what you can do about dispelling this foulness in the soil. It's magical in nature."

"It's necromantic," Nishi replied. "Maybe one of the Ebons will know more about it."

"We'll send them over later. For now, do what you can to dispel the fumes, at least. The rest of us will ride over to the Argent Stand and let them know that our job is done."

"It's done and we're all still alive. I'm rather surprised at that."

"Don't look a gift hawkstrider in the beak. It means we can gather in a few more and launch an attack on that ziggurat, now."

"Should we send forces to check on the reserve to the south?"

"No. Alayne won't be expecting us for another day at least. If we go in early, we could find ourselves under attack. She was setting up shop to hold off a goodly number. Let's not spook her if we can avoid it. Besides, as much as I want to go down there and make certain she's safe and leave about half of you with her, I can't," the paladin sighed. "Let's ride. The sooner the Argents know, the sooner we can rally them, the Ebons, and march on the ziggurat."

The Disorder of Azeroth quickly fell in behind Ger'alın, trotting steadily along the swampy soil until they reached the rocky broken road that led to the Argent Crusade's stronghold in Zul'Drak. Slowing their animals down, they dismounted to lead them up the once-fine stairs. At the top of the platform, they remounted and rode on, many pulling their feet out of the stirrups as they trotted through the marshy pools that surrounded the Argent Stand. Ger'alın grimaced at the muck as it splashed out of the pools, the chill water soaking the leggings he wore beneath his armor. The air was cooler here, cleaner, but still carried a hint of foulness. He was relieved when he saw the fires of the Argent Stand burning in the distance. A gentle breeze carried the refreshing smell of wood-smoke.

And the sound of combat. Hearing the ringing of steel against steel and the muffled cries of the living fighters, Ger'alın spurred Lucky to a gallop, leaning down against the horse's neck. He heard the others behind him doing the same. The Disorder of Azeroth splashed through the ruined pools and fields, pulling to a halt when they saw the battle raging at the Argent Stand.

"How did they get behind us?" Zerith muttered as he pulled up alongside Ger'alın.

"South," Ger'alın gasped, the air squeezed from his lungs in fear. "Someone should go check on Alayne and the Nether take the risk of friendly fire."

"We're going to need everyone here," Zerith replied. "It looks like they emptied the ziggurats for this attack." Without another word, the priest began walking swiftly to the field of battle. Ger'alın was a beat behind him, unslinging his shield and pulling his hammer from his belt. Trotting ahead, the paladin joined the fight. Spells flew and steel rang as the Disorder of Azeroth threw itself into the thick of battle. The Argent Crusaders had held their ground well, giving little to the enemy unless it was soaked in Scourge and Argent blood. Slowly, the fighting began to die out as only pockets of resistance remained. The combined forces of the living had overcome the Scourge attack.

Ger'alın glanced at the sky, startled to see that the sun was brushing the tops of the trees in the west. It had seemed just moments since he had rushed in. Looking around, he saw the healers moving among the forces, laying hands on those who needed it most while letting those who could use bandages to bind their wounds. Ger'alın shook with a mix of fear and exhaustion. "How did they get behind us?" he asked, repeating Zerith's earlier question.

"We're not sure," one of the Argent Crusaders muttered. "They came from our south hours ago. We were too busy holding them off to send scouts to trace their trail."

"South," Ger'alın repeated, fear nearly freezing his tongue. "South?"

"There's a fallen necropolis due south," the Argent fighter continued, running a gauntleted hand over his face. "They could have been holed up in there, waiting for a signal to attack. The whole thing is surrounded by a putrid mire. None of us could stand to get close enough to it to give it a thorough inspection."

The fear strangling Ger'alın's heart relaxed a little. They had come from the south of the base, not through Grizzly Hills. "Signal to attack?" he asked, coming back to himself, "how could they know to send a signal? I thought we had lucked out and managed to catch them all by surprise."

"They knew. The Scourge are smarter than we think. We underestimate them at our peril."

"Callie," Ger'alın groaned. Turning away from the warrior, he scanned over the crowds until he found Zerith. Running over to the priest, he gasped for air as he repeated the rogue's name. "Where's Callie?" he managed to get out between breaths.

"Not here," Zerith said worriedly, his forehead furrowed as he looked over the scene. "She should have been back here hours ago. She knew that if she didn't find us at the cauldrons, she was to report here and wait for us."

"She's been captured," Ger'alın said grimly. "That's how they knew."

“Knew what?”

“To attack. Pick out the freshest fighters you can find and send half of them to reinforce our southern guard. The rest, send with me. I’m going to march on that ziggurat before the sun is down. If we wait any longer,” Ger’alin added, seeing that the priest was about to argue, “we may not live to see tomorrow.”

“Should we bother asking for reinforcements from the Drakkari?”

“Waste time when you have it, Zerith. Right now, we don’t.”

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Alayne wiped sweat and blood from her forehead, glancing up wearily at the pikes that were just barely holding. The skirmish had gone on with intermittent pauses on both sides since midday. She’d climbed up the barricade to hurl fire down on the Scourge and had taken a stone to the forehead. Her head ached abominably, throbbing with each heartbeat, but she forced herself to carry on. Blood trickled from the cut over her eye but she ignored it, paying just enough mind to wipe it out of her vision while she prepared another spell. Beside her, Run’ok and Ber’lon stood firing blazing arrows into the attackers, keeping them from pressing against the pikes again.

The wind blew from the north, carrying the stench of the Scourge. They had managed to whittle down the force from Drak’Tharon Keep to a mere two dozen. Alayne sighed fretfully as she counted up the numbers. Two dozen who would not need rest against fourteen who did. She’d already sent several of the other magi to find what rest they could. Dar’ja had collapsed an hour ago; her healing energy spent. Alayne prayed that they could hold the current stalemate into the next day though she doubted it was possible. Hope flared briefly as she reminded herself that thus far, no other Scourge had joined the battle. If they could just find the energy to hold their position; if they could just find spare resources to bring down a few more trees, they could rest. Surveying her forces, she shook her head and immediately regretted it when the world swam, blurring before her eyes.

“Sit down and catch your breath, Alayne,” Ber’lon muttered as he fired another arrow. “You’ll do us no good if you collapse like Dar’ja did.”

“You need my fire,” Alayne replied. “We have to hang on. We have to.”

“We won’t hang on if every last one of us is too tired to move.”

“I’ll rest in a bit.”

“Rest now.”

“In a bit,” she whispered, tears of tiredness and pain leaking from her eyes. Ber’lon pursed his lips but said nothing.

The wind picked up from the north again and Alayne shuddered. On it came the sounds of hooves against stone and steel against steel. She was beyond hoping that the others would check on them. Ger’alin had told her fairly firmly that they wouldn’t be able to do so unless there were clear sign that the southern position was being overrun. As the hours had ticked by with no sign of the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth, Alayne surmised that the Scourge had been smarter than she wanted to believe. They had left no trail for the others to spot and know that an attempt was being made against Grizzly Hills.

“No,” Ber’lon muttered, startling Alayne. She had not realized she was speaking aloud. “This isn’t a true attack. If they had doubled their number, they would be past us by now. This is a delaying tactic.”

“What do you mean?”

“They want to hold us here and keep us too busy to reinforce the others. They want to make the others have to fight their way to us. Light, if only we had a few more men...we could break through them and go find out what is going on up there.”

"I'm tempted to try it anyway," Alayne sighed.

"Unless you've got another few magi in your pockets, I wouldn't suggest it."

"Give me a minute," she muttered, closing her eyes. She focused on her worry about the others. She tried to call up her fear for them, her anxiety. She whimpered when, instead of the rage she knew she was capable of when pushed to the wall, she felt nothing but pain. Ber'lon stared at her in concern, almost dropping his bow to tend to her. "Come on, damn you," she whispered to herself. "They could be up there dying and you're down here doing nothing."

She thought she heard a soft susurration. Concentrating on it, she tried to summon up the red-tinged blind anger. A faint laugh rang in the back of her mind, reproachful and reproving. "Come on, damn you, come on!"

"Alayne!" Ber'lon shouted, jerking her out of her thoughts. "Up there. Zerith and the others," he pointed to the top of the stairs.

The priest and several fighters were taking the Scourge from behind. Alayne flung the spells she could muster, doing her best to help them clear their way and feeling more tired and useless than she had in a while. She shoved aside her despair, knowing it did no good. With it vanished the whispers and laughter she thought she had heard. Moments that stretched out like hours passed while the fighters, Ber'lon, Run'ok, and Alayne worked to dispatch the holding force. Zerith eyed the pikes respectfully, wondering if there were a way past them without destroying them. Alayne saw his confusion and walked up the ramp easily, ignoring the stares from her brother. "It's an incline," she muttered. "It's not as if we had time or materials to turn it into a wall."

"Ger'alın sent me here to check on you. He's marching against the ziggurat now. We found the Argents and the Ebons both under attack. He figures that Callie has been captured and forced to give up information."

"Captured? By the Scourge?" Alayne winced, her concern rushing through her painfully. Zerith nodded and motioned for her to climb down the pike wall. She scrambled down, careless of the way the sharp points tore her robes and the splinters ripped into her palms. What was a little more pain compared to the throbbing in her skull? "If she were captured and there were some skilled necromancers nearby...she could be worse than tortured," Alayne muttered, her voice pitched low for Zerith only. "When I served...there were plans on how to force the Forsaken back into the fold. It wouldn't work on a large scale but one or two, here or there..."

"Let's hope that's not the case," Zerith prayed as he lifted his hands to cup Alayne's head. Whispering a plea to the Light, he let healing energy pour from him and into her, relieving the pounding in her head and healing the cuts on her hands. He reached up and wiped the now-dried blood off her forehead with a fond smile. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," she said gratefully. "Dar'ja wore herself out with healing. She's out cold. Most of the others are too. Ber'lon," she called out, looking over her shoulder and raising her voice so that it carried down to the others. "See if you can wake the others and get them up here. We may need to move."

"You need to continue to hold this position if you can," Zerith sighed. "I've come to check up on you and to tell you what is going on. It's a good thing I did, too. Another couple of hours and you would have been overwhelmed."

"We'll take up position further up the stairs. If we've got a respite, I intend to use it. You there," she said, pointing at one of the orc warriors with Zerith, "you and your friends gather up the pikes. Just rip them off the rocks if you can. Haul them up the stairs to here. Did you manage to destroy the cauldrons?" she asked her brother. Zerith nodded warily. "Good. I can use them now. If you're coming back later, I suggest you give the call 'For Quel'Thalas' if there is no danger and 'shindu fallah na' if there is."

“What are you planning?” he asked suspiciously.

“You’ll see. Ger’alin would be proud. I did read his books, sometimes.”

Zerith again nodded warily, wondering just what she meant. Deciding it was better not to ask, he began searching for a way down the stairs so he could tend to the others before returning to the fight at the ziggurat.

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Callie shivered as the necromantic magics flowed through her body. She was able to retain her own will but her body obeyed the commands of the Scrouge necromancers. The few times they had tried to penetrate her will, to force her to obey their orders on her own, to pry information out of her, she had resisted as Alayne had taught her. Thus far, their attempts had been futile. Still, it had taken all the concentration she had not to gasp in despair when she heard Drakuru order an attack through Drak’Tharon Keep. If they ever found out how small a force was left there to hold that position, they would throw their might at it, breaking through and capturing Callie’s friends. As it was, Drakuru had taunted her with that. “We know your friends are hiding in Grizzly Hills. We’re going to send our scouts to find them and add them to our ranks. You may as well surrender to us now; you will have no choice about it then.”

