

Alayne waved off the confirmations that she had been right about the cultists all along. *At this point*, she thought to herself, *it hardly matters if I was right or wrong*. She stared, agape, at the massive stone doors before her. Etched high with strange symbols, the heavy doors opened and closed easily as the party of explorers made their way inside. Brann had told them that this particular building was called the Halls of Stone and was mostly likely home to some of the earliest Titan-created lifeforms. The great building across the island was called the Halls of Lightning. Alayne prayed that they would find whatever they needed in this first imposing structure. She felt as if Loken, the mad prime designate, were watching their every move.

On the slope above the two massive structures was Ulduar itself. Shielded by a dome that nothing could penetrate, the Titanic complex sat, dwarfing the other massive structures on the isle. "We should probably go on," Ger'alín whispered into her ear, startling Alayne from her thoughts. "We're the last ones out here."

Alayne sighed and walked in to the building. The doors opened smoothly as she pressed against them and then, once she and Ger'alín were inside the inner hallway, the huge doors closed just as quickly and quietly as they had opened.

"We'll go on ahead," Brann muttered. "The way up there splits into three corridors. We'll take the one on the left. You three," he pointed at an orc, a dwarf, and a tauren, "go right. I'll let the two of you head straight on. If you see anything that looks like it might have the answers to entering Ulduar, return to the crossway and give the signal call."

Ger'alín and the others nodded and went the group split apart, each going their separate ways. Ger'alín and Alayne walked down the stairs into the massive corridor, the mage stopping to stare in awe at the construction. "You could fit the entire Sunfury Spire in here and it still wouldn't touch the ceiling," she whispered.

"The Titans built things larger than life," Ger'alín quipped. "Still, it is impressive."

"I wonder what kind of magic powers the lights," Alayne mused, ignoring her husband entirely as she reached out with her senses. She could discern no magical threads in the lights or the floor. Shaking her head, she knelt down to study the strange beams of light that ran in a straight line beneath their feet, pulsating slowly, surges traveling towards the closed doors at the end of the corridor. As they drew closer to the massive metal doors, the pulses of light flashed more rapidly, changing color from yellowish-white to pinkish-white. Alayne tapped a finger against the side of her face thoughtfully as she studied them. "Let's go back a bit," she suggested. As the two sin'dorei backed away from the doors, the light pulses slowed their frequency and shifted back to a more neutral color.

"Could be some kind of warning system," Ger'alín muttered, staring at the floor beams in consternation. "Do you sense anything?"

"No," she sighed. "It's as if it's not magic at all. Either that, or it's so well shielded that I can't sense it."

"Whatever it is, we need to see what's beyond those doors."

"Yes, but how are we going to open them?"

"Let's at least get up there before we worry about that," he answered, taking her gently by the elbow and leading her up to the foot of the vaulting doors. They both pressed their hands to the door and pushed. Neither was surprised when nothing happened. "Hm," Ger'alín said, rubbing his fingers along his jaw as he studied the door. "It's locked," he said, noticing the mechanism that held it shut. Pointing up at a set of cogs and gears several feet above their heads, he wondered just how they were supposed to climb close enough to study the lock. The doors were exceedingly smooth and slick to the touch. There were no protrusions he could use as hand or footholds nor anything he could toss a rope over to pull himself up. He studied Alayne out of the corner of his eye and then gazed back up to the lock.

Even if he could convince her to stand on his shoulders, she would still come several feet short of reaching the bottom of the housing mechanism.

Alayne, meanwhile, was also studying the lock. For the first time since entering the Halls of Stone, she felt a small glimmer of magic. Reaching out with her senses again, she probed the lock, hoping to uncover the spell that would let it fall open so they could try to push the doors open. She could sense the smoothness of the gears beneath her heightened touch. Despite having been left untended for countless ages, there was no dust or corrosion in the lock. The entire cogwheel seemed to be surrounded by a field of arcane energy with spokes radiating outwards in almost all directions. Focusing on the shape of the magical threads, she noticed that one spoke seemed to be missing. Studying the force, she let her senses slip around the other spokes, paying particular attention to their shape and length.

“Aha!” she exclaimed, startling Ger’alin who had begun pacing back towards the stairs, looking for something that he could stand on to gain an extra few feet of height. Alayne smiled and teased the threads, pulling a bit from each to fashion the last spoke. With the spokes shortened, the cogwheel began spinning and the mechanism holding the bolt in place fell away with a loud clanging sound. The doors shivered and parted slightly now that the force holding them together had vanished.

“What did you just do?” Ger’alin asked, staring at his wife in awe.

“I just opened the door,” she grinned. A gentle nudge with magic sent the doors sliding apart, revealing a large high-ceilinged room. The room was shaped like a hexagon. The floor was transparent. The beam of light that had run down the center of the corridor split at the door, running down the edges of the stairs where it formed a hexagon of light on the transparent floor. The light continued to pulsate steadily, a pinkish-gold color filling the room. Alayne gasped when she saw the room’s single occupant. A woman made of sandstone stood at the far end of the room, staring at the pair with a look of pure disgust and annoyance. She wore a dress that wrapped around her and appeared to be made out of white marble. Her dark eyes glittered in a dusky face. She appeared to be guarding a small table behind her, glaring at the intruders. Ger’alin and Alayne took an involuntary step backwards beneath that baleful gaze.

“Who are you?” the woman demanded angrily.

“We have come seeking answers,” Ger’alin said quickly. “We mean no harm or desecration. We are merely here to discover the truth.”

“The truth? The truth about what?” the stone woman growled.

“About Ulduar, the Titans, and the forces they imprisoned,” Alayne answered, hoping that her honesty would quell the stone-woman’s temper.

“Ulduar is not for mortals to question,” the woman said. “It is not for you to consider. It is only for the Makers. You shouldn’t have come,” she continued, reaching behind her to take up a large staff. “Now, you will die!”

Alayne and Ger’alin barely had time to dive opposite directions before the tall guardian had crossed the room and swept the area near the doorway with her enormous staff. Ger’alin tucked his legs under him and rolled smoothly onto the transparent floor. He glanced down and blinked in shock; it appeared to him as if he were standing atop the night sky. His shock nearly cost him his legs as the stone maiden swung at him again, her staff nearly clipping his feet out from under him.

Alayne had managed to summon enough magic to transport herself into the shadows on the far right-hand side of the room. While the stone watcher’s attention was focused on the plate-wearing paladin, Alayne readied her spells. Balls of fire, bolts of frost, and missiles of pure arcane energy flew from her hands, landing against the stone woman’s back. She whirled, her hatred focusing on the spell-casting mage, and began walking back towards Alayne. The sin’dorei woman wondered why the stone woman did not use magic against her.

She did not wonder this long as the woman paused and lifted a hand. A vacuum of energy flew towards her and Alayne felt as if her own emotions were being drained away, leaving her lethargic and apathetic. The stone woman nodded in satisfaction and flung the energy back at the mage. A circle of black depression surrounded her, burning her flesh and tearing at her soul. Images of the trial where she thought she was going to be executed, flashes of Ger'alın snarling at her and then striking her when she would not aid him in his addiction, the pain of seeing Zerith and Ger'alın staring at her while her death knight helm skittered across the stone floor of the necropolis – every memory of sadness assailed her at once. She clutched at her head with hands that shook, trying to block out the onslaught of misery. Dimly, she heard Ger'alın's voice shouting at her to move. Collapsing to her knees, she managed to roll out of the cloud as the staff wielded by the stone woman whistled in the space where she had been standing. Once out of the dark pillar of depression, her mind cleared quickly and she concentrated on attacking the guardian, trying not to let herself be overwhelmed by the stone woman's deft manipulation of her emotions.

Ger'alın, once Alayne seemed safe, sprang to the attack. While his wife hurled spells at the woman, he flung the Light at her, praying to it for protection for both of them and pleading with it to lighten the darkening despair she could cast on both of them at will. He also moved, his arms and legs a blur, striking against her legs with his mace, pulling his shield around and striking at her with that, doing anything he could to chip away at her stone skin. Whenever she focused her attention on him, he jogged across the room, forcing her to chase after him and giving Alayne more time to throw her magical spells at the monstrous woman. Again and again, the marble maiden hurled her dark spell of despair at the pair, forcing them to each relive some of the worst moments of their lives. Ger'alın shuddered, recalling the day he had been told Alayne was dead. Alayne screamed as she saw an arrow explode through Zerith's chest. Yet, aware of what the woman was trying to do, they were able to keep their heads long enough to fight it off.

Ger'alın let the female golem close with him, hefted his hammer back as far as his shoulder would allow, and smashed it into her weakened knee. Alayne, seeing his blow land, threw her most potent fire spells at the same point. The stone woman's leg broke, shards of rock flying everywhere, toppling her. Ger'alın leapt onto her chest, climbing over to her throat, and bore down with his mace.

"I hope you rot!" the woman gasped, her breath rattling in a nearly shattered throat. "I...never...wanted...this..."

Alayne walked over to where her husband stood on the woman's shoulder, her eyes wide with horror. "What in the name of the Titans was that?" she asked.

"I don't know but I'm glad she's dead," Ger'alın muttered, leaping down lightly from his perch. "What was she guarding?"

The two elves walked to the back of the room and examined the strange table the woman had been watching over. "It looks like the control panel for those Light-forsaken zeppelins," Alayne shivered, her stomach clenching at the thought.

"This place is rather large to be a zeppelin," Ger'alın said softly. "Can you make out any of the symbols?"

Alayne shook her head. "Some of them almost look like arcane runes but in a form I've never seen before. I don't know what it is, what it does, or how to decipher it. Perhaps we should go find Brann. He might know more."

