

Ger'alín lay curled up around his wife, glad of the thick blankets they had found in the soldiers' quarters. The amenities provided by the military quarter were Spartan by most standards but by those of the Disorder of Azeroth, they were luxurious. Plenty of beds, even communal baths and showers, and a well-stocked kitchen were included. The Lich King may have relied mostly on the dead to supplement his forces but he did provide for any living servants foolish enough to join the Scourge.

Alayne shivered against him as he lifted the blanket covering them both to pull it off her face. She had slept soundly for a day and a half after the battle with Kel'Thuzad. He himself had slept almost as long before Zerith had dragged him out of the bed to settle on the new position for Naxxramas. Highlord Darion Morgraine had been there, quietly amused at the paladin and the priest bent over a map while they argued about the route his death knights would take to put the fortress in position. He'd been less amused when Ger'alín had ordered those same death knights not to use the defensive or offensive capabilities of the ziggurat when the Alliance, seeing the Scourge base begin to move, launched a hasty attack. The dragons had been forewarned about the events that had taken place and had, wisely, refused to carry the Alliance in their aerial assault. "You're not going to start a war for us!" Ger'alín raged at the death knights. "Leave those... whatever they are alone!" he gestured at the strange mechanical flying contraptions buzzing close to the citadel.

As the fortress floated high above the clouds, hiding itself from view in the thick mists of the night sky, Ger'alín had relaxed. He was confident that, once word reached Garrosh's ears of the Horde victory over Naxxramas, he would be able to convince the Mag'har chieftain to give up Wintergrasp and its titanic fortress for the safety of a floating citadel. His sole condition to allowing that, though, would be that Garrosh call off all attacks against the Alliance and agree to meet with their leaders under the flag of truce. If the Alliance would not agree to end the attacks, then the Horde would reposition itself in Icecrown and the Storm Peaks, well away from Alliance reach.

"It won't work," Alayne mumbled in her sleep, opening her eyes a crack and rolling them back to look at Ger'alín. "General Fordring will never agree to it."

"If the end is that we all wind up serving the Scourge, I'm sure he'll agree to it. He'll have no choice."

"Ger'alín..."

"Didn't he accept exile for freeing Eitrigg once? If the choice is to do what is right or to stand with the Alliance, he'll do what is right."

"But he's not the one in command of the Alliance. Bolvar Fordragon was."

"I know that but Fordring's words will surely carry weight with..."

"...those who still, in their heart of hearts, consider him a traitor? I think not."

"You sound as if you almost don't want this to work," he sighed, rolling to lie on his back. She turned on her other side, facing him, and lay her cheek against his chest.

"I just don't want you to get your hopes up too much that you're going to be able to negotiate a treaty between the Alliance and the Horde. Garrosh probably won't give up his fight for control of Wintergrasp. The resources there would grant him greater independence from Thrall's oversight. He wants that as much as he wants to kill every human ever born. Varian Wrynn is not going to be reasonable just because we've killed those responsible for Fordragon's murder. He wants to kill every orc ever born even if it's not going to bring his father back. And, no, neither one of them is going to listen to a speech about how the Lich King is the true threat. Out of sight is out of mind with some people."

"Either they'll see how it must be or they won't," he said simply. "I'm going to do my best to make them see the truth and, if they refuse to, then I'm done with them. I'll send a report to Thrall telling him he can't trust Garrosh alone in Northrend. I'll send a message to

Jania Proudmoore telling her that her people are about to head straight over a cliff. Someone somewhere will listen and, one day, we will have peace.”

“I hope you’re right,” she whispered softly. “But I fear you’re wrong.”

“Why? Why do you fear I am wrong? Talk to me, woman. Something is troubling you and the more you try to stay quiet about it, the more it worries me.”

Alayne lapsed into silence for a while as she gathered her thoughts. Ger’alin shook her gently, wondering if she had fallen back asleep. She turned her head, propping her chin on his chest, and met his gaze. “I’ve been having dreams again,” she began. “There’s something here, something close by, that wants war between the living. It wants to see the Scourge triumph because the Scourge will be easier to beat back than the living. Something that sees the living as its prison-keepers. Or, perhaps it would be better to say that it sees our deaths as a way out of its prison. I’m not sure. But, something terrible is here, something worse than the Scourge. I think even the Lich King knows it and fears it. That’s why he’s doing his best to shore up his defenses.”

“Any clue where or what it might be?”

“Close,” she muttered, her eyes unfocusing. “Some place that is ancient, even by the standards of dragons. But it’s close. The feeling of something wrong has grown stronger ever since we captured Naxxramas. I thought it was something in here but…”

“So that’s why you were searching this place from top to bottom when you were supposed to be resting!”

“According to you, I’d just spent close to thirty-six hours sleeping. Do you think I would sleep more after that long a nap?” she growled softly. “Besides, I was hungry and Ber’lon’s a good cook.”

“How would you know that?”

“Because he made those omlets I’m always trying to teach you how to make only you put enough cheese in them to have them qualify as cheeselets instead. At any rate, yes, that’s why I was searching Naxxramas. I thought that perhaps the Scourge had captured the wrongness or an agent of it and had it imprisoned here. With their magic being removed and replaced by our own, perhaps that’s why the sense of foulness grew stronger. But, I was not able to find anything out of the ordinary – for the Scourge,” she added hastily, seeing a slightly outraged look on her husband’s face. “The things I found were only out of the ordinary for us. For the Scourge, they were perfectly normal.”

“‘Perfectly normal’ she says,” he muttered sourly. “You’re mad.”

“No. Just… I’ve seen too much,” she shivered, huddling back under the covers. Ger’alin fished her out and held her against his shoulder, patting her on the back. “It is terrible what they do to those they capture who won’t turn to their service willingly. But, it’s simply what they do. And, I have a feeling we’ll see worse if we keep persuing whatever it is I fear awaits us all.”

“As soon as you find a solid lead on it,” he whispered, pressing his lips against the crown of her head, “as soon as you know more about it, we’ll set aside everything and go after it. That I promise. This will not be another Black Temple.”

Alayne nodded drowsily and soon fell back asleep listening to Ger’alin’s strong and steady heartbeat. He remained awake only a moment longer, wondering what it was she could foresee and wishing she didn’t have to face these visions alone.

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“Bad news?” Zerith asked mildly when he heard Ger’alin’s fist slam against a table and the paladin begin muttering oaths that would have scorched the ears of anyone other than his wife had they heard them.

“Garrosh is a thick-skulled, dim-witted, stubborn fool of an orc who is hell-bound and determined to get us all killed!”

“Like I said,” Zerith sighed. “Bad news.”

“Listen to this! ‘I regret to inform you but any actions taken against my orders will result in execution for treason. I am the Warchief’s sole agent in Northrend and the only one with permission to speak in his name. Claims to the contrary will result in execution for treason. You are hereby ordered to convey your floating citadel to the northern part of Wintergrasp in order to participate in gaining control of this strategic area. Failure to comply with my orders will result in death. Garrosh Hellscream.’ He sent this load of crap,” Ger’alin continued, balling the letter up and throwing it across the room, “to every last one of his commanders. Only a letter from Thrall explaining the truth of the situation will rectify this and that could take weeks to get here! By then, Garrosh could have very well started a war with the Alliance that Thrall will not be able to back out of!”

“What are you going to do?”

“The only thing I can do,” Ger’alin grimaced. “Go and beat the ever-living snot out of my adopted brother. Maybe then he’ll see reason. Failing that, he’ll be unconscious and at my mercy and I have little mercy for fools right now.”

“Alayne still hasn’t learned anything more, has she? That’s what really has you on edge.”

“It’s the dragons,” Ger’alin muttered, waving his hand. “They don’t want to talk about anything that they think of as ancient. At least not with a woman who would barely be an egg if she were a dragon. Alayne’s getting tired of being told she’s too young or too ignorant or too anything for something. She actually threw a plate at Krasus yesterday when he started in on the garbage. Most amusing thing I’ve seen in weeks. She threw it at him and, if she’d been able to, she would have called it back before it landed against his face. She seemed confused as to whether she was angry or in awe of him,” he chuckled. “Still, it was only meat sauce on the plate and he was already wearing red robes.”