Callie wondered how he had known they were hiding in the Grizzly Hills. Ger’alin and Zerith had worked hard to make it seem that they were based somewhere in Zul’Drak. She managed to keep her eyes from widening in shock when Drakuru mentioned knowing where they were based, adopting her most bland expression. As long as he didn’t send a large force, Alayne could hold them off, keeping them from being used against the groups attacking the cauldrons and trying to destroy the Scourge who controlled the lands beneath the ziggurat.

At length, Drakuru had left her, ordering his necromancers to keep her in the cell with the bodies of those they had yet to animate. Callie was forced to sit in the corner of the cell, able to see through the iron bars, and watch as the necromancers pulled the dead back to a corrupt form of life. Whenever she tried to avert her gaze, the necromancers used their magic to wrench her head back, forcing her to watch. After a while, she stopped fighting them, looking on in growing horror as she added up the numbers. Where were the Scourge finding all of these bodies? And what was that weapon Drakuru had mentioned before she’d been uncovered?

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“We took the pressure off her,” Zerith said when Ger’alin eyed him as he rode up. “They were being attacked. A small force, though. Looks like it was either a probing force or was supposed to hold them in place. Alayne’s repositioning the whole lot of them further in the ruins. I left a few more with her; she’ll be able to hold off anything. She mentioned something about the cauldrons, though. She said you would understand.”

“She’ll need chains for that trick to work. And a few dozen pulleys and strong men.”

“What in the name of...you know what?” Zerith sighed. “Nevermind. I hate trying to figure out how you two can read each other’s minds without even having to be looking at each other.”

“Maybe she could float them up there, though,” the paladin mused. “Might work. Good idea on her part at any rate. It keeps them from being completely overwhelmed if she pulls it off.”

“Ger’alin, shut up unless you’re going to explain it to me.”

The paladin waved his hand irritably. Zerith grunted and fell silent. "I'm not certain how many the teleporter can take up at once," Ger'alın said. "I almost wish you brought Alayne. She would have figured it out."

"What does it matter? Let's just get everyone up there quickly. The Scourge must know we're coming. Every minute we wait down here is another minute they have to prepare."

"I don't like the idea of rushing in to a situation where we know nothing. Callie was supposed to return and tell us how many they have up there and give us an idea of the layout. Still, there's nothing left but to go up anyway and hope that the Light is with us."

"I don't like it anymore than you, but you're right," Zerith sighed. "You take the first group up. I'll be in the second group. We'll take magi and fighters first, healers and ranged fighters next. Have you divided everyone up? Good," he said when Ger'alın nodded. "Let's go."

Ger'alın signaled those he had selected to make the transport with him and then headed over to the teleporter. The half-dozen fighters stepped on it and, in a flash of light, were transported by Scourge magic to the ziggurat floating overhead. Zerith gave a quick count of ten, signaled the healers, and hurried on to the platform himself. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth and the Argent Crusaders began forming themselves into groups for transport and prepared to follow. Zerith blinked, raising his hands against the sudden glow, as the transporter hummed and the magic activated. When he opened his eyes a few seconds later, he saw Ger'alın and the others already fighting, swords, hammers, and axes hewing away at zombies and ghouls while Ger'alın's baleful glare held the necromancers. Zerith hurried off the platform, pressing himself against the rear wall to give the fighters room to maneuver. The paladin roared in frustration, hurling the power of the Light against the Scourge, trying to clear a way into the hallway. If they remained pressed into the small transport room, they would be crushed, unable to move for fear of harming an ally. The magi were hanging back, irritation at the forced inaction clear on their faces. The press of Scourge was pushing Ger'alın and the others back into the room. The paladin gritted his teeth and raised his shield to cover his face. Closing his eyes, he poured holy energies into the floor, sanctifying the ground around him. The Scourge began twitching madly as the holy energy held them fast, preventing them from moving and maddening the necromancers who controlled them as they felt the pain from their minions' minds flooding their own. Ger'alın continued to channel the energy of the Light into the ground. Several zombies and skeletons collapsed into dust from the force of the attack. Others began running, reflex and instinct stronger than the commands of the necromancers. With a grunt and a mighty heave of his hammer, Ger'alın smashed through the last Scourge holding them in place and bolted into the hallway. The magi and the rest of the fighters followed quickly after, just in time for another transport group to arrive.

Zerith pointed the direction opposite the one Ger'alın had taken and then jogged into the corridor himself. The walkways were practically filled to bursting with Scourge. That worked both for and against the Lich King's forces. It kept the Disorder of Azeroth from using the magic users as they could not see past the crush of the melee forces against the Scourge. However, it caused several dozen zombies, ghouls, and skeletons to fall through the large opening at the base of the ziggurat. Zerith wondered idly if they would survive the crash with the swampy ground far below. He motioned to Tau're, ordering the tauren to hang back and keep an eye on the transporter room. Any Scourge who did survive and managed to make their way back would have to get through the tauren warrior and his forces. Satisfied that their rear was guarded, Zerith made his way deeper into the hallway. "Destroy that thing," he ordered, pointing to the circular platform that rose up over the opening, blocking the view around the hall. "Just break it down and then you'll be able to see around it."

Nishi, the elf Zerith had put in charge of the magi, nodded and began hurling his spells at the pylons that connected the platform to the base of the floating necropolis. The other magi followed his example. The Scourge began attacking frantically, trying to break through the front lines to reach the casters. Ger'alín grinned savagely, using their own urgency against them, forcing them back, breaking their front line to let them fall against the fighters arrayed behind him. With a heart-wrenching, jaw-clenching roar that shook the entire floating necropolis, the central platform gave way, crumbling and falling through the hole at the base to smash into the ground far below. "That's done, then," Zerith heard Nishi mutter absently as he began hurling bolts of fire, frost, and missiles drawn from pure arcane energy at the Scourge on the other side of the corridor.

"They'll know we've come to call, at least," Zerith replied, a slight grin on his lips.

"It is an improvement and it gives them something to remember us by," Nishi quipped. "If, you know, the fact that we're about to completely destroy them wasn't enough."

"Pride goes before a fall. Let's work on getting through here and finding Callie and the commander first," the priest reminded the mage. "Drakuru should be here somewhere."

Minutes ticked by as the magi picked off the Scourge packed tightly across the corridor. The fighters, led by Ger'alín, pushed them back, giving them little room to maneuver. One half of the fighters broke off, heading back the way they had come to circle around, pressing the Scourge from both sides and squeezing them like a nut caught in a vice. Slowly but surely, the Disorder of Azeroth broke through the Scourge, leaving the necromancers the only ones on the field. Ger'alín squared off with them, his anger blazing in his eyes as he bore in, his hammer shining with the light of his outrage. Spells flew and almost as soon as the fight was joined against the few necromancers, they were dead.

"I believe we have a problem now," Ger'alín muttered as he caught his breath.

"What?" Zerith asked as he quickly healed those who needed it.

"Our way up," the paladin pointed to the gaping hole in the ceiling, "is probably currently down on the ground. Let's split up and see if we can find some stairs but as the Scourge never got reinforcements, I'd say it's safe to assume that they are just as trapped as we are. Moreso, actually. We could still get back out."

The priest groaned and squeezed his eyes closed until his ears rang. Ger'alín was probably right. Opening his eyes again, he stared up at the hole in the ceiling, seeing Scourge milling about, waiting for them to make any attempt to scale the gap. "This is going to be worse than ugly."

"It usually is," Ger'alín agreed. With quick instructions, he ordered several groups to explore the outer chambers, searching for any way that might lead to the upper floor. Just as they began splitting up to begin the search, bolts of shadow, dark flame, and putrid explosions began falling among the group. "Necromancers," Ger'alín muttered sourly. "Back everyone! Don't let their spells hit you!" The others were already quickly following his lead. Ducking into the side rooms, they managed to avoid most of the spells raining down upon them. They had enough presence of mind to head for different rooms, allowing them to call out through the doorways that no way up was available. "Tau're!" Ger'alín roared, poking his head out of the doorway but pressing his body against the wall, making himself a difficult target to hit. "Ropes!"

The tauren nodded and reached into the pouch he carried with him. Other fighters began doing the same, each pulling out lengths of ropes and grappling hooks. Ger'alín was glad he'd ordered those brought on this mission. He'd thought it more probable that they would be needed to get out of the ziggurat once inside but they would work just as well to help the living forces make the ascent through the ziggurat. Pulling up his shield, he placed himself squarely in the doorway, squatting slightly so that the magi could cast around him. Missiles both magical and physical began flying through the air, many striking their targets on

the upper level. Ger'alın grunted each time a dark spell fell against his shield. The metal began to grow uncomfortably hot and the sickening feel of fel magic made him want to throw up. Little by little, the assault from the upper floor began to ebb, leaving enough of a breathing space for the Disorder of Azeroth to quickly throw the ropes, secure them, and begin climbing. Ger'alın, Tau're, and the others hurried up first, forming a barrier near the ropes that shielded them from being torn down while the others pulled themselves up. Just when about half of their forces had made their way to the upper level, the ground began rumbling. Ger'alın looked around, his mouth dropping open in stunned surprise as hulking trolls, their eyes blazing with unlife, began pounding out of the rooms to attack the forces strung out to protect the ropes.

"What in the name of all that is holy..." he said breathlessly. "Attack!"

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Callie stood on the top of the ziggurat, Drakuru and two necromancers holding her firmly in place with their magics. A bright orb hovered over the center platform flanked by four rods. The orb showed the struggle inside. Callie was cheered when she saw how easily and quickly her friends were dispatching the Scourge. When the ziggurat gave a lurch and bobbed upwards as the central platform fell, she felt as if she could have cheered.

"They are good," Drakuru conceded. "They will make fine additions to the Lich King's army. Strong in body. Strong in magic. They will be fine foot soldiers for the attack against Dalaran. Don't you agree, little traitor?"

Callie glared at him, unable to move her mouth. He nodded at one of the necromancers and she felt the foul magics holding her mute abate slightly. "They'll be the end of you. We've destroyed many Scourge foot soldiers. We've fought the Legion. Every enemy that has threatened us, we've destroyed utterly."

"Even if they win against all the Scourge inside, little traitor, they won't win against the Drakkari."

The orb flashed again and Callie could see the still-living trolls gathering their forces as if planning for an attack. "I know the Drakkari, little traitor," Drakuru said pleasantly, almost conversationally. "They don't care much about anyone besides themselves. They draw on spirits and gods that would make you fear to close your eyes. They want their empire back. They don't care anything about your Horde or your Alliance. They figure that, to prove themselves worthy of the ancient ones, they'll wipe you all out. Then, they'll have the power to fight the Scourge. It's foolish of them but they'll do it."

"It looks as if they're preparing to march against you," Callie muttered.

