

“A ziggurat?” Ger’alin said, sounding surprised. “I suppose if we wanted to use it to penetrate enemy lines, it could come in useful. However, it’s not as if you can just nip over to the carpenter’s and have one built.”

“There are several already here,” Ber’lon pointed out. “You’ve just destroyed one yourselves.”

“Yes,” the paladin said, dragging the word out, “that tends to happen when you have to fight a battle inside of them.”

“It wouldn’t happen to the one I’m thinking of,” Ber’lon grinned. “You could house entire armies in it and let them kill each other from now until the end of days and that structure would weather it none the worse for wear. It would be a mobile base of operations, accessible only by those you wished to grant access to. Well-fortified, it would withstand direct assault from anything short of an Aspect. With our aid, you would have complete control over the magics that keep it floating and flying.”

“I suppose it’s not a completely insane idea. Especially considering that it’s not coming from Alayne. She and Callie are our experts in that department. Would the Knights of the Ebon Blade agree to aid us in controlling it once we had it in our possession?”

“Morgaine has already vowed that he would send a detachment under your command to maintain the ziggurat if you can capture it. His only condition was that you allow any of our brethren who need safe haven access to it. Not only that, Fordring has promised to do his best to convince the Alliance to treat it as a neutral area in return for a promise that you will not let Hellscream use it as a base to attack their settlements.”

“Is Garrosh still causing problems?”

“Unfortunately, yes. He’s sending every spare fighter he gets to Wintergrasp. There’s a pitched battle for control of that area. The snow outside of the titan fortress there is stained red with the blood of many peoples. Morgaine thinks Thrall is insane because he hasn’t brought Garrosh to heel.”

“Thrall is struggling to convince the rest of the Horde that the Alliance is not the true enemy. Ever since the battle for Undercity, the Alliance has been attacking Horde settlements throughout the world. Far too many are coming to think like Garrosh. They believe that if they could conquer and subdue the Alliance, they would then have plenty of time to dedicate to eradicating the Scourge. After all, the threat that lives the next mountain over looms much larger than one that is a good sea away. Short-sighted fools, the lot of them,” Ger’alin grimaced. Ber’lon nodded sadly in agreement. “Still, if we could take Naxxramas without destroying it...”

“Believe me, you’d be hardpressed to destroy it,” Ber’lon laughed. “I remember being stationed there for a short time. It’s the most heavily-fortified Scourge bastion in existence outside of Icecrown Citadel. And, Kel’Thuzad is paranoid beyond belief. In order to access the inner sanctum, you have to activate switches in each of the four wings, not to mention get past his pet dragon, Sapphiron. The switches are guarded by high-ranking Scourge. Failure to provide the proper passcodes – which change weekly – results in an instant and painful death,” the man shuddered. “But, that just makes it more useful to us when we capture it.”

“When we capture it,” Ger’alin repeated. “You say that as if it’s going to be easy. We’ll need to return to Dalaran and gather in what strength we can from there. We’ll have to fight our way back through Scarlets and Alliance holdings to even access the thing. We’ll have to pray that our dragons are not attacked or killed while we’re flying our troops into the ziggurat or that we get lucky and manage to find a safer way in there. And, once we’re there, we have to clear the entire thing out, praying that your paranoid Kel’Thuzad hasn’t left any nasty magical traps to kill us all. Sounds fun,” he shrugged. “Sounds exactly like something Alayne would come up with.”

“How is she doing?”

“Better. A few days’ of rest have really helped her. She can throw things at me now and hit me seven times out of ten. She still has trouble with casting many spells, though. It tires her a lot more than it used to. If I were to agree to this nearly insane plan of yours, you wouldn’t be able to rely on her to fling fire and brimstone left, right, and center for hours on end,” he said pointedly. “She’s still recovering from whatever she did that scared the daylights out of Mir’el, not to mention the poison from the trolls. I swear, we live for centuries but I’ve seen her age decades in the past few weeks,” Ger’alin growled, slamming a fist against the table. “If this plan of yours depends on her wearing herself out, consider it out of the question.”

“You are not leaving me out of this entirely, Ger’alin Sunrage,” Alayne sputtered angrily. Ger’alin whirled around, his hair flying out behind him and his eyes wide with surprise.

“How much did you overhear while you were eavesdropping?” he growled.

“Enough,” she said evenly. Ger’alin growled deep in his throat, knowing that could mean anything from ‘one sentence’ to ‘the entire conversation.’ “I will not stay behind again. That’s no guarantee that I’ll be safe,” she pointed out in her most reasonable tone.

“You should still be in bed. Zerith is going to chain you to the tent pole if you don’t stop ignoring his orders to rest,” he said, trying to change the subject. Alayne rolled her eyes at him and sat down in one of the chairs around the table. She glanced at the map, trying to ascertain what they had been planning before her husband went off on his diatribe about her condition. It was true that she was more tired and less able to wield magic of late but she had *not* aged decades. She just needed to get a little more rest to clear up the dark bruises under her eyes. “You should still be in bed,” Ger’alin repeated stubbornly.

“I’m sick of laying around doing nothing,” she muttered, wishing she didn’t sound so sulky. “I’ll go back to bed in a bit. Let me help out with something, Ger’alin. Please,” she pleaded.

Ger’alin stared at her, his expression blank but his nostrils flaring to betray his worry. Without a word, he walked over to the table next to her. She winced, fearing that he was about to pick her up and carry her bodily back to bed. Ber’lon averted his eyes, feeling awkward to be witnessing a marital disagreement. Instead of bending down to pick her up, Ger’alin leaned over the table, spun the map to face her, and pointed.

“Naxxramas,” he said. She nodded, recognizing the area. “Ber’lon reckons we can take control of it from Kel’Thuzad.”

“Take control of it?” she blurted out, eyes wide with shock.

“Indeed. The Knights of the Ebon Blade have several among their number who are familiar with controlling a ziggurat. It would give us a mobile and secure base of operations. We would take it and reposition it here,” he said, unrolling a map of the Storm Peaks. He pointed to a remote location in the far northern part of the region. “The mountain passes are too treacherous for anyone to climb up them. The wind currents are unstable and unpredictable, making an aerial assault nearly impossible. In a ziggurat, we’d be virtually untouchable there.”

“But take control of Naxxramas?” she shuddered. “Kel’Thuzad is no pushover. He’s powerful and he has the favor of Arthas. The Lich King would send his strongest soldiers to help the necromancer. He feels an odd...loyalty to Kel’Thuzad. Strange, that, because Arthas is the one who killed Kel’Thuzad all those years ago.”

“Do you think it could be done?” her husband asked. “What do you think we would need to do to manage such a feat.”

“In theory,” she speculated, leaning back in the chair and staring into space, “in theory, it’s possible. Ber’lon, I remember you going to Naxxramas back when...do you know anything about the security measures there?”

“It houses the Four, Thaddius, Heigan, Noth, and your favorite,” he grinned, “Patchwerk. Not to mention the mindless beasts who are enslaved by Kel’Thuzad himself. Sapphiron is there as well.”

“Patchwerk,” she muttered. “I wonder if he’ll remember the death knight who once sewed his hook back on after other hacked it off because they thought it would be funny to make mock of the abomination,” she added, staring hard at Ber’lon.

“He kept hitting me with the damned thing when I was dueling the others. He deserved it,” the death knight replied. “Though, if I knew then what I know now...”

“If we had been able to see through the lies poisoning us then, we wouldn’t be here at all,” she finished for him. “It’s enough that we did see through them in the end. And, from what I hear, more and more are breaking free of the Lich King’s control each day.”

“That’s true,” Ber’lon sighed, “but will it be enough?”

“Every creature has a weakness. Even Thaddius,” she shivered. “And, the bigger they are, the harder they fall. Ger’alin,” she said briskly, turning her face to meet his gaze. He continued to wear a bland expression, his eyes cool and business-like. “I will need you to gather whatever information you can on the creatures in Naxxramas from the Knights of the Ebon Blade. If any of the new recruits to their banner can provide insight, have them write it up in a report for me. I will stay in bed,” she added, struggling not to roll her eyes at the satisfaction she saw in his eyes, “and read them. With enough information, I can help you plan a campaign against Naxxramas. Of course,” she continued, “you realize that defeating the guardians is the easy part? Kel’Thuzad...only Arthas ever beat him and that was only because it was part of the ultimate plan of the Lich King at that time.”

“I will see that you have all the information your heart desires,” he said, bowing gracefully. Then, he reached over and scooped her out of the chair. “And, I will also see that you keep your promise and *stay in bed*. What is with you that you can’t follow simple instructions?” he muttered, his voice trailing off as he carried her out of the tent and back to their own. Ber’lon shook his head ruefully, grinning to himself as he watched them walk off. He could recall the long-ago day he’d first met the warlock in Eversong. He could recall the time they spent together among the Scourge. He’d always known her to be a strong, stubborn, defiant woman who could inspire those around her to reach beyond their own boundaries and become more than they ever thought possible. Watching her be carried off, he thought that the only person who could stand up to her was the man carrying her in his arms.

“If I’d known then what I know now,” he muttered to himself, laughing, “I might not have left you and Zerith alone, going my own way.”

With a last glance at the maps and another shake of his head, he left the command tent as well, searching for the picket lines that held his horse so he could return and report the favorable outcome of the meeting to Morgraine. “You’re stubborn enough to make this work, Alayne. Naxxramas will fall and, whatever this new danger is, at least the Scourge will have had a mighty loss.”

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Alayne forced herself to stifle a giggle. Zerith rolled his eyes at her and shook his head, warning her that she had brought this on herself. Dar’ja, uncharacteristically, managed to say nothing. Still, it was humorous. The four of them and Callie sat in Ger’alin’s large tent, pouring over scrolls and tomes concerning what was known of Naxxramas, Kel’Thuzad, and the creations that had been made there. Ger’alin sat in a large wooden chair, his feet perched

on top of a chest and a pair of small, wireless glasses set on the end of his nose. "Laugh all you want," he muttered as he turned another page. He knew the spectacles amused the others. "Laugh. Go ahead. But I disdained books and studying as a child for a reason. Too much of it makes my head hurt and my eyes burn."

"You just look so ridiculous wearing them," Alayne burst out. "You look sillier than Mir'el when he wears them."

"Stop making me read all the stuff written in print so small you almost need a telescope to see it and I'll stop wearing them," Ger'alın returned evenly. "Until then, get used to it when we're cooped up in here for hours on end trying to figure out the weaknesses of the guardians in Naxxramas."

"You don't have to stay here and read," Alayne pointed out.

"Woman," he sighed, sounding exasperated. Peering at her over the tops of the glasses, he frowned when she raised a hand to cover her mouth, hiding her smile but not the amusement sparkling in her eyes, "if I don't watch over you, you will be out of that bed and out of the tent, maybe even out of the camp, before I have a chance to draw breath."

