

“I don’t want to hear about it,” Zerith sighed. “I have a feeling I’ll strangle her if I do hear about it.”

“She was good. She listened. For the most part,” Ger’alin replied. “Still, she’s having those premonitions again.”

“I never know what to make of them,” the priest said, rubbing his temples wearily. “The times we’ve ignored them, we’ve run headlong into disaster. But considering the source...”

“I know exactly how you feel,” Ger’alin agreed. “And, trust me, she knows how you feel too. The only difference is she’s the one who receives these warnings.”

Zerith blinked and shook his head, recalling a strange dream he’d had himself not too long ago. He couldn’t recall the details but he could recall that the Lich King had been warning him of some hidden danger, some event that would signal the total triumph of the Scourge. And, it had something to do with Alayne. That was all he could recall of it.

“She may not be the only one,” Zerith said into his beard. He shook his head to clear it. “I dislike doing anything that Arthas wants us to do. But, just because he’s the most evil, foul, untrustworthy son of a bitch birthed to the human race doesn’t mean he’s always wrong.”

“I passed the warning along to Brann though not the source,” Ger’alin continued, relieved. “After hearing Loken himself and seeing how mad that bastard was, Brann’s going to be very cautious about entering Ulduar. He’s planning to try to disturb it as little as is possible. Perhaps he’ll give up his plot and be satisfied with the answers he can find in the Halls of Stone.”

“I know dwarves,” Zerith sighed. “They’re as curious as gnomes but would rather die than admit such a close resemblance between their races. He may be frightened off momentarily but it will tug at him, pull at him, until he enters and finds either that which he seeks or destruction. I don’t think any warning, not even one handed down from the Light or the Titans themselves, would put him off for very long.”

“At any rate, we’re clear with him. He feels that we’ve more than kept our word to help him and he has promised to do his best to smooth over the tensions that Garrosh is causing. However, with Hellscream continuing to attack every Alliance he can get his hands on, I’m not so certain that Brann will be able to do much good.”

“I hate to say it,” Zerith grimaced, “but, right now, the best thing Garrosh could do for the Horde would be to get himself killed. At any rate, I didn’t call you back here to worry about Ulduar or Garrosh. Alexstrasza needs us to help her. We’re going to meet with her in Dalaran to discuss what she has in mind. And, she’s promised to look over Jez’ral,” he added. “None of our best healers were able to do much other than ease his pain and set him on a rather long and wearing road to recovery. Perhaps A’dal could do better but surely Alexstrasza, the Aspect of Life herself can do something to help him.”

“I still can’t believe he convinced Mir’el to bring him up here. And how did he know we’d come here instead of returning to Nagrand as we let him think?”

“Because while we’re not ancient,” Mir’el answered from the shadow of the door. Ger’alin and Zerith both braced themselves, “we’re hardly young fools. When word came that the Disorder of Azeroth was up here, working to contain Garrosh, then working to help the taunka and then when we heard rumors that Naxxramas was finally going to be taken in hand, we put two and two together. I’m not surprised to find you up here. Neither was Jez’ral surprised to hear you’d returned here instead of home. Instead, he was worried sick that something was going to happen to Alayne. He knows enough about what she did to herself in Undercity to know that she very nearly killed herself. He takes that seriously – as do I. We didn’t teach her those arts to watch her be destroyed by them. At any rate, once we heard

rumors that you were going against Kel'Thuzad, nothing would settle Jez'ral but that we come up here and make certain you were safe."

"Is he here? I could go and wake Alayne...", Ger'alín offered.

"He's in Dalaran. He would be able to survive the cold in this place," Mir'el said firmly. "He's as weak as a newborn but as stubborn as a greybeard. But then, he's a Cloudslasher and they always were cutting and stubborn. Now, what is this I've been hearing about old gods and Ulduar?"

"Ulduar is the name of a Titan city left over from the earliest days," Ger'alín explained. "We've just been up there helping the dwarven Explorer's League gain access to parts of it while helping to get rid of certain threats to both the Alliance and the Horde. Now, we believe that an old god – a creature of immense power..."

"Like C'thun in Silithus?" Mir'el said, cocking his head and looking amused. "I warned you; I'm not ancient but I'm hardly a newborn. You think we didn't hear of C'thun? You think we had spies in the Burning Blade cult and the Twilight's Hammer and heard nothing? Everything we know, we've passed along to the druids and to the commanders of the Horde and the Alliance."

"Why didn't you...you mean to tell me...I should..." Ger'alín growled, lurching out of his chair and stalking over to the older man.