"That sounds like a good idea to me," Ger'alın agreed. "Let's go find Brann. Maybe he'll even know what she was and why she was here. He knows a surprising bit about this place."

“He knows more than even the Lich King, I think,” Alayne said thoughtfully. “For all that Arthas wanted control of all of Northrend, something kept him from reaching far into the Storm Peaks. Perhaps the Titans watch over their creation even from afar.”

“Perhaps,” Ger’alin agreed as they began walking out of the room, glancing back over his shoulder at the rocky corpse. “Perhaps they do at that.”

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A group of five marched down the corridor Brann had taken. The two elves had fought and overcome a woman made of stone with a heart of ice and the others had been set upon by a huge crystalline monster. Both had guarded strange control panels and, after examining them both, Ger’alin suspected as much as Alayne that they were some kind of access panel to something. What they allowed access to was an open question. Continuing on the direction the dwarf had chosen, they came to a large, open room. A cold wind whistled against the immense ceiling and snowdrifts covered parts of the floor. Footprints in the snow showed that the others with Brann had passed through this room. A faint knocking noise echoing through the doorway on the wall perpendicular to the entrance told them that the others had pressed on ahead.

“I wonder if there were more guardians,” Ger’alin sighed, loosening his mace in its holster. Alayne said nothing but began preparing her spells, praying that whatever they were coming face to face with would not try her mind as much as the monster she and Ger’alin had fought had.

Turning the corner, they stopped and stared. Another pair of massive doors stood at the end of a hallway. In the center of the room with the doors hovered a globe. Alayne studied it and gasped when she realized it was a globe of their world. Clouds passed over it, obscuring parts of Kalimdor. A sandstorm brewed in Tanaris and the Maelstrom whirled. Ignoring the others, she walked as close to it as she could, agog with wonder. The globe rotated slowly on its axis and weather patterns changed. “This is our world,” she said breathlessly.

“It is, lass, it is,” Brann replied, chuckling. “It’s quite a sight. What brings you all here now? We’re trying to get this door open and not having much luck with it.”

“We each ran into guardians hovering over strange control panels,” Ger’alin explained before his wife could start talking about the strange globe again. “We were wondering if you could come and examine them. Perhaps they hold the key to the thing you are looking for?”

“In just a bit, lad,” Brann nodded. “First, we need to get inside here.”

Ger’alin glanced at the door and noticed that the lock was similar to the one Alayne had unlatched with her magic. Shaking her gently to break her attention, he gestured towards the door. Her eyes widened in recognition and she nodded. Reaching out as she had with the door before this, she tripped the lock, setting the mechanism spinning. Only this time, instead of the doors needing to be forced open, they parted smoothly and silently on their own. The group entered the room and Alayne stared at the floor. Like the room she and Ger’alin had explored, the floor of this room was transparent and seemed to look out over the vast universe. However, this room was much smaller and a third control panel stood at the far wall. Three enormous faces stared down from the wall, silent sentinels watching over what Alayne guessed to be the last of the control panels. The faces seemed to exude a sense of peace and ancient wisdom. The face in the center, gazing down serenely over a square control panel, was that of an old man with a flowing beard. To his left and right were the faces of women of mysterious beauty. Brann walked to the center of the room and spread his arms as if to gather the three in. His face beamed with pure joy and a wide grin split his face.

“Take a moment and relish this with me! Soon all will be revealed!” the dwarven archeologist exulted. “Alright then, let’s do this!”

Striding over to the control panel, he began pressing buttons rapidly. Ger’alin quirked an eyebrow at the dwarf’s back and shared a glance with the other members of the Explorer’s League. None of them seemed surprised so the sin’dorei relaxed his stance slightly. Evidently, either Brann knew exactly what he was doing or he gave a good impression of knowing. The red-bearded dwarf paused after a few moments and studied the blobs moving across the black screen in front of him. Looking back to the console, he continued his work.

“Now keep an eye out! I’ll have this licked in two shakes of a…” Brann muttered loudly. Alayne let out a high-pitched wail of terror as the metallic face just above Brann woke to life, white light glittering in its eyesockets and red beams streaking through its jaw.

“Warning! Life form pattern not recognized. Archival processing terminated. Continued interference will result in targeted response,” the metallic man’s head intoned in a mechanical voice. The room rumbled slightly and Ger’alin glanced over his shoulder into the hallway, wondering if they would need to vacate the premises post-haste.

“Oh, that doesn’t sound good,” Brann muttered almost absent-mindedly “We might have a complication or two…”

“Behind you!” Alayne shouted, spotting several stone golems running down the hallway, past the globe, and straight for them. Ger’alin tore his mace from his belt, snapping the sheathe, and spun to meet the attackers. The rest of the group swarmed to the doorway, Alayne hanging back slightly as she watched for an opening through which she could send her spells. The second face, that of a woman wearing a cowl high on her forehead, came to life, her eyes flashing white and red. “Security breach in progress. Analysis of historical archives transferred to lower priority queue. Countermeasures engaged.”

“What are they talking about?” Alayne muttered as she watched the countermeasures swarm into the room.

“Ah, you want to play hardball, eh? That’s just my game!” Brann chuckled recklessly as he continued to fiddle with the control panel. The third face, that of a woman with a warrior’s helm, awoke and beams of light shot from her mouth and eyes. The group danced away from the sparks and the beams, the first strike that burned through them warning them that this was an experience they would not care to repeat.

As the beams continued to threaten them from inside the room, golems and stone dwarves raced towards them, threatening to overwhelm them. Ger’alin reached out to the Light and let its energy flow through him, turning the ground beneath his feet into a holy mire that seared and staggered his attackers. A golden storm of divine power swirled around him, sending the golems and dwarves back into the hallway and soothing the wounds they had inflicted on him and his allies. Rogar, the orc warrior at his right, was a blur of action and fury, his brutal axe whistling through the air whenever one of the ‘countermeasures’ drew near. The dwarves stood alongside them, hurling their throwing hammers and doing their best to keep the guardian creatures from getting past them. At length, Alayne summoned the cold air from the far room and set it swirling in the doorway, creating a snowstorm that chilled any who passed through it, making them easier targets for Ger’alin and the others.

“Just a couple more minutes and I’ll…” Brann shouted over the din.

“Critical threat index. Void analysis diverted. Initiating sanitization protocol,” the first head intoned in a lifeless male voice.

The waves of stone golems and dwarves increased. The line Ger’alin held at the door wavered, nearly breaking several times. Alayne caught the few who managed to surge through the Horde and the dwarven fighters, reducing them to piles of rubble with her strongest spells. Sweat slid down her face and it was all she could do to keep casting and moving away from the perilous light beams that shot from the faces above her. She roared in

frustration and anger; how could the Titans leave anything like this in place? Did they not want folk like the dwarves, with their insatiable curiosity, learning more about the Titans and their work? Were they that afraid? Or was this place the key to unlocking the prisons of the Old Gods? Alayne's shivering had little to do with the chill or her exhaustion as she thought about that. She ran across the room, intending to pull Brann away from the console and drag him and the others kicking and screaming from the room if need be.

"Hang on! Nobody's gonna' be sanitized as long as I have a say in it!" Brann growled angrily as he began hammering away furiously at the console. He shoved Alayne away with a strength that surprised her. With a few presses of the odd buttons and a twist of a knob, the beams stopped shooting from the faces above them and the waves of defenders called in began to slacken off. After several more minutes of furious combat, the doors slammed shut, keeping the explorers trapped inside but mercifully safe from the creatures summoned by the metallic archivists.

"Ha! The old magic fingers finally won through! Now let's get down to..." Brann cheered, shaking his fists in triumph.

"Alert! Security fail safes deactivated. Beginning memory purge..." the man's metallic voice said calmly, coolly. Brann's eyes widened in panic and he began poking and pressing at the console frantically.

"Purge? No no no no no! Where did I..." he muttered, near hysterical at the thought of destroying one of the very things he had come to salvage, "Aha, this should do the trick..." he sighed with relief as he keyed in the final sequence. The faces hummed quietly and then the lurid red lights shining from them vanished, replaced with calming, soothing lights that made them appear less inhumanly metallic.

"System online. Life form pattern recognized. Welcome Branbronzan. Query?" the man's metal voice said warmly as if greeting an old friend.

"Query? What do you think I'm here for? Tea and biscuits?" Brann sputtered. Alayne, who had walked back across the room to sink down in her husband's lap, stared at both the dwarf and the three strange heads. Did none of them speak normally? "Spill the beans already! Tell me how that dwarfs came to be! And start at the beginning!"

"Accessing prehistoric data," the old man's voice said. "Retrieved. In the beginning Earthen were created to..."

"Earthen?" Ger'alín whispered, his lips near Alayne's ear.

"They're the dwarves' ancestors," she replied. "Legends say they were made out of stone and earth and that's why the dwarves love working with stone and metal so much. It's a myth...or it was," she sighed, confused by the strange speech she was hearing.

"Right, right! I know that the Earthen were made of stone to shape the deep reaches of the world but what about the anomalies? Matrix non-stabilizing and whatnot," Brann demanded of his metallic friend.

"I think he's talking about the Sundering," Alayne supplied helpfully. Rogar and the tauren Run'ok both scooted in closer to catch what the elves were saying, desperate for some explanation of why they had just risked life and limb for three strange machines to wake to life and begin speaking in terms that made little sense to any of them.

"Accessing. In the early stages of its development cycle Azeroth suffered infection by parasitic, necrophotic symbiotes."

"Is that even a word? 'Necrophotic?'" Ger'alín wondered.

"Not that I've ever heard," Alayne whispered.

Apparently Brann had never heard the term either. "Necro-what? Speak bloody common will ya?"