"You really should have listened to me," Zerith said in a sing-song tone. "It would have spared you some trouble."

"She never listens," Ger'alın complained. "Are you at least feeling better?" he asked, taking the glasses off and tucking them away in a pocket. In truth, the lenses were giving him a worse headache than the reading in a dim tent. Alayne nodded. "Zerith, keep an eye on her for me while I go exercise Lucky?" The priest nodded and Alayne scowled. "I need to get out of this tent and away from these books for a little while." Alayne glared at him, a hint of wistfulness in her eyes. "As soon as you say she's ready, I'll take her out for a ride as well," Ger'alın said, pointing at Alayne. "Until then, stay in bed."

"She will," Zerith promised, standing up and placing a restraining hand on his sister's shoulder. "She will not get out of this bed unless it's necessary. And I will decide what's necessary," he added firmly.

Ger'alın nodded and strode out of the tent. It felt good to get out of there for a little while. After days spent sitting in one tent or another, pouring over maps, texts, and reports, the canvas walls had started to feel as confining as a prison. He could sympathize with Alayne wanting to get out, even if just for a short time. Still, he reminded himself, she was not fully recovered and every day she spent in bed with only short walks around the tent, her worries not taxed by command, and napping frequently was another day closer to recovery. He just prayed she would listen to him and avoid any spellcasting for another few weeks. Zerith said she was close to being completely over whatever it was she had done to herself in Undercity. If she would avoid spellwork of any kind for another couple of weeks, she should quickly regain her former stamina and endurance with magic. Still, getting her to actually follow those instructions was draining. He relaxed a bit, feeling the tension drain out of him as he combed and curried his horse. Saddling Lucky, he was soon letting the horse trot through the thick forests of Grizzly Hills, enjoying the clean air and the slight chill after days spent inside stuffy, warm tents. He nodded absently to some of the furbolgs he saw in the distance. After leaving Zul'Drak, they had stumbled over the bearlike creatures. Luckily, the furbolgs had no argument with the others and were gracious enough to allow them to make camp near the waters of their tribal hunting grounds in exchange for a little extra meat brought in payment.

The furbolgs began following Ger'alın. Not wanting to look suspicious but wondering at the sudden furtive nature they had developed, Ger'alın slowed Lucky to a walk and let the horse amble beneath the great trees. The bearmen continued to keep a bit of distance between themselves and the sin'dorei. He pulled his horse to a halt and turned, staring at the furbolgs frankly with what he hoped was an open expression. Instead, he heard them snarl and begin

running towards him, pulling their spears from the holders on their backs and waving them wildly. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor in this case, Ger'alın wheeled Lucky on his rear hooves and rode a gallop back to the camp.

When he skidded back among the tents, he quickly explained what was going on, hoping that the two furbolgs he had encountered would not be foolish enough to try to run into the camp waving their spears. Word spread quickly around the perimeter and the guards were on alert, watching for a possible maddened bear-man attack. When an hour passed with no sign of them, Ger'alın shrugged sheepishly. "I guess they were just mad at me," he muttered, flushing. "Take some extra fish up to the tribal grounds tonight and say that I send my apologies for whatever it was I did wrong."

"I'll see to it personally," Andeo laughed. "Maybe you walked across an ancient burial ground or something."

"Let's not even joke about that," Ger'alın shuddered, envisioning armies of Scourge-controlled furbolgs savaging the rest of the world with sharp claws and teeth. Walking back to his tent, Ger'alın heaved a hefty sigh before pushing open the tent flaps. The last thing he wanted to do was more reading. He felt as if he had deciphered more treaties on necromantic magic in the past few days than any person had a right to have to wade through. When he saw Alayne curled up, her knees tucked to her chest and her hair tousled and tangled, he grinned. If she was asleep, he had every excuse he needed to spend more time poring over his maps than reading another damned book written in a language only tangentially related to Thalassian.

"She's had one of those nightmares again," Zerith said from the shadows of the tent. "I couldn't wake her. She just kept moaning about something and arguing with someone from the dream."

"Anything you could make sense of?"

"Only something about madness and insanity and destruction," the priest muttered, shaking his head. "I almost wish I could climb inside her mind. The only problem would be keeping my own sanity."

"Let's not joke about that either, shall we?"

"She quieted back down after a bit and hasn't woken up. She's been...I'm hesitant to say 'obediant...'" he sighed. "Well, at the very least, she only complained ten times about being stuck in the tent and not able to even go sit by the river and fish instead of her normal fifty times about it."

"I'll take her out riding tomorrow. It probably would do her good to get out and get some fresh air. Provided, of course, that my peace-offering works."

"Peace-offering?" Zerith repeated slowly, frowning his brow.

"I think I made some of the furbolgs mad," Ger'alın explained. "I came upon a pair while out riding and they gave chase, waving their weapons around and shouting. I've asked Andeo to take some extra provisions up to the chieftain tonight and explain that I'm sorry for whatever I did wrong. I hope it holds. I'd hate to have to find a new camping area after staying at one so congenial already." Zerith nodded in absent-minded agreement and left the tent. Ger'alın took one look at his maps and decided that perhaps he was too tired to pursue them again. The routes to Naxxramas and the routes they hoped to drive the ziggurat once it was under their control had been settled upon days ago. All that was left was to keep track of the constant Alliance and Scarlet presence near the floating citadel. Pulling off his boots, Ger'alın climbed into the bed next to Alayne and wrapped his arms around her. "More dreams, hm?" he whispered into her hair. "Let's hope that these turn out better than the last ones you had."

“This,” Dar’ja announced loudly, “was a terrible idea.”

“Hate flying,” Alayne shuddered as she gripped the stonework beneath her fingers. Ger’alin stood over her, holding her hair out of her face and wondering if her leaning out into space to be sick was the best way of handling the situation.

“Teleportation spells wouldn’t work,” he muttered defensively. “And, you’re crazy if you think I like this any better than you,” he added, nodding towards Alayne.

“I don’t think we’ll ever have to worry about Alayne deciding to run away with a dragon. Or becoming a harpy,” Callie teased.

“As soon as I can stand up again,” the woman threatened, “I am going to hurt you.”

“Yes, but it may be a while before you get back on your feet. I’ll enjoy it while I can.”

Ger’alin shot Callie a look that pleaded with her to quit teasing his wife. Ahead, just inside the doorways leading into the ziggurat, Zerith watched the scene with a touch of amusement. He kept constant watch over the spells that prevented the Scourge from detecting their presence, thankful that they worked. Nishi and Jemuya stood next to him, powering the shields and trying not to burst out laughing when Alayne crawled away from the precipice and curled into a ball of misery. Ber’lon bent down and whispered something into her ear that earned him a slap across his face. Rubbing his cheek, he grinned and shook his head. “I told her to just remember back when she flew one of these things with her father. She seemed to enjoy it.”

“She hates flying.”

“She hates *feeling* as if she’s flying,” Ber’lon corrected. “Still, a little anger will get her back on her feet. Any sign of the Scourge?”

“No,” the priest said, checking the area. “Not a whisper.”

“Kel’Thuzad rarely bothers with patrols unless he’s expecting another lich. He knows he’s the favored of the Lich King and he knows that Naxxramas is hard to take. What he knows will be what kills him for good this time,” the death knight said grimly.

“I hope so,” the priest replied. Alayne managed to stagger to her feet and stumble over to them, regaining a sense of balance now that she was not looking out over an enormous drop. Ger’alin looked relieved and Dar’ja amused. “It will begin soon,” Zerith said with a sigh. “I just hope we have enough people up here before we’re discovered. You’re certain these shields will hold once we’re on the move?” he asked his sister.

“Only our lives depend on it,” she muttered, scrubbing her mouth with the back of her hand. Zerith rolled her eyes, in no mood to deal with her sarcasm. “It will work. It’s the same kind of spell as we would use to move against a troop of magi without being detected. I tested it myself. It’s mobile to a point. It doesn’t block sound, though, and it does have a tendency to produce waves that will cause watchers to look more closely, risking breaking the illusion. But, we should be able to get inside and at least get ourselves ready before they’re aware that we’re here.”

The priest nodded reluctantly, staring down the empty corridors. He could see vaulting archways leading deeper into the ziggurat. One glowed green and, down another, he could hear the shouts of combat and the clash of steel ringing against steel. He and the others risked a move into the hallway, watching closely for any Scourge who could sound a warning. Zerith nearly jumped out of his skin when a strange cat began purring and rubbing against his ankles. Panic raced through him; he knew some magi used animals as familiars. Alayne cast a quick scrying spell over it and then relaxed. The cat was not magical at all. It was merely a cat. Reaching down, Zerith rubbed its head fondly, remembering the pets he had had as a boy. Soon, the others arrived and, with careful strides, made their way into the positions assigned to them. Ger’alin and Alayne nodded at Zerith as he and Dar’ja made their

way towards a corridor with a sloping ramp leading into its inner passages. Tau're went with them and, much to Alayne's surprise, a taunka woman followed behind him. "I've not seen her in a while," Alayne muttered to her husband.

"She's rallied the rest of the taunka and, with their new-found membership in the Horde, she's decided to fight alongside the rest of us. The others are working to finish off the vykrul off the coasts of Borean Tundra while keeping the Alliance from Garrosh's throat. The Alliance is reluctant to march on them entirely considering that the race is almost extinct. So, they make excellent buffers to keep all-out war from erupting."

"Not to mention, I think she likes Tau're," Alayne added meaningfully. Ger'alın grimaced, sighed, and nodded. "Could be worse," his wife offered cheerfully.

"At least she knows she's not cut out to be a warrior. She is a fairly good healer, though. She'll help Zerith and Dar'ja a lot with their part. From what I could glean of the reports, the spiders of Naxxramas are all poisonous and their venom is fatal in a very short time." Ger'alın blanched slightly at the last statement, recalling how ill he had been after his encounter with venomous spiders in Azjol-Nerub. Alayne squeezed his shoulder, reaching beneath the plate spaulders, giving him comfort. "We'll have it easy compared to them. We're taking on the death knights and other living soldiers."

"Who are we sending to handle the constructs?"

"Ber'lon and the other Ebons. They have the most knowledge of how to disable the foul magic and technology that hold many of them together. Callie and the rest of the Forsaken we have left are going to handle the plague creatures. By virtue of being dead themselves, they have little risk of contracting anything."