"First of all," Mir'el muttered, "you never asked. Second of all; C'thun is the only one we know anything about. Our spies tell us that the Twilight Hammer cult has begun sending people to Northrend to serve the faceless ones and the True Master but that's all we know. What powers they might have, what they look like, or what they are capable of is beyond our knowledge as yet. None of our spies have heard anything they consider reliable and none of them have been sent here."

"Why didn't you tell us you had spies among the Legion-loyal?" Zerith asked.

"Honestly, I figured you knew we did. After all, recall how quickly Jez'ral responded to Alayne being kidnapped? We knew far more about that than you did. We knew who held her captive and we were preparing our own attack to free her when Callie came in and took Jez'ral. Not that he didn't deserve it for letting Alayne face that trial without so much as a pat on the shoulder for comfort. He always believed she could stand more than she should ever see. Believes it still, truth be told," Mir'el sighed. "But, even if you hadn't reasoned it out, it's simply something that never has come up."

"Why wouldn't Alayne say anything, though?" Zerith wondered.

"Because Alayne, while she may have tested for Mastery a full sixty years early, is still considered too young, too hot-headed, and too untrustworthy to be told that we have spies in the Legion-loyal cults. She doesn't know. I'm only telling you now because you need to know. Now, sit down. We have much to go over before I return to Dalaran."

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Alayne shuddered as she thought about what the dragonqueen had just proposed. Mir'el eyed Alexstrasza, just barely managing to hide his own skepticism that the Aspect's plan would work. "Can he not be reasoned with at all?" Mir'el asked.

"We have tried," the dragonqueen sighed. "His madness has completely clouded his mind. He sees everyone as a threat. Already he's attempted to launch an attack against Dalaran. We were just barely able to hold his drakes off. They've moved against the holy temple as well. One of the blacks, Sartharion, was convinced to join the blues and attempted to sabotage our defenses. We've imprisoned the black beneath the temple he tried to defile. Still, Malygos knows our minds. He was one of us for aeons. In a way, we are the easiest enemy he has to face."

"I see," Mir'el muttered. "But what of the armies?"

"They were unprepared for the battle," Alexstrasza said sadly. "Malygos was able to capture them, imprisoning them within the Eye of Eternity. They were days in the dying. Some may yet even live in torment as the mad Master of Magic exacts his price. We have sent word to the Alliance high command of their defeat. Varian Wrynn replied that he would not be able to spare further forces to aid us against Malygos because he must send every spare man he can recruit against the Horde in Wintergrasp. Thrall has put out the call for volunteers but most of the Horde are interested in joining Garrosh or joining you. Very few seem interested in facing Malygos, even with our aid."

"Short-sighted fools," Ger'alín growled. "Very well, we accept. We will help you as best we can." Alayne shot her husband a look that promised hard words later on when they were alone but the paladin ignored it. He was hoping that, if they were able to overcome Malygos, the reds could then be convinced to help guard Ulduar. He had, as yet, not revealed the folly they had committed in removing the defenses to the Titan city.

"It will not be easy. We are working to cut off the ley-lines that power the Eye of Eternity," Alexstrasza continued. "It will take several more days, possibly a week, before we can complete that task. That will leave Malygos vulnerable in his own realm. Without magic to draw upon, he can only rely on that which he possesses within himself. While we work to sever the ley-lines, I will need you to enter the Nexus. One of my own children stole into the Nexus to try to steal away some of the blue eggs stored there. We hope to raise the blues yet unhatched along with our own to rebuild and renew the ties which Malygos, in his insanity, has cut."

"We will find her," Alayne promised, her stomach lurching with nervousness.

"I hope so," the leader of the red dragons said. "But, I would not count on it. Keristrasza was one of the best of my scouts. She was brave, intelligent, and deft. We have heard nothing from her since she vanished shortly after entering the Nexus. I fear that she is being held prisoner there or worse. All of us are fiercely protective of the unhatched eggs of our own flight. Of any flight, truth be told. Malygos lost nearly all of his flight, all of his children, to Deathwing in ages long past."

"He lost more than any of us to Deathwing's betrayal," Krasus sighed. "He lost his brother, his closest friend when the Earth Warder became Deathwing. It was truly a black day when the Dragon Soul was used against us the first time."

"Luckily it is gone forever," Alexstrasza shivered. Alayne and the others shuddered. Anything that the dragon Aspect feared was something that should terrify mortals. "Let us put it from our thoughts. For now, we must focus on the next step: the Nexus and the Oculus."

"Indeed," Zerith agreed. "We appreciate the information you have given us. I promise that it will go no further than it must. I would not betray your secrets to those who might use them to harm you, my lady."