"Designation: Old Gods," the metal man explained.

“When you’re right, you’re right,” Ger’alin teased. Alayne shushed him, hoping she hadn’t missed anything important.

“Old Gods rendered all systems, including Earthen defenseless in order to facilitate assimilation,” the metal man continued, “This matrix destabilization has been termed the Curse of Flesh. Effects of destabilization increased over time.”

“Old Gods, eh?” Brann muttered, sharing a look with Alayne. “So, they zapped the Earthen with this Curse of Flesh. And then what?”

“Accessing,” the woman to the left said, “Creators arrived to extirpate symbiotic infection. Assessment revealed that Old God infestation had grown malignant. Excising parasites would result in loss of host.”

Everyone in the room, including Brann, looked confused as they pondered over that explanation. “If they killed the Old Gods Azeroth would have been destroyed?” Brann asked, seeking clarification.

“Correct. Creators neutralized parasitic threat and contained it within the host. Forge of Wills and other systems were instituted to create new Earthen. Safeguards were implemented and protectors were appointed.”

Alayne’s temples began to throb as she tried to translate the strange terms into something that approached normal speech. She knew she herself could sound pompous when she waxed escatically on some esoteric treatise but this was ridiculous!

“What protectors?” Brann asked nervously, pulling his flat-topped hat off his head and wringing it in his hands.

“Designations: Aesir and Vanir or in common nomenclator Storm and Earth Giants. Sentinel Loken designated supreme. Dragon Aspects appointed to monitor evolution of Azeroth.”

“Loken,” Alayne gasped. “He’s supposed to be protecting us? Why is he out to destroy us? Is it because of this curse of flesh they mentioned?”

“Aesir and Vanir. Okay. So the Forge of Wills started to make new Earthen. But what happened to the old ones?”

“I’m lost,” Alayne admitted, shrugging and leaning back against Ger’alin’s chest. The rise and fall of his chest and the rock-steady beating of his heart against her shoulder calmed her.

“Additional background is relevant to your query,” the woman to the right said, “Following global combat between...”

“Hold everything!” Brann shouted, waving his arms wildly, “The Aesir and Vanir went to war? Why?”

“Unknown,” the speaker said reluctantly “Data suggests that impetus for global combat originated with prime designate Loken who neutralized all remaining Aesir and Vanir affecting termination of conflict. Prime designate Loken then initiated stasis of several seed races including Earthen, Giant and Vrykul at designated holding facilities.”

“This Loken sounds like a nasty character,” Brann said, winking at the others. He felt relieved that the archivists weren’t rushing to defend the prime designate. “I hope we don’t have to worry about him anymore,” he continued. “So if I’m understanding you lads the original Earthen eventually woke up from this stasis. And by that time this destabily-whatever had turned them into our brother dwarfs. Or at least dwarf ancestors. Hm?”

“Essentially that is correct,” the woman replied.

Brann paused, running a hand through his thinning red hair. He seemed overcome with the knowledge that had been imparted to him by the archivists. He wanted both to digest it and make sense of what he had learned and to demand still more information. Glancing over his shoulder at his wearied defenders, he sighed and came to a decision. “Well now.

That's a lot to digest. I'm gonna need some time to take all of this in. Thank you!" he concluded, pressing a few keys. The lights in the room began to fade.

"Acknowledged Branbronzan. Session terminated," the man's voice said cheerfully.

"What is going on?" Ger'alın demanded loudly. "Why were they calling you Branbronzen? Who are they? What in the name of the Pantheon were they talking to you about?"

"Always more questions than answers, eh, lad?" Brann said tiredly. "Let me sit down and see if I can make it clear to you..."

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"And so you think this Forge of Wills is nearby?" Ger'alın asked uncertainly.

"It's got to be. It only makes sense. Let's go check out those control panels you found to see if they grant access to it. If it's nearby, we can take control of it and use it to create an army. Imagine that," the dwarf said exuberantly. "An army, and more forces whenever you need them, right here. You don't have to worry about betrayal or recruiting or even feeding and housing them. The earthen are hardy. We descend from them," he said proudly.

"It doesn't sound right," Alayne muttered. "Just creating living creatures? For an army? What of their wishes? What of that? What you're talking about sounds little different than what the Lich King does by subverting the will of his army, forcing them to fight for him whether they want to or not."

"She's got a point," Ger'alın sighed. "I'll have no part of enslaving other beings."

"You wouldn't be enslaving them," Brann explained as they stood up, dusted themselves off, and began walking back the way they had come. "They're part of Azeroth just like the rest of us. Once they understood what was going on, they'd be happy to help."

"All the same," Alayne said, "I'd rather we recruited only those who already know what's going on."

Brann muttered into his beard and Alayne affected not to hear what he said about her being stubborn and short-sighted. Crossing the corridor that branched into the three paths, they walked first to the control panel guarded by the crystalline giant. Brann's face lit up when he saw it and another furious series of button-pressing began. The others tensed, waiting for some disaster to fall down upon them. When nothing happened after Brann stepped away from the console and dusted his hands, they relaxed. Retracting their steps again, Alayne and Ger'alın led him to the room where they had defeated the stone woman. Her body still lay on the floor but the magic that had animated the rock was waning quickly. Chips fell from her and her skin was turning into a murky dust. Brann ignored her and walked to the console. A few moments later and the group was on its way back to the entrance.

"That was not there before," Ger'alın muttered beneath his breath. A new doorway opposite the corridor from where they had been was lit up ahead. Brann walked over to it and began fiddling with the controls set up at the base of the doorway.

"It's just ahead," Brann said, breathless with excitement. "We'll finally be able to see how the Titans intended us to be before this...parasitic whatever-it-is mucked things up."

"I'm perfectly happy with how I am, thank you very much," Alayne whispered in Thalassian. Ger'alın snorted in amusement, masking it with a cough. Brann pressed his hands against the door and the doors parted swiftly.

"Who the devil..." Brann demanded, seeing a strange man standing over the control panel. "He's trying to create his own army! Hold him away from there until I can get things under control," the dwarf ordered, his anger and outrage at such brazen conduct on the part of the strange man making him sound imperious. Squaring his shoulders and marching straight

up the ramp towards the control panel, the dwarf forced the others to hasten to keep up with him. As their heavy footfalls brought them close, Ger'alın could see that the strange man was actually a vykrul of some kind. His flesh was metallic and gleamed dully in the soft light of the room. His eyes blazed like the light from behind a precious stone. His hair looked like wire. Turning to see who approached him, the metal vykrul threw his head back and laughed, his voice being the only thing that seemed organic about him at all.

“Soft, vulnerable shells,” he jeered. “Such brief, fragile lives. You cannot escape the curse of flesh!”

Before any of them could react, the vykrul forger was running straight for the gaping Brann. Ger'alın rushed in, lowering his shield over the dwarf and taking the blow that was intended to smash the explorer into the floor. The sound of metal ringing against metal echoed through the large room and the vykrul continued laughing, his laughter cutting and sneering. Ger'alın swung his hammer around, connecting with his enemy's kneecap and then swearing as the vibrations rang up his arm, nearly dislocating his shoulder.

The others quickly gathered themselves. Brann took the opportunity afforded by the distraction to duck out from beneath Ger'alın's shield and begin sprinting for the controls. If he could just get the forge working under his orders, he could create an army of earthen to help take care of this strange trespasser. He wondered, idly, who the strange vykrul was. The other panels had indicated that the Forge of Wills was idle and that only Loken had the access codes to it. It had been a stroke of pure luck – but he would spin it as one of daring skill – that he had been able to crack the security measures as Branbrozen. That the archive thought he had legitimate access helped greatly in tricking the rest of the system into allowing him in. Poking around at the control to the Forge, he began trying to wrest control of it away from whoever had the true access codes. Meanwhile, behind him, the fight continued.

Ger'alın had given up trying to actually hit the creature with his mace. While it was a holy weapon, blessed by the Light and sealed by the naaru, even it had its limitations. He fully intended to return it to Sar'la in mint condition when she was old enough to begin learning to use it. He would not see it destroyed now. Instead, he hurled the Light itself as a weapon, forming a hammer of judgement with his faith that cracked against the vykrul's metal skull. Behind him, he could hear Alayne muttering the words to an incantation and he could feel her spells whistling past him, landing against the interloper with chimes and high-pitched thuds that left his own ears ringing. Rogar and Run'ok did their best, turning their weapons against the rocky railing nearby to chip away missiles that they could hurl. They had already seen that metal weapons did little damage to metal flesh. The dwarves had joined in, moving around to the sides to give the vykrul small chance to dodge their attacks while giving themselves a chance to rush to the Forge if Brann gave the order.

After long minutes of fighting, Ger'alın began gasping for breath as he continued to use his shield to block and absorb the worst of the blows. Sweat trickled down his face and several times he risked attacking again with the mace he had been given. Each time, he swore it was the last time he would try that fool stunt. His arm was growing numb from the reverberations ringing up his bones. Then, he felt the hair on the back of his neck begin to stand on end. His skin pebbled with goosebumps and the rest of his hair began to stick out wildly. Glancing at the vykrul in confusion, Ger'alın saw that the giant was channeling in bolts of lightning. Bashing at the creature once with his shield, Ger'alın trotted back away from him, just in time to avoid a bolt of lightning arcing in the spot where he had been standing.

“Armies of iron will smother the world!” the vykrul shouted as he rushed towards Ger'alın. “Flesh is no match for iron!”

“Just hold him a bit longer!” Brann called out over the din of battle. “I think I...oh no,” he groaned, resuming his frantic key-pressing.