"I know the Drakkari," he laughed. "They won't move against me until they think the gods are on their side. See what they are putting on their spears?" he continued, pointing to the green substance some of the trolls were taking out of a cauldron and rubbing carefully on their weapons. "That's a strong sleeping poison. They found it from some of the other little traitors. Works good. The Lich King had a hard time figuring out how to work around it. But, it doesn't work against us anymore. They're going to march against you and your friends and sacrifice you all to the ancient ones. Then, they'll have the power to fight the Scourge. Or so they think," he finished, chuckling and knuckling tears of amusement out of his eyes. "I know the Drakkari. They're stupid and savage. They're like the Gurubashi of old days. They're making alliances with powers that will tear the world apart. But, they don't care about the world, little traitor. They care about the Drakkari. That's all they care about."

The orb flashed once more, showing the scene below them. The Disorder of Azeroth was now scaling ropes, pulling themselves up to the second level. Callie could see Ger'alın, his long hair flying around him as he wove in against the Scourge, his mace shining with its

own vengeful light. Zerith was directing the rest of the forces, spreading them out so that they could continue their assault unabated while the fighters following Ger'alín and Tau're continued pressing forward. She cheered when the necromancers fell, nearly choking when the Scourge captors slammed the spells back down on her that rendered her mute. Drakuru seemed pleased in spite of his losses. He crooked a finger and pointed at the rods flanking the glowing orb. They began glowing a fierce red, nearly blinding Callie with their awful glare. She felt the roof beneath her tremor slightly as if some massive weight were pounding on it. When her vision adjusted to the new lurid light, she gasped. Dozens of enormous, hulking trolls, their arms bulging with heavy muscles, their fists dragging the floor, stomped towards Drakuru. No intelligence shone in their dead eyes.

"These are dire trolls, little traitor," Drakuru said, noticing her horrified gaze. "They are the best of the best of the Drakkari. So dedicated to their tribe they were, that they built themselves beyond what any would consider possible. Fierce fighters and tough to kill," he nodded, gazing on them the same way Callie would have gazed at a well-bred horse. "They were worth the losses. With a hundred of these, I can destroy an army of thousands. They don't feel much but hunger, hatred, and battle lust. And that's when they're alive," he chuckled. "When they're dead, they feel no pain, no hunger. Nothing except the need to kill whoever they're pointed at. This is what awaits your friends. First, the ones downstairs who have made such a mess of my home. Then, the ones in Zul'Drak. But, little traitor, if these don't get your other friends out of where they're hiding, the living ones will. The Drakkari don't care anything about anyone other than themselves. For every dire troll I have at my command, the Drakkari have ten. Think your friends are going to last long against that? Let's see how long they last against these."

Waving his hand, Drakuru directed the dire trolls down into the ziggurat. The Disorder of Azeroth had just begun a sweep of the rooms, searching for a way further into the floating necropolis. In the orb, Callie saw Ger'alín and Zerith both freeze as they felt the first ground-shaking steps. The two men shared a glance that said both knew nothing good could come of this and hurriedly began gathering their forces together, looking around for the cause of the disturbance. Hours seemed to tick by as the dire trolls made their way down the stairs and into the main corridor. Ger'alín's eyes widened and he glanced around as if disbelieving what he were seeing. From four rooms, the dire trolls slunk out. Ger'alín charged the first group and was flung back, narrowly missing falling through the gaping hole in the ziggurat. Putting their backs to the wall, the Disorder of Azeroth began the fight in earnest.

Callie watched as some of the dire trolls seemed to ignore the fight, their meaty hands gripping the edge of the walkway as they threw themselves down. "For your other friends," Drakuru laughed at the stunned expression on her face. "A welcoming committee."

Zerith was watching the trolls make their way to the teleporter, a grim expression on his face. Shaking his head so that his long reddish-brown hair flew around him, he focused on the trolls who remained. Flinging the Light to heal his forces while doing his best to smite the undead trolls with its holy vengeance, he and the others began to make their way through the chaotic melee, hoping for the best. Ger'alín stood with his back to the wall, his legs nearly buckling under the strain of three of the dire trolls focusing their blows on his shield. He couldn't even move it aside long enough to get a single blow in himself. It was all he could do to defend. The others saw the paladin's predicament but could not get to him. The magi were pressed in against the melee forces, nearly squashed between them and the walls. Unable to cast their spells for fear of hitting their own allies, they watched as the trolls squeezed them in the same vice-like attack they had used against the Scourge earlier.

Ger'alín weighed his options, not liking any of them. Rage began to boil through him. He was determined not to die here but, if he had to, he was going to take as many of them with him as he could. Gritting his teeth, he drew in as much holy power as he could before he

threw his shield aside and let the Light's own power explode out around him. The three trolls were forced to take several leaping strides back, the holy storm searing their undead flesh and blinding their eyes. The necromancers near Callie grunted from the blow but quickly regathered themselves, ordering the trolls to wade back in. But, the few seconds had given the paladin the time he needed. With a jump, he slammed his hammer against the skull of one of the dire trolls, calling on the Light to aid him. His mace went through the creature's head, cracking it open like a macrabe nut. He continued to hew away until it was little more than a lump of bruised and battered flesh. Spells began to soar through the air near him as he poured holy energies into the ground, causing the other two dire trolls to move slowly, reluctantly towards him while their masters above flogged them for haste. When the first one was within range, he brought his hammer down again, slamming the creature between the shoulder and neck, his strength multiplied by divine power. The dire troll collapsed, falling heavily near the edge of the walkway. With a grunt and a kick, Ger'alın sent it hurtling through the empty space and turned his attention on the last one coming after him. It seemed to struggle against the commands it was receiving, reluctant to continue to attack one who had just killed two of its fellows and caused it considerable pain. Ger'alın stood, seemingly calm except for the expression of pure rage on his face. When Callie saw him, she thought that he resembled his wife more than ever.

Around the narrow walkway, the battle continued. The Disorder of Azeroth was managing to hold a stalemate; forcing the trolls to give ground but gaining little themselves. Ger'alın glared around, his eyes blazing with holy light as he saw the trolls continuing their relentless assault. A few of his fellows began to give way to the troll's sheer strength, collapsing, shields and weapons clattering to the ground when arms grew too tired to continue to defend against the pummeling blows. Zerith called out to the Light, shielding those who were spent as best he could, beseeching it to restore their strength and energy. The last troll continued to circle towards Ger'alın. The paladin saw it and let loose a primal scream of savage fury. Once again, the Light exploded out of him. Only this time, it filled the entire corridor, whirling around in a storm. The trolls cried out in pain as the holy energy pelted them, scraping against their flesh and burning their eyes. The troll before Ger'alın collapsed in a heap, its spirit severed from its un-natural body by the force of the attack. The others were greatly weakened, giving the Disorder of Azeroth the precious seconds it needed to regroup and renew the assault. Now, with the way cleared and their enemies no longer bearing down on them, the magi could focus on their spells, using fire, ice, and fel shadow to destroy the dire trolls. When it was over, Zerith rushed to Ger'alın's side. The paladin had collapsed, his hands splayed to keep him from pitching over on his face, gasping breaths making his body shudder as he tried to draw in air. Callie could not hear what the priest said to him but, from his expression, it had been a demand to know what in the name of the Light that had been and why he hadn't done it earlier. Ger'alın waved his hand as if to say "don't bother me right now; I'm busy staying conscious." Callie glanced over at Drakuru to see what his reaction to the decimation of his forces was.

The troll still wore a small smile but the amusement and arrogance was gone from his demeanor. He seemed to be admiring an enemy he had not expected to triumph but, who having done it, he respected. With a shake of his head, he snapped his fingers at the necromancers. "Little traitor," he muttered, "your friends have done well. But, even if they defeat me. Even if I die here, they will still lose. The Drakkari or any one of the other dangers lurking here in Northrend will tear them apart. In the end, they'll die and, if they are lucky, the Lich King will raise them to serve him."

"Unlucky, you mean," she grimaced. The necromancers had eased their hold on her, allowing her to move her limbs and mouth again.

“You’re going to serve regardless,” he muttered. Just then, the Disorder of Azeroth burst out onto the roof. Drakuru crooked his finger again and Callie could feel the necromantic magics pulling her along as the traitorous troll desired. Her body lurched forward, shuffling steps taking her towards where her friends were. Her eyes widened in shock and she saw her expression mirrored on Ger’alin’s face. With her good arm, she drew the sword she wore belted at her waist. With the other arm, she raised the blade that had replaced much of the missing flesh. She struggled against the spell, feeling it bite more deeply into her the more she fought. She tried desperately to recall everything Alayne had ever mentioned about breaking spells but her mind was filled with a frantic plea that would not let her focus. Ger’alin raised his battered shield and hunched, preparing for the blow. She could see Zerith standing nearby, his gaze settled on Drakuru and his lips moving in a prayer to disrupt the spell controlling Callie. When his eyes passed over her, she could see pity and sorrow mixed in their glowing green depths. She felt the ground freeze around her and could see one of the magi muttering an incantation. Power surged through her and she heard the ice binding her shatter as she continued to be forced towards the others. Ger’alin glanced around his shield, clearly trying to devise a way to put her out of the fight short of severely injuring her. She knew that, under normal conditions, he could wipe the floor with her and never break a sweat. However, the necromantic magics wielded by Drakuru increased her strength, heightened her senses, and gave the troll access to the knowledge she had of Ger’alin’s fighting styles.

“If you’re lucky,” Drakuru shouted, “you’ll serve as well as this little traitor has. Attack!” he ordered her, his voice echoing in her skull. She bore in, unable to keep the spell from forcing her into a deadly attack. Her sword clattered against the shield and, when Ger’alin moved it to try to shove her away, he barely had time to lift his hammer to parry the attack from her sword-arm. She felt the sword in her right hand whirl over her knuckles, her wrist twisting to bring it off the shield and back around. Ger’alin batted it away with the shield again. She felt cheered when she realized his defense had nearly torn the blade from her hand. Pain shot through her as she realized that the defense had shattered her wrist. Ordinarily, she would have lost use of her hand by that but the dark Scourge magic quickly mended the bones and she jabbed, reversing the blade and cutting into the sin’dorei’s leg. Ger’alin winced and shifted his weight to his other leg, barely dancing out of range of her next attack.

“Don’t keep defending,” she prayed, wishing she could speak the words, “just attack. Even if it kills me, don’t let me do this.” Something in her eyes must have communicated her heartfelt desire to him because she saw his expression soften, then harden with determination. Once again, he pulled the shield around but this time, he quickly snapped it forward, slamming it against her body. She felt a sickening crunch in her chest and knew that several ribs had been broken. Her jaw dropped open as the shield passed over it, breaking and dislocating the bones that held it closed. He let his momentum carry him around, flanking her. Reaching down with his hammer, he quickly snapped it upwards just beneath her hip, knocking one leg out from under her and shattering the bone so she could not stand. She gasped in pain, tears streaming down her cheeks and her body shuddering as the magical spell holding her captive was released. She let her arms fall to the ground and groaned. “I’m sorry,” she slurred out, her jaws nearly useless.

“Zerith, take care of her,” Ger’alin ordered, nodding to acknowledge her apology while his eyes sought out the one responsible for this. “You there!” he bellowed. Drakuru began cackling, his laughter tinged with hysteria. “You will pay for this,” Ger’alin roared, pointing to Callie.