"It is a risk that we must take in order to ensure that life continues to survive and thrive upon this world. Such was the oath I took when the Titans made me the Aspect of Life."

Alexstrasza stood up and the others rose to follow her. Ger'alín, Alayne, and Zerith already had their heads together, coming up with a plan to locate and rescue Keristrasza if such were possible. Mir'el hung back in the shadows, hoping to speak with the leader of the red dragonflight. As the others filed out, Mir'el worked up his courage to approach one of the most powerful forces in the world.

"Yes?" Alexstrasza asked, smiling a welcoming smile at the sin'dorei man. Mir'el's mouth dried and the request he had nearly fled from his mind. Krasus put a steadying hand on the elf's shoulder, recalling him to his purpose.

“You are the Aspect of Life,” Mir’el began lamely. Alexstrasza nodded, hiding her amusement behind a mask of concern. “My...friend was struck by a disease developed by Putress and his minions. None of the traditional healing methods have helped him to overcome his illness. He takes several steps forward but then falls back, sicker than ever.”

“I was able to do little against those struck down by the foul disease Putress developed,” Alexstrasza said, her nose wrinkling in disgust at the memory.

“It’s not what killed those at the Wrath Gate,” Mir’el explained quickly. “It’s something else. Something that most forms of healing seem powerless to handle.”

“I will see what I can do but do not hope for too much. If your best healers have already tried their skills, then it may be that mine can do little more. Time is your best ally in such matters. Time and patience.”

Mir’el led the way out of the Violet Citadel and down to the well-appointed house that had been given to Lord Sunreaver after he joined the city’s ruling council. Jez’ral lay inside, his skin as pallid as the freshly laundered white sheets he lay upon. Though Mir’el had done his best to make the trip smooth and painless, Jez’ral had not weathered the change in temperature, altitude, or atmosphere well. He’d barely been able to find the strength to speak in the days that followed their arrival through the corridors of magic. Mir’el had hovered over him, spooning watery broth between his lips, caring for him as intently as he had when Jez’ral had first been brought out of Undercity. He reached down now and gently shook the dark-haired man to wake him. Alexstrasza and Krasus stood just inside the doorway, studying the sick man and whispering amongst themselves in the language of dragons.

“Wake up, Jez’ral,” Mir’el whispered softly.

“Where is she?” Jez’ral demanded as he did every time he’d woken and had the strength to speak since their arrival.

“She’s at the inn now. They have plans to make. Nothing too dangerous,” he lied smoothly. “Just a bit of trouble with the blue dragonflight.”

“Tell her,” Jez’ral gasped, sweat popping out on his forehead and above his upper lip. Today was going to be one of his worse days, it seemed, “that she will have to be careful. She’s never fought those who are as powerful and as talented and knowledgeable about magic in all its forms as the blues. Even the weakest drake is stronger than most of our most powerful magi.”

“I’ll warn her,” Mir’el promised, smoothing back the man’s sweat-dampened hair. “For now, I’ve brought you someone to look at you. She may be able to help heal you.”

Jez’ral’s feverish eyes wandered towards the door. When they fell on Alexstrasza, he tried to sit up, to greet her with the respect and honor she deserved. “My lady,” he panted.

“Do not disturb yourself,” she said soothingly, walking over to the bedside and placing a cool hand on his chest. With gentle strength, she forced him back down and then began examining him with her eyes and her magic. She winced, sensing the powerful infestation eating away at him. Hiding itself in places that normal healing could not reach, it was slowly draining his strength, drawing his life and vitality into itself. If she used her magic to purge it, the strength it would require from him would kill him. If she left a trace behind, it would regrow, continuing to fester. The dragonqueen tapped her lips thoughtfully as she considered the problem. “I’ll need to consult with others about this,” she said at last. “I could heal him completely but the process would probably kill him. Something more gradual may be called for but I am not certain how best to effect it.”

“Will he live, though, if we do nothing?” Mir’el asked. He was willing to spend the rest of his life caring for Jez’ral if it meant the man would live. He would not have him risk his life needlessly if time itself would provide the cure.

“He might,” Alexstrasza sighed. “The disease is feeding off him. If it kills him, it will die. However, without some kind of healing, he will probably never recover fully.”

“I am not spending the rest of my life laying in bed,” Jez’ral moaned. “I’d rather die.”

“Don’t say that!” Mir’el said harshly.

“It’s the truth. If the past months are any indication of what the rest of my life would be without her healing, I’d rather risk the chance of dying than survive being little more than a parasite myself.”

“Don’t talk that way,” Mir’el repeated, his voice thick with fear and anger. “Do you think Miris or Ta’lar would want you to die, leaving Alayne without someone to look after her and keep her out of trouble?”