Ger'alın glanced across the room to see the massive forges beginning to move. Their strange bellows pumped and the wheeze of air rushing past them could be heard even over the metallic ringing of combat. However, instead of earthen, slimy oozes began pouring out of the forges, sliding down the ramps towards the battle, searching mindlessly for flesh to devour. Ger'alın groaned and focused his attacks, hoping to bring down the vykruł intruder before he had to deal with the oozes.

Alayne ignored the vykruł altogether. Her spells were doing little, her magic utterly unable to penetrate its metal skin. Instead, she summoned together the chill air of the room and flung it at the oozes, freezing the liquid into blocks of ice which could not move and would not survive for long. Ger'alın saw this out of the corner of his eye and sighed with relief. Deciding to risk the pain, Run'ok and Rogar rushed to Ger'alın's side, flanking the vykruł and cutting in with their blades. Both orc and tauren grimaced as their weapons leapt back in their grip but continued to hack away as they saw that even the metallic flesh could be cut open with the sharp edge of an axe or polearm. "Fight him; metal is not so much stronger," Rogar said tersely. Ger'alın gritted his teeth and shoved his shield aside, knocking the vykruł off-balance for a second. Slamming his mace into the creature's stomach, he felt a sense of satisfaction when he saw the dark metallic face pale and heard the creature begin gasping for breath. Renewing their attacks, the three fought with a desperate frenzy while Alayne continued to hurl spells of fire that heated and weakened the metal shell until, at last, the creature staggered to his knees under the onslaught. Earthen began pouring out of the forges on either side of the room. Pausing only to smash the frozen oozes, they rushed to help the fighters. Under the wave of spells, blows from bladed and blunt weapons, and the earthen's attacks, the vykruł collapsed. His gemstone eyes began to darken as he groaned, "Loken will not rest until the forge is retaken! You changed nothing!"

"I told you I could do it," Brann said, sounding chipper. "My brothers," he smiled warmly at the expressionless earthen. "Come, you all go find a place to rest and recover. The Forge of Wills is ours now. Next, we'll press on against the Halls of Lightning and then...then we shall enter Ulduar itself!"

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"No," Zerith's voice crackled over the gnomish device Brann had given them. "I agree with you; we will not just forge an army of slaves to fight our battles for us. Light, how could the Titans be foolish enough to leave such a thing where anyone could get to it?"

"I don't think they ever intended for mere mortals to use it," Alayne answered, wincing at the static noise the device emitted. "We should set guards on it to ensure that the Lich King never gets access to it."

"We don't have many to spare," Zerith sighed. "We would if Garrosh would...but, I might as well ask for pigs to fly and Arthas to remember his humanity as to ask for that."

"How much trouble is he causing?"

"Plenty. Thrall is planning to come up here and relieve him of command. The only problem is that about half of the orcs worship Garrosh. He's held Wintergrasp against every attack the Alliance has launched. He's working on taking back Borean Tundra and is promising to restore the taunka's homelands to them. Nevermind that the Forsaken have finished clearing out Howling Fjord so that the tribal grounds there are safe. If Garrosh can convince enough orcs and taunka to stand with him, we're looking at a civil war in the Horde."

"Life was so much simpler when we just struck out on our own and the Legion take what the rest of the world was doing," Alayne sighed.

"Speaking of life getting complicated," Zerith said suddenly. "Mir'el's here."

“Oh no! Is Jez’ral...”

“Jez’ral is doing as well as can be expected. Mir’el convinced Lord Theron to arrange for a transport for them both. Jez’ral is in Dalaran...”

“...Shattrath would be better. The Aldor and the naaru might be able to heal him...”

“...and he’s worried half to death about you.”

“That’s not new,” Alayne sighed. “Is Mir’el there? In Naxxramas?”

“He is. He likes the shielding spell you’ve put in place. He says it must have taken a lot of intelligence and a very deft touch to pull it off. He’s studying your notes on levitation and has a few suggestions for how we can remove the Scourge work entirely and replace it with something less vile. At any rate, he’s here and he has asked to join your expedition to Ulduar. Are you going to scream if I send him there to get him out of my hair?”

“I’ll scream but I promise I’ll wait until you’ve turned off this infernal device.”

“You have my thanks, Sis. When will you be going into the Halls of Lightning?”

“Sometime in the next day or so. Brann is pressing us for haste. We tried to enter Ulduar earlier today and the protective shield is still there.”

“Do you really think that anything in those Halls is going to give you access to it?”

“Honestly, I’m no longer certain. At least once we’ve investigated the Halls of Lightning, we might feel better. Zerith, the Light take me for a fool but I swear it feels as if someone is watching us the whole time we’ve been here.”

“A premonition?”

“I’d prefer to think it was just paranoia.”

“Well, regardless of what happens, I’m going to need you and Ger’alin back here in a week. Alexstrasza has been asking after you. Apparently, she doesn’t like the idea of anyone entering Ulduar. She can’t explain why but she says it’s not safe. Still, she needs us to help investigate one of her flight going missing over in Borean Tundra. She’s afraid that Malygos might be on the move against them and that it’s no longer safe to consider him held at bay.”

“I thought the Alliance was taking care of that.”

“So did I. Apparently, the first attack was repelled fairly swiftly by Malygos himself. Now the blues have left Coldarra and are taking parts of Borean Tundra. She fears that Malygos may use the power inherent in Sholazar to launch an attack and she wants him taken care of in short order. The Alliance won’t have time to send word back to Stormwind and wait for another dragon-killing group to be mounted and sent up here. The Ebons are stretched thin, the Argents are busy, and Garrosh is too pre-occupied making certain the Alliance couldn’t send anyone to do anything other than fight him. That leaves us.”

“Well, at least it gives Jez’ral a real reason to worry about me,” she sighed. “I need to get going. Ger’alin’s been hovering over me about not eating enough lately. I should go over to the mess tent and see if supper is ready and then get some sleep.”

“You do that. Take care, Alayne.”

“You too, Zerith.”

Alayne switched off the device with a sigh of regret and relief. She regretted not being able to return to Naxxramas immediately and see what, exactly, had brought Mir’el and Jez’ral hunting her in Northrend. She also wondered just what the red dragonflight needed their help for. Still, she and Ger’alin had promised Brann that they would do their best to help him enter Ulduar. At least she could pass along Alexstrasza’s message to the dwarf. Perhaps she could temper his enthusiasm with a bit of caution. Shrugging into her thick cloak and pulling on her overboots, she put a hand to the tent flap and prepared to step outside.

Darkness overwhelmed her. She felt herself falling but could do nothing to break her fall. She cried out, clutching at the black air around her, trying to grasp hold of something, anything, to keep her from pitching headlong into the chasm she feared was awaiting her. Then, just as quickly, she stopped falling. Gentle gusts of air seemed to support her in the

infinite darkness. She strained her eyes but could see nothing. She felt as if she had been blinded. "Someone help me!" she shouted, her voice echoing loudly in the darkness.

"You must stop this," a deep, familiar voice rang in her ears. *"Surrender to me, join with me and my loyal subjects once more, and I can protect you from the destruction you are so close to awakening."*

"I will never submit to you again!" she shouted. "I was a fool to fall for your tricks the first time, Arthas. Never again!"

"You know not what you are dealing with. You would risk bringing death and destruction upon the entire world. Even I will bring only death; that last darkness which must come for all peoples. You would bring utter destruction."

"So, what? We surrender to you, become your slaves, and you'll save the world? Are you mad or stupid or both?"

"I have warned you in the past, little Alayne. I showed you the destruction your prince was bringing upon the world. I tried to spare you and your people more suffering by showing you that the Legion itself loomed large in their future if Kael'Thas were allowed to continue on his path unchecked. And still, you left me. You ignored my warnings. Because of you, Kil'jaeden nearly entered this world to destroy it and claim it for his own."

"We stopped him. We didn't need any warnings or help from you! If anything, your 'warnings' made it easier for Kael'Thas to continue in his plotting! Everyone knows that if it weren't for the fact that you rebelled against the Legion out of love of power, you'd be serving Kil'jaeden yourself!"

"I was born to rule, not to serve. My destiny is greater than that of what my former Master sought. But still, I tried to warn you. I am warning you now that dangers beyond anything you could imagine await you in Ulduar. There is a reason that even I have not sent my forces to take control of the Forge of Wills or to storm the Titan city there. It is because to do so would destroy everything."

"I don't believe you."

"Your belief or disbelief is irrelevant. Your opinion does not matter. All that matters is that you and the dwarf cease probing the Titan city lest you set in motion a series of events that not even I could save you from."

"You? Save anyone? That will be the day," she snorted. The darkness swirled around her again, this time filled with the sounds of thousands of insane shrieks. She could feel her sanity beginning to crack under the strain and could sense her reason beginning to work against her. Madness washed over her and she was taken back to the days when the Lich King's foul sickness had claimed her mind, leaving her a shattered woman who could not perform the simplest of tasks. Now, the darkness lifted and she could see Zerith and Ger'alín clawing at their own faces and chewing their tongues in their insanity. Dar'ja sat, vacant-eyed, staring at some nameless horror only a diseased and broken mind could conjure. The shrieks and cries of the darkness came from the throats of those she knew and loved.

"This is what I would save you from. Is not death and 'slavery' better than freedom and insanity?" the Lich King sneered angrily. *"Go your own way at your peril, little Alayne. There are many dangers beyond that posed by my followers here in Northrend. This land will be your end if you do not join the one force working to hold destruction away."*

"Alayne? Alayne, wake up. Don't do this to me, sweetheart," she heard Ger'alín saying across a vast distance. She glanced around in confusion. Ger'alín was sitting before her, his eyes looking past her and not seeing her. His lips moved in a silent prayer. "Alayne, come on, snap out of it woman," she heard him growl.