“I’ll take over talking to the dragons from now on,” Zerith winced.

“Mordenaku had it smoothed over and he was almost as much in shock as she was. Leave her to handle it. She speaks their language more than you do. At least, she can get them to talk about spells that cover Northrend. The dragons have suggested that, if we need a fall back position, we look at Sholazar. The only issue is that the Forsaken can’t cross through the shield blocking it.”

“A shield that prevents the undead from entering...” Zerith mused. “I definitely want to send a team to check that out.”

“Alayne and I will go,” Ger’alin offered. “She’s your best magi with Diami unable to get through it and Jez’ral and Mir’el being away.”

“Alayne, you, Tau’re, Grogna. Take Diami and Callie as well. I know they can’t cross the border with you but perhaps they can work something out.”

“I want to make a last attempt at getting Garrosh to listen to reason as well on this trip,” Ger’alin added. “Either before or after. Probably before, though.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea at this point,” Zerith sighed after a lengthy pause. “He’s threatening to cut your head off. Let him cool for a bit or let him work the heat out of his blood with fighting in Wintergrasp. Don’t argue with me. The last thing I need is you being executed for mutiny or whatever he’s going to charge you with.”

“Fine, I’ll stay out of Wintergrasp,” Ger’alin grimaced. “I’ll go talk with the others about a trip over to Sholazar. Maybe that will take Alayne’s mind off of whatever it is that is troubling her lately.”

“She’s still having those dreams forewarning of something worse than the Scourge?”

“Yes. That’s another reason I want to head to Wintergrasp. She said she dreamed of a structure that was built on a scale unimaginable. Something that made the gates of Ironforge look puny and insignificant. She mentioned magic that even the dragons couldn’t control or wield. That makes me think ‘titans’ which makes me think ‘Wintergrasp.’”

“Do you think the fighting there is going to help this...whatever it is?”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t either. She warned me not to be so worried about finding it that I ran down the wrong track. She’s afraid of another Black Temple.”

“So am I,” Zerith muttered. “The last thing we need is a repeat of that. Look, if you find a sign that whatever it is is in Wintergrasp, go there with my blessing. But, until then, just go to Sholazar, scout it out, and report back here in a fortnight. In the meantime, I’ll be sending scouts out on dragonback to see if they can get a feel for a good entry point into Icecrown. If we could disguise Naxxramas as something else, we could just float over it ourselves.”

“Disguising something this big would be quite a feat. I’ll be back in two weeks,” the paladin grinned, chuckling at the thought of extensive renovations to the Scourge necropolis.

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Alayne gasped as she walked directly through the shield into Sholazar. It felt warm as it brushed against her skin but it did not impede her in any way. Callie and Diami, on the other hand, were throwing themselves against it, unable to get so much as a fingernail across. Callie rapped on the shield with her fist, making a faint ringing noise. Alayne reached back through the shield and grasped Callie’s wrist. Her own hand slid through the shield easily but Callie’s hand slammed against it painfully enough to make the Forsaken wince.

“You study it from there,” Alayne said, raising her voice to make certain she was heard.

“We will,” Diami promised as she removed several objects from her belt pouch. “If we find a way through it, we’ll send up a flare,” she added.

“It’s warm in here,” Ger’alin muttered, scratching at his beard.

“Then you can shave that thing off,” Alayne grinned.

“I’ll just have to go right back out there,” he said, pointing towards the shield. “No point in shaving it when I’ll just grow it right back.”

“You could wear a scarf like I do,” she huffed. “Then you wouldn’t need that thing.”

“A scarf gets caught in my armor too easily,” he said absently. “I promise you that I will shave the minute we get back to Nagrand.”

Alayne muttered something beneath her breath that he decided to pretend he hadn’t understood. If he thought she was serious about that, he’d have to learn to sleep with his eyes open. “I wonder what causes this shield to exist,” she said after several moments of silence.

“Whatever it is, it must be to the good,” Grognek said, pointing around. “It’s protected nature here from the bitter cold. Look at how...alive everything here is.”

“It reminds me of Stranglethorn only without the bit where I was three sheets to the wind,” Ger’alin added. “And I can never go back to that inn. Life-time ban.”

“Sounds like you had a good time,” Grognek laughed. Ger’alin flushed, remembering that the reason he couldn’t go back to that inn was because of the shouting match between him and Tasia the morning after. Tau’re, who knew the whole story, shook his head warningly at Grognek and Alayne stared at the ground. She knew enough to know that she didn’t really want to know more or to let him dwell on the time he had believed her to be dead.

“No bars here, I think,” Tau’re said. “But, let’s move further in and see what we can find.”

The group made its way further beyond the border of the shield. They paused to glance over their shoulders every few minutes, wondering if the Forsaken had managed to figure a way to penetrate the shield. When the border was out of sight, they pressed on, following a river, searching for signs of life other than themselves. Once or twice, the group thought they spied strange wolf-men or gremlins lurking in the thick shade cast by the towering trees or the massive, monolithic mountains that sprang up suddenly in front of them. Alayne paused at the foot of one of the tall cylindrical mountains and stared up at the sky, shading her eyes with a hand, lost in thought. Ger'alın shushed the others harshly whenever they seemed to grow bored with watching the woman stare at the clear blue sky. He could tell that she was reaching out, testing and sensing the currents of magic, trying to learn more about this strange land.

"There's corruption to the west," she muttered. "Grognaak, Tau're, go back and find Diami and Callie and tell them to follow the shield west. There's a weakness there. Perhaps they can enter Sholazar at that point instead of trying to break in through the south."

The tauren looked at each other. Ger'alın glared at them until they shrugged and walked back the direction they had come. "There's some kind of extremely powerful magic here," she said absently, as if speaking to herself. "It's not arcane. It's not natural magic like druids and shaman wield. It certainly isn't fel or necromantic."

"It's not divine either," he added softly. "I sense no ill-will from it but it's not the Light."

"Let me think," she sighed, sitting down and leaning against the cool dirt wall of the cylinder. "What do we know of Sholazar? That it borders Icecrown, the taunka consider it holy, and the Forsaken can't enter it. We've not been here an hour so it's extremely possible that something lives here and that it doesn't like anything un-natural. That something would have to be unimaginably powerful, though, to raise a shield of this magnitude that effectively keeps the undead out. None of the races I've ever heard of could do it. Not even the naaru, I think, though they would be the ones who could come closest. I wish I hadn't sent Grognaak off now," she sighed. "Maybe he could sense something about this. All I can sense is that it feels nothing like the magic I've felt from shaman and druids."

Ger'alın left her in silence a while longer, recognizing the expression on her face as one of intense thought and knowing that to disturb her now would result in being impressed at her ability to swear worse than he could. He glanced around whenever he heard the thick undergrowth rustle, half-expecting to see either the tauren or a monster coming to join them.

"A titan's playground," she said, lifting her head and smacking a fist against her knee as the answer came to her. "I can't remember where I read it, but one of the elven magi who came here mentioned a vast basin, much like Un'Goro, filled with powerful magic. He said evidence existed that it had been home to some of the titan's creations and that the force that kept it green and lush even in the far north was a remnant of their magic. It's untappable by any living being, save for maybe a dragon aspect like Alexstrasza. I wonder..." she muttered, reaching to clasp the bangle the dragonqueen had given her. "Perhaps she could come and..."

"Let's not bother her short of an absolute emergency," Ger'alın said quickly, reaching over to stop her hand from clasping the bangle. "I'm certain she wouldn't be happy being asked to fly all the way over here just to refuse to answer your questions because you're not a dragon."

Alayne opened her mouth to answer but Grognaak and Tau're returned. "They're heading west," Tau're answered. "We should do the same. We could meet them there and it would give us a chance to cover more of this place."