Alayne grunted and followed Ger'alın into the shadows near the corridor that led to the military wing of Naxxramas. The sounds of combat and training grew louder as they came closer. Once the rest of the group joined them, careful to keep their footsteps muffled and their weapons from clanging together. Then, with the signal from the rest of the groups sent by quick relay, they charged in, catching several death knights and skeletal soldiers by surprise. Smashing quickly through them, they pressed into the next room where more knights and captians stood, dueling and working with bladed weapons on wooden practice dummies. Ger'alın was relieved when no additional troops came to their aid, most of the others on the floor beneath them thinking that the sounds of combat were just another one of the many drills on-going in the quarter.

"That was almost too easy," Alayne whispered as they slew the final trio of death knights guarding the upper level. Risking a quick glance over the railing, she gasped. "Below will be much more difficult."

In the long room beneath them, several pairs of knights were mounted on dark horses wearing dread plate armor. They practiced fighting from atop their mounts and marching in formation. The riders' armor matched that of their horses and, towards the nearer end of the room, Alayne could see an instructor working on close-combat tactics with several students. She knew that once they were down the ramp, there would be no hiding from the others. Ger'alın likewise was making a careful study of the room below. Drawing the others together, he whispered quick instructions. Then, as a group, they ran down the stairs, charging into the horsemen immediately, surrounding them and never giving them a chance to use their trained warhorses as weapons.

Ger'alın kept glancing over his shoulder, relieved each time when the powerful instructor and his students seemed to ignore what was going on. Once or twice, he heard the combat from the walled ring cease for a few seconds. He held his breath each time, expecting to have to deal with an attack from behind. After several long moments of tense fighting, the instructor himself walked up the ramp from the guarded circle and, spying the intruders, rallied his students. "The time for practice is over!" the hulking death knight master shouted,

sweeping his arm out towards the other end of the room. “Go, show me what you’ve learned!”

Turning and letting the rest of his group handle the horsemen and soldiers swarming from the back of the room, Ger’alin raced to meet the students. He smashed into the first one, blocking the man’s sword with his shield and slamming his hammer into the plate armor covering his abdomen. Ger’alin felt the armor buckle under the stress of his blow. The student wheeled quickly, using his two-handed broadsword as a shield and put a little distance between himself and the sin’dorei. By then, the other three had reached them and began trying to close a circle around Ger’alin, giving themselves the opportunity to cut him down from all sides. Ger’alin whirled again, breaking their closing circle and sprinting backwards towards the wall. With the wall guarding his back, he grinned, his eyes blazing and face heated with the hot blood of combat. The students quickly redeployed themselves, the one with the broken armor hanging back a bit. Ger’alin called on the power of the Light and let it whirl through and around him, surrendering to it and letting it guide his mace and his shield. The divine power swirled around him, forcing the students back. Two lifted their hands to cover their eyes, giving Ger’alin the chance to knock them back further with blows from his shield. He glanced through the widened gap between the students to see the rest of his group finishing off the knights and soldiers. He noted how easy it had been to keep the Scourge from using their warhorses effectively and made a mental note to work on developing a counter-tactic. He winced when he felt a sharp pain near his shoulder. Attention returning to the students in front of him, he saw that his momentary distraction had allowed one of them to lunge in, the tip of his sword cutting through the plate armor as if it were leather.

“Good, good!” their instructor praised. “Use the momentum of his own spells against him.”

Ger’alin reached out, beseeching the Light to shield him. The shields blew away almost instantly, nearly knocking the paladin off his feet. Cold air whistled near him and he saw that Alayne had given off hurling her spells at the last few horsemen behind her and was flinging them frantically at the students. The air turned to ice around them, chilling their blood and slowing their movements. Still, whenever Ger’alin tried to hurl his divine power at them, it was turned back against him.

“Stop casting,” Alayne shouted. “Necromancy has its own methods.”

Not understanding what she meant but deciding she knew what she was talking about, Ger’alin ceased reaching out to the Light to power his attacks and relied on brute force instead. He was still at a slight disadvantage, unable to move away from the wall and unable to gain momentum but he no longer felt pressed quite as hard. Run’ok spun at a word from Alayne and began pelting the students with arrows. One fell, nearly toppling over on Ger’alin, an bolt shot through his neck. Ger’alin wheeled, seizing the opportunity the opening gave him, and pressed the students themselves against the wall. As the last of the horseriders were dispatched, more and more of the group came to the paladin’s aid, hurling spells and attacks against the students and overwhelming them while their instructor watched with amusement. When the last student fell, the instructor clapped loudly.

“Good job,” he cheered. “But they were only amateurs.”

Ger’alin stretched out with his shield, flinging a shield of pure, golden light at the instructor. The man’s eyes widened in surprise as he felt his limbs growing heavier and his motions slowing. “Turned it against him,” Ger’alin muttered as Alayne trotted up to him, looking as surprised as the instructor.

“You’re a quick study,” she muttered coolly. Summoning fire, she threw a huge, burning rock at the instructor. Ger’alin and the others ran in, surrounding the mighty death knight, cutting, hammering, and slashing at him while the magi threw spells. Ger’alin felt

himself being thrown through the air, landing solidly on his back. He blinked in surprise to see the instructor, still moving slowly but with a sardonic grin on his face, walking towards him.

“You’ll have to do better than that to beat me, young one,” the servant of the Scourge taunted. Ger’alin roared and leapt back to his feet. Taking a second to consider the dark spells the man had woven around him, Ger’alin did as the students had done to him and used the Light to block them, twisting them, using them to sap the instructor’s energy and slow his attacks further. “Good, good,” the instructor murmured. Then, lifting his sword high above his head, he brought it down with a ground-cracking thud. Ger’alin was thrown off his feet again by the force of the air moving from the blade. “But not good enough.”

Ger’alin gaped in amazement at the instructor’s raw power. Even turning his own strength-increasing spells against him did little to stave off his power. Alayne continued to hurl spells at him, studying him closely. “Fast,” she shouted. “Speed.”

Ger’alin watched as she pelted the instructor with spells that froze the joints in his armor and weighed him down, slowing him further. While the man was slow, he was still lethal and his attacks seemed to gain additional power and focus. “Hard and fast!” she shouted again. Ger’alin drew on the Light, using it to speed his own attacks but not to enhance his strength. The others seemed to get the same idea and began focusing on moving faster and faster, dancing around the instructor, never giving him a chance to focus on them. By the time one of his powerful attacks landed, they had moved elsewhere. Slowly, they wore him down until Ger’alin was able to move in and, with a quick and decisive stroke, smash the man’s elbow, causing him to drop his sword. He reversed his swung and let his mace take the instructor flush in the chin, wincing only slightly when blood sprayed on him and the film of death began covering the dark instructor’s eyes. “An...honorable...death,” he gasped through a shattered jaw as he pitched forward on the ground.

“Let’s keep moving,” Ger’alin said after a short break to catch their breath. “There’s no telling what’s ahead of us.”

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Zerith wrinkled his nose in disgust as he brushed cobwebs off his shoulders. He was glad that the antidotes he’d brewed up seemed to be working. The spiders had hissed, spitting their venom on everyone, but unable to poison the inoculated fighters. Still, he wished there were a way to make themselves immune to the sticky webbing as well as the poison. Dar’ja smiled bemusedly as she plucked a strand of webbing out of his hair. He glared at her, wishing he could have found chain mail like she wore. The sticky strands seemed to slide right off of it. Andeo walked back over, a grumpy expression on his face that had little to do with the cobwebs trailing in the air behind him.

“Locked,” he muttered, gesturing to the other side of the room. “We can’t go through there.”

“What do you mean locked?” Zerith sputtered.

“I mean,” the paladin sighed, “there is a big gate on the door and there’s no way to lift it. We’ll have to go through there and see if there is another way around,” he gestured, pointing to a room where yet more spiders lurked. Zerith stared that direction with a shiver. He had just finished getting the cobwebs off his arms.

“I suppose you’re right,” the priest sighed. “Let’s get ready for more webbing.”

The group moved into the twisting corridor, quickly taking down the spider pack that stood in the center of the hallway. The short, frenzied battle cost them more sticky spray but they managed to bring the oversized arachnids down with little trouble. Zerith gasped and Dar’ja whistled when they looked in the room at the end of the corridor. A huge spider, much

like Anub'arak, sat at the far end of the room. His forelegs were crossed casually in front of him and his demeanor spoke of boredom. "Ahh," the spider sighed, sounding like a well-bred noble welcoming guests to his hall, "welcome to my parlor. Come closer now, tasty morsels," he laughed, his mandibles clacking together audibly, "I've been too long without food. Without blood to drink."

Zerith shuddered as the spider pushed itself up on its eight legs and began scrambling across the room towards them. Dar'ja ran ahead, meeting the attack head-on. The magi and hunters spread out across the side of the room, hurling spells and arrows at the arachnid while the paladins forced it back with blows from their swords and shields. The nerubian seemed to find the fight amusing, laughing wildly and screaming about how running just made the blood pump faster. Dar'ja, sickened by the thought of a spider feeding on her like a vampire, smashed her shield across its face with a bone-crunching crack. Venom and green blood dripped from the nerubian's face and its eyes began to glow red with anger. Dinner was no longer amusing it. Pushing himself up on his rear legs, he began beating his beetle-like wings rapidly, sending a spray of smaller insects at the paladins. They pelted the sin'dorei, buzzing around them and stinging them, making it nearly impossible for the Blood Knights to focus on their holy spells and attacks. Finally, when the swarm grew so thick that Dar'ja could barely see in front of her, she felt Andeo grip her arm and begin pulling her away. The pair ran down the side of the room, waving their hands in front of their faces, trying to clear the little beetles out of their eyes long enough to see where they were going. Dar'ja slipped and fell into the shining green water that ran through the room, keeping from being swept out of the sewers only by grabbing hold of the stone basin and pulling herself back up out of the water. She grimaced at the stench clinging to her but was relieved to find that the insects found it no more to their liking than she did.

The nerubian regarded the fleeing paladins with outraged contempt. Waddling after them, its mandibles still dripping gore, it roared in anger and hatred for the living. Dar'ja whispered a quick suggestion to Andeo and, when the nerubian reached them, he distracted it by flinging holy magic directly in its face. Momentarily blinded by the divine attack, the nerubian pounded at the ground, lifting its forelegs up while it rared on its rear legs. Dar'ja took her chance then, thrusting her sword deeply into its carapace. Andeo matched her gesture while the rest of the group focused their spells on the soft, unarmored underbelly.

The creature faltered, dropping to the ground with a look of surprise on its twisted features. When its shudders stopped, Dar'ja and Andeo grasped the hilts of their weapons and pulled them out, grimacing at the black, slimy blood that coated them from tip to crossguard.

"Clean those off," Zerith suggested, hurrying over to check on his wife. The rest of the group was searching around the room for a passageway that would let them move further into the ziggurat. "Ger'alín always says that demonic blood can etch holy blades."