"G...Ger'alín?" she whispered, opening her eyes again and surprised to find herself shivering. "What happened?"

“You’ve not been eating enough. I knew it. I keep telling you that you have to eat more than you do when you’re out here in the cold but you never listen to me. You must have passed out. Close your eyes. I’m going to get you out of the snow and carry you back to bed. A little rest and actually finishing what I put in front of you will do you a world of good.”

“I just had the strangest dream,” she muttered, closing her eyes but still feeling a rush of dizziness as her husband lifted her off the cold, wet ground. “The Lich King was warning us not to enter Ulduar.”

“What?” Ger’alin said, so shocked he almost dropped her as the strength drained from his arms and legs.

“He was saying that the reason the Scourge has never pressed into Ulduar is because there is a power there that could destroy the entire world. If we surrendered to him, we could all overcome it together, he claims.”

“He would claim that,” Ger’alin said tonelessly. “Anything to give him more mindless slaves.”

“I hate to say this,” she sighed as Ger’alin laid her on the cot they shared, “but his warnings have been right in the past. Perhaps...”

“We should exercise extreme caution in entering Ulduar,” Ger’alin cut in, “and we should consider abandoning the plan altogether if it’s too risky. I’ll agree with him on that though in my heart I’d love to do just the opposite of anything he counsels.”

“That is exactly what I was going to say,” she muttered.

“I’ll pass your warning along to Brann though I’m not going to tell him exactly how it came about,” Ger’alin sighed as he finished settling her in the cot. “And, I’m going to bring back a double helping of supper and you are going to eat every scrap of it. Now, what did Zerith have to say?”

“Oh, not much. Just that we’ll need to return there by the end of the week. Oh, and Mir’el and Jez’ral are here.” Ger’alin sighed and shook his head. “Apparently, the red dragons need our help with something. The Alliance was unable to contain Malygos and the reds fear to leave him at liberty much longer. We’ll have to head over to Coldarra in Borean Tundra to help them.”

“Life was so much simpler when we did our own thing,” Ger’alin sighed. “But, we’re caught in the midst of several breaking storms. Best to ride them out since there seems to be no one else to handle them.” Without another word, he strode from the tent, his mind full of worry over the Lich King’s counsel and the worries of the red dragons.

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“I appreciate the danger,” Brann sighed. “And, yer right, it could be dangerous to break into a place that the Titans themselves locked up. However, the lass has been sensing danger coming from there for a while now, hasn’t she? Her brother told me she’d been feeling as if something deadly were waiting for us all up here. Better to find it and face it than to run from it and pray it goes away. The dragon is always bigger in your mind than in reality.”

Ger’alin clenched his fists but said nothing. Brann was still set upon his plan to find a way to open Ulduar to the world. “We will only be able to remain here to help you for a few more days,” the paladin said instead of what he wanted to say. “We are needed back in Naxxramas. Other events are coming to a head; we will do our best to see that you are safe in your endeavors but I’m afraid that we will not be able to spare men to guard you.”

“That’s fine, lad,” Brann nodded. “I understand. You and your friends have gotten to be rather important in the larger scheme of things with the Horde. You’ve got other business to tend to. I’ll be fine up here once we have access to the Halls of Lightning. Either Hall is

warm enough to live in. No more hasty tents that can be snowed under for us,” he laughed. “I’m not thinking you’re breaking your word. Life happens.”

“We have those communicators that the gnomes gave us all,” Ger’alin continued. “If you get in trouble and need us to send help, use them to contact us. We’ll come as soon as we can.”

“I’ll do that. For now, let’s go over the plan for tomorrow. I’ve bad news for you, though. Loken is in there.”

“Loken? How?”

“Our spies saw him enter the Hall this afternoon. He must have the access keys to Ulduar himself because he came out of there and entered the Halls of Lightning.”

“Did they see him enter Ulduar?”

“No. Just leave it. He looked rather pleased with himself, though, from what my scouts say. He was talking to himself in that way that people who rarely speak to anyone else have, muttering that everything was in place; the Watchers were all taken care of. Something about his master being free at last.”

“His master? Then we know for certain that there is an old god in Ulduar,” Ger’alin groaned, clenching his teeth so tightly his ears rang from the strain.

“If the night elves and the dragons could overcome the one in Silithus to lock it away, surely we can do the same. They were thousands and thousands of years behind us, after all. I much misdoubt that the first of your people had even drawn breath or worn their first swaddling clothes when that happened.”

“Alayne could tell you that better than I,” Ger’alin sighed. “She’s the historian.”

“Aye, she has an aptitude for it. But let’s leave the concerns of Ulduar itself for when we can actually enter it. Now, I want you to take these to yer wife,” he said, pointing at a stack of books and several scrolls. “This is everything we know about the Halls of Lightning and Loken. We’re fairly sure we can handle the guardians of the Hall itself but Loken is another matter entirely. I’d like her opinion on how we should approach him.”

“She thinks he’s insane and evil,” Ger’alin replied. “Her idea will probably involve either getting very far away from him or killing him.”

“Getting far away from him is not an option, I’m afraid,” Brann chuckled. “But, he’s sure to have his weaknesses. Have her have a look at that and see if she can figure something out. The rest of the fighting should be fairly straight-forward. We know there’s another vykru like Sjonir. He’s called General Bjarngrim. There’s also the forger, Volkhan. He’s said to be mostly mad, though. The stone and metal golems we’ve seen in other parts of the Storm Peaks are his work. He spends his time creating them and then forgets about them. And, that’s as far as my scouts were able to see without being caught out.”

“I’ll look over these with her. Hopefully, we can piece something together from them.”

“Good luck to ye, then,” Brann said, turning back to his notes on Ulduar and what he hoped to find there. Ger’alin muttered that he would return to the dwarf that evening with whatever he and Alayne had worked out. He just hoped she would be recovered from the strange dream she’d had the night before. She’d been weak that morning, tired and unable to focus much. The cold had seemed to affect her more strongly as well, leaving her listless and drained. Shaking his head again and muttering a quick prayer in Thalassian, Ger’alin gathered the books and scrolls in his arms and marched back out into the falling snow.

By the time he reached their tent, he was glad to be in from out of the biting wind. So high atop the northern isle, there was little to block or break the wind other than their own tent canvass. Alayne was sitting on the cot, the blankets wrapped around her and the brazier pulled near. She chaffed her hands irritably and her gaze was unfocused, as if she were mulling a problem over in her mind and had not yet reached a conclusion. Ger’alin caught

one of the legs of a small table with his ankle and dragged it nearer the cot. Dropping the books and scrolls on it, he settled down next to Alayne, putting an arm around her and rubbing her shoulder and arm to warm her. “Brann suggested some light reading,” he teased.

“I heard from the others, the scouts,” she muttered, her gaze still unfocused. “Loken is in there.”

“I see. Then there’s no need for me to explain that Brann is hoping this information will help you figure out a way he might be defeated, is there?”

“It’s insane,” she muttered, rubbing her eyes to bring her gaze back into focus. “But, let’s see what we have to work with.”

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Alayne sighed as they entered the small crack in the wall that was their “secret” entrance into the Halls of Lightning. She knew that Loken must know they were coming. Some of the tools gifted to him by the Titans included various methods of monitoring the world. He must be watching them and laughing at their pathetic attempt to attack his stronghold with only a dozen fighters. Still, she gave herself a bit of comfort in knowing that Loken had, over the ages, grown overbearing and arrogant. A brief conference with Alexstrasza using the magic bracelet she’d been given had revealed that the dragons had long ago slipped from Loken’s domination, turning their backs on him as best they could, and leaving him to sit in solitude. Aeons of loneliness since he had driven away his brother and murdered his sister by marriage had taken their toll. Though Loken was powerful and paranoid, he was barely half-sane. She tried to take the comfort she could from that knowledge but, if anything, it made her less certain of the wisdom of attacking his stronghold. However, Brann was adamant. Ulduar must be opened to him. The answers he had long sought must be found.

“The minute we engage those brutes,” Ger’alin sighed, “the alarms will sound and we’re going to have a stiff fight on our hands.”

“Aye,” Brann nodded. “Still, we’ve got the trap set and ready to spring.”

Alayne winced in anticipation. Her ears still hurt whenever she thought about the devices they’d used at Warsong Hold to stop the waves of nerubians from attacking through the underground tunnels. Similar devices had been set up nearby. “Well, there’s nothing to do for it but to get started,” Ger’alin muttered. He glanced around, seeing that everyone was in position, and then stepped out of the shadows. Marching boldly down the ramp, looking as if he had every right in the world to be in the massive building, the sin’dorei locked eyes with one of the metallic vykrul soldiers standing at the bottom of the platform. The steel-skinned man laughed, his booming chuckles echoing throughout the hall, giving more than adequate warning of Ger’alin’s approach.

“You seek to enter the Halls of Lightning, fleshling?” the vykrul taunted. “Run off now and you may live out your short life.”

“I have come to seek Loken,” Ger’alin said calmly, standing with his feet spread slightly apart and his arms hanging back, looking as if he were completely at ease.

“You seek Loken?” the vykrul laughed, bending at the waist and slapping his knee as if it were the funniest thing he had ever heard. “Why would a pathetic creature like you seek he who is the sun and soul of Azeroth?”

“My business is my own,” Ger’alin continued evenly. “I have come to bring him a gift for which he has long waited.”

“I see no gift for the great one, little mortal.”