“What happened to her is what is in store for any who oppose the Lich King,” Drakuru taunted. “We are creating the greatest Scourge army of any. These are just the first

of many,” he continued, summoning more of his undead dire trolls from the deep shadows around the edge of the roof. Ger’alin winced and braced himself, relieved to only see four coming towards them. After having dealt with numbers beyond that, he felt safe that they could handle four of them. “We shall sweep across Zul’Drak like the wind. The Drakkari will fall to us. You will fall to us. Give in now or be destroyed!”

Ger’alin’s legs were pumping before Drakuru had a chance to finish his threat. Smashing with his shield and his hammer, he managed to knock the first dire troll back, breaking one of its wicked tusks. Spells whistled through the air, striking the hulking, mindless beasts, slowing and draining both them and their controller, the traitor troll. Drakuru grabbed one of the four rods, using its energies to keep control over the undead dire trolls and continue the attack. If only he could force them to push the invaders closer to the edge of the roof...

Zerith noticed what Drakuru was doing and, giving care of Callie to another, jogged into the melee. Placing his hands on a second controlling rod, he forced his mind to work the magic that was neither his gift nor his birthright. He wished Alayne were there; she would have known better how to gain mastery over such magics. As it was, he could send only the simplest commands to one of the dire trolls. One broke away from its steady pursuit to wheel on Drakuru, pummeling the Scourge master. Drakuru strengthened his control over the other three, using one to pull his attacker off his back. Zerith grunted in pain as that troll began to take a beating. He wondered idly how any Scourge necromancers could stand the shared pain of the minds they enslaved. However, within a few moments, the one he had controlled was destroyed. Grinning as Drakuru laughed in mocking triumph, Zerith forced his mind onto another. Drakuru’s mirthful expression changed to one of anger as he ordered another of the three remaining dire trolls to begin attacking the one Zerith controlled. Again, the fight played out in the same manner. But now, where there had been four to fight the Disorder of Azeroth, there were only two. Releasing the rod, Zerith tried to scamper back to safety but the last troll was on him. He screamed when its fist landed on his back, knocking the wind out of him as the blow threw him to the ground. He tried to roll out of the way, to turn on his back and kick but his robes tangled around him, trapping him.

With a flash of movement, he gasped to see Callie throwing herself on the troll. She had cast aside her sword and slashed savagely with the one welded onto her stump of an arm. Again and again, she drove it into the dire troll’s bulky body. The beast began to lurch awkwardly, stumbling and staggering under the attack until, at last, the undead body could carry on no longer. It collapsed, landing with a thud near Zerith. Callie leapt off of it and her bones melted, shaky legs depositing her on the ground. She smiled a shuddering smile at the priest who was just managing to get his breath back and his legs unsnarled from his robes. In the meantime, Ger’alin and Tau’re had managed to pull down the last dire troll. The Disorder of Azeroth began fanning out, spreading themselves around the perimeter of the citadel, giving Drakuru no chance to escape. The traitorous troll glanced around wildly, seeing his last lanes of escape closing, and then took firm hold of himself. Standing up as tall as his bent posture would allow, he eyed his enemies arrogantly. “You will make fine servants for the Lich King,” he sneered. Closing his eyes and clasping his hands around an amulet, he sent out a mental call to his master.

A dread, chill wind began howling over the ziggurat. In the darkness of the night, an even darker portal formed with threatening purple flashes that burned a blinding afterimage into the eyes of any who glanced upon it. The living forces braced themselves against the wind. Ger’alin mentally prepared himself to face death, hoping only to avenge his wife and his family by bringing down the man who had tormented her and killed them. With a shocking snap that sent tremors through the group, the portal solidified and the Lich King

stepped out. Drakuru seemed to grow several inches as he puffed up with arrogance. Pointing casually around, he opened his mouth to speak.

“You have failed me, Drakuru,” the dread armored figure said, his deep voice resonating in the hearts and in the darkest parts of the souls of all who heard him. His voice was like the rustling of dead leaves in a winter wind. “Be content that your death is a quick one.”

Dark energies surrounded the traitorous troll. Drakuru began screaming in agony. Even Tau're swallowed hard, aghast at the lethal discipline the Lich King enforced on his own. Ger'alín began sliding around the edge of the ring, hoping to get a clear line of attack. He could see others doing the same while most of the Disorder of Azeroth cowered, the terror that Arthas could weave striking their hearts and chilling the hot blood of battle in their veins. Drakuru collapsed, his body burned to ash in a matter of seconds, the ash borne away on the same chill wind that had brought the Lich King among them. Ger'alín lifted his shield and planted his feet, preparing for a wild leap that would let him smash that awful tri-pointed helm and the head that carried it. The Lich King's eyes fell on him, freezing him where he stood. “As for you,” the unholy knight said, his eyes flashing with a mixture of irritation, disgust, and amusement, “I spare your lives for now. You may have potential, properly directed. Already you have thinned my ranks of the unworthy, sparing me the work of doing it myself. However, the next time we meet, you will need more to justify your continued existence.”

Turning on his heel with the same regal stride that would have been commonplace in the palace of Lordaeron, the Lich King walked back through the portal, slamming it shut behind him. Ger'alín hurled his mace to the ground, growling in frustration at himself for missing the opportunity to attack. His legs buckled and he smashed a gauntleted fist against the roof of the citadel. “Surely the Drakkari must see that their only hope of survival is to join forces with us and the Argents now!” he roared, needing desperately to redirect the rage flowing through him.

“I wouldn't count on that,” Callie said tonelessly, her eyes filled with dread as she watched the orb near where Drakuru had fallen. “They're on the attack.”

“Where?” Zerith asked, rubbing his eyes. The dark-on-dark of the portal had left him disoriented.

“South,” she said softly. “Through the ruins of Drak'Tharon.”

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Alayne sighed and stretched, trying to wake herself more fully from the brief nap she had allowed herself. Once her small contingent had set up the pike traps at the front of the tunnel and she had, using magic, helped gather the three cauldrons, she had left it to Jemuya to lift them up to the tops of the walls. The fighters Zerith had left with her had gathered wood to keep fires going atop the walls while the magi and the others carried water back from the rivers in Grizzly Hills. Alayne had wondered whether or not it would have been wiser to fill the cauldrons before lifting them but the bags under Jemuya's eyes told her that the seemingly harder method had been the better one. Now three cauldrons, filled with water the could be replenished using ice spells, sat simmering atop the walls. Long ropes gave the ground forces access to them, allowing them to be tipped over. Alayne had left Dar'ja atop the wall, tasked with only pulling the empty cauldrons back upright should they need to spill them. Jemuya she had also ordered up there, letting the other sin'dorei woman rest.

Surveying the land around her, Alayne was satisfied. She should be able to see any Scourge approached and direct the fighters to deal the most damage. Sighing with relief, she began walking back into the tunnels, thinking that she might give herself a little more rest.

Just as she made her last sweep of the area, she saw troops marching in their direction. Hiking her skirts, she hurried back and gave the signal to warn the others to prepare for an attack. She then hurried back, hoping to see if it was Ger'alın and the others who were approaching but knowing that it was too early in the evening for that hope to have much weight. She glanced back up at the watchers on the overlook, covering her eyes with her hand and trying to see if they had discerned who approached them.

"Drakkari," Ber'lon said, his voice carrying over the area. Alayne and the others relaxed their vigil, wondering why the trolls were marching on them.

"Perhaps they've come to try to re-establish a hold on their imperial grounds," Alayne muttered. "They should have sent a messenger, though. Ger'alın and Zerith told them we were going to hold this pass against the Scourge. I'll go out there and see."

"I'm coming with you," Ber'lon grunted. "Your husband would kill me if anything happened to you. He's one I don't care to cross."

Alayne gritted her teeth and nodded. It probably would be wiser for her to take a pair of fighters to remind the Drakkari that there were forces that could hold out against the Scourge. Instead, she motioned for Ber'lon to follow after her and began taking long strides to meet the coming trolls. Something in their posture spoke of a readiness for battle. She wanted to avoid any mistakes if possible. As she and Ber'lon drew closer to the trolls, her heart began to thunder against her ribs. Several of them jerked spears, pointing at the blood elves. She heard them yell to each other in their harsh, guttural language. A few peeled off the main group, coming directly to her. She could see the lust for battle burning in their eyes. "We are not Sc..." she managed to get out before she felt a sharp point stab into her shoulder. Eyes wide with horror, she looked over to see a javelin, its point sticking in her shoulder while the pole dragged down on the ground. Fierce heat began coursing through her bloodstream and her legs began to wobble. Ber'lon spun, reaching around her, and jerked the weapon out. Her vision began to turn red as she saw the troll warrior reaching for another spear. Ber'lon whirled the one that had stabbed her through his hands, hurling it at their attackers.

"I don't think they're interested in talking," he growled, reaching for his runeblade.

"I d-d-d-don't..." she gasped, her teeth chattering and clacking. Ber'lon stared at her anxiously. The front of her robes were stained with blood and it continued to pour out of the wound. Her left arm hung limply at her side. He glanced back over to the trolls marching on their position, shook his head, and let his hand fall from the hilt of his sword. Scooping her up in his arms, he began running back into the thin copse of trees to their left. Alayne trembled violently by the time he set her down and began studying the wound. The cloth and blood should have formed a hasty bandage by now, he thought, but still it flowed freely.

"Poison," he muttered sourly. "This is not good."

Alayne nodded and reached over to probe the hole in her shoulder herself. It was deep but narrow but much less severe than the arrow that Zerith had taken years ago. She thought she had cut herself worse while learning the sword. It was the un-natural heat burning the skin around the wound that was weakening her. "We can't let the others get caught unprepared," she managed to stutter.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his blue eyes glowing stubbornly.

Alayne didn't waste energy on words. Pulling herself up, she focused on the trolls marching onwards. Summoning all the energy she could muster, she hurled a huge ball of fire into the midst of the marching army, hoping more to use it as a signal than to actually thin the numbers. The columns of trolls stretched into the distance. She prayed that they could be held at the walls until the others came back. "Go," she ordered Ber'lon. "Get the others. Tell Ger'alın it will be like a hammer and anvil."

"Hammer and anvil?"

“He’ll know what I’m talking about! It was in one of those damned books on tactics! Just go!”

“He’ll kill me for leaving you here with a poisoned wound. You’re coming with me.”

“I’ll make it back to the wall,” she promised. “Someone there can help me. I’d just slow you down. Go. Don’t argue, just go!”

She waited until Ber’lon began sprinting off, keeping as far as he could from the trolls while skirting around them. She hoped he would reach the ziggurat in time and that the fighters with Ger’alin would have the energy to hurry down to the southern wall and pin the trolls between them and the wall. Summoning the last of her reserves, she began dragging herself back to the fray, praying that her attack had sent the warning she may not be able to deliver herself.