"I heard the same lectures," Dar'ja said, her voice sickeningly sweet. She and Andeo rinsed their blooded blades in the foul water rushing around the sides of the room. A loud click caught their attention as Nishi announced that they'd found the trip-switch that might open the gate on the other door. "Let's keep moving," Dar'ja muttered. "There's no telling how much longer we'll go unnoticed now."

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Ber'lon winced as he and the others twisted the dark magics powering the abominations and the other constructs, causing the creatures to explode violently. Still, he reminded himself that wielding the Scourge skills was for a good cause. If they could put an end to Kel'Thuzad and claim Naxxramas for their own, they would be much closer to defeating the Scourge and avenging themselves on their former masters. Still, Ber'lon hated

destroying the constructs. Most has no minds of their own. They were just fleshy robots serving the necromancers.

“He’s not gotten any smarter, has he?” Aelonius muttered, pointing to Patchwerk. The enormous abomination was walking up and down the long strip of cement that led further into the quarter. As long as they waited for him to have his back turned, Patchwerk paid no mind to the intruders. “Still dumb as a box of rocks.”

“He’ll smash you flat, though,” Ber’lon replied as they waited for the abomination to make his patrol back to the other end of the room. “He doesn’t need brains to go ‘me smash, you die.’”

“Foul things, these,” another death knight grimaced, holding his nose as a spray of plague-inducing toxin squirted from one of the smaller construct’s arms. “Still, they could come in useful against that one,” he added, jerking his thumb towards Patchwerk.

“A cannon would be better but I suppose this will work. Just be certain not to get any on your own skin,” Ber’lon cautioned. “Ger’alin will have a fit if we take any of our own out of combat and Morgraine will probably put us cleaning the underside of Ebon Hold until our grandchildren have grandchildren.”

“Speak for yourself, sin’dorei,” Aelonius chuckled. “I’m not having any.”

“You know what I mean. Just be careful. We can’t afford any accidents because we have very few healers with us. I wish Zerith had come,” he added. “Because the ones we do have don’t seem to trust us very much.”

“Well, we did betray them to join the Scourge.”

“I know that,” Ber’lon snapped. “And, hopefully, destroying the Scourge for once and for all will finally free us all of that suspicion. Hopefully, it will free us entirely of the taint we took into ourselves so we can return to our old lives. So that the life in the forest will no longer cast me away as an un-natural and corrupt thing.” Ber’lon flushed, his pale skin turning bright red. He had not intended to mention his most heart-felt desire to return to the life he’d once thought to lead. When he had seen that Alayne had managed to return to her own life, leaving necromancy behind forever, he had begun to hope that the same redemption might be possible for him as well.

Aelonius patted him awkwardly on the shoulder and the rest fell silent. Rigging the spray cannon, they waited once again while Patchwerk wandered through the room. This time, something shining in the green waters caught the abomination’s eye and he stood near the invaders for several long minutes trying to grasp the object of his adoration with meaty hands or the iron hook he wore slung over his shoulder.

“Fishy!” the abomination chuckled delightedly. “Fishy in the water! Bony fishy swim!”

“May the gods and the Light forgive us for what we did to that thing,” Ber’lon sighed, feeling a twinge of pity for the twisted soul housed within the mass of putrid flesh.

Patchwerk began wandering back to the other end of the room when he grew bored with the skeleton of a fish he’d found. Muttering to himself about being Kel’Thuzad’s avatar of war and how no one would get past him, Patchwerk seemed quite pleased with himself as he swept his hook over the cement walkway. “Slimes no foul up nice chamber!” Ber’lon and the others quickly set the cannon where it would unleash a foul, flesh-melting spray on the abomination. Patchwerk made his way back down the corridor once again, eyeing the cannon with curiosity and grinning brokenly at the men behind it. “Come to play?” he asked in a voice that made Ber’lon’s soul writhe.

“Pull it,” he said between clenched teeth as the abomination made its eager way over to what it thought were new playmates. The foul spray gushed out of the nozzle, hitting Patchwerk square in his chest. The abomination roared, arms flailing wildly while the hook attached to a tentacle swung wide, knocking the cannon and its foul spray over. Ber’lon and

the others scattered, diving and rolling away from the angry abomination. Ber'lon cursed the hook that Alayne had, long ago, reattached to the creature. Several of the Knights of the Ebon Blade tried to turn the cannon back around, tried to aim it at Patchwerk again. Already, the toxic spray was having its effect on the creature as gobbets of flesh melted away, falling on the floor in greasy, sickening piles.

“Raaarrgh!” Patchwerk cried, swinging his meaty fists around. One blow caught Ber'lon flat on the back, sending the man, sprawled, sliding on his belly across the room. He groaned, feeling as if his ribs had all been shattered and his spine cracked. One of the healers hurried over to him, casting a quick spell reserved for battle. Ber'lon felt strength return to him but knew it was fleeting at best. Pulling his double-handed rune blade from its sheath on his back, the death knight sprinted back towards the bellowing abomination, working to get behind him while he hammered away at the cannon. With each pounding, the cannon sent more of the toxin spraying on Patchwerk. The abomination did not seem to connect his agony with the liquid from the cannon. Meanwhile, his distraction gave Ber'lon and the others a chance to rally themselves behind him and begin cutting away, blades slicing into the undead flesh, forcing the monster to step into the spray again and again. Patchwerk's hook tore a chunk out of Aelonus's arm and smacked Ber'lon on the head when it came down again. Finally, the death knights were able to bury their blades in the abomination's spine, causing its arms and legs to go limp, dropping it on its gaping belly while it stared wildly around for the threat it had ignored. “Sorry, Patchwerk,” Ber'lon grimaced as he wrenched his blade out and stabbed it through the creature's rolling eyes. “Come on,” he said to the rest as they eyed the fallen behemoth. “We've still got work to do.”

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Callie prodded the gargoyle's corpse with her foot, wondering how it could go from flesh to stone to flesh again so quickly. She'd half-expected it to explode outward on its death, spraying them with toxins or knocking them back with hard pellets flying everywhere. Instead, it had just dropped to the floor. She wiped her hand again and scraped her arm-sword against the wall to get the gooey remains of both gargoyle and slime off of the blade. “I wonder how the others are doing,” she said aloud.

“As well as can be expected, I would suppose,” Diami muttered. “At least, we haven't had the fortress empty itself out looking for us so I'd say so far so good.”

“Noth's down there,” Callie said, pointing towards the room on the lower level. “This is going to be fun. I hated that bastard for what he did to so many towns and villages. Him and his damned cauldrons.”

“Going to give him a taste of his own medicine? I'd wondered why you were carrying poison with you.”

“Call it sweet revenge,” the rogue shrugged. “I normally don't use it but in his case, I'll make an exception.”

“He looks mad,” Diami observed.

“He's going to get a whole lot madder.”

“No, I mean he looks insane. He's muttering to himself. No, to the bone piles. As if they were his children. We may not even have to fight him,” she added, sounding shocked. “We could slip past him if he's truly lost his mind.”

Just then Noth glanced in the direction of the doorway. Spying the warlock and the rogue, he began laughing. Pointing at the bone piles, he shouted, “Rise, my soldiers! Rise and fight once more!”

Callie gulped as several skeletal warriors seemed to pull themselves together from the chaotic mass of bones piled around the room and began lumbering towards them. With a

shout, she called the others down to the room and rushed in, running past the skeletons and focusing on their master. Diami began casting hexes and curses on the plague-bringer. With a strength and endurance borne of insanity, he ignored the spells that should have been crippling, continuing to raise skeletal warriors who were now clattering against the Forsaken forces pouring into the room. Callie reached him and he grinned at her, a mad light in his dull grey eyes. Just as she swung her blade in the place where he had been, he was gone, teleporting himself several yards behind her. The rest of the group was too busy holding the skeletons at bay to help her with Noth. Grunting and spinning on her heel, Callie rushed to attack him once more, blades whirling in front of her. He lifted his hands and hurled a bolt of shadow at the rogue, knocking her back several feet. Shaking herself clear, she rushed in a final time, closing with him and leaving him no choice but to attack with his fists.

Madness shone clearly in the necromancer's eyes as he laughed each time her blades cut into him. He seemed to enjoy the pain. He summoned more and more skeletons, pressing the group hard, nearly overwhelming them. Callie risked a look around the room, relieved to see that he would soon run out of skeletons to summon as the bone piles grew thin. The rest of the Forsaken were taking no chances. Whenever they managed to stun one of the skeletal warriors, they began shattering its bones, rending them and destroying them so that it would take more concentration and more powerful necromancy than the insane plague-bringer seemed capable of to bring them back. Noth seemed to realize this as well and his expression turned from one of glee to one of anger. Roaring, he swung his fists at Callie, screaming wildly, ignoring the slashes and stabs from her weapons but never leaving himself so open that she was able to get a clean stab. His hands reached for her arms, intent on rendering her unable to attack while he prepared a spell that would reduce her to little more than an unwilling servant. At the last moment the rogue was able to pull her stump of an arm out of his grip, leaving her arm-sword dangling in his grasp. The split second of confusion he experienced was enough time for her to unbalance his grip on her good arm and thrust hard with her sword.

"I will server the master...in death..." he gasped, a smile on his thin and bloodless lips. He pitched forward into Callie's arms and the skeletal army he command collapsed with him, becoming mere piles of lifeless, useless bones once more.

"Ground them into powder before we move on," Callie suggested. "And let's burn this one," she added, pointing to Noth. "If we've all managed to move through here unnoticed so far, let's leave them little trace to follow."

"Good idea," Diami seconded. "And, I for one would feel safer knowing that no skeletons could sneak up behind me and cut me down while a necromancer watched on."

"True enough," Callie nodded. "Let's get to work. It looks like the slugs in there aren't much smarter than the slime in here," she muttered, kicking Noth's corpse as she glanced at the room ahead.

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Ber'lon shuddered and heaved, glad that Aelonius was not cracking anymore jokes. Taking apart Grobbulus had been tricky enough but seeing the monstrosity the Scourge referred to as a "pet" was more than the hunter-turned-death knight could stomach. After they'd slain the demonic Scourge dog, Aelonius had been full of quips about whether or not they would see something like it when they finally moved against Icecrown. Mocking the mindless zombies who had come when called to be fed upon, the rest of the death knights had enjoyed a good laugh up until Ber'lon's knees buckled and his stomach spewed. After that, the others had backed off, unable to find humor in the grim situation.

Across the massive stone hallway stood the last creature they had to fight in order to gain control over the switch that would allow them to access the inner sanctum where Kel'Thuzad lurked. Staring at its blind, lifeless eyes, Ber'lon felt his stomach churning again. The soul of a young child had been twisted and chained to the stitched together flesh. Controlled utterly by Kel'Thuzad, the innocent soul struggled to free itself from its unnatural body, the confusion granting the creature much of its strength. So dangerous was this particular construct that two flesh golems stood sentinel over it, controlling enormous electrical coils that kept the guardian from running amuck. Ber'lon sighed as he studied them again, wondering just how they were going to get past them and defeat the last monstrosity. He'd felt guilty when he'd killed Patchwerk for the torment the soul powering the abomination had been put through. That guilt returned tenfold when he glanced at Thaddius.