“It is not something the likes of you could see,” Ger’alin replied, a hint of steel entering his voice. Raising his hands, he channeled holy power, reaching out to the Light and flinging its shield at the steel giant before him. Before the vykrul could react, a bolt of molten

fire flew through the air, striking it on the chest. The unholy fire seared the vykrul's metal skin, heating it and smelting it even as he prepared to attack the paladin. The other vykrul standing on the connected platforms glanced in the direction of their suffering comrade, their gemstone eyes widening in shock as they watched him contort, writhe, and then fall at Ger'alın's feet. As the other vykrul began rushing towards the entrance to avenge the fallen, Ger'alın snorted contemptuously. "You see, monster," he growled, spitting out the words before his enemy died, "I bring justice."

Ger'alın waited until the first wave of metal vykrul were in range before jogging back a few paces. When he was safely out of range, the dwarves hidden in the shadows at the top of the ramp stepped out, flinging the explosives they'd brought. The shockwave of many grenades going off at once nearly tripped Ger'alın but he managed to stay on his feet. Alayne waited until the smoke thinned slightly before hurling her next spell. Fel magic mixed with arcane energy to form a molten bolt that would continue to burn the steel skin of the attackers. Mixed with the heat of the bombs and the heat of the Ger'alın's holy attacks, their skin would become a weapon that could be wielded and welded against them. Still, she had little love for what she was doing and would be glad when it was over with. Mir'el and Jez'ral would both lecture her until her hair was silver if they found out she was crossing the streams of two opposing forms of magic. Ger'alın had been against the idea until she'd demonstrated just how effective it could be. At the same time, she hated the simultaneous sensations of ecstacy and the foul slick of fel magic coursing through her body.

Glancing up the ramp and seeing that the others were able to keep up with their ranged attacks, Ger'alın nodded to himself in satisfaction and reached out to the Light again. Letting its divine power course through him, he used it to purify and heat the stone and metal walkway beneath his feet. As the vykrul continued to try to ignore the searing pain from Alayne's spells and the molten blood dripping from superheated wounds, they grimaced when they stepped on the ground the paladin had consecrated against them. Their feet grew tacky in their metal boots. Some began to stick to the floor, unable to wrench their feet off of it to take another step. Ger'alın felt a grim sense of satisfaction as the expressions on their faces changed from anger and arrogance to surprise and alarm. As more and more grenades exploded against their bodies and they fell to join their comrade, the alarm turned to fury on the faces of those left.

"That's it," one of the dwarves shouted, announcing that they were out of grenades. Only three vykrul remained standing and they were in various states of meltdown as Alayne continued her casting. Ger'alın pulled his mace out of the loop at his belt and pulled his shield around from his back. Wading into the mess of melted metal bodies, he hammered away, surprised when his mace cut through the heated skin instead of rebounding and reverberating up his arm. The vykrul seemed just as stunned as he grappled with the paladin, overbalanced on his good leg, and fell. The dwarves were running down the ramp, axes and maces at the ready. Within seconds of them reaching the base of the ramp, the vykrul were down, their acidic green blood staining the steel of the axes and maces.

"Wipe those off good," Ger'alın muttered, shaking his mace and grimacing as the blood splattered back onto the vykrul corpses and began eating away at the metal skin. The dwarves muttered about the way it was already etching their weapons, creating pits and eating holes into the tempered steel. Ger'alın studied his mace, hoping it was not ruined. Amazingly, it looked just as it always had. He had little time to wonder at it, though, as an enormous vykrul came running through the door at the far side of the room. He carried twin axes in his metal hands. Lightning arced and danced around his metal body. A look of pure rage contorted his features as he ran over the connected platforms and towards the group near the entrance.

“I am the greatest of my father’s sons!” he roared as he reached them, his axe smashing against Ger’alin’s shield. “Your end has come!”

Ger’alin held his ground, his arms ringing with the strength of the enraged vykruul’s blows. He realized that this must be the General Bjarngrim they had heard of and, from the way he bellowed, the vykruul they had slaughtered must be his brothers. The enraged golem battered away at Ger’alin, his axes hammering against the paladin’s shield again and again. Chips flew through the air as the face of the shield and the edge of the axes began splintering each other from the force of the blows.

“Graaaaah!” General Bjarngrim roared in frustration as he changed his footing and let his weapons whirl in his grip. “Behold the fury of iron and steel!”

Ger’alin danced backwards as the vykruul became a whirlwind of steel, the blades of his axes cutting through the air as he turned around and around, a maelstrom of metallic death. Bjarngrim halted his attack when he saw that everyone had moved away from him and changed his tactics once again. Looking almost amused at the fleshy mortals before him, he stood, his stance open. “Give me your worst!” he shouted.

Behind him, Ger’alin could hear his wife preparing another of her searing fire spells. Waiting until the incantation wound down, he rushed in to attack, his mace, its power increased by the intervention of the Light, slamming against the vykruul’s guard. Alayne’s spell landed against Bjarngrim’s chest seconds later, leaving him stunned at the heat racing across his body. Ger’alin winced after his next attack as the electricity swirling around Bjarngrim coalesced and shocked him, sending him staggering back several steps. Alayne continued to hurl bolts of fire at the giant, careful to send them to the same spot, hoping to weaken him as she had the others. The general tried to shrug off the magical assault but sought out the cause of his sudden warming. Spotting Alayne, he raced towards her, his axes at the ready. “Defend yourself, for all the good it will do!” he screamed.

“Oh no you don’t,” Ger’alin swore, reaching out to the Light and throwing a shield of holy energy around Alayne. Strong as steel, the shield protected her from the vykruul’s lethal blows. Ger’alin raced after Bjarngrim, slamming his hammer into the giant’s back. Bjarngrim shouted and swore, whirling to face the paladin once more. The dwarves rushed in to surround Bjarngrim as well, creating a wall with their own bodies between him and Alayne. Axes and maces cut into the general’s legs and knees, slowing him. When the giant bent to try to brush the dwarves away the way he would fleas, Ger’alin smashed his mace into the giant’s face. The general screamed, molten blood streaming down his face. Another one of Alayne’s spells smashed into his back, weak and bruised from the paladin’s earlier attack. Collapsing on his stomach, Bjarngrim, groaned in disbelief as the small, fleshy fighters surged over him.

“How can it be?” he demanded as Ger’alin’s mace rose to smash into his forehead. “Flesh is not...stronger!”

“It would seem that it is,” Ger’alin muttered dryly, wiping sweat from his forehead. Alayne, eyes wide, walked over to stand by him. “We probably don’t have much time before the rest of the place comes after us. Let’s get moving and keep moving,” the paladin suggested. “What’s the matter, Alayne?” he asked, seeing the concern on her face.

“Nothing,” she said breathlessly. Ger’alin glared at her, a look that said he knew damned well something was wrong and was prepared to stand his ground all day until he got it out of her. She shook her head and sighed. “Something,” she admitted. “A horrible suspicion I’ve been having. I’ll tell you about it later. For now, you’re right,” she sighed as she pointed to the door through which the general had come. A wave of rock golems was racing towards them. “We don’t have much time.”

Ger'alín swished the warm water in his mouth and then spat it out. He wished there were enough for him to pour it over himself to get the rest of the rock dust and shards off of him. He was coated, head to toe, in a thick dust, the remains of the rock golems they had faced. Their creator, the forger Vulkhan, lay dead near his anvil and Ger'alín was beginning to wonder what kind of madness had infected these once-noble beings. From the statues he could see lined up along the walls, the Titans had once blessed the vykrol, leaving them the cherished children of those the shapers had left to oversee Azeroth. Now, it seemed as if the overseers and their children had gone mad, turning against everyone who was not one of them.

"It's the same story again and again," Alayne sighed. "Will none of us ever learn?"

Ger'alín quirked an eyebrow at her and, when the fine dust floated into his eye, immediately wished he hadn't. "You're different, therefore, you are evil and must die," she explained. "We elves did it to the trolls – still do, to a point. The trolls did it to us. The humans and the orcs do it to each other, the Forsaken get it from all sides...and now those who were supposed to look after us, to protect us from things like the Legion and the Lich King, they're more determined to see us dead than help us find safety. Light, what a tangle."

"Still, what would drive them to this pass?" Ger'alín wondered. "Why would those who were given the task of protecting life on Azeroth turn away from it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps living so long, seeing so much, is a curse. I know everyone wants to live forever and have their friends and family live forever with them. But...perhaps it's a prison in and of itself; forced to watch as others age, wither, and die, and you can do nothing to stop it from happening. Maybe it's driven those who were supposed to protect us mad and now we're at their mercy as well as the mercy of those we should be protected from."

"True, but at least we're facing the dangers on our feet like men instead of hiding behind someone's skirts, wishing and praying that the danger would go away. I must say that I do not much like the idea that the Titans trusted their creation so little that they left caretakers and guardians to oversee it."

"I think," Alayne muttered, glancing around to make certain that the dwarves could not overhear her. "I think that the Titans, while wiser, more knowledgeable, and more powerful than I can imagine, are really not so different than us. Experience and long-sightedness help them, yes, but they make mistakes the same as we do. They may not trust those who don't live a thousandth part of their own lives just the way that we mistrust the humans and have throughout our history because their lives are so brief compared to our centuries upon this land."

"Careful," Ger'alín teased lightly, putting an arm around his wife's shoulders and kissing her on the head. She grimaced as the fine dust coating him fell on her. "Brann thinks the Makers can do no wrong."

"I just...I have a feeling that the Lich King is right about all of this," she said, gesturing around the massive hallway. "Oh, don't get me wrong," she added, "Arthas can lie until he's blue in the face when it suits his purpose. But, he didn't lie about not moving into the Storm Peaks. I asked my father," her face crumpled in pain at the memory and Ger'alín held her against his chest. "I asked him once what lay in the mountains. He said that the final death lay there and told me to focus on my balance. But, the Scourge never entered these mountains. Though we were sent through all the rest of Northrend, we left shielded Sholazar and the Storm Peaks alone."