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Ber’lon groaned in frustration as he stepped onto the teleporter again. The magic powering it seemed to have failed. He could hear the sounds of battle above him. A few Scourge had fallen through the massive hole at the base of the citadel. Ber’lon shuddered whenever he glanced at the wreckage. He had just narrowly avoided it when it fell to the earth with a jarring thud. The Scourge who fell through regathered themselves quickly, heading towards the teleporter. Ber’lon let one climb on it, hiding in the shadows nearby. When the teleporter did not activate, he saw the Scourge skeleton reach for something in his belt pouch. With a roar, he ran up the platform, reaching behind him to unsheathe his runeblade. He smashed into the skeleton, knocking it to pieces. Several abominations rushed him, their entrails leaving a glistening path behind them. The death knight cut through them, severing arms and hooks, sending them flying into the distance. More and more Scourge rained out of the sky, many unable to even pull themselves back up before Ber’lon tore into them, his blade shining with an unholy light. He hurried back to the platform, searching for the remains of the skeletal warrior. Finding the pouch, he dug through it, nearly shouting for joy when he saw a crystal pendant. Searching the struts around the platform, he found the slot where it would go and shoved it in. His joy turned to frustration when the platform remained unresponsive. Going mentally over every command he could recall from his time as a Scourge slave, he tried to conjure the phrase or command that would allow him to teleport up to the ziggurat. Finally, in frustrated failure, he stormed off the platform, wondering how the others would manage to descend when the time came.

Hours seemed to pass. He wondered if Alayne had really intended for him to wait there instead of rejoining the battle at the southern pass if he failed. He started to return south several times, always pulling himself back at the last moment, phantom sounds haunting him, making him think that the others were coming down. Finally, he sat, his back against a small, dying tree, and stared up at the ziggurat. Purplish lightning streaked through the black sky above him and a frightening familiar sensation washed over him. He heard deep echoes of what sounded like a voice he knew. One that sounded like a snake rustling through dead leaves. Shivering, he wished he could travel the paths of magic up to where the Lich King must be confronting his comrades. Slamming a fist against his thigh, he stood up, storming around the platform. Moments later, it flashed with an unholy light and a pair of blue eyes glared at him contemptuously. *We will settle our score another day*, they seemed to say. The platform flashed again and Ber’lon ran over it, blinking in confusion when a wall appeared in front of him. He smacked into it with a grunt, leapt back up, and began racing through the ziggurat. “Ger’alin!” he called out. “Ger’alin, we’re being attacked! Alayne needs you! Something about a hammer and anvil!”

Ger'alın swung down a rope hanging from the second floor, landing near Ber'lon with an expression of concern mixed with confusion. "Hammer and anvil? She needs a pinning attack? The Scourge?"

"The Drakkari," Ber'lon answered. "They've attacked us. We had no warning. It began hours ago. I've been trying to reach you. I must have gotten here just after you made it up to the ziggurat. The teleporter stopped working."

Ger'alın didn't waste words. Running over the teleporter, he was transported back down. Ber'lon glanced through the hole in the floor and saw the man sprinting towards where the animals were tethered. The others were descending. When Zerith saw Ber'lon, he began jogging towards the teleporter, prompting others to follow after him, sparing no time to ask questions. Ber'lon joined them, bringing Callie up to speed. "Ride behind me," she offered when he explained that he had walked the entire distance. "He kept telling me that the Drakkari only care about the Drakkari. Why didn't I realize what he meant?" she asked.

Ber'lon shrugged, uncomfortable. He felt as if he had failed. The others had been under attack for hours now and he had not been there. The forces who had stormed the ziggurat had been at battle for long moments before he stumbled upon them. His timing had been off all around and he felt worse than useless. He feared that Ger'alın would kill him if anything had happened to Alayne and the woman had not been well when he'd left her. He wondered if she'd made it back to the wall.

"She'll have made it," Callie sighed. "She wouldn't give herself the option of failing. She's tough sometimes."

"I don't doubt her toughness," Ber'lon muttered. "I recall that she can drive herself hard. I question her wisdom, though."

"Alayne and wise don't generally belong in the same sentence," Callie replied. "I hope she's well, though. She'd better be. Ger'alın would never forgive himself...or me," she added in an undertone. "Hang on tight. It looks like we're really going to ride," she said quickly, bending low and signaling her skeletal horse to a gallop.

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Worry flooded Ger'alın's mind and panic made his heart race. He knew he had left the others with far too few defenders to hold the pass against an attack from the Drakkari. It had been chancy that they would hold it against a serious Scourge offensive but he had figured that the Scourge would be too busy fighting the main force to try to press south. That the Drakkari would do so had never entered his thoughts at all. "Why?" he wondered aloud, "why would they attack us? We're on the same side. We even asked for their help. They hate the Scourge as much as we do. We're clearing their own lands for them. We weren't going to make any claim on Zul'Drak. Why would they do this?"

"Don't ask yourself questions that don't have any rational answer," Zerith replied. "I've never trusted trolls. The Darkspear are tolerable; Thrall civilized them when he brought them into the Horde. But remember the stories of the Amani? How they had to be forced back into Zul'Aman? And how it took a dedicated army to hold them there?"

"I grew up on the same stories as you, Zerith," Ger'alın muttered. "I remember hearing what would happen to me if I ventured into troll territory. But the Drakkari have no reason to..."

"It could be bound up in the strange gods they worship. Trolls are barely civilized."

"You're not helping, you know."

"If she and Dar'ja have gotten hurt, I'm going to be much less than helpful. I'm going to be extremely angry and I may do something that would impress even her."

"They have no reason..."

“They don’t need one. Remember, I went among them to try to negotiate with them earlier. They’re savage. Let’s just focus on getting there with enough energy to deal with whatever we’re going to find.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Ger’alin said hoarsely. Leaning down until his face was almost buried in Lucky’s mane, he signaled a gallop, hoping the rest of the band could keep up. All were weary from a full day of fighting with only short breaks to rest. Still, worry spurred them on, lending them the strength of fear and the endurance of anxiety.

Within moments, the walls of Drak’Tharon Keep came into view in the distance. Ger’alin could see flames flickering along the walls and small gusts of steam floating above them. He pulled Lucky to a walk, his own long ears twitching back and forth like his warhorse’s, straining to catch any sound that would tell him what was going on. He heard nothing but peaceful silence. Glancing back, he glared at Callie, his gaze a command for her to come forward and bring Ber’lon with her. “I swear,” the death knight said when the skeletal horse pulled alongside Ger’alin, “I swear, they were coming for us when I left.”

“This is either really good or really bad,” the paladin muttered. “Prepare for an attack,” he said in a louder, carrying tone, “we’re either walking into safe fires or into another battle and we’re not sure which. Leave the animals here. Tether them loosely,” he advised. “If we can’t make it back to them, we want them to flee instead of giving our enemies more speed.” Forcing himself to wait patiently while his orders were followed, Ger’alin grunted in satisfaction when he could, at last, lead the host to the walls. Those with shield raised them over their heads and the heads of those closest to them, creating a protective barrier over most of the group. Only a few places were without cover and those gaps were filled with helms and hoods of chain mail. Marching on in an orderly fashion, the group drew near to the wall.

The signs of a terrible battle sprang out from the ground as they walked onward. Blood, cloth, and broken weapons told the tale of a struggle between two forces. The pikes raised at the entrance of the passageway were stained red and coated in gore. The soil near the wall was swampy, some of the grasses burned away by the heat of the water poured down. The grimy walls themselves bore cleaner cascades where the boiling kettles had been overturned to dump their contents. Yet, there was no sign that anyone was still there. Ger’alin’s consternation grew as he continued his investigation. Spears, arrows, their tips coated with a substance he recognized as a paralyzing poison, were strewn around the area. He whispered a caution to the others when it came to handling them. The last thing he needed was a group of fighters that had incapacitated itself. They reached the wall without any sign of impending attack and Ger’alin lowered his shield. Tugging on a rope, he felt the cauldron up top begin to give and sway. Signalling the others to move back far from the wall, he gave it a hard tug and leapt to the side. A small wave of water trickled down the wall, splashing lightly where he had been standing. He frowned in confusion. The water must have been left to boil down for hours if that’s all that remained of it. Tugging the rope again until he heard the cauldron clang against the ramparts with a ringing thud, he pulled himself up the wall. Zerith began searching the ground, looking for clues to tell him where the others had gone.

Atop the wall, Ger’alin lifted a stick of burning wood from where the cauldron had sat. Using it as a makeshift torch, he explored the overlook. He could see signs of fighting even up here. He wondered how the cauldrons had been refilled, though, if the attackers and defenders were gone.

“Ger’alin, look out!” he heard someone shout. “It’s a trap!”

As soon as the words reached him, he spun, whirling his shield and his mace around him, looking for his enemy. A javelin bounced off his shield, falling to the stone wall with a clatter. A troll rose from the shadows of the toothy crenellations, a second javelin flying from his hand as he snarled in frustration. Ger’alin took quick strides over to the troll, flinging his mace at it, sending the heavy hammer flipping end over end, when the troll began to try to

run along the wall. Jogging past the body, he reached down, jerked his weapon from the corpse, and continued on. Below him, he could hear spells being chanted and steel ringing. Instead of climbing down, he followed the wall, searching for and finding several more troll fighters hiding in the depths of the darkened wall.

“Why did you attack us?” he demanded of the last one he found. “Why?”

“For da gods,” the troll gasped, his breath nearly choked out of him by the enraged *sin’dorei*. “Dey demand sacrifice. We don’t have so many left so we came to find suitable offerin’s.”

“You’re mad,” Ger’alin muttered. “We would have given you everything back. We would have stood by you against the Scourge. We cleared them out of your territory for you and this is how you repay us?”

“We be da Drakkari,” the troll replied. “We ain’t no tame table-eaters like the Darkspear you be knowin’. Da gods are with us and we will be stronger than anyone!”

“What did you do with the others? The ones who were here keeping the Scourge from taking control of *your* empire? The ones who were protecting your lands while you were all too busy hiding in the trees and sulking?” he snarled.

“Dey going to da gods,” the troll laughed. “Dey in Gundrak now waiting to give their blood to give us power!”

Ger’alin nearly dropped the troll in amazement. He’d heard the Drakkari talk about the ancient temple to their gods. Located at the far corner of Zul’Drak, Gundrak was where they had once housed prisoners captured in battle or those of their own number who, for whatever reason, were deemed worthy or necessary to sacrifice. When Zerith had met with them weeks before, sounding them out for a future alliance, he said they talked of Gundrak as a temple long closed and forgotten, its gods left in their tribal past. The troll in his grasp began cackling at the stunned expression on the elf’s face. Ger’alin put an end to that by bringing his mace down on the troll’s nose. Flinging the incoherently babbling body off the ramparts, Ger’alin made a quick pass through the rest of the wall. Finding no others, he hurried back to a rope and scaled quickly down the wall. Zerith and Callie had cleared out most of the tunnel, reclaiming it from the Drakkari. The priest and the paladin shared a glance. “Gundrak,” Ger’alin said firmly.

“That’s all the way at the other end of the area,” Zerith muttered. “There’s no way we can make it there tonight. Too many are working past the bounds of exhaustion for us to march or ride there together and still have the energy for a fight.”

“And we know next to nothing about it,” Ger’alin sighed. “But, that’s where they are. The trolls must have attacked them, captured most of them, and taken them all to Gundrak.”

“Why, though?” Zerith wondered. “The temple was closed up ages ago. It’s an old tribal temple. They built a new worship area here in Zul’Drak when they went from being a tribe to being an empire.”

“They may consider this area tainted because of the Scourge,” Ger’alin muttered. “Or, they may be calling on old, savage gods. I think...no, I fear that they’re planning to sacrifice those we left here *en masse* to some of their brutal deities. At least, that’s what the one I found up there seemed to think before I sent him on to his own private hell.”