“It’s not as if I have been the best one at doing that,” Jez’ral grimaced. “Dragged her into Desolace. Caused her to be captured by the Burning Blade.”

“Carried her to Outland, helped her discover the love of her life and marry...”

“Miris would have a fit...”

“She’d be delighted. She eloped at sixty. She’d have no room to chide her daughter, especially after all of the ‘duty to the blood’ speeches that every last member of the ruling council were giving as we brought in recruits from all over the world.”

“I don’t want to live like this,” Jez’ral sighed, plucking at the thin sheets feebly. “As soon as I know she’s back home, safe and sound, I want to either be well enough to keep up with her or dead. None of this having her visit me in my sickroom every day for the next six hundred or so years.”

“I will do my best to see that you are restored to health,” the dragonqueen promised solemnly. “I must go now. There are matters that require my attention and I will need to consult with others on the best way to treat this malady. For now, take care, rest, and do not worry over the lives of others. Each person has their own path to walk. It is enough to walk your own without worrying over the journey another must take.”

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“He’ll be fine,” Ger’alin said reassuringly as Alayne picked at her food. “He’s too stubborn and too determined to watch our children grow up to have children of their own to die. Didn’t he follow you all the way up here? That’s not the spirit of a man who’s going to give in to whatever has him lying abed easily.”

Alayne said nothing but continued to pick at her food. She’d been silent and pensive ever since she’d returned from visiting Jez’ral. Mir’el had been full of assurances that Jez’ral was doing much better and would soon be completely well. Ger’alin wished that the man had been less optimistic and more realistic. Alayne was taking the weakening of her one-time mentor hard. She sighed again, a heavy sigh, and continued to push the food around on her plate. “He looks terrible,” she whispered at last.

“He’ll be fine,” Ger’alin repeated. “He shouldn’t have made the trip up here, even if it was using magical means. But, now that he’s here and he’s seen you, I’m sure he’ll relax and will be much better in no time at all. And, Mir’el did mention that he’d spoken to Alexstrasza about it. Perhaps she can do something since the rest of us cannot seem to make him well with our healing powers.”

“Alexstrasza,” Alayne said dully, not really hearing what her husband was saying.

“Yes,” he replied patiently. “The dragonqueen herself.”

“When do we go to Coldarra?”

“We can leave tomorrow if you want,” he sighed. “Do you want to return to Nagrand with Mir’el and Jez’ral? It’s about the only way you’re going to convince them to go home. Mir’el would stay in Silvermoon and manage your affairs there but Jez’ral is convinced that you’re going to get yourself killed up here.”

“I can’t go home without you,” she said softly. “I don’t think I could stand it.”

“I will understand if and when you change your mind,” Ger’alin said, patting her hand reassuringly. After a few more minutes of not eating, Alayne muttered something about being tired and rose to go to bed. Ger’alin watched her leave the room with concern in his eyes. He hoped she would be able to rest and clear her mind before they left to go to Coldarra. If she was distracted by worry over Jez’ral, she might not be able to do what needed to be done in the icy depths of the Nexus.

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Zerith counted again, impatiently waiting for the last groups to make their way onto the landing for transport to Borean Tundra. Alayne and Ger’alin sat leaning against the wall, her face clouded with concern while his spoke of an eagerness to be done with this business. Ger’alin had become increasingly sharp and impatient whenever he was reminded that there could be no reconnaissance done on the island without giving away their interest in it to the blue dragonflight. The paladin had accepted the situation but he had yet to truly reconcile himself to it.

“What can’t be helped must be handled,” Zerith muttered as he began his fifth count of the morning. Where were the others? He’d given orders that everyone was to be ready to go at first light. Just as the priest reached the end of his patience and was preparing to send Ger’alin and Tau’re to round up the laggards, a bell rang. Deep bronze tones pealed through the quiet morning air, cutting off the soft sussurations of whispered conversation. Ger’alin rose to his feet, Alayne right behind him, glancing back towards the city proper in confused concern. “What in the name of the Light...” Zerith wondered as he began making his way towards the stairs that led down into the heart of Dalaran.