"I hate the Scourge. I especially hate the Lich King," Ger'alín whispered in her ear. "He's mixed in just enough truth to keep you wondering. Perhaps he's right and we're engaging in a fool's errand here with Brann. But, that's something we'll learn for ourselves."

For now, we need to focus on finding the way into Ulduar. If great danger lurks there, we can lock it back up and throw away the key. If great knowledge is there, if there is something there that will help us defeat the Scourge, then we can throw open the doors and let the world in there.”

Alayne nodded and Ger'alın rubbed her arm, holding her against his chest affectionately. He turned, keeping his arm around her, and began walking with her down the long corridor in front of them. Fine crystalline statues of various demi-gods from Azeroth's distant past lined the star-studded walls, their peaceful gazes staring down serenely upon the mortal intruders. Ger'alın wondered why the Titans would build something like looked like a cross between a cathedral and a museum to the ancient powers of the world. Shaking his head and spilling more dust into the air, he put the thoughts out of his mind. As they reached the end of the corridor, he saw that the others were huddled near one of the pillars of the arching doorway, peering into the next room with apprehension. Ger'alın glanced around the corner and gasped. A vaguely human-shaped tempest hovered, patrolling the far end of the room. A gentle breeze gusted past them as the magical monster passed on the near side of the room. Lightning crackled and danced in its wake, making the hair on the back of Ger'alın's neck stand on end. On the far side of the room, open doorways let the chilly air from the mountains blow in. Snow drifts dotted the opposite side of the room and a tang of winter dampened the interior air of the massive structure. Ger'alın was thankful for the gentle breeze; it began to blow the dust off of him.

“Any idea what that thing is?” he asked Brann, keeping his voice pitched low.

“Looks like something the Kirin Tor ought to have locked up in the Violet Hold either for study or for the crime of existing like that,” the dwarf shuddered. “I find it hard to trust anything that has no legs. Spiders, voidwalkers, and elementals. It's not natural.”

“Whatever it is, it bars our way,” Ger'alın muttered. “Light, I thought the rest of the keep would be empty after we set off every alarm possible and just finished fighting a pitched battle against the forger from hell.” Crooking a finger at Alayne, he waited until she came alongside him and could see what lurked ahead. Her eyes widened in surprise and then narrowed in thought. “What do you think?”

“It's going to be really hard for you to hit it,” she muttered. “And I'm the only mage here.”

“So, it is magic?” Brann asked.

“In part,” she nodded. “It's a fairly powerful wind elemental. I've never seen or heard of one so strong.”

“What's your advice?” Ger'alın asked. “Should we go back and try to get reinforcements from Naxxramas?”

“I don't think we're going to have the chance to do that,” Alayne said, her eyes opening as wide as they would go.

“You wish to confront the master?” the wind creature demanded in a thin, reedy voice. “Then you must weather the storm!”

The wind kicked up quickly, plastering their clothes against their chests and making their hair stream out behind them. Ger'alın's hair pulled free of the pony tail he wore draped over one shoulder to fly out behind him, whipping and stinging in the violent gale. His eyes watered as dust flew into them. He could hear and feel the static of lightning crackling towards him but could not open his eyes to see where to move to be safe. Alayne, reaching out with her mind, could sense the chaotic jumble of magical forces that held the elemental together. Drawing upon the chill of the room, she hurled a bolt of frost where she sensed the creature was and was rewarded with a sense of the magic dispersing slightly, a sign that she had hit it. The gale force winds slackened a bit, allowing the others to open their eyes enough to see to attack. Ger'alın fingered the metal hammer at his side before deciding that steel and

lightning were not a likely mix. Pulling his shield around in front of him as both a windbreak and a weapon, he called out to the Light to be his hammer against the enemy. Holy energy suffused him and, landing where he pointed, began to break apart some of the bonds holding the creature together. Alayne continued to throw her spells, the ice she wove slowing the creature down, making it move sluggishly towards them. Lightning still crackled and Alayne flung arcane spells at the bolts, causing them to explode as cross-currents met a safe distance away.

“The slightest spark shall be your undoing!” the creature roared. Alayne blinked, feeling the magic both surging and dissipating at the same time. The creature’s body spread out, transforming into a foggy cloud that clung to the ground. Bolts of lightning arced in the cloud, its static spreading out far beyond the billowing borders. Inexorably, the creature continued to move towards them. Spread out as it was, Alayne could find no center to attack with her spells.

“To the other side!” she shouted. “Don’t let it get close to you!” Suiting action to words, she hefted her skirts and began running across the room. Ger’alin was close behind her with Brann and the others at his heels. Weaving around the pillars in the room, they were able to keep distance between themselves and the strange wind elemental. One of the dwarves fell back, determined to attack the creature. Alayne tried to call out a warning; she could sense the magic coalescing back together. The creature re-formed itself from the cloud. A ball of lightning shot from it, lancing through the dwarf’s body. He opened his mouth in shock, his body going completely rigid as the electricity raced over him. He was dead before he hit the floor.

“Shocking, isn’t it?” the creature taunted. Brann roared with anger and would have rushed in if Ger’alin had not tripped him. Racing ahead of the dwarf, the sin’dorei let the Light be his shield and his weapon as he hurled an onslaught of holy magic at the devilish creature. Alayne watched and waited, her senses on high alert. She held off, a spell from her days as a student of the shadow ready on her lips. When she sensed the creature weakening again, preparing to disperse itself once more, she struck. Fel lightning arced from her hands, striking the creature at the center of its being. Ger’alin continued to hammer with his holy attacks, the opposing forces of magic meeting in the creature and exploding as they reacted with each other. The shockwave of the explosion picked Ger’alin up off his feet and flung him backwards into a pillar. He lay on the ground, stunned, as the magic holding the creature together failed completely, its power drained by the thunderous explosion.

“Master!” it wailed, “you have guests...”

With a whistling gasp, the creature swirled into nothingness, disappearing in a gentle puff of wind. The doors at the far side of the room creaked open before the group had time to wonder at their victory and dozens of iron dwarves and vykrul began pouring into the room, followed by deep, maniacal laughter.

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Alayne groaned and pressed a hand against her ribs where one of the iron vykrul’s axes had glanced off her side. The wound had not been deep though it had been long. Ger’alin, worn out from a day of battle where he had used magic as often as his muscles, had been unable to find the energy to heal it. He sat now, slumped against the wall, his eyes closed and his breathing deep and even. She knew that if she approached him, he would rouse out of the semi-sleep he was in, alert as ever. Instead, she kept her distance, biting her lips to keep from crying out whenever the cloth rubbed against the cut.

Rogar and Run’ok sat on the stairs, arms dangling over their knees and muzzles nearly touching the floor. The dwarves had gone back to the far end of the room to retrieve

the body of their fallen comrade, intent on taking it back to Ironforge for a proper burial. They'd spent time gathering up dust from around the room to send with the body; a pinch of the enemy that felled him, they said. Brann paced around, mangling his hat in his hands, a stricken look on his face. "I never thought it would come to this. Magni is going to have a fit."

"Calm down, Brann," Alayne whispered. "If you give up, your comrade's death will have been in vain. I just hope that the knowledge you seek is truly worth risking our lives for. Bringing Loken down, stopping him from murdering more of us the way he did his brother, that is worth fighting for. But perhaps Ulduar..."

"The answers inside Ulduar will help us move into a new age, lass," Brann said, his voice soft and lacking its normal enthusiasm and conviction. "With the knowledge of how and what the Titans did, we can improve ourselves. We can learn more about our world. We can grow in power and wisdom until the likes of the Lich King or the Legion are no threat to us."

"We are not the Titans," Alayne replied. "And, for all that they are powerful, ancient, and wise, they still made mistakes. They are not gods. They are beings not so different from ourselves. Perhaps, one day, in the course of time and with the grace of the Light, we could become like them. But not any time soon."

The dwarf peered at her. "Ye've got a point, lass. The Titans are not perfect; I'll grant you that. Sargeras was a member of the Pantheon, once upon a time. Still, they are powerful and they know so much. So many secrets they've uncovered and used to make worlds like our own. So many things they've done and left to do still other, greater things. If we had their knowledge and their power, we..."

"Would probably destroy ourselves and the world with us," she finished for him. "But, I'm glad you're not giving up."

"I can't give up," Brann sighed. "Honri's paid the price with his life. And...I keep hoping I'll find sign of Muradin. I've searched all over while seeking Ulduar..."

"Brann," Alayne sighed, laying a gentle hand on the dwarf's shoulder and kneeling down so her eyes were level with his, "Muradin died. Arthas killed him when he took Frostmourne. It was one of the first of many betrayals from the false prince of Lordaeron. It is a story those of us who once served him knew well. The only sign you'll find of Muradin are his bones scattered throughout the land. Arthas left him unburied for the carrion eaters to pick apart."

Brann nodded, his face crumpling in agony and Alayne wished she could take back the words she had said. It was the truth; many times she had heard how Frostmourne demanded blood and a pure soul when Arthas wrested it from its hiding place. Muradin had paid the price so that Arthas could wield the runeblade. Still, she hated remembering that she had once bent knee to the foul abomination seated on the Frozen Throne. She hated bringing pain to a man who had such enthusiasm for his adventures seeking knowledge and answers long denied to them all. But, it was the truth.

"Lass, you should lay down and get some rest while you can," he muttered, concerned.

"I'll be fine," she sighed, pressing her hand to her side again. Her fingers came away wet and stained with her own blood and she grimaced. The edge on that axe had been razor sharp and coated with something that was turning her blood to water at the wound. "How much longer do you think we have?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I'd have expected Loken to come out when the others were defeated. We know he's in there. He knows we're out here. Perhaps, he thinks that if he leaves us alone, we'll leave him alone. Perhaps he thinks we're too frightened to attack him."