“Sacrifice?” Zerith squeaked, the air rushing out of his lungs. “I knew trolls could be barbaric but...sacrifice? A blood offering? I...They’ve got my wife and my sister and they’re going to...”

“Yes, and as much as I hate to admit it, we can’t do a blasted thing about it tonight,” Ger’alin grimaced. “It’s going to be all we can do to make it to the Argent Stand. Perhaps some of them can go up there and survey the situation for us, give us the chance to catch a few hours of sleep, and let us know how we can break in. I say we rest until just before dawn and then hit them hard and fast when we’re fresh.”

Zerith nodded sullenly, reluctant to concede the point. "I don't like it anymore than you do, Zerith," Ger'alın continued gently. "But, I can barely keep myself standing upright. If I thought I had the reserve, I would be storming that temple within the hour. However, if I go in now, as tired as I am, all I'm going to do is die. Besides," he sighed, "if they had to fight to capture the others – and it looks as if they did capture every last one of them – they'll be tired too. It's been too long to hope that they're still marching back and we could catch them in the open though I'm damned well going to ask the Argents to ride ahead and see if they are outside. The Drakkari will need to rest, no doubt, and will need time to prepare whatever ceremony it is they have planned. We need time to rest and to decide how we're going to go about rescuing them."

Ber'lon trotted up, his runeblade dripping blood. He stayed a safe distance away, his shoulders hunched defensively. "I searched everywhere," he reported. "No bodies. I can tell Alayne made it back to the wall, though. I found part of her cloak. What now?"

"We'll ride for Argent Stand," Zerith said. "Then, before dawn, we'll ride for Gundrak."

"Gundrak?" Ber'lon whispered, pale and looking as if he might vomit. He'd heard tales enough of the ancient troll temple and the terrible gods it venerated.

"Yes," Ger'alın confirmed, "Gundrak."

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Alayne lifted her head and felt a surge of triumph at being able to do that much. With focus, she could twitch her fingers a bit and could flex her feet. Her arms and legs would not respond to her commands but she hoped, given enough time, she would be able to meet her captors standing up instead of laying on the cold ground. Turning her head, wincing when her cheek smacked the ground, she rolled her eyes until she could see Dar'ja laying prone like she was. "Any luck?" she asked the paladin, her words slurred from the effects of the poison that kept her immobile.

"Not much," Dar'ja replied in a similar tone. "Still can't bend my knees but my shoulders will hunch a bit."

"Keep trying," the mage encouraged. "Pass it on." She heard Dar'ja flop her head over on a wobbly neck and slur the message to the next person. As Alayne continued concentrating on regaining control of her limbs, she thought back to the battle and wondered if Ber'lon had been able to find Ger'alın and the others. She had staggered back to the wall, dragging herself on hands and knees at the end. She'd cut a section from her sleeve and wadded it into a hasty bandage which, mercifully, the trolls had replaced with a real one. *Small mercy there, she thought. They just didn't want me to bleed to death before they could sacrifice me to these strange gods of theirs.*

They had almost held the trolls off. Giving up the lower passage altogether, they had tipped over the pots and pulled themselves up using the ropes and magic. Only a few had been captured by that point, Alayne almost being one of them until Dar'ja saw her predicament and had Jemuya levitate her up into the air the way she had done with the cauldrons earlier. Alayne had been set back against the wall, her head lolling against one of the tooth-like crenellations. The poison had been spreading through her, paralyzing her while leaving her completely conscious and aware of what was going on around her. Hours had passed, leaving Alayne stiffer than ever but keeping the trolls below. Whenever they tried to scale the walls, a flood of spells and boiling water met them, killing several outright and discouraging the rest. If Ger'alın and the others had shown up before nightfall, they might not have been captured at all. In the end, the trolls had managed to break through the pike walls and traps in the tunnel to make their way into Drak'Tharon Keep. Through the ruins of their

imperial city, the trolls had managed to make it to the walls before the Disorder of Azeroth realized it. The Drakkari pressed them back, finally subduing them and taking them captive. The poison coating their spears and arrows had helped tremendously, rendering most of their captives unable to resist at all at the end. Once the battle had finished, the Disorder of Azeroth was lifted, tossed over troll shoulders, and carried into the ruined city. There, witchdoctors and shaman had treated any serious wounds. Alayne had begun to wonder if the whole thing had just been some strange, nightmarish drill until she heard them talking about sacrifices. Recalling what she knew of the Amani and what she had heard of the goings-on in Zul'Gurub, she realized that they were not sparing the lives of the others out of compassion or out of a hope of ransoming them. They were to be sacrifices to whatever spirits or gods the Drakkari planned to invoke in their fight against the Scourge. Unable to struggle, she began praying that Ger'alín and the others would show up before the Drakkari could make off with their inert captives.

She had held to that prayer during the long trip through Zul'Drak. The Drakkari skirted wide of the Argent-held areas in central Zul'Drak, traveling up to the mountains that guarded the northern border. They had stopped to deposit their own wounded and some of the witchdoctors at the strange temples along the way. A hissing, spitting serpent had been tethered in front of one and an angry, growling cat in front of a second. The Drakkari would prop many of the prisoners up before the altar before they engaged in a strange victory dance. The ceremonies never lasted long and seemed to consist mostly of boasts to the spirit world. The prisoners were pointed out as "gifts" whose blood would prove the might of the Drakkari and would provide sustenance for their gods.

The Drakkari had carried them down to the depths of the temple called Gundrak, dumping their captives in a large stone room that smelled as if it had not been opened in decades. Thick dust coated the floor, nearly choking them as they were dropped unceremoniously onto it. Cobwebs Alayne thought she could have walked upon covered the eaves and corners of the room. From the muffled sounds outside the heavy wooden door, she knew they had only one jailer. The shifts changed regularly but, from the way the trolls talked to themselves through the long hours of the nightwatch, it was only one at a time. A second voice never chimed in. If the captives could just fight the poison enough to stand, they could turn the trolls' arrogance against them.

"Better to die on our feet," she thought as she strained once again to lift her shoulder, "than to have our throats cut while we can't even fight back. All for some strange gods. Damn trolls. Why can't they all be more civilized like the Darkspear?" she honed her anger, feeling its heat flood through her, praying it would give her strength. "At least they no longer eat the dead. Mir'el and Jez'ral always warned me that trolls were trouble. I'll make the Drakkari fear me. That's something they'll understand."

She felt an odd absence as she tried to will herself into a frenzy. It was as if the strength that gave her the ability to fight on when she should not have been able to, the will that gave her the determination to face desperate odds, had been taken away from her. Refusing to let herself consider failure, she continued to focus on lifting her shoulder and her hand. She could hear the others straining to push themselves up. "Let me face this on my feet," she prayed. "Don't let me be cut down without a fight."

Echoing in the darker recesses of her soul, she swore she could hear faint, mocking laughter. Focusing on that, she continued to press herself to her limits. Sweat beading on her forehead, began trickling down her cheeks. Her breath came in rapid gasps and her neck, while feeling stronger, began to ache with the strain of holding her head up. Still, for all her efforts, her shoulders remained firmly on the floor and her hand would not budge from where it lay draped over her stomach. As the first rays of light streamed in through the cracks in the ceiling, she began to feel a tide of panic threatening to overwhelm her. When the door to their

cell flew open with a booming crack of wood against stone, she bit her lips to keep from crying in frustration. Trolls filled the doorway, each walking over to gather up a captive. "Please," she begged silently, "please don't let us die like this."

Mocking laughter was again the only reply.

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Ger'alın surveyed the situation, trying to ignore the snores from Tau're. He and the tauren had been up for hours now, moving through the darkening shadows to study the temple. Most of it was underground, it seemed. Three buildings guarding a central courtyard with a raised altar and a circle of stone blocks comprised the campus. Large, looming doorways gave entrance to the southern and northern buildings. Stone statues of crudely carved snakes and rhinos guarded the entrances. Ger'alın had crept right up to the doorway of the northern building. He'd peered in, hoping that his vision would penetrate the utter darkness. He'd abandoned any plan to sneak into the building when he heard troll voices. Listening carefully, he'd been relieved to hear that the sacrifices wouldn't take place until morning. Apparently, despite their numbers, Alayne's forces had given a good account of themselves, taking a few dozen trolls down before the paralyzing poison had rendered them unable to fight at all. The sin'dorei stumped back to where the tauren sat propped up against a tree and hidden by the underbrush. "No need to let the entire empire know we're here, old cow," he grumped as he shook the other man awake.

"Did you get any rest?" Tau're muttered. "You were the one who insisted on everyone getting a few hours of sleep."

"I got plenty of sleep back at Argent Stand."

"I am going to tell Alayne on you."

"You do that."

"I will. Any idea how we're going to break in there?"

"Go through the main door and kill anything that moves."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Give me a week and enough information and I can be more creative."

"I'm not complaining."

"Good. I'm too tired to drub you properly if you were. The others should be here shortly. If I'm guessing right, the whole temple is based on circles." Tau're raised an eyebrow. "It's the most common theme in the carvings and in the courtyard. Circles. The underground complex probably has halls running from both buildings that meet in a main chamber."

"What makes you think that?"

"I have listened," he growled, "to my wife yammer on and on about more ancient civilizations, their practices, and their philosophies than any man in his right mind would. The Drakkari fit the description. If there are a lot of circles in their carvings, then they have a fetish for them and you can bet it's incorporated in everything they do."

"I see."

"I'm going to tell my wife on you."

"No no," Tau're said placatingly, "no need for that."

"Good. Now, I want to sit and think on this a bit. If my eyes happen to shut while I'm thinking, do me a favor and shake me to speed up the thinking process."

Tau're nodded and grinned while Ger'alın sat, crossing his ankles with his legs stuck out straight in front of him, and studied the ground. His head nodded a few times and once he did begin to snore in earnest. However, the sin'dorei always managed to wake himself before Tau're could shake him. He muttered to himself in Thalassian, counting out the numbers he

had, dividing them into several groups, thinking over what little he could piece together of what the temple might look like, and wishing that Alayne were with him. When he heard the soft padding of many feet behind him, he pushed himself up off the ground, ran a gauntleted hand over his face, tugged at his beard to pull himself further into wakefulness, and turned to greet the arrivals.

The numbers he expected were doubled by the Argents and the Ebons. He grinned in pure relief. With this many, it mattered little that he knew nothing about the terrain. They should be able to overwhelm the entire tribe with sheer numbers. Zerith nodded, a sparkle in his own eye, and jerked his head back towards the group. "Sometimes, if you write it in three-foot tall letters and shove it under their noses, they can see it. Besides, General Fordring sent a message that he wants the Argent Stand stripped and every hand sent to him if they can spare it from the Scourge threat. Big things are happening in Icecrown and he's planning to build a fortress there to house the Argent Crusade's operations."

"No wonder they want Zul'Drak taken care of so quickly, then," Ger'alın muttered. "We'll do the best we can but what are we getting out of the deal?"

"Free passage and up to date information from Icecrown."

"Suits me fine. Let's split into two groups. I'll lead the north group and you take the south? If Alayne's lectures were right, we should meet in the middle somewhere."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," the priest admitted. "However, I think we should hang back a bit. You can't see it from here, but as we were cresting the ridge back there, we could see movement just inside the doorways. It looks as if they were carrying something that they plan to bring outside into the courtyard. I could see a few of them gesturing that way when the light flashed off their armor."