A trio of blue dragonkin swarmed up the stairs, halting at the edge of the landing in surprise. Clearly they had not been expecting to run into a massed small army. They stared at the group for a split second in shock as Zerith stared back dumbly at them. Ger’alin wasted no time. Rushing in, he smote the cowed spellcaster over the head, satisfied to hear a liquid crunch as the dragonkin collapsed. That woke the other two from their shock and they wheeled on the paladin, spears and long daggers slashing in the air where Ger’alin had been. The paladin blocked the daggers with his shield and parried the spear with his mace while Alayne sent a bolt of cold fire slamming into the spear-wielder’s back. The dragonkin grunted and glanced over his shoulder, seeking out his ranged foe. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth began attacking as well. Arrows and spells flew through the air and Tau’re and Callie were among the first to reach Ger’alin, their swords and axes cutting and cleaving the dragonkin until they collapsed to join the first on the ground.

“I guess we’re under attack,” Zerith sighed, confused. The bronze bell continued its doleful tolling. The group made its way back into the city and into a scene of madness. Dozens of packs of blue drakes and dragonkin were battling their way towards the Violet Hold. The Kirin Tor battle-magi and guards were hardpressed to contain them, just barely keeping them from spilling out into the rest of the city from Runeweaver Square. Ger’alin had pressed ahead, pushing his way through the fighting until he could see down the arched stone corridor that led to the magi dungeon. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth lent their skills and spells to the fighters in the streets, quickly bringing down the half-dozen packs of blues who were trying to fight their way out.

Zerith, Alayne, Dar’ja, Callie, and Tau’re caught up to where Ger’alin was. He stood in front of the prison’s massive doors speaking with a human woman. Sweat poured down her face, slicking her blonde hair to her skull. She groaned and gasped for air. “They’re trying to break the prisoners out,” she was saying to the paladin. “It’s the blues. It started just a few minutes ago, when you gave the call to gather.”

“They’ve been teleporting themselves into Runeweaver Square,” Ger’alin explained. “Lieutenant Sinclari says that the Kirin Tor have placed a seal on the prison. It might hold for a bit but...”

“What do they need us to do?” Zerith asked.

“The prisoners held in the Violet Hold are some of the most dangerous and nefarious beings in existence,” Sinclari replied. “Servants of the Legion, elementals of great power, ethereals who would sell their own mothers to Sargeris if the price was right,” she spat. “They have little love for those of us who have bound them away to protect the innocent. If they could be induced to serve Malygos, though, they would bring much might to his forces. And, as the reds have whittled down his numbers, the Master of Magic must be growing desperate for troops to guard him while he completes whatever work it is he is performing in his lair.”

“All the more reason for us to hasten on to Coldarra and put an end to him,” Zerith returned.

“If we go on to Coldarra and leave these prisoners to break free,” Ger’alin said, shaking his head in disagreement, “we’ll lose too many allies we can’t afford to lose.” The priest stared at him for a moment before the explanation registered. “They’re spread too thin,” Ger’alin confirmed when he saw understanding dawn in Zerith’s eyes.

“Again, then,” the priest sighed, “what do they need us to do?”

“Enter the Violet Hold and execute the prisoners,” Ger’alin said calmly, coldly. “It’s the only way we’ll be able to survive the battles to come.”

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Alayne shivered as the doors closed behind them, shutting off the last rays of the dawning sun. “We’ll lift the shield just long enough for you to get inside. Once inside, use this access key to open each cell. Do what you must and, when the last prisoner is dead, press the key against the panel inside. The shield will fall, then, and you’ll be able to exit,” Sinclari had explained, handing Ger’alin a rune-inscribed amulet. He’d tucked it into a belt pouch and nodded. Then the magi had lifted the shield, let the doors open, and the others had hurried in. Most of the Disorder of Azeroth remained in the city, surrounding Runeweave Square and waiting on the quai in front of the Violet Hold lest more blues teleport in. The first wave of attacks had ended just moments before they lifted the shield but the silence spoke of a new wave coming. As she glanced around the cavernous prison, she shuddered again. She could sense the raw power emanating not only from the captivity spells themselves, but from the prisoners held in stasis as well.

“We might as well get started,” Ger’alin said grimly, gripping the leather-wrapped hilt of the sword he had borrowed. He would not risk profaning the gift Sar’la had given him by using it against those who might not deserve death. “I hope, for the sake of us all, that these prisoners truly merit the fate that will be meted out to them.”

“They wouldn’t be imprisoned on a whim,” Zerith replied, sounding as if he could use some convincing himself. “The Kirin Tor are not without their own form of justice. And, if these could be turned against us, we would be in dire straits indeed.”

“That powerful, eh?” the paladin grimaced.

“More than you could imagine,” Alayne answered, her voice toneless and breathless.