“Or, perhaps he wants a challenge instead of an easy fight,” Ger’alin replied. Alayne gave a start; she had not heard him approach. “I’m rested now. Let me try it again.”

Alayne forced herself to lift her arm and let Ger’alin lay soothing hands on the wound over her ribs. The paladin concentrated and muttered beneath his breath. She could feel the warmth of healing energy flowing into her. The flow of blood eased to a mere trickle and Ger’alin sat back heavily on his heels. “Light, I will be more than happy to sleep after this is all done,” he sighed. “That’s the best I can do. It’s a stubborn one. You’re lucky you didn’t lose an arm.”

“I may be out of shape with a blade but I still know how to dodge,” she replied lightly. She tested her side, feeling only a slight tightness tugging.

“Be careful. It can and will break open again. Titans help me,” he muttered, “but I didn’t realize just how tiring all of this can be.”

“It’s not just the fighting, lad,” Brann joined in. “It’s the cold. The dark. The fear of that beast sitting in there,” he pointed to the room ahead, “waiting, watching for us. Thinking that we’re nothing but puppies.”

“This old dog has some sharp teeth,” Ger’alin growled. “I’ll give the others another few minutes to get their legs under them and then...then we’re going to move on. The waiting is doing nothing for us. We can’t sleep or rest easily knowing that the moment we do, we’re defenseless against the thing in there. For all I know, he could be raising another army of dozens of vykruks and iron dwarves to fling at us.”

Brann nodded and walked back over to the others. Giving them a few minutes to finish saying their good-byes and wrapping the body of their fallen comrade in cloaks, Ger’alin sank down on the stairs and wished there were some way he could replenish his own energy. He also wished that his wife would sit down instead of engaging in her endless pacing. She was worn out from the day of fighting; the dark circles under her eyes, the pinched look to her face, and the way her shoulders sagged told him that she was more than ready to sink into bed and sleep for a good several hours. He hoped it wouldn’t be long before she could do just that. When the dwarves had finished their moments of silence, they stumped over to the stairs where the others sat or paced. Ger’alin rose to his feet and nodded briskly. Brann gestured at the rest fell in behind the sin’dorei.

The room they entered was one that they had glimpsed only for a few seconds. Too chaotic during the battle and then too tired after to explore ahead, they had not seen the wonderous globes, three dimensional images of Azeroth throughout its history hovering over various tables. Brann stopped to study each, his eyes as wide as saucers and as bright as a child’s at Winter Veil. The other dwarves and Alayne seemed equally overawed. The sin’dorei woman stepped up on the tips of her toes and reached out a hand to try to touch one of the floating worlds. Her hand met with nothing, though, passing through the southern ocean without disturbing anything.

“Let’s keep moving,” Ger’alin suggested, taking her gently by the arm. “The sooner this is over with, the sooner you can come back here and gawk, I promise,” he added, sounding somewhat amused. He knew Loken would be nearby and hoped that the stone man was not in the midst of preparing an army to face them. Turning the last corner into a room, Ger’alin gasped.

The end of the room they were in stood in shadow. At the far end, bathed in light that shone down from above and up from below, seated atop a giant throne, was Loken. His arms rested easily on the arms of the chair and his chin was propped on his right fist. He gazed at the newcomers idly, almost bored.

“I have witnessed the rise and fall of empires. The birth and extinction of entire species. Over countless millennia the foolishness of mortals has remained beyond a constant. Your presence here confirms this,” he sighed. “My master has shown me the future, and you

have no place in it. Azeroth will be reborn in darkness. Yogg-Saron shall be released! The Pantheon shall fall!" By the time he finished the last pronouncement, he was seated on the edge of his throne, his hands gripping the armrests, his eyes blazing with a mad eagerness. Loken seemed to pant with excitement at the thought of what he would do next.

"Who is Yogg-Saron?" Ger'alın demanded. "Who is this new master you claim to serve?"

"Yogg-Saron was imprisoned by the Pantheon countless ages before your people were even a dream of the world, mortal," Loken chuckled. "They locked him away, deep beneath the world, inside Ulduar, because they feared his power. He can destroy them. He can destroy everything. He can destroy it and remake it without the imperfections the so-called Makers left."

"That must be the name of the old god waiting ahead for us," Alayne sighed. "And, it's true. It is in Ulduar. We can't just open the place to everyone." She'd been careful to try to speak in an undertone so Loken wouldn't overhear her. However, the golden haired giant on the stone throne threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Once I would have killed you for those words. Once I would have held it my most sacred duty to safeguard Ulduar against the likes of you. Now, I would be happier than anyone else if you opened it and let my master go free. Nothing would please me more. But, he does not want the likes of you around at all. He has charged me with your destruction lest his be the result of allowing you to exist. What hope is there for you, after all? None!" he roared, leaping from his throne and striding quickly over to where the others stood.

Ger'alın and the others rushed in to attack, hoping to trip up Loken before he could take the time to do more than reach them. Slamming his hammer into the giant's ankle and then letting it bounce off to attack the knee, Ger'alın winced when the stone-sandaled foot swept sideways, knocking the sin'dorei off his own feet. Ger'alın tucked and rolled, tumbling lightly back up to his feet. The others scattered as Loken swept with his foot again, kicking them away. Alayne hung back, watching, waiting for the opportunity to use one of her spells. Loken's skin was made of rock, not steel, so her searing spells would do little good against him. Ger'alın scrambled back to his feet and waded back into the fray. Loken summoned lightning and hurled it, causing the bolts to arc around him. Only quick reflexes kept Ger'alın from being struck. The paladin began muttering beneath his breath, looking for an opening that would let him press an attack. Instead, Loken seemed to be holding them easily at bay. They could neither engage nor flee for fear of the lightning he wielded so easily.

Alayne did her best to dodge the bolts that arced and danced around her. Her robes were signed from where she had been too slow and her hair stood up on end. Then, she saw an opening. While the prime designate toyed with the others, Alayne prepared a spell. Hurling it with all of the power she could muster, she felt a moment of satisfaction when it exploded against Loken's chest. The stone giant staggered back under the force of the spell and then glared, searching for his attacker.

"You stare blindly into the abyss!" Loken roared. He continued to scan the room, expecting to find an opponent worthy of his attention. When his eyes fell on Alayne as she prepared to let loose another spell, he snorted in derision and began trying to walk over to her to shove her out of the way, ending her magic forever. Ger'alın and the others swarmed around his ankles, tripping him up, hammering at his feet and legs, hemming him in so that he could barely take a step without risking falling on his face. Glancing down, the golden-haired giant saw that one of them had begun to pull himself up, using his own robes as a ladder, a shining hammer clutched in the mortal's hand. Loken reached over to pluck him off and send him sprawling, the way the paladin would a fly that landed on his arm. Instead, Ger'alın struck hard, smashing his mace into Loken's chest near where Alayne's spell had landed, weakening the rocky skin.

Loken gasped, the air rushing from his lungs in shock and pain. “Your ignorance is profound,” the giant panted, his baritone voice trembling with lack of oxygen and the first tinges of fear. “Can you not see where this path leads?”

“To a world without you, you murdering behemoth!” one of the dwarves shouted as they renewed their attack. Alayne continued to throw her spells, each one further sapping and draining the giant. Loken’s lightning attacks came further and further apart as the giant tried to ward off multiple attacks – arcane, holy, and physical. The glint of madness was in his gemstone eyes as he snarled, anger giving way to fatigue.

“You are crossing the precipice of oblivion!” Loken threatened. “Do you not know what will happen to this world with my death?” Panic and the first signs of sanity began to show in his face. “Stop this madness! Stop it!”

“We’ll risk oblivion,” Ger’alin growled as he pulled himself up atop the giant’s shoulders. Loken stared at him dumbly, trying to sort out the jumble of voice and thoughts coursing through his mind. His master’s voice dominated but other voices, his brother’s, his own, his makers fought to be heard over the confusion. Loken knew that his death would have dire consequences and that, though he had done many things that merited death, none merited what he knew with a sudden clarity of mind he had not experienced in centuries would follow.

Before Loken could make sense of the thoughts floating through him, Ger’alin hefted his hammer and brought it down between the stone man’s eyes. Loken’s knees buckled and the sin’dorei leapt lightly off his back. The dwarves and the others surged around the prone figure, hacking and hammering away until they were each assured that Loken would never rise again. Ger’alin shook his head as he pondered what he thought Loken had said before the strength left his legs. “Your death can’t herald the end of the world,” Ger’alin muttered to the rocky corpse. “You are no longer here to effect that.”

“It’s over,” Brann was saying loudly. “We’ll not have to worry about Loken again. Now the way to Ulduar is clear and, if this Yogg-Saron is there, we’ll be very careful in how we open the place. Ye’ve done your part,” he added, nodding to Ger’alin and Alayne, “and you’ve proven yourselves true friends to our cause. Go back to Naxxramas and to the other duties you must perform knowing that you are square with Brann Bronzebeard.”

“We will,” Ger’alin agreed evenly. “However, I want a promise from you that you’ll send us warning before you open Ulduar. If Loken spoke true and Yogg-Saron awaits us there, we’ll want an army around you when you bring down the barrier that keeps that place sealed away. The Lich King loose is destruction enough. Let’s not add an old god on top of it.”

“I promise on my honor, sin’dorei,” Brann nodded. “We’ll send warning. For now, once your wife is strong enough, we’d appreciate it if you’d escort our friend back to Dalaran. They’ll see that his body is sent home and that his wife and children want for nothing in the meantime. It was a heavy price we’ve paid; one that will not have been in vain.”