“Of course,” Alayne nodded, pushing herself up off the ground and dusting the dirt off her robes. “But first, Grognak, what do you sense when you try to analyze the magic surrounding this pillar?”

Grognak stared at her as if he had not understood the language she used. “I sense the wind, the water, the earth, and the fire in the amounts they should be. All is in balance here. Life flourishes and the elements are strong and at peace. There is no war between fire and water, wind and earth.”

“Yes,” she said slowly, nearly clucking in frustration, “but what about the magic surrounding this pillar? Surely you can feel it?”

Grognak shook his head, his long, braided beard swaying with his irritation. He’d spoken with magi at length before but had never yet managed to find the words to convey the difference between “magic” and “elemental service.” Ger’alin could sense a fight brewing if he let Alayne keep pressing the shaman like an intelligent specimen but Grognak sighed and answered before the paladin could step in.

“I sense great power,” Grognak said simply. “A power that holds the world in place. A life that gives of itself freely to sustain all life. I sense a calmness in the elements nearby that speaks of ages of peace, ages longer than those of any race on this planet. The wind carries only the songs of birds and the scent of flowers. The earth has never felt the shock of quakes. Fire is calm and placid as water in this place and water flows, singing its eternal song of life renewed and refreshed.”

Alayne nodded as if she had understood what he said. Grognak sighed. “There’s great power here,” he repeated. “It could be used for good or for ill but it is neither and both. That’s as clear as I can make it.”

Alayne nodded once more and turned on her heel. Walking in a westwardly direction, she chewed her lower lip in concentration as she pondered what the shaman had said and what her own senses had told her. There was a power there, yes, and she found it impossible to draw upon it. Arcane magic was mixed in with it but was not the primary ingredient. The power itself seemed to consist of everything and nothing at once, a great paradox of energy that no magi she knew of, not even Krasus of the Kirin Tor, could hope to wield. She was both comforted and worried about the magnitude of such power existing. Comforted by the thought that no mortal, perhaps not even the Lich King, would be able to draw upon it. Worried because, whatever could draw upon it might have vastly different ideas about good and evil.

“What could be used to create can be used to destroy,” Ger’alin whispered, pitching his voice low for her ears only. “Perhaps that’s why the shield is there.”

“What do you remember of Un’Goro?” she asked, her eyes brightening with the beginnings of a theory. Ger’alin grimaced. He remembered the sweltering heat, the buzzing flies, the weird giant lizards, and the second-worst hangover he’d ever had.

“I remember that goblin ale is not something anyone who isn’t a goblin should imbibe,” he said lightly. “There was power in Un’Goro,” he added quickly, seeing the irritated look on her face. “But it was being drained away by something in Silithus. The druids were working on it and were trying to recruit people to go and investigate some old ruins there.”

“Why you had to drown yourself in ale...,” she started to sputter.

“I thought you were dead and I rather wanted to either forget it or die myself,” he said harshly. “I’m sorry that my inability to remain sober and deal with what I thought was the end of my life has caused me not to recall what could be valuable information,” he added sarcastically, “but, dammit, you go a year thinking that the greatest person on Azeroth is dead and see how you handle it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I don’t like to think about that time, either.”

“All I can tell you is that there wasn’t anything like this,” he said, waving his hand around to take in the entire basin, “in Un’Goro. There were hot springs, strange reptilian beasts, singing crystals dotting the landscape, but no power like what you sense here.”

“Drained away,” she murmured, latching on to something he’d said earlier. “What could drain away a power that nothing on Azeroth should be able to tap in to?”

“Beats me. I stick to bashing things over the head. Much less confusing than magic.”

“Ger’alin, I love you dearly but could you shut up for five minutes? I’m trying to think.”

Ger’alin grinned sheepishly and quieted down. Letting his stride slacken, he fell back with Grognaq and Tau’re and was soon involved in an interesting discussion that took his mind off the ponderings of his wife.

“It’d be a good match,” Grognaq said firmly. “She’s just as stubborn as you are.”

“I don’t want her to keep following me into battle.”

“She’s going to follow you and drive you crazy. You might as well enjoy it,” Ger’alin pointed out.

“She’s not a fighter.”

“But she can work the healing quite well for a novice,” Grognaq returned. “A few months of practice in connecting with the elements and she’ll be a good healer. She has a good touch for it.”

“I don’t want her to get hurt.”

“Tau’re, take it from a man who knows exactly how you feel,” Ger’alin sighed.

“She’ll either follow you or she’ll stay behind. Either way, you’re going to worry about her. Nothing is safe anymore, especially not here in Northrend. If I could pack Alayne up and send her back to Nagrand, I’d still worry over her. I worry over her now and she’s right in front of me.”

“Ger’alin, lower your voice a bit, I’m trying to think!” the subject of discussion snapped angrily. “And I’m not going back to Nagrand! Not without you!”

“See my point?” Ger’alin said in an undertone. “Sometimes, you can only keep her safe and keep her happy by keeping her with you. If you care for her, and it seems that you do if you’re this distracted over it, then you should talk with her about it when we get back to Naxxramas.”

Tau’re’s tail lashed the air behind him and he grunted in sullen acknowledgement of the point. “How did you manage that...discussion...with her?” he asked, pointing ahead.

“It was a complete and total accident,” he admitted. “If I’d tried to sit her down and explain it, I think we’d still be pining after each other.”

The three men shared a chuckle until Ger’alin walked right into Alayne’s back. She was gaping, staring off in the distance, bouncing on her toes on the verge of breaking into a run. “What is it?” he asked, worried.

“Death,” she gasped, pointing at the beginnings of a ruined area. “Where life is strong, there is death.” Without another word, she ran through the verdant growth and towards the brown and dying earth.

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“I thought the shield kept out the undead,” Ger’alin said for the dozenth time.

“Obviously, it’s weakened,” Callie muttered. “Still, that hurt like hell.”

Diami grunted in agreement and pulled the rag off her eyes. “I am not looking forward to having to go through that thing again.”

“Why would it weaken if Alayne says there is so much power here?” the paladin muttered. “Alayne? Any answers?”

“No,” she called out from across the dying glade, “only more questions.”

“That’s a real help,” he growled softly.

“Well, considering that I think no one has ever set foot in here before, it’s the best I can do!” she cried in frustration. “I don’t know why or how it weakened. I don’t have the first clue how to renew or reinforce it. I’ve done the best I can to hold the Scourge off but they’ll eventually break through our barrier.”

“What was it you two did?”

“Don’t ask me,” Grognaq muttered.

“I combined our magics to create a small shield beneath the big shield. It’s a mix of earth and wind held together by the arcane,” Alayne explained, turning back and walking over to the others. “It’s nothing the Scourge won’t figure out given some time. I got the idea from the original shield and from other things I’ve done with combining magics…”

“Combining magics?” Ger’alin sputtered. “Isn’t that something that has damned near killed you a few times? Are you insane, woman?”

“It worked. Leave me alone.”

“Indeed it did work,” a deep feminine voice said from beneath the hill they sat upon. “But why would you block out your allies?”

“Who’s there?” Ger’alin demanded, leaping to his feet and reaching for his mace.

“The Scourge are no allies of ours!”

“Then why did you aid two of them into Sholazar Basin?” the voice demanded, a clear tone of menace and anger in it.

“They’re Forsaken, not Scourge. They broke free of the Lich King and work against him now.”

“This I must see for myself.” The six drew together, looking around for the being who was speaking to them. From the far side of the hill appeared a woman’s stone head crowned with metallic hair. Gemstone eyes shone out of a marble face, curiosity and a touch of apprehension glinting in them. “Yes, you are all touched by the Curse. Yet, you are not enslaved.”

“Curse? The Plague?” Ger’alin gasped. Callie’s eyes widened and she shook her head; none of them had done anything to bring them in contact with the dreaded Plague of Undeath. Even when they had taken Naxxramas, they had been careful to avoid anything that might contaminate them, preferring to allow the magi to scrub it clean with fire.