“If it takes her breath away, that’s not a good sign at all,” Ger’alin sighed, glancing at his wife out of the corner of his eyes. “Let’s get this over and done with.” Walking over to the first of the lower cells, he lifted his hand to press the amulet against the sigil that would lower the stasis gate. Before he could touch the stone to the wall, the hair on the back of his neck stood on end and gooseflesh pebbled on his arms and legs. Turning, he saw a vertical

vortex swirling in the air near the main prison doors. Alayne shook her head; she did not know what this was and it sounded nothing like what the Kirin Tor had described to them. Tucking the amulet back into his belt pouch for the moment, Ger'alın walked back over to where the others stood and waited to see what this unexpected portal brought forth.

A flash of blue-tinged light completed the opening of the portal and brought with it a nearly mature dragonkin. He grunted in surprise to see the sin'dorei, tauren, and one-armed Forsaken standing there, staring at him. He threw out a hand carelessly, flinging them backwards several feet, and then began channeling into the portal. A shield sprang up around him. Callie was the first to regain her feet. Jogging nimbly over to him, she slashed with her arm-sword and winced when it bounced, ringing, off the shield. The dragonkin eyed her with amused contempt and pointedly turned his back to her. Lifting his hand again, he began channeling into the portal. The swirling chaos began to expand and grow stronger. Tau're and Ger'alın had reached the dragonkin by now and discovered their weapons to be useless against the shield. Alayne grimaced and concentrated on the shield itself, trying to unravel the spell.

"It's useless," she muttered. "As long as the portal is open, he can't be attacked and as long as he's here, the portal will remain open."

The rest of the group did not have much time to worry over her pronouncement. A trio of dragonkin, smaller than their guardian, rushed through the portal. One headed towards the doors while the other two split away, moving towards the cells. "Stop them!" Alayne shouted.

Ger'alın hurried after the first one, the one who was currently attempting to unravel the spell shielding the prison and holding them all inside. Tau're and Callie ran after the other two, their swords and axes cleaving at the scaly creatures, distracting them from opening the cells. Alayne and Zerith remained where they were, hurling their spells as best they could. However, the trio were soon joined by others. Three became six. Six became nine. No sooner would one drop than others would rush through the portal to replace the fallen. Alayne grit her teeth and studied the portal. The stream of magic rushing from the channeler into the portal was both a weakness and a strength. Grasping hold of it, she tugged, jerking the threads of magic out of alignment.

She lifted her head weakly, her vision blurry. She could see Zerith looking down on her with an expression of exasperation upon his face. "Could you please stop doing that?" he groaned. "She'll be fine!" he called out to Ger'alın.

"Tell her if she does it again, I'm going to do to her what her father used to do when she acted up!" her husband shouted back. "I've had enough of being thrown across the room by my wife!"

"At least it worked!" Callie shouted from another part of the room. "If she hadn't made the portal explode, we'd all be dragon fodder."

Zerith helped his sister to her feet. She closed her eyes to regain her balance and then opened them to study the results of her work. The guardian lay near where he had been standing, blood pooling around his mangled corpse. The explosion had nearly torn him apart. The nine other dragonkin were mostly dead now, their spells not much use to them in the face of hand-to-hand combat. "Others may come soon," Alayne said thickly.

"Finish those off and then let's get done with what we came in here to do!" Zerith shouted. "I just pray we'll have enough time."

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Alayne's body shook with exhaustion. She hoped that there would be time to rest before the next battle. Already they had faced an ethereal who summoned the shadow of the

Nether against them, the fel magic shocking their skin until it glowed red and their hair stood on end. Then had come the water elemental with her impossibly-thick shield that seemed to take ages to break down. After that had come a demonic beholder, its gaze a beam of death and its breath fetid poison. And, through it all, portals had spawned, depositing more dragonkin in their midst. The dragonkin did their best to cut them down while they fought to kill the prisoners but, thus far, the worst injuries had been delivered to, not by, the blues.

“How many more?” she asked tiredly. For the moment, no portals stood open and the five were taking the chance to catch their breath.

“Just two, I think,” Ger’alin said, making a quick count. “That fel hound and the voidwalker.”

“Just two left and we’re done. Without the prisoners to try to entice to their side, the blues have no reason keep attacking the city this way,” Zerith nodded, thinking quickly. “They’ll probably try more traditional methods, not that those are any more effective or anything I really want to face myself.”

“Does anyone remember when we originally came here to fight the Lich King?” Ger’alin asked rhetorically. “Someone remind me just how in the name of the Pantheon we wound up getting involved in a civil war, a fight between the Alliance and Horde, discovering some musty old museum the Titans built, and executing prisoners for magi while fighting off blue dragons?”

“Mir’el likes to remind me that life is neither fair nor easy,” Alayne quipped. “Let’s take the voidwalker first.”