"We're going to have to wait for the others," Ber'lon said at last, swaying slightly on his hands and knees. Scrambling back onto his seat, he glanced at the pipe set high in the wall that had granted them entrance to the room. "Aelonius, climb up there and go see if you can find sign of the others. We're going to need every man we've got on that monster."

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Callie reached up and wiped the ooze out of her eyes. Whatever had been in the foul sprays that shot up through the floor of the room was something she did not want to know. It stank worse than a bog in high summer and the oily slickness of it made her want to throw up. She could tell that the substance was poisonous to living flesh. However, it rolled off their undead flesh like water off a duck's back.

"Still," she grimaced, "it stinks and it stings a bit."

The few Forsaken priests were doing their best to help with healing where a hefty dose of poison had been dumped on one of their number, enough to overcome their resilience to it and cause them to be a trifle ill. As Callie surveyed her situation, she was glad she had only Forsaken with her. Any living creature who had entered the room and tried to find the method in the Scourge necromancer's madness would have surely died to the jets of poison that showered the room.

Once the others were on their feet, Callie glanced at the next room. Pits filled with green and orange bubbling liquid held tall eyestalks who could kill with a gaze. Oversized maggots chewed on rotting meat strewn over the floor of the long room, bumping into each other blindly, sometimes chewing on a neighbor who was not quick enough to show signs of life. Callie grimaced again and swallowed hard. She had hoped that the control switch would be nearby but it seemed they needed to press on through the next room and make another search. "We have to go through there," she muttered, pointing at the room ahead.

"Stick close together," Diami suggested, eyeing the maggots warily. "If we can keep from attracting their attention, we can probably make it through."

"It's those eyestalks that will be the biggest problem," Callie added. "If one of them looks at you, run. Run as fast as you can."

The group pulled itself together and began jogging through the room, careful to hug the wall and move lightly as swiftly. The maggots stirred but, sensing food closer by, ignored the group. Callie heaved a sigh of relief as they reached the back of the room. None of the eyestalks had glanced their direction yet and the maggots seemed to be far enough away that they wouldn't notice the semi-living flesh passing through. Then, without warning, one of the eyestalks swiveled and caught a glimpse of the packed group. A blue beam shot from it, focusing on Callie. The rogue shrieked in agony, willing herself to move forward. The beam began to drain her energy, feeding on her life-force, slowing her movements and leaving her weak. Her shriek drew the maggots' attention and they began surging through the room,

following the sound of her cries, seeking their next meal. Diami pursed her lips and began flinging the most powerful spells she had, trying desperately to break the eyestalk's gaze. Two more sprang up, focusing on others. The rest of the group, eyeing the maggots coming directly towards them, grabbed those who were the targets of the beams and hauled them into the next room. The gaze broken, the eyestalks could not continue to drain their victims of life.

A horde of maggots rushed the fighters, drawn in by the shrieks of pain and the scent of still-pumping blood. Callie and the other two were laid down on the bridge, gasping for breath and moaning in pain. The rest of the group, under Diami's quick direction, hacked away at the maggots, destroying them and leaving them to writhe and twitch in a pile of noxious goo. Once the maggots were dead, the priests moved back to examine the three who had been caught in the eyestalk's deadly gaze.

"They'll need to rest," Jarl muttered sullenly after he examined them. "It sucked the life right out of them. Only time will heal that."

"Thankfully, we have time now," Diami said, glancing over the bridge and into the room. She could see the switch behind a huge, hulking spore monster. "I just hope none of the others come looking for us. Crossing that room would be death for any of them."

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Zerith eyed the bodies of the cultists and their leader, the self-styled Grand Widow, with disgust. How anyone could turn their backs on life to serve death was beyond him. Even in his darkest days when he had thought to follow the path of darkness and pain in vengeance, he had not thought to serve death itself. Deal it, yes, but serve it?

"Don't get so worked up," Dar'ja said softly. "Plenty of fools succumb to the temptation to serve the Scourge and conquer death. In reality, they're making themselves slaves and they'll die all the same, but remember what Alayne said. Arthas can find the weakness in anyone and exploit it, twisting a person into a mockery of who and what they were."

"But to worship him," Zerith shuddered. "That's foul even for the Scourge. The Lich King is not a god. He's...he's..."

"Calm down. They're done with," Dar'ja said firmly but gently. "For now, let's focus on finding this switch. I thought it would be nearby."

Zerith nodded in agreement. He'd thought it would have been nearby as well. Instead, he suspected they needed to follow the hallway that branched away from this room and see where it led. He just hoped there would not be any more spiders. After all the ones they had fought with already, he prayed he would never see another arachnid as long as he lived. Turning the corner and walking down a small bridge that led further into the rear of the quarter, the priest groaned. Several more packs of spiders milled about, mandibles clacking audibly as they spoke to each other in their strange clicking language. "Get ready for more webbing," he said sarcastically as the others walked up to him. "Let's just take them out. The sooner the better." Not waiting to let the others argue, the priest ran into the room bellowing and waving his hands, hoping to spook the spiders into running away. Instead, they stared at the priest in the arachnid equivalent of stunned surprise at seeing supper place itself on the plate and then hurried towards him. Some of the larger spiders kicked the smaller ones away. The rest of Zerith's group caught up to him in seconds and the air was soon filled with the sounds of combat. Living fighters hissed as webbing or poison coated them and spiders shrieked as spells or blades landed heavily against them. After minutes that seemed to pass far too slowly for Zerith's liking, the spiders began to fall back and, moments later, were twitching as life left them. The group fanned out around the room, searching for the switch but finding nothing. Finally, they ascended a flight of stairs and came to a blank wall.

Doubling back, Zerith noticed a thick coating of webbing extending down from a hole high in the wall. He glanced at it, wondering where it led. Calling the others to him, he grimaced and gripped the webbing, pulling himself up the sticky ladder and nearly fainting at what he saw.

In a large room sat a giant spider. Next to it, shining brightly on the wall, was the switch that would open the pathway into Kel'Thuzad's chamber. The spider was idly tearing the head off of a zombie, feeding peacefully. Long black legs covered in red spikes supported a massive abdomen streaked with red, black, and yellow. Beady eyes peered out from a tiny head and venom dripped from its mandibles. Zerith swallowed hard, wondering just how they were going to get passed the creature to activate the switch. Dar'ja had climbed up next to him and opened her mouth to ask what was wrong. Seeing the spider for herself, she paled and motioned for the others to climb up the web.

"That," someone muttered, "is a very big spider."

"It's huge. How did it get in there? The hole isn't big enough for it."

"Maybe it climbed up from below. That's not floor," Zerith groaned, pointing at the almost solid white ground in the spider's lair. "That's web."

"That is a lot of web," someone else observed.

"Well, it's a rather big spider."

"Whatever it is," Dar'ja growled, "it's in our way. There's the switch over there. We need to get in there, kill that thing, and then activate the switch. After that, we can make our way back towards the entrance to see how the others are doing."

"Provided, of course, that setting off the switch doesn't bring the Scourge down on our heads," Zerith sighed. "But, you're right. There's little choice left. Still, once we're done here, if I ever see a spider again, I'm going to scream like a little girl."

"You do that anyway when you get good and scared," Dar'ja teased in an undertone. Zerith snorted and rolled his eyes, shaking his head. He'd walked right into that one. "Well," she continued, speaking so the others could hear, "let's get moving."

Unsheathing her sword and pulling herself over the stone lip that was covered in cobweb, Dar'ja ran across the web to the spider, ignoring the way the seemingly solid silken floor swayed and bounced with her movements. It reminded her far too much of being on a boat. When the spider noticed her rushing at it, it raised itself up on its hind legs and began skittering lightly across the web, hardly disturbing the structure at all. Dar'ja had only a moment to gape before the spider reached her and rared up, bringing its wildly swinging forelegs down where she had been standing. She leapt out of the way at the last moment, leaving the spider shaking on its own webbing, spitting and spraying poisonous fumes that would have knocked her out if she had taken them full in the face. The spider turned, its eyes and mandibles twitching, seeking out its prey. The rest of the group hurried, most keeping to the spider's rear while others spread out along the wall. They used the stone to steady themselves while they cast spells at the spider's back legs. Dar'ja kept the spider focused on her, refusing to let it turn back around to deal with her friends. She could sense the Light surrounding her and knew that Zerith was busy channeling all of the holy power he could hold into a shield to protect her from the buffeting blows of the spider's legs and the noxious fumes it exhaled. She cut away at it, clipping at its legs and mandibles whenever it seemed on the verge of turning around.

With a cry and a thud, she felt herself hit the wall. Sticky webbing covered her from head to foot. She tried to scream but the spray clung to her mouth, suffocating her. She couldn't lift her hands to tear it away; they were bound to her side by the glue-like substance. She heard and felt others running towards her and shuddered with relief when she saw her husband's angry face as he ripped the webbing off her own. Drawing in great gasps of air, she let him tear the rest away from her arms and then bent to help him remove it from her legs. The spider had used the interruption to turn and was pummeling away at several of the

magi. Running and using short range teleportation spells, they tried to get away from the creature only to find themselves wrapped up in the sticky substance, twitching futilely as they tried to escape it.

Zerith's eyes blazed, the dark forest green shining out like emerald fires. His nostrils flared as he sought out the Light and hurled it, not at the spider, but at his friends. The ichor holding the web wrappings together dried up instantly and allowed them to break free on their own. Dar'ja saw the spider stare in momentary confusion as its victims escaped their prisons. The moment of indecision was all they needed. Rushing back in to the fray, they surrounded the spider. Unable to defend all sides, it quickly fell as its legs were literally cut out from under it. Rocking back and forth on its massive abdomen, it tried to repel the attackers once more but failed as swords, spears, and spells buried themselves deeply in the creature's underbelly.

When the light dimmed in its multi-faceted eyes, Dar'ja heaved a sigh of relief. Moving through the web nimbly, she helped with healing those who needed it. Then, with a last sigh of relief, the group moved over to the switch and activated it, sending a lurid light out over the web they stood upon. The light flashed and coalesced into a portal. Glancing through it, she saw the platform atop the entrance. With a ghost of a shrug, she pointed at it. "At least we know there are no spiders there," she pointed out to her husband.

With a relieved laugh, he stepped through the portal, glad to see the entrance once more. A light that matched the one in the room he and the others had just left shone along the pathway leading up to the platform. "One down," he muttered. "Let's wait here and see if the others come along soon."