Ger'alın took firm hold of his patience and leaned against the tree, letting his head slump backwards and looking down his nose towards the buildings. Just as Zerith had pointed out, there was activity in the large dark doorways. Watching, waiting, they nodded thoughtfully when the trolls began dragging a dozen of the captives out and tying them to the stone pillars surrounding the courtyard's perimeter. Counting them, Zerith growled when neither Dar'ja nor Alayne was found in their midst. "I thought they were going to make it easy for us," the priest muttered. "All they've done is split them into two groups at the very least."

"You take care of the ones out here. I'll take a few men with me inside. Once we begin, they're going to know that a rescue party has arrived. I just hope they don't decide to kill the other captives. I might get angry if they do that," the paladin said evenly, his deep, puffing breaths and the way his eyes seemed to glaze with anger belying the seeming calmness of his tone. "Tau're with me! Nishi too. Andeo and Aichylos as well. The rest of you, with Zerith. Let's go. Zerith," he said in an undertone, "when you get the courtyard cleared up, go through the southern building."

The priest nodded and, separating themselves carefully, the group surged forward, their own bonechilling battlecries shattering the silence of an otherwise peaceful morning. The trolls in the courtyard gaped in surprise for a few seconds before they threw the captives aside and began sprinting for the attackers. Spears with dangling ceremonial feathers flew from their hands, striking shields and armor and clattering harmlessly to the ground. Ger'alın caught one that lodged itself in his shoulder plates and snapped it in half, flinging both halves back at the trolls. Bringing his shield down and around, he smashed into the first one he reached, hearing its ribs creak with a satisfying crack as it flew through the air to land a few feet away.

Nodding to Zerith, Ger'alın's group veered off, running up the shallow stairs of the courtyard and fighting their way into the building. Soon, they were lost inside the thick shadows of the looming corridors. Zerith turned his attention away from them and back to the

fighting in the courtyard. He had retained most of the fighters and magi and, while he wished Ger'alın had taken more, he knew he would need every one of them to beat back the trolls. While they fought in the center of the courtyard, more Drakkari pouring out of the southern building to reinforce their brothers, Zerith and a few others moved quickly around the courtyard's northern side, cutting the bonds holding the captives upright against the stone pillars. They collapsed like boneless rag-dolls when their bonds were cut and the priest wished that the animals were closer so he could arrange for a swift transport. As it was, the best he could do was get them out of the hands of the trolls and hope to stage a fighting retreat once Ger'alın returned with the half-dozen others from inside the temple.

The trolls seemed to sense the priest's thoughts. Ignoring the fighters, they wheeled, flanking them quickly and moving towards the prostrate captives and the healers working to try to counteract the poison. Zerith felt shields spring up around them, creations of Light and magic. The trolls ran into them, bouncing back with a crackling thud. The priest wasted no time feeling relieved. The witchdoctors and troll magi would be able to work through the shields quickly enough. Instead, he joined the other healers in trying to find a way to counteract the toxin that rendered the captives immobile. Outside the shield, he could hear the sounds of battle as the fighters used the shield to pin the trolls, hacking, slashing, and throwing spells wildly. He tried to pay at least half a mind to the fighting, knowing that his skills in healing would be needed there as well. When the trolls broke through the line of fighters and began sprinting towards the altar, Zerith feared that all was finished. Instead, the trolls pulled out their daggers as one and thrust them into their own chests. The shields protecting the priest and the others fell away and the ground began rumbling ominously. Zerith wondered what was in store for them as a large, ghostly figure began to coalesce in the center of the courtyard.

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Impatient to find the others, Ger'alın leapt off the ramp and plunged into the water. The others followed behind him, helping to pull the soaking sin'dorei out of the water. Taking only a moment to glance at the room in front of him, he rushed in, shield slinging around in front of him and his hammer whirling through his hand. Leaping down the stairs, he spun around, looking for any other occupants in the circular chamber.

A lone troll stood at the rounded edge of the ovular stairs, a stone altar rising up behind him. Ger'alın rushed up the stairs when he saw legs hanging off the altar. The troll brushed him aside with a wave of his hand, nearly sending Ger'alın smashing into the wall with the strength of the spell. Feeling his teeth rattle, Ger'alın quickly righted himself.

"Drakkari gonna kill anyone who trespass on these lands!" the troll snarled. With a sickening shimmer, he began to transform, the skin undulating, becoming scale-like, and the troll's long nose and mouth joining into a flattened muzzle. Ger'alın recoiled as the troll transformed into a serpentine creature, a mockery of both troll and snake. Deep-set eyes opened, vertical pupils regarding the others from irises that glowed an eerie red. Ger'alın tried to look around the horror facing him to see who lay on the altar. He heard a low groaning become a fretful wail as the woman laying their tensed while the vile animalistic troll raised his arms, a noxious green glow surrounding him and his victim. "Minions of the scale, heed my call!" he commanded in slithering, hissing tones. A forked tongue licked between pointed teeth as hundreds of snakes began streaming into the room from the swampy waters of the entrance and a room opposite it. Nishi began to summon the cooler currents of air to him, whirling and whipping them into a frenzied icestorm. Hail and sharp chips of ice cut through the slithering snakes. The chill froze the blood in their veins, rendering the snakes as paralyzed as the captives were. A grim satisfaction painted the mage's face as he poured

his energies into the spell. The snake-troll watched, uncertainty and the beginnings of fear on his scaly face. Ger'alın did not give him a chance to consider his options. With sure, quick strides, the paladin ran to guardian of the altar and brought his mace down on his head. Tau're was close behind, his twin axes cutting through the Drakkari's body, sending gobbets of flesh and blood spraying through the air. The troll gasped, his scaly visage twisting back to normal as the strange magic left him with his life's blood. Glancing back at the victim on the altar, Ger'alın scooped her up, recognizing Jemuya. Handing her over to Nishi, he motioned for the others to follow him deeper into the underground temple.

The next room was empty, its serpents having been summoned to fight them earlier by the guardian of the first altar. Pressing on past the room filled with water and piles of bones, the fighters paused when they felt the entire complex shake. Loose mortar and stone fell from the ceiling, raining lightly down on them and coating them with a thin cover of dust. Ger'alın shrugged, torn. Part of him wanted to go back up and see what was making the ground shiver like that. Part of him needed to press onwards, desperate to find and free the others. Praying that Zerith could take care of whatever was happening above them, the paladin and the others continued on, passing through an empty chamber and into another altar room. This time, the troll guarding it stood ready for them. Throwing his head back and laughing, the troll began to transform like the first one had. Ger'alın winced as fur sprang out over the troll's body. His already long tusks grew even more and his hands became massive paws, flat like those belonging to an elephant. Within seconds, instead of a troll, a mammoth stood ready, pawing the ground and screaming through its long trunk.

"We fought back da Scourge. What chance you thinking you got?" the troll's voice demanded from inside the mammoth.

"We have destroyed the Scourge in Zul'Drak," Ger'alın replied dryly. "I'm thinking we have a very good chance against you."

Nishi set Jemuya down on the ground and began preparing his spells while the paladin crept down into the arena, keeping close enough so that the mammoth could not charge but far enough that he could not grab hold with his trunk. The mammoth reared, kicking with its front legs, landing with an unbalancing thud. Ger'alın managed to absorb the shock of the ground shaking a few times but eventually, he fell, the ground beneath him too unstable for him to stay on his feet. That was when the mammoth, seeing his attacker helpless, charged.

From the side of the room, Nishi hurled fire, flinging it viciously into the mammoth's thick fur. Tau're jumped down behind the creature, cutting with his blades, searching for the muscles that let it move its legs. Ger'alın rolled out of the way, feeling one of the massive tusks brush hard against him. Wincing, he forced himself up to his feet, reaching out a gauntleted hand to grab the mammoth's ear as he pulled himself up. The mammoth reared his head, trying to dislodge the paladin's grasp. Twisting his head violently, he tried to shake the sin'dorei the way a dog would shake a rat. Ger'alın used the creature's momentum to pull himself on its back where he could hammer away at its skull. When the panicked troll-mammoth tried to snake its trunk back to pull the man down and smash him against the ground, Aichlyos was there, using the creature's distraction to bring his deathly chill two-handed runeblade down, severing the trunk. Wild cries were wrested from the mammoth as the assault pressed on. When Ger'alın felt the back legs give way, he leapt from the creature's back. With a quick gesture, Aichlyos slit the creature's throat, causing the polymorphic magic to fail and fade, leaving just the corpse of a battered troll laying, eyes staring sightlessly on the floor.

"If our gods can die," the troll's voice gasped with a sickening gurgle, "then so can we..."

"Gods?" Ger'alın muttered.

“The Drakkari worship the primal spirits. It was said, among those of us who lived in Northrend, that the trolls could infuse themselves with the spirits of their gods and transform into animals,” Aichlyos offered. “I see now that it is true.”

“If they could do this, why didn’t they do it before?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Because they have to make sacrifices,” a weak voice came from the altar. “These gods of theirs demand blood in return for the ‘gifts’ they give the Drakkari.”

“Dar’ja!” Ger’alin said, sounding both relieved and disappointed at the same time.

“Ger’alin, I’ll take back every bad thing I’ve said about you if you’ll get me out of here,” she muttered.

“Where are the others?”

“They took some to the amphitheater and the rest up to the courtyard.”

“Alayne?”

“I’m not sure.”

Ger’alin motioned for Andeo to pick up Dar’ja. Nishi had scooped Jemuya back into his arms and they looked at the paladin expectantly. Ger’alin walked past the altar and stared down into the water-filled room that could be seen from both this room and the previous sanctum. In the middle of the room was a floating island of stone with a stairwell. Craning his neck to see as far around as he could, Ger’alin decided that must be where the amphitheater was. “Take them up to the others and, if Zerith can spare any, send them back. Tell them to just jump past the altar,” he said to Nishi and Andeo. “If Zerith can’t spare anyone, stay up there with him. If need be, fight your way back to the animals and get the captives out of here until this poison wears off.” The two men nodded reluctantly and loped off on orders. Ger’alin gestured for Aichlyos and Tau’re to follow him, gripped the stone railing, and leapt over.

The wall was smooth with few places that could be used as handholds or to gain footing. Thankful now more than ever for the protection his gauntlets gave him, Ger’alin and the others slipped and slid down the wall, landing heavily in a pile of discarded animal and, gulping as he studied them more closely, humanoid bones. With quick strokes, they swam across the shallow pool to the island, kicking hard at the flesh-eating fish who nipped their legs and ankles. Once there, Ger’alin hoisted himself out of the water. The other two pulled themselves up onto the cold stone floor, resting only to let the paladin pour healing energies to seal the wounds. Just as they were beginning to make their way up the island, the floating structure began to tremble violently. Water sloshed up over the edges, making the smooth pavement slick. Pushing his hair out of his face, Ger’alin stared at the cause of the terrors. Two rhinos stood at the top of the stairs, their Drakkari masters causing them to buck and rear. Cracks were already beginning to form in the island and Ger’alin knew they did not have much time left before the structure fractured and sank into the water. While it was not deep, it was filled with biting fish who had a definite taste for flesh. Grabbing the other two by their biceps, Ger’alin ran, propelling them behind him, and headed for the stairs.