“Do not worry. I mean only that you are not as the creators envisioned. Few earthen remain at their tasks. The destabilization gave rise to new forms of earthen. Still, I see in you the original design. The modification, while meant for malicious purposes, is neither good nor ill. And, you did attempt to correct the deharmonization in the shielding.”

“Alayne?” Ger’alin asked out of the side of his mouth.

“It was Common but I have no clue what she means,” Alayne replied, sounding both awed and confused.

“Why have you come here?” the stone woman asked.

“We’re searching for information on how to hold back and ultimately destroy the Scourge,” Alayne answered quickly. “As the shield around Sholazar Basin holds them out, we thought to study it, learn how it works, and see if we could duplicate it on a smaller scale.”

“Mortals like yourself could not hope to wield the immense power that is contained in the shield,” the woman replied, sounding amused. “Of all the beings upon Azeroth, only myself or another of the Watchers could do so. It is the purpose for which we were created by the Titans. However, recent events have caused me to leave my temple to observe and protect this area of experimentation from those who would use it to destroy what the makers have forged. I had feared that perhaps Loken was correct when I took my leave to venture here.

Mortals who served destruction had taken control of this pillar and, unleashing its power, managed to weaken the shield put in place to hold the Scourge out of this birthplace of life.”

The confused looks of consternation made the stone woman’s expression soften as much as was possible for such a refined face. “I am the avatar of one called Freya,” she explained. “I am the daughter of the Titans, tasked with overseeing the development and protection of life on this world.”

“Like Alexstrasza?” Alayne ventured.

“Somewhat. I remember her creation. She guards life more closely than I do but our mission is the same. When I sensed the threat of the undead attempting to penetrate the mysteries of Sholazar, I set the shield in place to protect it from their desecration. However, the shield is weakened from the incursions of other mortals and the undead are able to enter. Should that dread power uncover a way to harness the energies of creation held here in Sholazar, I fear for the world and for all life. And something else lurks around the periphery as well. Something that feels fouler than even the undead,” the giantess shuddered. Ger’alin’s eyes widened at the first real confirmation he had that his wife was not grasping at straws.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” he asked.

“You do not have the power to rebuild the shield where it has broken down,” Freya replied kindly. “And, as it was mortals like yourself who caused the damage to the pillar, the only answer would be to shut out all life from Sholazar. However, that is contrary to the purpose of the shield and would slowly result in the destruction of the basin itself. Life cannot survive cut off from other life,” she explained. “All that you can do is aid me while I work to renew the parts of the shield that were damaged. As I must give of my own life force to do so, I will be easy prey for the Scourge should they choose to attack.”

“What must we do?” Alayne asked carefully. “We seek the end of the Scourge just as you do.”

“My presence,” she said, “will enhance your magic, giving you power undreamed of by most mortals. For those of you who have no magic,” she continued, turning to Tau’re and Callie, “there are weapons which you can use to hold off the attackers while I renew the shielding. It was created as a guardian for places such as Sholazar, to prevent the power here from being used for ill-purposes. Its destructive abilities are unparalleled. However, before I can entrust any of you with these gifts, I must know that you serve the side of life and not the forces of death.”

The six looked at each other worriedly, wondering how they were going to prove their sincerity to the stone woman if their words and deeds already had not been enough. Grogak stiffened suddenly as he felt her power sweep over him. With a thoroughness that amazed him, he felt his mind and soul being probed. The best and the worst of him was open to the avatar, read as easily as a child’s primer. The other five underwent similar states. Ger’alin flushed in humiliation as he recalled his drunkenness and depression and then flushed again as he saw himself leading a band of warriors in a fight against the worst of mankind’s nature. Alayne felt Freya’s avatar ponder over her decision to serve the Scourge and then the revelation that she had been tricked, her own love and kindness used against her. She then saw the delighted amazement when the stone woman pulled up her memories of her self-imposed penance, seeing that she had been willing to risk everything in order to destroy forces opposed to life and order. Over Callie and Diami, she lingered, studying the agonizing moments of their deaths, the memories of their mindless servitude that they still could not fully recall, and then the shock of their minds returning to them and the horror at what they had become. Satisfied that each of the mortals in front of her were relatively pure of heart and clean of soul, the avatar nodded.

“You serve that which continues and guards life. Death and destruction in your hands is a power you would use only against those who would destroy life. This,” she continued,

gesturing as a translucent image appeared in front of them, “is the weapon the Titans created to safeguard Sholazar. You will find them by waygate to their storage facility. You may each take one and guide it here. The weapon is called ‘the Etymidian’ and it will bond itself to you, obeying your orders as quickly as your own limbs obey your orders to move. The waygate lies to the southwest of us.”

With a nod, Callie and Tau’re trotted off to seek this potent weapon. The other four stood around, feeling awkward, wondering what this weapon was and why the stone woman had not used it to utterly destroy the Scourge.

“I have not used it,” she answered their thoughts, “because it’s destructive powers are too much for me to risk using it. Bound as tightly with the protection of life as I am, I am likely to be unable to control my reaction when bonding with the Etymidian and could quite easily destroy all life in this land with the power I would grant the being by melding my will with it. Beyond that, my job is to protect and defend life and to guard such areas as were made powerful and sacred by the makers. My job is not to pass judgement and hand out punishment. Such power alone belongs to the prime designate Loken and if he has not seen fit to mete it out, it is not for me to question his decision or challenge his authority.”

They nodded blankly, not understanding much of what she had said beyond that her power was more vast than they could imagine. Ger’alin began to worry about the wisdom of any of them wielding this Etymidian at all but decided that if Callie and Tau’re felt they could handle its destructive power, he would trust their judgement. The avatar of Freya offered them refreshment while they waited for the others to return and began to explain more about the history of Sholazar and the power embued in the lush and fertile basin. Alayne was impressed and continued to ask more and more questions while Ger’alin stared on in bewilderment. This place was where life had originated? The Titans had experimented with various forms of life until they arrived at the one they thought was best? It sounded almost blasphemous to him to hear that anyone had deliberately toyed with living and intelligent beings, training them and culling them until they were “good enough.”

“In time,” the avatar explained, “life was able to sustain itself and progress forwards without constant supervision. At that time, assured that the world could maintain its proper order without them, the Titans departed to search for other places that might need their aid. However, the malevolent infestation they had locked away did resurface briefly, altering the nature of life upon Azeroth. The Titans returned to see much of their work in disarray but were unable to permanently remove the Curse placed upon living creatures without destroying the very life they had created.”

“What curse is this?” Alayne asked, curious. Unlike Ger’alin, she had no qualms with the thought of guided evolution. Her husband shook his head in distaste knowing that if he interjected to demand just who the Titans were to decide anything of that importance, he’d catch an earful from Alayne.

“I am not certain,” the avatar admitted. “Prime Designate Loken understands it best. The archives in Ulduar could reveal the full story. Much of the memories of those early days are lost to me.”

“Ulduar? Where is that?” Ger’alin asked.

“Far to the north, overseeing the entirety of the world,” she replied. Just then, the ground began shaking beneath them and the avatar smiled as two stone giants tramped up to the group. “I see you found them,” she said happily.

“They were difficult to miss,” Callie’s voice came from near the head of one of the stone golems. Ger’alin peered at it, trying to find where she was hidden. The giants came to the tall stone woman’s shoulder and were dressed in stone garments that looked like flowing linen tunics with hoods pulled up over their rocky heads. Blue gemstone eyes shone out of the hoods, gazing with familiar warmth and amusement. Upon the shoulders of the giants,

Callie and Tau're sat perched, the Forsaken all but invisible behind a stony fold. Even the tall and bulky tauren warrior looked miniscule compared to the Etymidian he controlled. Striding ahead of the others, the avatar of Freya beckoned them to follow her further into the devastated area.