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Ger'alín stared at the horsemen staring at him. He'd heard their taunts clearly as soon as Gothik had lain dead. Waves upon waves of death knights, Scourge captians, and horsemasters had charged them as they made their way from that massive divided chamber to the one where the four waited patiently. Now, however, the generals of the Scourge seemed to regard their uninvited guests with amusement.

"A pity that we have to kill you," the woman mounted on a dread black skeletal steed sighed. She shook her head dismissively, the long white plume sweeping across her shoulders. "You have been very entertaining. Lord Kel'Thuzad would be most amused at your antics."

"Aye," the dwarven death rider agreed, his long white beard swishing from side to side. "He would at that. Yeh've done well for a pack of daisies. We'll give 'em a quick, clean death."

"Quick? Clean?" Baron Rivendare sneered. "We shall grind them to dust for the glory of the Scourge!"

"Run," the last rider gasped, trembling as if he were fighting off a controlling, commanding will, "run while you still can!"

"Zeliek," the woman laughed, "don't speak like that. Surely you wouldn't want to be a rude host?"

Ger'alín shook his head and pointed to others in his group. Choosing out those who stood the best chance against mounted fighters, he divided them into four groups, pointed at the ones he wanted to go on each horseman, and then waited for their nods of understanding. The silent communication took mere seconds and the horsemen seemed to sense that the group was readying itself to strike. Gripping their reins and leaning low over their mounts' backs, they unlimbered their weapons, waiting for the foolish living to attack them so they could add their might to the bounty of the Scourge.

“Your foul oppression of the living and the dead ends this day!” Ger’alin roared at the self-styled generals of Kel’Thuzad’s army. “Go!”

Rushing to attack in what seemed to be a chaotic jumble, the fighters of the Disorder of Azeroth quickly closed with the horsemen, denying them the chance to charge or to use their horses as weapons. The same tactic had been used to great effect against the riders in the first rooms. Now, it was employed again with ruthless efficiency. Closing in around them, the horsemen were unable to escape the box made from living beings. Unable to face all of their opponents lest they turn an unguarded flank to swords, they were forced to allow spells of all kinds to fly at them and at their horses. The dwarven rider’s face was a mask of rage as he felt his mount being chipped away at by the fighters who would not let him get room to maneuver. Baron Rivendare seemed to have lost his normally cool equilibrium as he tried to beat away swords and spears that sought to bury themselves in his unliving flesh. The white rider, the one the others had called Zeliak, seemed to be struggling not to attack. He continued to call out warnings and pleadings that they leave at once. Apologies flowed from him every time a blow landed until the dwarven rider turned and shouted at him. “Stop your sniveling!” the dwarf raged. “Our master won’t like it at all!”

The distraction provided by the apologetic Zeliak gave the Disorder of Azeroth the opening they needed. The dwarf roared in outrage as Ger’alin moved in and, with several quick blows from his hammer, shattered the skeletal horse’s front legs. The creature dropped forward, depositing the dwarf in front of the angry paladin. Not giving the shorter Scourge the opportunity to find his bearings, Ger’alin hammered away at his head while Alayne encased the dwarf Scourging in ice.

Next came screams of pain and outraged shock from the woman rider. She was pulled from her horse by several strong fighters. Ger’alin saw Tau’re pinning her arms to her side at the cost to several gashes opened along his own arms. The horse she had ridden was quickly dispatched since, riderless, it did little to defend itself. With a twist of his arms, Tau’re snapped the woman’s neck and threw her body atop the corpse of her horse. The box closed in more tightly around the ones who were left. Rivendare ceased attacking and began concentrating on escaping while Zeliak sat still, not bothering to defend himself from blows and spells. Rivendare snarled at the white rider and prepared to unleash a spell upon his cowardly co-general when one of Alayne’s spells caught him in the face. Fire flashed and burned on his pallid skin and the Baron’s shrieks nearly deafened the fighters. He soon joined the other two in death and Zeliak, still holding himself rigid, pleaded with the others to forgive him as a twisted and perverted mockery of holy magic exploded outward, nearly throwing the Disorder of Azeroth across the room. Ger’alin grunted in shock as he picked himself up and waded back in to the fray.

“I do not wish to,” Zeliak shivered. “But I must. Please, end this! End it now!”

“As you wish,” Ger’alin replied, reaching out to the Light and hurling it at the undead rider. It flashed, searing the Scourge but not felling him. The others quickly regained their feet and returned to the fight and within moments, Zeliak lay peacefully among the dead. Out of the four pairs they had made the four horsemen, only Zeliak’s and Rivendare’s horses stood standing. “What do we do with them?” Ger’alin asked. The bodies of the other horses and riders were being dragged across the room where they could be safely incinerated by magical fire. After the fiasco that had happened when they left the bodies of their fallen foes alone while fighting Gothik, they were risking no further chances.

“A trained warhorse is nothing to snort at, even if it is skeletal,” Alayne muttered as she studied the steeds. “Give one of them to Callie. She’s always wishing that her horse spooked less in formation. I’ll take the white one,” she grinned. “I’ve always wanted a horse that could fight for me. Leetha’s hopeless when it comes to that.”

“Has anyone found the switch?” Ger’alin said loudly, not wanting to take the bait he saw his wife setting in front of him. “You realize you’re very out of practice with your blade work, woman, don’t you? Stick to spells; you’re good at those.”

“It’s right over there,” she replied, smiling sweetly. “And, if you’d help me with my forms again, I’m sure I could get back in top shape.”

“Just take care of activating that switch. We’ll argue about this later. Though why one of the most talented and powerful magi I know would want to keep up with the blade is beyond me,” he muttered. Within moments, the switch glowed brightly and a portal flared over it, showing them the entrance of Naxxramas. Alayne gasped when she saw Zerith and the others sitting around plucking some kind of string out of their hair. Ignoring her husband’s remarks, she led the pair of horses through the portal.

“I told you it wouldn’t take long,” Zerith said when he saw a flash of light shoot up the ramp and his sister appear out of thin air. He gave a start when he saw that she was leading two skeletal horses.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of them,” she winked. “How are you? Did you get your switch activated?”

“We did,” he replied. “We’re just waiting on Callie and Ber’lon to report in now.”

Another flash of light brought the Forsaken stumbling out muttering at the top of her voice. “If I never see another...Light of heaven, it still stinks!” A strong, malevolent odor wafted through the portal and the rogue grimaced. Ducking her head back through the magical gateway, she shouted for the others to hurry up and make their way through it so they would be away from the stench. “Foul thing,” she muttered, scrubbing a hand over her mouth. “Some sort of spore creature. It wasn’t too bright; we were almost able to activate the switch without bothering it. Then someone thought it might be funny to try to harvest the leaves from the damned thing.”

Diami grimaced. “They could have clues that will help us develop a Scourge-specific toxin. That was Putress’s original plan before he went crazy and decided to side with the Burning Legion. It’s not a bad idea.”

“No, but letting that creature know that enemies had come to call while it stood there drooling probably wasn’t one of your better ideas,” Callie retorted. “Nice horses, by the way,” she added to Alayne, seeing the black and white skeletal horses the woman held behind her.

“I’m glad you like them. This one’s yours,” Alayne grinned, passing the reins to the black horse to Callie. “He’s one of the only survivors of our last battle. A trained warhorse. You’re always going on about how you wouldn’t mind having one.”

“This beats the old bag of bones I’ve been running around on,” Callie nodded. “I’ll have to get Ger’alin to get me up to speed on how to really ride one of these. The other one is yours?” Alayne nodded. “We’ll get lessons together. It will be *fun*.”

Ger’alin, who had by now made his way through the portal, overheard the conversation and whimpered softly. With his wife on one side and Callie on the other, the lessons would be anything but fun for him. He nodded to himself in relief, though, noting that the rogue seemed more like her old self than she had been in a while. Her confidence had returned and the aura of leadership shone a little more brightly in her eyes. “Where’s Ber’lon?” she asked.

“We’ve not seen him,” Ger’alin answered. “Though, if we’ve managed to activate all of our switches, he should be finishing up shortly.”

The groups mingled back together, taking the quiet time to catch some rest, clean their armor and weapons, and double-check their spell reagents. After a short time had passed and no word or sign came of Ber’lon’s progress, Ger’alin began to grow concerned. He and Zerith moved over to the side away from the others and discussed seeking out the other group

in hushed tones. Just as they had decided that it was time to see if the Knights of the Ebon Blade needed their help, Aelonius came jogging out of the quarter they had been assigned.

“We’re almost done,” the Forsaken death knight said at the looks on the others’ faces. “However, we need your help to finish this. The last guardian is Thaddius,” he added, sharing a significant look with Alayne.

“Thaddius,” she moaned softly. “The poor thing.” Zerith stared at her and Ger’alin looked confused. “I didn’t think they’d finish building it.”

“It’s there. And, we’re going to need all of us to pull it down.”

“What is it?” Ger’alin asked.

“It’s a giant construct built like a strong man and housing the souls of women and children,” Aelonius explained. “It was built from their flesh and bones. I remember when the plan was being devised. They were afraid that so many souls would be difficult to control.”

“It’s probably half-mad,” Alayne muttered, shivering. “Such creations as I saw back when...back then generally were. But then, Kel’Thuzad is the strongest necromancer in the Scourge. His will is surpassed only by that of the Lich King’s. He probably could keep control over the many souls housed in that flesh golem.”

The paladin and the priest glanced at each other uneasily. A construct built out of the souls of women and children? Half-mad? “Is there any other way...” Zerith began.

“No. It’s standing right over the switch. He’s got two guardians with him as well. We’ll have to kill all three of them in order to activate the switch without setting off the alarms. It’s been lucky that we haven’t set any off yet. He’s the last one left standing before we can make our way into Kel’Thuzad’s sanctum.”

“Then lead on,” Ger’alin sighed. “Let’s take this Thaddius down and put him out of his misery.”

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Ber’lon was relieved when he saw the others drop out of the pipe in Gulth’s chamber. Sprinting over to them, he motioned for Alayne and the other leaders of the Disorder of Azeroth to come off to the side with him where they had a hasty conference. He explained to them what little he knew of such constructs as Thaddius. Ger’alin stood quietly for a few minutes before he began calling off people to split into two groups in order to attack the guardians. “Those coils they’re next to,” he muttered, pointing into the room. “What are they doing?”

“I suspect they’re keeping Thaddius docile. But those creatures won’t let us just walk up to him. They’re set there to let him go loose if anyone breaks in this far. There’s probably a spell or a passcode you can use to get around them but, of course, none of us know it.”