One of the rhinos charged just as the paladin and the others reached the base of the stairwell. Throwing them aside, Ger’alin rolled away, laughing when the rhino and his rider plunged through a crack of their own making. The rhino’s cries of pain were loud as the fish gnawed at it while the troll rider tried to cut himself free of the tangling stirrups and reins that held him on to his mount. Satisfied that they were no longer a threat and that the other one would not try the same stunt, Ger’alin hurried to his feet and ran up the stairs, Tau’re and Aichlyos just behind him.

The rider sawed at the reins and the rhino swung his massive head, his horn scrapping through the air mere inches from Ger’alin’s abdomen. Dancing backwards, the paladin studied the situation while the other two men flanked the rhino, determined not to let him get

range to charge or gore in with his deadly horn. The rider atop his back reached behind him and began throwing spears which the fighters dodged easily, the troll's aim made difficult by the motion of the creature beneath him. When next the rhino swung his massive head, Ger'alın's hammer met its horn with a resounding "crack!" that shattered the tusk. The rhino shook his head as if to clear it, confused as to what manner of creature could have broken its most powerful offensive weapon. With the rhino slightly panicked, Tau're and Aichlyos moved in quickly, hacking with swords and axes at the creature's shaggy underbelly. The rhino bellowed in pain, its knees buckling. This time, the rider was quicker to escape his saddle, rolling lightly on the ground as he searched for a weapon to use. With a heave, Tau're threw his axe, whirling end over end, across the room where it buried itself in the troll's chest. The Drakkari stared down at it in horror as the film of death began covering his eyes.

Mocking laughter rang out from the shadows of the back of the room. "Good one," the laughter congratulated. "But now, I'm gonna spill your guts, mon! Ain't gonna be nothin' left after this. If you wanna see power, I'm gonna show you power!"

Prepared for the horror of watching a transformation, Ger'alın and the others watched as a lone Drakkari stepped out of the shadows of the back of the room, his eyes glowing red and his body already in the process of changing shape. A massive horn, shining like steel, sprouted from his nose as he dropped on all fours, a shaggy mane covering his stretching and undulating body. By the time the transformation was complete, the room was shaking violently as the massive rhino, three times the size of a normal specimen, began stomping towards the three men.

At first, it was all he could do to keep out of range of the massive horn. Ger'alın ran, careful to never turn his back on the creature, dodging, weaving, and twisting to keep from being gored. Whenever he could, he swung out with hammer and shield, smacking the creature on its sensitive snout. Meanwhile, Tau're and Aichlyos kept trying to flank and surround the creature, trying to use the same tactic that had brought down its kindred earlier. However, the troll-rhino was wiler than his savage cousin. Whenever one of the fighters closed with him, he whirled, turning his attention to them and chasing them. With legs longer than any other rhino in existence, it was all the other two could do to keep up with the creature, let alone draw close enough quickly enough to hamstring or bleed it. Ger'alın's breath was coming in short, sharp gasps that sent pain blazing through his side. His legs felt leaden and he was reminded forcefully of how little rest he had allowed himself. Yet, he forced himself to continue on, doing his best to harry the creature, hoping that it would eventually slow enough for them to attack.

The creature that had been a troll began to grow bored with his attackers. If he could get them to the altar, he could slaughter them and the captives. The gods would then reward him with strength enough to destroy the Scourge utterly. He could hear the words of his god floating through his mind. Turning a last time, feigning a tiredness he could not feel, he drew them back towards the back of the room, circling and wheeling, stomping and snorting while he waited for the fools to try to move in close.

Ger'alın noted the sudden change in the creature's tactics and wondered at them. Just seconds before, it had seemed as if the rhino would go on forever, toying with them, keeping them just out of reach. Now, it seemed it was pulling them back. Using the opportunity the rhino's change in tactics gave him, he reached out and hurled holy power at it, begging the Light to become a hammer of divinity to strike the creature down. Golden light crackled around the rhino and it bellowed in pain just as it reached the end of the room. The flash illuminated the area and, seeing his wife and several others laying prone in front of an altar, Ger'alın felt a surge of energy course through him. The rhino continued to bellow, transforming back into the troll from earlier.

“You all gonna die!” the troll shrieked as the animalistic strength ebbed from his shrinking body. “Da gods demand your blood!”

“Then come and get it,” Ger’alin taunted tiredly, jogging to put himself between the troll and the others. Tau’re and Aichlyos moved just as quickly, surrounding the troll. The Drakkari screamed in frustration as he tried and failed to resummon the animal spirit that let him use its strength. Above him, he could feel the primal creature he drew upon crashing through the open courtyard on a rampage. Why had the others not chained it as he had ordered? Surely if it were chained, if they were strong enough to subdue one of their own tribal spirits, the gods would grant them strength enough to repel these soft invaders?

“A test,” the Drakkari grunted. Pulling on the dark energy his god had taught him, he hurled it at the three trying to flank him. Aichlyos and Tau’re gripped their heads, sinking to the ground in terror and confusion as waves of terror washed over them. Panic swelled in their hearts and it was only because they were too frightened to move that they did not run off, screaming in pure fear. Even those laying prone on the altar felt the fear lapping over them though they were unable to do anything other than moan softly. Ger’alin stared at the others in confusion, nodding when he realized what was going on. Some dark spell had reached them that could not touch him. Rushing in quickly while the troll was savoring his triumph, he brought his mace down hard. The troll dropped to the floor with a liquid thud and the others were released from the spell immediately. Still, it took them long moments before the panic had passed and their hearts had calmed. Ger’alin examined the captives, relieved to see that, while they bore many wounds, none were grievous. He bound the wounds quickly, wishing he had been there in time to prevent the deep cuts from being inflicted at all. With time, they would heal.

“Gather them up,” he ordered. “Let’s go up and see what’s keeping Zerith.”

“Ger’alin,” Alayne said weakly.

“Hush,” he whispered softly. “It’s over. You’re safe.”

“No,” she replied, “it...I...they’re going to kill all of us. The madness will infect everything...they’re terrible...”

“We’ve killed those who hurt you,” he said soothingly. “The Drakkari won’t threaten anyone else ever again.”

“Not the Drakkari,” she said woozily, her voice fuzzed with lack of sleep and the paralysis that still gripped her. “Worse. Much worse.”

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By the time Ger’alin and the others made it out of the underground temple with the rest of the captives, Zerith and the others almost had the rampaging rhino under control. Using the long tethers that the trolls had left attached to the poles they tied the captives to, they were able to rope enough of them around the creature’s horn and, securing the ends around those same poles, force the creature to slow. With it no longer running wild, the fighters and magi were able to focus their spells and attacks on it until, soon, it was another corpse like those of the trolls who served the strange savage spirit.

Zerith still wondered at their mass suicide. The creature had not appeared until their blood ran freely down the well before the altar. Then, several times, it had seemed to phase in and out, disappearing almost completely and becoming ethereal. When Ger’alin recounted the way that the trolls in the temple had changed forms, first into a snake and then into a mammoth, Zerith wondered if other places had been arranged and if, upon returning to Argent Stand, they would hear tales of those presumed missing found dead, their blood paying the price that allowed the trolls to transform into the spirits they venerated.

"I wish I knew more about their strange faith," the priest muttered. "Not that the ones with us have been very forthcoming." Mixed in with myths and legends about the Amani and the Gurubashi empires, the Darkspear told of attempts to summon gods using the powers of the tribal totemic spirits and the blood of sacrificial victims. It sounded like nonsense to him but perhaps Alayne, when she awoke and recovered, would be able to make sense of it. As he rode, careful to keep El'a's stride gentle, he wondered at the folly of the day's events. "Small wonder the Lich King and the Scourge were able to conquer Northrend so easily. It's almost as if something in the very air or soil turns those who should have a common cause against each other. First Garrosh and the Alliance. Now the Drakkari and us. Who will be next? The Argent Crusade? The Knights of the Ebon Blade? The Kirin Tor? Will any of us remain united and remember that the Scourge is the true enemy, not other living creatures like ourselves?"

"I hope they will learn," Dar'ja said thickly, sleep threatening to wash over her. "Otherwise, we might as well pack up and return to Outland. I'm as ready to fight the good fight as you are, sweetheart, but if we're going to be left to face the Scourge alone, it would be hard enough. If we have everyone waiting to plant their daggers in our backs while we fight on, it will be impossible."

"Maybe we should just give up," the priest sighed. "We could quite easily return to Shattrath, to Nagrand, to where ever those who remember that the enemy is those who would destroy us utterly hide."

"And maybe we should just slit our own throats while we're at it because, in the long run, we're all dead," Ger'alın snorted as he pulled up alongside the priest. "Feeling better, Dar'ja?"

"So concerned," she teased. "If you keep this up, I might start to think we're friends."

"I'll always find enough compassion to worry about one of our healers," Ger'alın grumped, playing along. "Pardon me for eavesdropping, but I couldn't help but overhear you two sounding a little on the despairing side."

"It's true," Zerith sighed. "The more I think about the battles we have ahead of us and the small wars that seem to spring up on every side, the more I wonder if it's worth risking our lives for it all."

"That I can understand," Ger'alın said, exhaling loudly and widening his eyes. "But, if we don't do it, who will?" Zerith shrugged, acknowledging the point. "Nothing would please me more than for all of us to return to our home in Nagrand and leave this whole mess to the armies of the Alliance and the Horde. We've fought too many of their battles for them. But, they're too busy hating each other to see the truth and if we wait until they've either seen it or, more likely, killed each other, that just gives the Lich King and the Scourge more time to grow stronger and more bodies to raise to their command."

"There is worse than the Scourge," Alayne said sleepily, her voice muffled by Ger'alın's chest. "There is something worse. Something in the air or the soil...it's out to kill us all..."

"That's what I was thinking," Zerith said ironically. Ger'alın raised an eyebrow at the priest and shook his own head.

"She's been babbling, raving all morning," the paladin explained, pitching his voice low and praying Alayne couldn't overhear him.

"I'm not raving," she said irritably. "The Drakkari were driven by something...I thought...it felt like what we saw in Ahn'Kahet. It was awful. The madness...I could feel it trying to press against my mind, seep into my soul...I was thankful when they cut me. The pain...I could focus on that instead."

"What on earth..." Ger'alın swore.

“Something lurks deep within this land,” Alayne continued. “Something that hates everyone. I could feel it. It laughed at me. It hated me and I hated it and my hatred made it stronger.”

“The Lich King?”

“Worse than that. The Scourge seeks only the death of every living creature...”

“Oh, only that,” Ger’alin quipped dryly.

“This wants the entire world to not be there,” she finished. “It hates this creation, the order. It’s chaotic.”

“Any clue what ‘it’ is?” Zerith asked, sounding concerned.

“I’ve studied demons,” she answered. “I’ve studied creatures of magic foul and fair. I’ve read history books that some historians had forgotten. I’ve listened to the words of night elves, tauren, of anyone who would know anything about the past. I’ve spoken with dragons but...I have no idea what this is other than that it’s worse than the Scourge and out to destroy us all.”

They continued on in thoughtful silence. Something worse than the Scourge? Zerith shuddered. He hoped, for all their sakes, that his sister was just shaken and overreacting. Thinking back to the last time she’d had a premonition like this, however, he realized that she could very well be right. All that was left was to determine the proper course to take and pray that disaster would not fall on them all.