“Any portals incoming?” Ger’alin asked as he walked up the ramp towards the cell holding the shadow demon in stasis.

“None that I can sense. Not that I’ve sensed any before they were open,” Alayne replied.

Ger’alin lifted the amulet and pressed it against the sigil. The shield flared and then dissipated and the voidwalker stretched its dark, nether arms. It glared at the sin’dorei and then rushed out of the cell. Alayne flung her spells, trapping the creature in place momentarily while the others surrounded it and began hammering away with weapons while she pulled apart the core of the magical being’s existence. The creature tried to cast them into the shadow realm, to make their physical bodies travel a plane never intended for material beings to tread upon. Alayne was quick to reverse its spells, though, and after a short but intense battle, the creature exploded in a final gasp of demonic magic.

“Just one left,” Ger’alin sighed as he walked over to the last cell on the far side of the room. He set free the fel hound and cut at its two heads. Being a creature of flesh and fire, the fel hound was the easiest of the lot to take down by far. Ger’alin was glad they had saved it for last. When it collapsed in a shuddering heap, the paladin started to turn towards the door to give the signal that the grisly work was done.

“Hold,” Alayne said, placing a hand on his arm as he passed by her on his way to the doors. At the far end of the prison, atop the upper platform, a small portal blinked open and then vanished as quickly. An elven-seeming woman appeared where it had been, her long blonde hair flowing down her shoulders and a look of amused irritation on her face. She leapt lightly through the air to land in the middle of the room. The executioners stared at her warily, wondering who – and what – she was.

“A valiant defense,” she praised them, “but this city must be razed. I will fulfill Malygos’s wishes myself!”

Before they could react, the air swirled around her and where a sin’dorei had been now stood a proud blue dragon. Fully mature, her wings spanned the entire width of the room. Her tail swished around her, breaking down the stone walls of the cells and platform behind her. She opened her mouth, drawing in a deep breath, and exhaled frost. The others

scattered, dodging her freezing breath attack and flanking her sides. Watching both her tail and her head warily, they pressed in close, hoping that the dragon would be trapped by the size of the room in proportion to the size of her serpentine body.

“We finish this now, champions of the Kirin Tor!” she laughed, turning her massive body to face them. Lifting her head, she brought her open mouth with its sharp teeth down, hoping to swallow one of the puny creatures whole. Ger’alin danced back, waiting until her head was nearly down, and then slashed her snout with the blade of his sword. The others ran back, keeping to her flanks, out of range of her tail and her head. The dragon regarded the paladin warily, red blood running down her blue scales. She had clearly underestimated them. Instead of wasting time on more breath attacks or using her tail, she summoned them in as closely as she could. Ger’alin felt the magic swarm over him and nearly fell on his face as the room blurred. He found himself standing under her chin, staring up at her in alarm. She lifted her head high, bringing her snout out of range of his sword. With a thought, she flung them all backwards, satisfied at the thuds she heard when her arcane blast threw them into the walls around her.

“Who among you can withstand my power?” she taunted as she summoned them back again. Once again, they found themselves grappling for balance and then being thrown back the way they had come. When she sensed them wearying from the attack, she summoned them back one final time, intending to finish them off.

Callie was, again, the first to regain her balance. While Ger’alin and Tau’re tottered on their feet, wondering if they were about to be thrown once more, the rogue grabbed hold of the dragon’s scaly hide and propelled herself onto its back, burying her arm-sword into its neck as she pulled herself up. The dragon shook her head, hoping to dislodge the Forsaken and regretting her decision to finish them off with a closer attack. Alayne stabbed at the dragon’s flanks with her dagger, her spells utterly useless against a creature of such powerful magic. While the dragon tried to shake Callie off, Tau’re and Ger’alin risked moving in closer to her soft underbelly and neck. With a mighty heave, each man buried his blades deep in the dragon’s flesh. Ger’alin felt air rush out, nearly knocking him over, as his borrowed blade cut deep into the dragon’s gorge. Tau’re’s axes tore chunks away from her belly. Slick blood began pooling around her feet and her head ceased shaking as her eyes widened in shock. She tried to lower her head, to examine her wounds, to find some way to shift back or use her magic to teleport away from these creatures. Instead, her head collapsed to the floor as the blood rushed out of her. Callie continued her stabbing climb until she stood on top of the dragon’s head, her blades poised just between the eyes.

“Perhaps we underestimated you,” the dragon sighed mournfully as the rogue drove her blades in deep.

“Perhaps we should hurry up and make an end of them before they have time to stop underestimating us,” Ger’alin muttered.