“I’ll go with the left group. Tau’re, take the right group? Let’s move up together and try to make quick work of them.” The group split into its assigned halves and began moving up the ramps. When Ger’alin saw that Tau’re was ready, he lifted his arm, lowered it quickly, and ran in to attack the hulking hunchbacked creature guarding the electrical coil.

The creature lunged at him, leering, its insane face twisted in amusement. With long arms and meaty hands, it swung at Ger’alin, trying to knock him off the raised platform and into the foul waters covering the bottom of the room. Ger’alin risked a glance over the edge and quickly moved back as close to the middle of the platform as he could. Bones floated beneath them and he had little doubt that whatever was in that green and brackish water would be fatal in short order. He smashed away at the golem, satisfied whenever he heard cracks or saw chunks of pallid flesh smack on the floor. The golem’s face twisted in rage and he grabbed Ger’alin in one mighty fist and threw the paladin clear across the room. Ger’alin thought he saw Tau’re passing him in mid-air headed the other direction. Both men hit the

walls on the opposite ends of the room. Ger'alın shook his head to clear it and then quickly engaged the other monster, blasting it with his hammer and with the Light. His head still rang and his body felt bruised and battered from slamming into the wall. Lightning arced and shot from the coil behind them, nearly zapping him more than once. He could hear Alayne shouting something on the other side of the room but could not make out what it was. Then, again, without warning, just when he had a clear shot at the creature's head, the golem hefted him and threw him away.

"This is madness," he muttered as he sailed through the air, trying to twist himself like a cat so he could control his landing.

"This is Naxxramas," Tau're muttered back as he passed the paladin again. Both fighters landed with another bone-jarring thud and returned to the fight. Ger'alın's armor was dented in several places from his hard landings and he thought he would need to find a good blacksmith to have it repaired. Flailing wildly with his hammer, he managed to smash the golem's throwing arm, preventing himself from being sent on yet another flight of fancy across the massive chamber. The golem roared in anger and increased the pace of his attacks. However, the sum of his wounds was taking its toll and, moments later, he collapsed in a pile of quivering flesh. The sickly sweet smell of burning skin and hair filled Ger'alın's nostrils as his wife and Diami, from opposite ends of the room, did their best to ensure that the golems would never rise again. Ger'alın jogged to the back of the platform and, with a running leap, landed lightly on the platform holding Thaddius just as the coils overloaded and began sparking violently, blue light and lightning bolts arcing all across the ceiling.

Thaddius shuddered and began looking around in confusion as the sparks hit its flesh. The dull eyes began glowing with life and its metal jaw creaked and groaned as it opened and closed its mouth. The giant construct flexed its muscles and stomped its feet, the platform trembling so violently that Ger'alın nearly fell on his knees. "You are too late. I...must...obey!" it roared in a voice that sounded like the despairing wails of many people.

Ger'alın watched as dark lightning seemed to streak over the construct, dulling the life in its eyes but making it grow larger and more violent. Thaddius stomped over to the nearest person it could find and lifted a gigantic fist. Ger'alın rushed over and stood over the shaken Jemuya, calling on the Light to form a shield the construct's fist couldn't smash. Thaddius's fist bounced off the shield with a resounding crack and Ger'alın reached out to the Light once more, using it to purify the ground and air around him and causing the monster considerable pain. Then, lifting his own shield and relying on his own strength once more, Ger'alın began to fight.

The others made their way off the platforms and quickly joined in the battle. Magi flung spells, hunters sent missiles, and warlocks cast curses and hexes at the enormous flesh-and-metal being. For a moment, Thaddius seemed confused. Screams and cries that sounded like the anguished shrieks of tormented women and children filled the air as the bolts landed. Thaddius turned and began stomping towards the ranged attackers but Ger'alın jumped back in front of him and channeled holy energy into the floor, slowing Thaddius and causing him yet more pain. The giant construct sought the cause of his torment and focused his attention on Ger'alın, ignoring the others while they fired away. The melee attackers surged forward, nipping at the creature's heels. Ger'alın did his best to ward off blows from the creature's iron-knuckled fists while Tau're and the others tried to form a human totem pole so they could hamstring the giant. The magi and hunters shifted their focus from the arms and legs to the chest and head, praying that one of them would be able to land a telling blow. Their spells and arrows did little more than annoy the giant golem. He continued to swoop down, bending at his waist, increasing the pace of his attack against the paladin holding him off from the others. Ger'alın's shield started to buckle beneath the blows and he was reminded of the desperate fight against the pit lord Brutallus. He couldn't move the shield aside an inch to

find an opening that would let him climb up the golem like he had then. Glancing between the monster's legs, he saw the human totem pole swaying and saw Ber'lon make a desperate leap. Grabbing on to the monster's belt, he plunged his sword into Thaddius's spine.

Thaddius roared as his legs buckled and Ger'alín heaved a sigh of relief. Swarming over the creature, the melee forces stabbed, smashed, and hacked at the Scourge giant. The ranged forces ran in closer, hurling their spells quickly and with a boost of power spawned by the rush of victory close to hand. After a few more moments of frenzied and bloody combat, Thaddius shuddered and went limp. The pitiful moans of women and children ceased and Ger'alín could have sworn he heard "Thank you," coming from dozens of ghostly voices. He sank to the ground, shivering from the exertion of battle, his arms still ringing from the powerful punches he had fended off. Meanwhile, Alayne hastened to the switch and activated it. A portal leading back to the entrance formed in the air nearby.

"That was terrible," Ger'alín gasped when he found the breath for words. "How could anyone...even the Scourge..."

"Don't ask questions that have no answers," Ber'lon muttered, still scraping grime from his double-edged runeblade. "Things like that," he continued, glancing at the prone giant, "are just another reason why we need to clean this place out and use it to go against the Lich King."

Alayne, overhearing the conversation, nodded numbly, her mind elsewhere. She still had a feeling that the final confrontation against Arthas should wait. The belief that something strange, something alien, something yet more foul and fatal than the Scourge itself lurked in Northrend filled her thoughts. She just wished she could uncover what it was. "Let's go," she said hollowly. "Let's clear this place out and then we'll decide what to do next."

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The platform above the doorway glowed solid icy blue when they stepped through the portal from Thaddius's chamber. "It's been activated," Alayne muttered. "All we have to do is step on it and we'll be transported into the inner sanctum."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Ger'alín asked. "Let's get moving."

Alayne reached out and grabbed him by the arm, nearly tripping him as he pulled her forward. "Sapphiron," she explained. "Kel'Thuzad's personal guardian. He might be waiting for us when we go in there. We should all move together quickly and be prepared for a battle against the bone dragon the minute we reach the sanctum."

Ger'alín sighed and nodded in agreement. His wife was more than likely right. Taking firm hold of his impatience, he waited for the others to finish coming through the portal, warding them away from the blue platform until the entire Disorder of Azeroth was assembled once more. Alayne and Ber'lon drew Ger'alín, Zerith, and Callie off to the side and explained what little they knew of the one-time blue dragon. Pooling their knowledge, they settled on several plans. "If he's in there waiting for us, we'll rush in and try to keep to his sides," Ger'alín decided. "If he's not in there, we'll move on through and see if we can find Kel'Thuzad and the control room. If he shows up later, we'll rush him unless he's in the air. If he's in the air, I want every one with any ranged talent to focus on the wings and bring him down where we can get a good shot at him."

"Too bad we can't get Mordenai and the other dragons in here," Callie lamented. "They'd make it much easier."

"Full grown dragons wouldn't fit in the doorway," Zerith snorted. "Not unless they were shapeshifted and from what Alayne's told me, it takes a few minutes for them to change forms and they do get disoriented. Not exactly the best way to begin a battle."

"I know," the rogue muttered. "I was just saying."

"I trust we have the power to bring down a dragon," Ger'alın said, trying to cheer them a bit. "I mean, the humans in Dustwallow brought Onyxia down when she started raiding nearby settlements. And I'm sure I heard something about the dwarves taking on Nefarian when they came across him in Blackrock Mountain."

"Let's just get going before we really have a chance to think about it too much," Alayne suggested. "Arthas did kill him once, though. It can be done."

They returned to the Disorder of Azeroth and quickly explained the strategy. Then, moving as one mass, they ascended the walkway to the upper blue platform. Magic surged through the air and Ger'alın felt himself being carried on its strange currents from the entryway to somewhere else. When his vision cleared, he gazed out on a vast chamber. Piles of snow dotted the stone floor and mists of cold spray hung in the air. The chamber was icy; Ger'alın's breath rose like fog in front of his face. Mixed in with the snow around the room were bones. A great dragon skull sat in the center of the room atop a blue circle.

"Looks like he's already dead," Ger'alın muttered, pointing at the skull. Alayne nodded uncertainly.

"He could be," she replied, "but how and why? He was under the complete control of the Lich King. He was Kel'Thuzad's loyal guardian. Why would he have been killed and his bones left in the inner sanctum?"

"Perhaps control slipped at the dragon remember his true self?" Zerith suggested. "And perhaps, after he was killed, Kel'Thuzad decorated this room as a warning to any who might challenge him in the future. Seeing a huge dragon's skull and knowing that the person who killed that dragon can and will just as easily kill or destroy you would be an effective deterrent."

"It could be," Alayne said, the words being dragged out of her. "Still, be careful. Kel'Thuzad is nearby. I can sense strong magic in this room."

The group walked down the small ramp and into the room, everyone glancing about warily for sign of an impending attack. Ger'alın held his shield in front of him and his mace to the side, ready to strike hard at anything that came his way. He started to feel the beginnings of relief as they reached the dragon's skull. Then, apprehension overwhelmed him as a wind picked up, swirling around them. The skull lifted off the floor and the bones strewn about the room began hurtling towards the center. Ger'alın gestured for the others to make their way to the right side of the room and watched as they ducked and dodged the flying bones. In a swirl of icy cold wind, the bones reassembled themselves into a dragon. The eyesockets of the skull blazed with a fierce blue light as the dragon regarded the intruders calmly. Then, spreading its bony wings for leverage, the dragon lifted himself up and brought his head down, intending to finish off the man in front of him quickly before using his fatal breath attack against the others. Ger'alın threw his shield up and grimaced as his shoulder nearly popped out of the socket from the force of the dragon's blow. Shards of bone rained down on him from where the dragon had broken several teeth on the metal shield. The dragon lifted his head and shook it to clear the ringing sensation. Ger'alın moved his shield to the side and slammed his hammer into the dragon's snout. With a roar of pained anger, Sapphiron began hammering away, swiping with claws, snapping his still-sharp teeth, and buffeting Ger'alın with his wings. The others, safely on the dragon's rear flank, began chipping away at its hind legs, hoping to weaken them so much the dragon would not be able to lift off and fly. The magi formed an arc on the side of the room and began hurling their strongest spells, focusing on the dragon's wings and flank, working to keep the great creature grounded while Ger'alın held its attention.