For long moments they walked through dried and browned grasses, thick mists of corrupted dust springing up where ever they trod. Ger'alın wrinkled his nose at the stench that grew thicker and more pungent the further into the area they pressed. As they passed through a shallow river, the land turned marshy and swampy and flies and other bugs of pestilence and corruption swarmed around them. Freya waved an arm irritably and the creatures of death and decay flew away, not wanting to mingle too closely with the avatar who stood for the protection of all life. At last, they found themselves approaching a snowy foothill. Ger'alın was relieved to see the pure whiteness of fresh snow. The chill from it should cut the foul odor considerably.

"There," the avatar said, gesturing to the snowy ground, "there is where the shield is weakest and where it must be repaired. The renewal will spread from the wound to the rest of the weakened shield, reinforcing it. With you to draw my attackers away, I should be able to focus my concentration fully on restoring the shield. I'm afraid that, once it is repaired, your Forsaken friends will be unable to pass through it by physical means. Therefore," she gestured, reaching down and plucking a simple stone from the ground, "I will grant you a pass-key that will allow you to bypass the shield entirely. Only a living being may activate it," she apologized, "but once it is activated, for a short time, a gateway will open, allowing you access to Sholazar. Return here only if you have dire need of protection from the Scourge, though. While I understand the curiosity that drives you to learn more and better yourselves, the magic here is beyond anything you can hope to comprehend. Now," she continued, handing the stone to Grognaq and considering them carefully, "I will ask Eonar to imbue you with her powers for a time so that you may aid me without need of the Etymidians yourselves. You two who control them, use the powers they have sparingly. Death and devastation must only be meted out for cause and only in the smallest amounts necessary to accomplish our goals."

The group nodded in acceptance and felt a burst of power swell in them. Alayne managed to hold herself back from dancing with joy at the thrill of arcane power dancing around her. It seemed as if her senses had been heightened a hundredfold. She could feel subtle magical currents and ley-lines of microscopic proportions surrounding her. She thought for a moment that only Malygos could feel magic more thoroughly and subtly than she could at this moment. Glancing around, she saw the others going through similar stages of shock and pleasure as the powers that they had been granted by nature or by study were magnified by the Titanic blessing. Gesturing for them to walk ahead of her, the avatar waited until they were near the edge of the shield. Already they could see Scourge warriors, abominations, and gargoyles making their way down the mountain for another assault. Necromancers, both living and dead, moved with them, sending ghouls down to fling themselves against the shield, testing for the point of greatest weakness. The avatar of the guardian of life began channeling the thick magic that blanketed Sholazar, preparing to renew the shield where it had been weakened. The Scourge, sensing another attempt to block them away from the powerful magic their master coveted, began moving more quickly through the snow. Ger'alın reached out to the Light and poured its holy energy into the ground. The simple prayer spread far beyond what the paladin could normally do and caused the entire mountainside to shine with a vibrant golden glow. The Scourge began stumbling, staggered by the pain of the intense divine attack. Alayne hurled fireballs at them, amazed at the increase in size and power of her bolts. Diami rained fire down upon the Scourge as well, her hell-storm triple its normal size and intensity. They could each feel the avatar's blessing upon

them, increasing the destruction they were able to deal out. Grognaq felt the elements more keenly and sensed them responding to his slightest whim, as eager as he was to destroy the dead raised to a mockery of life.

As they held off the attackers, destroying them before they could draw close to the shield, the avatar of Freya began her work. Focusing intently upon the shield and allowing her mind to join back to the broken pillar, she pulled the magic of the three still-functional pillars to her, weaving it into a spell that would both heal the broken pillar and reinforce the shield generated by the magic of the pillars. Slowly the shield began to renew itself, healing the damage done. As her task proceeded apace, the Scourge intensified their attack. Swarms of gargoyles laden with skeletons, carrying abominations in their claws, swooped down low to the shield. The sheer numbers made it impossible for the spell-casters to hold all of them back. A few managed to make their way through the weaker part of the shield and only Ger'alín's quick work with his mace and shield held them away from the channeling avatar.

"They're going to be overrun," Callie thought, knowing that Tau're would hear her. "We should help them now."

"Remember the vision they showed us?" the tauren reminded the Forsaken.

"I remember it," she shivered. "I'm still not certain I believe it, though."

"I just think we should hold back until we're absolutely needed."

"If we wait too long, they could all die."

Tau're did not respond, resuming his careful study of the battle being waged. To fight such numbers, ordinarily they would have needed the entire Disorder of Azeroth plus whatever reinforcements they could have scrounged up from sources friendly to their cause. But, despite the overwhelming numbers of Scourge massing on the borders, a mere four magic-users of various types were holding them off. Tau're waited and cautioned Callie to patience through the first hour of bloody fighting. As the second began to close, the tauren noticed weariness falling heavily on the four spellcasters. Powers they were never meant to have access to were quickly draining their very life-forces away, sapping their energy and vitality. And still, the relentless assault from Icecrown continued unabated. The Lich King seemed determined not to let his access to Sholazar be cut off. Deciding that now was the time, Tau're sent a mental command to Callie and the pair led their Etymidians close to the other four.

Ger'alín was gasping for air, sweat slicking his brown hair to his forehead and making his beard itch fiercely. His skin felt as if it had been coated in oil and several times, he nearly dropped his mace onto the snow. Next to him, he could feel Alayne keeping to her feet by sheer will and he knew that, eventually, will would give out and exhaustion would drag her down. With each spell they cast, they drained more and more of their energy. And still, the Scourge were able to push through the shield. The shadow of the Etymidian fell over Ger'alín and he wondered if even these mighty weapons would have the power to drive the Scourge off long enough for the avatar to finish her work.

Callie saw that the others were nearing the limits of their powers. Sending a quick thought to Tau're, she and the tauren moved their Etymidians ahead. She felt a jolt at the weapons unleashed their massive destructive capabilities seconds apart.

The ground lurched violently beneath Ger'alín's feet, throwing him down on his back. The snow on the mountainside began to slide quickly, turning into an avalanche. He managed to lift his head in time to see that the Scourge had been obliterated, their bodies turned to dust and piles of entrails by the shockwave the stone golem weapons had unleashed. Grognaq was trying to push himself off the ground, calling upon the wind to form a barrier that would prevent the snow from plowing over them. The avatar of Freya was still hard at work repairing the shield when the snow collided with a wall of pure air, splashing up violently like a solid tsunami.

“There,” the avatar said firmly. “That will hold until the pillar can be completely revitalized. I am sorry you had to use the Etymidian,” she said to Tau’re and Callie who were detaching themselves from the weapons and looking distinctly shaken. “They are a force that is more powerful than almost anything else you will find in this world.”

“They wanted to...destroy it all,” Callie stammered, licking her lips nervously. “I’ve never felt such...not even from demons...all of it...”

“You are safe,” the avatar said gently, “for now. Come, I will ask the gorlocks to give you shelter this day. You must rest and then return to your friends. Should you have need to return to Sholazar for safe haven or aid, you have but to use the stone I have given you. For now, rest and accept my gratitude for the help you have given me.”

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Callie sat at the edge of the gorlock camp, her head leaned against a tree, counting the stars. She was tired but could not fall into the trance-like state that the Forsaken called sleep. Too many thoughts crowded through her mind to let her push them away. The avatar of Freya had led them to the gorlocks, strange creatures that reminded her of murlocs, and had convinced the gorlock elders to allow them safe harbor for the night. Then, the stone woman had returned to the desecrated pillar, saying that she must pour more of her energies into restoring it so that the shield would hold permanently. Callie prayed she would be successful. She never wanted anyone to have to join themselves to an Etymidian again.

The Etymidian. She shuddered thinking about the force it held contained inside an inanimate stone body. Such power shouldn’t be allowed to exist in any universe. The weapon-creature had been almost too eager to destroy the Scourge. It had wanted to level the entire area, killing everything in it. It had taken all of her energy to keep the destruction channeled in the direction and hitting the targets she desired. She’d spoken with Tau’re, finding the tauren just as haunted as she was, and he had experienced the same thing.

“They should never be used,” the tauren had muttered darkly. “Never. They are too difficult to control. I swear, I could feel its anger that I would not let it destroy the mountains along with the Scourge. It wanted to destroy Ger’alin, Alayne, Diami, and Grognaak as well. I’ve never seen anything that hated life and loved destruction as much as that stone giant. Not even demons. They, at least, love their own lives even if they hate the lives of everything else that breathes and moves.”

“Can’t sleep?” Alayne asked softly as she padded through the night. Callie jumped, startled by the sudden sound of her friend’s voice. Nodding, the rogue settled herself back down and patted the ground, inviting the sin’dorei to sit next to her. “I slept the day away and now I’m too awake to get back to sleep,” Alayne chuckled. “Ger’alin said he was going to use me for a pillow if I kept waking him up.”

“He’s still tired?” Callie asked absently, plucking a blade of grass from the ground with her hand and twirling it between her fingers.

“He is. I think he’s never channeled energy like that. Grognaak and Diami are also exhausted. I’m glad Tau’re could carry her after she fell into that waking sleep walking here. Grognaak could barely keep to his own feet and Ger’alin was cursing the weight of his armor. Still, it was a lot for them...”

“And it wasn’t for you?” Callie asked curiously.

“Had I not been the one who led the summoning at the Sunwell, it would have been for me as well,” Alayne sighed. “It reminded me of that. I remember how I had to pace myself and guard my reserves because we had no clue how long it would take the portal to form itself. And, I didn’t want to expend everything. I wanted enough held back so that I

could have trapped Kil'jaeden and destroyed us all who were there. That was my original plan. I never dreamed that you would come seeking me."

"I guess that would be a lot of work. Maybe that's why you're less tired than the others."

"I'm not less tired. I'm just less drained. There is a difference but it would take about a week to explain it," Alayne quipped. "Besides, the bed is so small that I can't get far enough away from Ger'alín and that Light-forsaken beard of his is driving me crazy. He's sweating in there and he still won't shave it off. And," she sighed, turning serious, "I thought you might need someone to talk to."

"About?"

"Callie, I saw your face after you climbed off the Etymidian," Alayne said sternly. "You looked as if you had just had the fight of your life against your best friend and she'd cursed you with her dying breath. You didn't even look that upset when you thought I had betrayed you all. What happened? And don't mutter that you don't want to talk about it. Take it from one who made *that* mistake too many times. Better to get it off your chest now than let it fester."

Callie seemed to try to gather her thoughts. Alayne left her in silence, neither pressing nor showing her own irritation at the many false starts the rogue made. Finally, Callie sighed and gestured with her hand and her arm-sword.

"It wanted to blow everything up," she grimaced. "And I mean everything. Sholazar, Icecrown, Northrend, hell, the whole world. I could barely control it. It looked out there and saw the Scourge and it didn't just want to go after them. It wanted to kill all of us, too. I would say it was almost as if it hated life only there was no malice, no emotion from the thing. It was as calm as could be, seeing a threat and wanting to exercise all of its power to eliminate it. I thought she said that the Etymidian was supposed to be a *guardian* of life, not a destroyer," Callie groaned.

"Powerful entities, even if they are inanimate, often have a will of their own granted them by their powers," Alayne said soothingly, reaching over and patting Callie on the back. "In and of itself, it wasn't evil. Just...powerful. Did it try to force you to blow up the whole world?"

"No," Callie said slowly. "It's more like...it wanted to unleash all of its power instead of just some of it...as if it were a flood of water trying to break through a dam. Only, I was the dam."

"But, in the end, you were able to hold back the water, letting through only a little bit; only as much as was needed to do what you wanted done."

"I suppose so..." the rogue replied, dragging the last word out thoughtfully. "Funny," she snorted, "this actually does make me feel better. I don't know why but..."

"I know something that might make you feel even better," Alayne chuckled. "Do you have a really sharp dagger with you?"

Callie lifted an eyebrow in curiosity at the strange request. When Alayne finished explaining, both women were gasping for breath and knuckling tears from their eyes. "He's going to kill both of us, you know," Callie laughed.

"Still, at least then I could bear to lay down next to him. C'mon," the sin'dorei said, standing up and dusting off her robes. Sticking out a hand, she pulled Callie to her feet. "Let's get started."

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Ger'alín's rubbed his clean-shaven face and glared at his wife. She blushed but said nothing. Well, it was her own fault for waking him up like that. How was he supposed to

have known that Callie was in the tent with her? “Don’t ever. Do that. Again,” he said, spitting the words between clenched teeth. “I told you I was planning to shave as soon as we’re done here.”

“I should have let her tie you up,” Alayne sniffed.

“Then you would have seen me get well and truly pissed off,” he growled. “Callie should have known better to suggest it. She tied me up once when I was three sheets to the wind and she found out that I don’t take well to it when I’m confused.”

Alayne grimaced and stared at the ground. “You still did not have to rip...”

“I had no idea you were sitting on my chest because you were shaving my beard off! I was asleep!”

Alayne said nothing, flushing more deeply and digging a hole in the dirt with her toe. Ger’alin stared at the crown of her head, knowing she was embarrassed but feeling that she deserved some measure of humiliation for the stunt she had pulled last night. It certainly wasn’t his fault! He’d been blissfully unaware of anything until she’d started struggling to get away from him and he’d realized that his face was wet and covered in shaving foam. Still, it had been one of her favorite pairs of traveling robes and he supposed she would have to put in a fair amount of time and effort into sewing them back up. With another sigh, he ran his thumb and forefinger along his jaw and then placed them beneath his wife’s chin. Lifting her face so her eyes met his own, he adopted his sternest expression.

“The next time you pull a fool stunt like that,” he hissed, using the voice that he used with a student who had done something exceptionall stupid during a spar, “I will turn you over my knee and tan your hide until you can’t sit down for a month. However,” he continued, allowing his tone to soften and a slight sparkle to twinkle in his eyes, “Callie certainly has enough blackmail material on us to last us to the end of her days and this is one of the best shaves I’ve had in my life. Truth to tell, I get more cuts when I do it than you gave me last night,” he lied.

Alayne made a noise that was half-sob, half-laugh. He chuckled and let go of her chin. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he hugged her, letting her know he wasn’t really angry with her all the while he prayed that she would never. Do that. Again. Of all the sights to wake up to, seeing your wife sitting over you with a sharpened dagger and a look of utter concentration on her face was one that no man needed to experience. Ger’alin hoped he never would again.

Tau’re cleared his throat awkwardly, wondering if either of the sin’dorei were ready to discuss the plans for the day. They could return to Naxxramas and report in; Freya had told them that a normal teleportation spell would speed them out of Sholazar; it was only entering that required special means. However, Grognaak and Diami both wanted to remain in the Basin a few days more in order to study and explore it at length.

“Yes, Tau’re, we’re going to stay another day or two,” Ger’alin replied. “Tell Grognaak and Diami. We’ll gather some provisions from the gorlocks and then will be on our way.”

“They’ll want to visit the pillars,” Alayne offered helpfully. “The magic that powers this area seems most bound up in them. Freya said she would take care of restoring the pillar that was destroyed but perhaps we could go there first. Maybe she’ll explain a bit more about this place.”

“I have a feeling she’s told us all she’s going to tell us,” Ger’alin said softly. “She doesn’t trust us; we’re mortal. And, to be perfectly honest, she’s right not to trust us. I know that if I had access to the power here, I would not be able to resist using it. And using it might be good or it might be evil; I don’t have the wisdom to foretell.”

“Be that as may,” Alayne muttered, masking her disappointment, “perhaps we could help her restore the pillar? Or just learn more about them in general? After all, if she can

ward an entire area against the Scourge, perhaps we could learn to do so as well and could ward against demons better. That's what the runestones along our borders were for in the first place."

"Very well," Ger'alın said lightly, trying to keep any sting from his words, "we'll try to convince her to enlighten us. However, don't get your hopes up. Go find the others, Tau're. I'll take care of procuring some supplies for us."