Ger'alın barely lifted his shield back in time when he saw the dragon lift its head and open its mouth. Drawing in the frigid air, the dragon exhaled a mist of bone-chilling frost

upon the paladin. Ger'alın felt the Light surround him, keeping his blood from freezing in his veins as the dragon launched its lethal attack. The dragon exhaled longer than Ger'alın would have thought possible and then, when he thought his target must be frozen solid, swiped idly with a claw, stunned and annoyed to find that the paladin could block the blow and smack his snout again. Flapping nearly-useless wings, Sapphiron boosted himself into the air and flew to the other side of the room, regarding his opponents with grudging respect. Calling on the dark magics the dragon had retained after his death, he summoned a massive blizzard on top of the heads of the attackers. The cold sapped their strength and the wind and snow made it difficult for them to get out of the storm before it froze them to death. Exhaling once more, Sapphiron waited until the blizzard abated before landing, fully expecting to find a mass of dead he could show his master.

"We w-w-won't g-g-go down s-so eas-s-sily," Ger'alın taunted, his teeth chattering and clacking wildly. In the heart of the storm, the Disorder of Azeroth had called on every power they could to keep them alive while the blizzard pelted them. Using snow drifts, they had blocked most of the dragon's breath attack. With the spell over, they were quickly regaining mobility once again.

Alayne eyed the dragon and threw a well-aimed firebolt at its wings. Calling in all of the heat she could muster, she extended the spell, causing it to dehydrate the bones that let the dragon fly at all. With a brittle snap, one of Sapphiron's wings folded uselessly against his side and he plummeted to the floor. One of his legs crumbled beneath him and he listed to the side, trying to use his wing to hold him upright. Seeing their enemy weakened, the Disorder of Azeroth redoubled their efforts. Ger'alın grabbed hold of the dragon's snout and pulled himself up its face, burying his hammer in the dragon's skull, pummeling away with his mace until the dragon lurched, shuddered, and then collapsed to the floor, a lifeless pile of bones once more. Ger'alın climbed down, wincing as the spiky protrusions scraped him beneath his armor. The great double-doors leading into the inner sanctum were being pryed open on silent hinges by Ber'lon and Aelonius.

"Just one more fight and we should be free of this," the paladin muttered.

"Yes," Alayne sighed, shivering as she felt an icy presence drawing near. "Perhaps one more fight will finish it all. Let's move."

Gathering the others around quickly, they began making their way down the sumptuously appointed hallway. Thick carpeting kept the chill of the stone floor from reaching their feet and brightly burning torches provided both warmth and light. Rich tapestries, masterworks from human and elven lands, hung down the dark stone walls, scenes of hunting and glorious battle oddly interspersed with the banner of the Scourge. It was almost as if the lord of Naxxramas were of two minds; one that reveled in his life as a human mage while another gloried in the dark depths of his post-mortem rise to power in the Scourge.

"Your forces are nearly marshaled to strike back against your enemies, my liege," a deep yet weedy voice said, the tone larded with obsequence.

"So, we will eradicate the Alliance and the Horde, then the rest of Azeroth will fall before the might of my army," a voice that sounded like a snake rustling in dried leaves mused.

"Yes, Master. The time of their ultimate demise grows close...What is this?" the floating lich demanded, spying the intruders making their way down his hall. The lich's eyes widened in icy shock at the sight.

"Invaders...here?! DESTROY them, Kel'Thuzad! Naxxramas must not fall!" the Lich King shouted, a tinge of desperation in his voice.

“As you command, Master,” the lich bowed to the unseen but potently felt presence. “Who dares violate the sanctity of my domain? Be warned, all who trespass here are doomed,” Kel’Thuzad said threateningly.

Ger’alin began running, the others following closely behind him. Through the arched doorway and into the room they hastened, hoping to make quick work of the servant of Arthas and fearful of finding the Lich King right behind him. Instead, they saw no sign of the Lich King himself though his presence seemed strong in the room. As the group made their way inside the chamber, Kel’Thuzad slammed the portcullis on the doorway down, trapping them inside with him. Lifting one skeletal hand, he called in hordes of skeletal warriors, abominations, and dreadful banshees who began rushing the attackers while the lich cackled madly. “Minions, servants, soldiers of the cold dark, obey the call of Kel’Thuzad!” the lich roared, pointing at the living invaders who had penetrated his inner sanctum.

“To me!” Ger’alin shouted, flailing about with his hammer and shield. “Rally to me!”

The Disorder of Azeroth fought their way through the streams of Scourge separating them and formed a ring in the middle of the fray. Keeping the ranged fighters and the healers in the center of the circle, the melee pushed outwards, forming a near-impenetrable perimeter. Spells, arrows, and knives flew through the air, wreaking havoc on the forces Kel’Thuzad had summoned in to aid him. The swords and maces of the front-line fighters cut and smashed through the rest of the Scourge, thinning their numbers. Ger’alin channeled all the divine power he could into spells that made the abominations roar in pain and caused the skeletons to collapse in a pile of useless bones. The banshees shrieked, their mournful screams raising the hair on the back of Ger’alin’s neck while he tried to dodge their icy talons. For long moments, the battle shifted advantage back and forth between the living and the unliving. Then, just as Ger’alin began to despair, the tide turned firmly in the Disorder of Azeroth’s favor. The portals through which the undead had been streaming grew empty and the Disorder of Azeroth continued to thin the numbers of those attacking them. Kel’Thuzad snarled, knowing he had run out of bodies to hurl against the attackers and that soon, he alone would stand between them and control of the floating Scourge citadel. Still, he cast his mightiest spells on the Scourge warriors, strengthening them, healing some of the damage that had been done, and increasing their resistance to most of the magic being hurled against them. The Disorder of Azeroth redoubled its efforts, pushing more power behind their spells while the melee forces worked themselves into a frenzy of fevered combat. Finally, the last of the Scourge fell with a liquid thud and Kel’Thuzad was left with no one to hide behind.

Ger’alin and Tau’re rushed the lich before he could pull off another spell. Powering his mace with the holy power of the Light, Ger’alin hammered at Kel’Thuzad’s floating form. When the servant of the Lich King tried to float away, the paladin poured divine fury into the ground, freezing Kel’Thuzad in place and causing the lich’s eyes to heat up with the pain of a power he opposed.

“Pray for mercy!” Kel’Thuzad shrieked as he lifted his hand and called upon the arcane forces he had wielded quite masterfully as a living man. Bolts of frost and snow rained down on the Disorder of Azeroth, chilling them. Their blood began to cool, running more sluggishly through their veins as the lich continued to press his icy assault. Zerith and Dar’ja did their best to ward off the cold and return strength and vigor to their friends but the toll of many battles in a short time was wearing them all down. Exhaustion and pain painted many faces as the floating skeletal lord threw spells around the room. Alayne stared at the lich, watching his mouth carefully. When she was sure of the incantation, she began matching his words, hurling bolts of ice just as powerful as the ones he was using. Whenever they seemed to be about to be overwhelmed by the force of his barrage, she would reverse the incantation, effectively blocking him from casting. Sweat beaded down her forehead even in the chill air

as the effort it took to keep him from casting or to use his own spells against him wore on her.

Kel'Thuzad seemed to be weathering the encounter little better than his attackers. After long minutes of battle, he lifted both arms. "Master," he cried out, "I require aid!"

"Very well," Arthas's tired, dead voice rang out through the chamber. "Warriors of the frozen wastes, rise up! I command you to fight, kill, and die for your master. Let none survive!"

Portals opened on both sides of the room. Giant nerubians with thick plated armor guarding their bodies came forth. Tau're and Ber'lon moved quickly, intercepting them, preventing them from reaching the others. Ger'alain started to move towards them to aid them.

"Stay there!" Ber'lon bellowed. "Focus everything you have on the lich lord! If we can kill him, we can worry about these bugs later!"

The 'bugs' seemed annoyed at such a callous disregard for their ability and began increasing the pace and strength of their attacks against the weary warriors. Ger'alain gnashed his teeth, torn by indecision while Kel'Thuzad cackled in victory. Calling upon the Light for one last burst of strength, Ger'alain unleashed a torrent of holy magic on the skeletal lich. Golden light flared around him, purifying the ground, flooding the Scourge lord and giving fresh heart to those around him. Alayne continued to reverse his spells, focusing on keeping the servant of the Lich King from doing any further harm to the Disorder of Azeroth while the forces arrayed against him pressed harder, reaching deep within themselves to find reserves of strength they had never yet tapped. Kel'Thuzad focused on Alayne, annoyed that such a child was rendering him harmless. His eyes widened in shock as he recognized the girl who had once been a death knight; Tal'ar's Daughter. "You!" he roared, pointing at her with his final strength. He may not live to kill her friends but he would put an end to this traitor. "Your petty magics are no challenge to the might of the Scourge!"

Alayne felt something snap inside of her. Then, she began shrieking in pain as her blood boiled in her veins and her muscles turned to water, depositing her on the floor. Kel'Thuzad turned back to the others, desperation and determination driving him onward to defeat these invaders. Ger'alain, hearing his wife's screams and then the terrible silence that came after, roared and poured every ounce of energy he had left into a frenzied attack. He hurled the Light against the unnatural life-force bound to the skeletal frame, wrenching it loose. The others followed his example, throwing their most powerful and fatal spells at the lich.

With a shriek of rage and defeat, Kel'Thuzad shouted, "Do... not... rejoice! Your victory is a hollow one, for I shall return with powers beyond your imagining!" Then, with a shudder, he collapsed into a heap that melted away on the winds of the same unnatural magic that had borne him into the air.

Ger'alain turned to take a step in the direction Alayne had been. His knees buckled beneath him. The portals through which the nerubians Arthas had sent reopened and the bug-like creatures scurried back through them. *The Lich King had obviously decided not to expend more forces in a battle already lost*, Ger'alain thought wearily. Zerith trotted over to where the paladin lay gasping for air and unable to lift so much as his head from the floor. His armor felt as if it weighed ten times what it normally did and his heart was beating faster than it ever had before.

"Alayne?" Ger'alain asked the priest as he bent over the fallen fighter.

"She'll be fine with a little rest," the priest answered. "He did to her what she was doing to him; reversed her magic within her. Nothing fatal. Just extremely painful."

"That's good. Ber'lon," Ger'alain said, his voice nearly breaking as he tried to raise it. The death knight walked over to the paladin on wobbly legs, exhaustion nearly overtaking him as well. "Find the control room."

“We’ll need rest,” Ber’lon muttered. “If I found it now, I could do little more than sleep there.”

“He’s right,” Zerith sighed. “Let’s just try to find more congenial quarters inside this unholy place and get some rest before we work out how to control it. After all, clearing Naxxramas and taking it for our own is quite enough work for one day.”