The group came back together at the eastern side of the gorlock camp an hour later. Ger'alın handed each one a sack filled with food, water, and their bedding before gesturing for them to follow him across the shallow river and onto the dying grass that marked the direction of the broken pillar. A half-hour's walk brought them to the foot of the pillar. Alayne, Diami, and Grognaк began examining the pillar, muttering amongst themselves about whether or not they could sense any change in it. Ger'alın, Tau're, and Callie looked around for the avatar. The three fighters saw no sign of her near the pillar. Ger'alın called out to Alayne who was barely paying attention to anything other than the rocky cylinder, saying that they were going to range farther afield in search of the mysterious stone woman. In amicable silence, with Callie turning pale every time she looked at Ger'alın, they walked through the dried out grasses, calling out to the avatar.

"I don't think she's nearby," Tau're said after a while.

"Strange," Ger'alın muttered, "I would have thought she'd stay close by. She did say she was going to try to revive this pillar."

"Perhaps she needed something from one of the others to do that," Callie ventured, not wanting to look at Ger'alın.

"Callie, quit jumping like that," Ger'alın grimaced. "I'm not mad at either of you though, if you could try to forget what you saw, I'm sure my wife would appreciate it. However, you've seen me in far worse state before so let's stop the blushes and just get over it."

Callie grinned and nodded, still not quite looking at the paladin. What she had seen during the night, before he had really waken up and noticed what was going on, wasn't something she thought she could forget any time soon. "I'm not going to forget it," she laughed. "Far too much blackmail potential there. Still," she said, changing the subject back to the original topic, "I wonder where Freya is."

"Well, we're not going to find her out here. That's for certain. Let's go round up the others, pry Alayne away from the pillar, and see if Freya is elsewhere. If we don't find her by this evening, we're leaving. I still want to drop in on Garrosh and see if I can talk some sense into him before he gets us all embroiled in a war that none of us need."

"Good luck with that," Callie grimaced, her mouth twisting in distaste. "You've got Varian Wrynn egging on the rest of the Alliance. He hates orcs. Hates them with a passion. Garona killed his father and he's been just looking for an excuse to kill every orc ever since he gained the throne."

"If I live to the ripe old age of nine hundred," Ger'alın sighed, "I will never understand how anyone, especially a king, could lose sight of a real threat like the Scourge and instead focus his attentions on a rather minor rivalry. I will also never understand why Garrosh cherishes some of the worst things about his father – namely, his bloodlust – instead of the best things – his sacrifice to free himself and his people from the worst mistake they ever made."

"Varian Wrynn is a hot-head just like Garrosh," Callie replied. "They're a matched pair. What we ought to do is try to get Velen and Thrall to lock those two in a room so the rest of us can focus on what's important: killing Arthas. You would think, though, that Wrynn would want to avenge himself and his people against the traitor prince. He and Arthas were friends before Arthas turned his back on everyone and betrayed them to their deaths."

“I suppose, in the long run, if we can convince enough people to lay aside their hatreds for now to focus on ridding the world of the Scourge, that will have to suffice,” Ger’alin muttered. The broken pillar was coming into sight as they climbed up the hill that had hidden the stone woman the day before. “Where are they?” he groaned, seeing no sign of the three they had left behind.

Tau’re caught a glimpse of something and began trotting ahead. He reached the pillar in time to catch Ger’alin who, having spotted the same thing, was in a dead run. The three magic users lay face down on the ground, silent and still as death. Their faces were pinched and pale and occasionally one groaned and muttered in the deep sleep they had been cast into. Other than that, only Grogna’s twitching tail gave any sign that they lived. “What happened? An attack? Alayne, wake up. Wake up. Shake it off and wake up, woman!” Ger’alin babbled. “Do you think they tried to tap into the power here? Is that what could cause this? Alayne, wake up and tell me what the hell happened!” he demanded, hysteria rising in his voice.

A ball of foul green light appeared from the broken pillar, its color overripe and putrid. Callie glanced at it, wondering why it had appeared and what it was doing. Then, sensing new targets nearby, it swooped down upon the three wakeful fighters. Ger’alin and the others collapsed, joining the magic users in their strange and unforeseen sleep.

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Ger’alin blinked in confusion. The last thing he remembered was finding Alayne asleep in the dirt in Sholazar. How he had gotten to this dark and imposing temple was a blank in his mind. Glancing down the stair case before him, he looked across the way, relieved to see his wife standing near a doorway that seemed to lead to an indoor forest. He trotted over towards her, stopping to stare at a stone woman who led a pair of tigers in a circular patrol around the base. She seemed to pay him no mind, not even seeming to see him walking past her. Stone guardians that reminded him eerily of the Etymidian stood flanking doorways, the eight of them guarding the four pathways that led off of the circular platform. Deciding he would satisfy his curiosity about where the hallways led later, he hurried over to Alayne, relieved to see her awake and responsive. The other five were with her as well, all of them looking confused as to how they got there and what they were doing where ever it was they were.

“It’s like a conservatory,” Alayne was muttering. As Ger’alin came up alongside her, she reached out and patted his clean-shaven cheek in affectionate greeting. “But why would anyone built a forest inside? Gardens, I’ve seen. Forests?”

“I think it’s sacred to something,” Grogna offered, staring into the green room. “Regardless, could we move away from here? I feel as if something is watching us from behind and I don’t like it. Whenever I turn to see who or what it is, it’s gone.”

The group stepped into the lush indoor forest. Ger’alin gasped and nearly screamed in fright when he saw a gigantic tree standing upright, glancing around with eyes that were ancient. “What is that?” he demanded in a shrill whisper.

“Forest spirits,” Grogna answered. “Guardians.”

“But guardians of what?” Alayne muttered, studying the forest with a jaundiced eye. Something seemed wrong to her about the teeming life blossoming here. Unlike other places in Northrend where life flourished despite the cold, this place felt cloying. The air was too sweetly thick with blossoms. The mists were too heavy from the small ponds and streams that cut through a marble floor. The sun seemed too harsh and bright, filtering in through a crystal ceiling. The very essence of life permeating the chamber spoke of death and corruption. Her

nose wrinkled in disgust, Alayne tried to sort out the magics she could sense running through the forest temple to analyse what had her on edge.

“It’s too much,” GrognaK snorted, sneezing from the thick pollen floating in the air. “This makes a mockery of nature; in a temple of it, no less.”

Alayne nodded. It was too much. Life was so overabundant that it was strangling itself in an effort to produce yet more life. The entire sanctuary felt so out of balance that even she, attuned more to magic than to the natural world, could feel it. Walking on through the verdant growth, she stopped in surprise when she saw a familiar sight standing before the still waters of an indoor pond.

The woman looked much as she had in Sholazar Basin. Her stone body stood at peace as she seemed to study the water before her. Finding it to her satisfaction, she turned, her gaze sweeping over the group. Alayne gasped; instead of the calm wisdom she had seen glinting in those emerald stone eyes, she saw madness.

“You!” Freya roared, rushing towards the intruders. “Elders, aid me! You will not desecrate this holy ground!”

Alayne heard the others begin trying to back away just as she herself was doing. She stared at the woman in confusion, wondering why Freya was attacking. It seemed that not that long ago, they had worked together to protect Sholazar from the Scourge. “Freya, what happened? We looked for you to see if we could aid you but...” Alayne cut off, choking on the thick dust that sprang from hundreds of plants. Her eyes watered until she could barely see and each breath she drew nearly strangled her, so heavy was the pollen in the air. “Why...what is...,” the sin’dorei gasped and gagged.

“You shall not interfere!” Freya roared. Alayne felt a gust of wind slamming into her and closed her eyes...

...opening them, she wondered how she had come to be laying on the ground. Ger’alin lay prone next to her, his eyes staring at the sky in horror. His hands were clawing at his face as if he sought to try to scrape something away that was covering it. Taking those hands in her own, she waited, wondering what horrors he was seeing and if they were related to the strange dream she had just experienced. Minutes passed before the others roused to wakefulness, each returning to himself with a hard shock and much confusion.

“I just had the strangest dream,” Callie moaned.

“I know,” Diami snapped. “I think we were all there.”

“All where?” Ger’alin demanded once he was certain that both he and his wife were safe.

“An indoor forest,” Callie started to reply. The others began babbling, adding that they had, indeed, experienced the same thing. Alayne held her tongue, piecing together what they spilled out and trying to deduce what had happened. “We were all hit by that green light,” the rogue said in response to Tau’re wondering what the hell had happened. “It appeared from the pillar and...”

“I think we should leave now,” Alayne said at length. “Freya is elsewhere. Where exactly, I don’t know. But, the more we try to probe this pillar, even if our intentions are good, the more trouble I foresee us getting into.”

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“We cannot allow the Alliance to take it if there is that much power there,” Garrosh said firmly. “Now, I want you to order half your forces to...”

“The Alliance couldn’t tap into that power if they wanted to. Neither could the Horde. I doubt the Burning Legion could draw from it even if they did have Sargeras at their helm,”

Ger'alín replied through clenched teeth. "I am not going to send half of my forces to stand around in Sholazar twiddling their thumbs when the real fight will be in Icecrown."

"No," Garrosh said angrily, "the fight will be here. We've managed to capture this hall with all of its wonders. The Alliance is mounting a full-fledged offensive to drive us out. Bad enough they aided the Scourge over in Drak'Tharon Keep – oh yes, brother," he spat, "I am well aware of how they aided Drakuru in taking over the Drakkari empire and how it caused you no little trouble to get Zul'Drak pacified. What I can't understand is how, even now after they've sided with the Scourge, you refuse to fight them!"

"They didn't side with the Scourge," Ger'alín sighed. "They were tricked by Drakuru. Yes, it could have caused us no end of problems but we were able to pull together with the Argents and the Ebons and drive the Scourge out of Zul'Drak and deal with the insane Drakkari as well. Now, for the last time, I will pass along no orders for those who are with me to join in this insane war of yours! I came to plead with you to abandon Wintergrasp. Who cares what machines of war you can develop here using the gifts left behind by the Titans? Unless you're planning to use them against the Scourge instead of the Alliance, I know I couldn't care less. We've taken Naxxramas, Garrosh. We control it. We have a movable base of operations. It's nigh on impossible to attack. By the time I return, the security measures should be overhauled so that we won't be making the same mistake Kel'Thuzad made. Send most of your forces to Utgarde and then bring the rest to Naxxramas. From there, we can launch an offensive against the Scourge and put an end to them and their Lich King for good!"

"Too many times have I been driven back by these cowardly humans," Garrosh roared. "First, we lose Warsong Hold because you and Thrall refuse to aid me in holding on to what is rightfully ours! We lost the stone quarries that supplied us with materials for buildings, for machinery, and missiles for our catapults. Not to mention; we lost control of the beaches nearby so the zeppelins must all route through Howling Fjord or must take a circuitous route bypassing the Alliance to resupply us! Agmar's Hammer hangs by a thread; only the dragons demanding that the war in Dragonblight cease lest they burn all of us to a cinder allows us to keep so much as a toehold there! Utgarde and Wintergrasp are the only two areas we hold securely and you would have me give us the wonders, the technology, the advantages that this fortress brings? Never!"

"Then we are truly at a parting, Garrosh Hellscream," Ger'alín muttered. "Do not bother to send me more orders. I will not reply to them. I know that we have only the manpower and resources to fight either the Scourge or the Alliance; not both. And, unlike you, I view those who would kill us all and enslave us to an eternal life of torment and mindless servitude to be the true threat."

"Get out of here, coward!" Garrosh screamed, lunging towards Ger'alín. "You and Thrall both make me sick! Once I have defeated the Alliance and driven the humans and their allies out of Northrend, I will destroy the Scourge. And then, then I will be the leader of the Horde and we'll see just how long those who disobey me last in the days to come!"

Ger'alín stared at the dusky-skinned orc in rising horror. He'd suspected that Garrosh wanted the chieftainship of the Horde but to hear it blurted outright like this caught the sin'dorei by surprise. "Even if that should come to pass, Garrosh," Ger'alín growled, "even if that hellish day does dawn, I would accept exile or death before I would follow you into this madness."

Turning stiffly on his heel, flaunting that he was turning his back on the Mag'har chieftain, Ger'alín strode from the room. Out in the hallway, the Korkon guards grunted, knowing full well that the raised voices they had heard boded ill for them regardless of the outcome. Tau're and Grognak exchanged concerned glances and then eyed a question at the paladin. Callie and Diami sighed and shook their heads; they had heard enough to know that

if Garrosh succeeded, their own people would be in a mire up to their necks. Alayne made a show of lounging lazily against a wall, her head hanging so that her hair fell over her face as she kicked idly at the floor. "He'd destroy everything we've built the past few years," Alayne said sadly. "We'll just have to see that his plans come to naught."

"Let's get out of here," Ger'alın said irritably. "This was worse than a mere waste of time." Taking Alayne's arm in his own, he and the others strode swiftly out of the enormous building. Passing the tall columns, they walked past the strong walls that protected the fortress of Wintergrasp and headed to the area called the Vault. "Perhaps we can find some answers here before we return to Naxxramas," Ger'alın said, nodding towards the monolithic structure. "Garrosh says they had a time fighting the stone watcher set to guard the archives. Archevon, I think he said it was called. At any rate, there should be some information there on Sholazar. We'll take whatever we can find back with us for further study."

"Garrosh gave his permission for us to do this?" Alayne asked, sounding surprised.

"Hell no," Ger'alın swore. "But what he doesn't know won't hurt me."

Alayne smiled tremulously, her lips quivering with a mixture of amusement and sorrow. She had hoped against hope that her husband would be able to convince the Horde leader in Northrend to give over his private war. Still, something about the strange events in Sholazar, especially that odd dream-vision they had all shared, gnawed at her. She suspected that the answers to the doom she sensed lurking in the near distance lay with the Titans. Putting together the little she knew, she wondered if events in Silithus had anything to do with what she was experiencing. Un'Goro had once, it seemed from what Freya had hinted, been much like Sholazar. Ger'alın and Callie had confirmed that the crater teemed with life, making it a lush oasis in a desert that stretched from Ashenvale to Tanaris. And yet, the power there was being diverted and drained away by something. Could that same something have a hand in what happened in Sholazar with the pillar?

"Cultists," she muttered to herself.

"What about them?" Ger'alın asked.

"What if the mortals who attacked the pillar in Sholazar had nothing to do with the Scourge? What if they were unrelated and the Scourge had merely pressed the advantage they had to break through the shield the rest of the way?"

"Well, what then?" Ger'alın shrugged.

"What do you know of what is going on in Silithus?"

"Precious little," her husband admitted. "Why?"

"Cultists. We stumbled across several of them in Ahn'Kahet. They were worshipping those faceless ones and working some foul magic the likes of which I've never heard of before. Now, a group of mortals tries to break down the shield over Sholazar and destroys a pillar. At the same time, something is going on that affects an area much like Sholazar, causing its energy to be drained away."

"That's quite a leap," Ger'alın sighed, "but you could be right. Perhaps there is some strange cult at work. But then, if so, who are they, what are they doing, and why?"

The group had made its way into the Vault and Alayne nodded in satisfaction at seeing the walls lined with books. The guards ignored them, assuming they were there with permission. Ger'alın did little to disabuse them of that notion. Muttering to the orcish watchers that they wanted to be allowed several hours to study the tomes in order to uncover information that might be of use to Garrosh in the future, the paladin was able to secure them more than enough time to accomplish their task.

"If it has anything to do with the Titans, history, Un'Goro, or Sholazar, we're taking it," Alayne grinned. "But, let's be quick about it. There's no telling how long until Garrosh lets everyone know that we're not welcome here."