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“We can’t afford a moment’s delay,” Rhonin muttered as he paced the distance of the room. Ger’alin and Zerith were sitting at a table at the far end of the room. Ger’alin had his arms dangling over his knees, his hands loose limp as he tried to make sense of what the leader of the Kirin Tor was saying.

“This is madness,” Zerith sighed wearily. “We’re exhausted. While we executed the prisoners, the battle continued to rage through the city. Everyone’s tired. Attacking Malygos while we can barely stand is worse than foolish.”

“Nevertheless,” Rhonin replied, “it seems we have no choice.”

“Tonight,” Ger’alin said, his face turned to the floor. He was too weary to even lift his head to argue. “We’ll go tonight. Not a moment sooner. Go out there. Make it look worse than it is.”

“That might work,” Zerith mused, rubbing his forehead and closing his eyes. Rhonin stared at the sin’dorei as if they were speaking a strange language. “If they thought we were...it would work.”

“Send word to Brann, too. Call out the taunka in Naxxramas to act as a rear guard for the city.”

“What are you talking about?” Rhonin demanded.

“He’s suggesting that we make it appear as if the city and our own forces suffered far more losses and injuries than we truly did,” Zerith explained. “Exaggerate the damage. Then, we go to ground until late tonight. That will give any blue spies a chance to see and report back to Malygos that we’re in no condition to attack and may not be for days yet. We leave tonight and we have the taunka come and hide themselves in the city in case you’re attacked while we’re away.”

“That might work. What was that about Brann, though?”

“Brann has found some interesting devices that make communication easier and swifter without relying on magic. If we’re going up against a master of magic, then perhaps it would be wiser not to tip our hands to him.”

“No,” Ger’alin grimaced, pushing himself up with his elbows and letting his shoulders hit the back of the chair. “Not that. Tell him not to do anything while we fight Malygos. Alayne says...the lines. They could be connected. A ripple could set off...,” he shrugged, closing his eyes. “Light, I could use a few hours of hard sleep.”

“Then go get it,” Rhonin sighed, gesturing towards the door. Ger’alin nodded dully, rose, and stalked outside. He was worn out by the days of fighting, little sleep, and the months of stress building up on him as Garrosh did his best to start a war with the Alliance and Thrall did little to put the younger orc in check. “He’s a good commander when he’s not ready to keel over from exhaustion,” the fire-headed mage sighed. “But, he’s right. You all need rest; we need rest before we go after Malygos and the blues. Now, what is this concern he’s mentioned about the ley-lines from the north? I know that Bran Bronzebeard has been working on finding a way to open the vaults of Ulduar. Your group was instrumental in getting him as far as he has gotten.”

“I’d probably have to go pull Alayne out of bed to get a full explanation for you,” Zerith apologized. “I think she’s worried that if something happens to disrupt the ley-lines while they’re all so...jumbled from Malygos pulling them to his lair, then it could have repercussions for more than just us. At least, that’s what I would suspect he was trying to say.”

“It’s probably wise to go softly and carefully at any rate,” the leader of the Kirin Tor agreed. “For now, let’s work on revising the plan you came up with to take into account the fact that half our forces are standing by will alone.”

Zerith nodded and glanced longingly at the door. He wished he could take a nap as well. However, Ger’alin needed the rest far more than the priest. Bending over the maps and reports scattered about the table, the sin’dorei and the human began making adjustments to their strategy which would hopefully win the battle without costing them the war.

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“Try not to wear yourself out,” Jez’ral wheezed, thin lips spreading over teeth that seemed too large for his mouth. “Mir’el is not going to remain your steward forever.”

“You mean they haven’t forgotten that?” Alayne sighed. “I was rather hoping they would.”

“It’s not so bad,” her former teacher muttered, wincing when Alayne squeezed his hand too tightly. “Just hire someone who has a fairly good grasp of mathematics and you should be able to leave the whole thing to him. And no, I won’t do it either. It was a mixed blessing that our properties lay along the Dead Scar,” he sighed. “I was not looking forward to balancing account books for the rest of my life.”

Alayne muttered something that it was best Jez’ral pretend he hadn’t heard. “I’ll be careful,” she promised. “But, I’d feel much better if you went to Shattrath and let the Aldor have a look at you.”

“I’ll do that soon,” he promised. “For now, I don’t think I could bear to be on a different world than you, worrying about you constantly while you’re here in the Lich King’s backyard. Now, why don’t you tell me what it is that has you keyed up. Bad enough that you’re thinking about going up against the Master of Magic himself,” he groaned, waving his hand weakly to show what he thought of that, “but what are you trying to hide from Mir’el and I that is much worse than that?”

Alayne chewed her lower lip, wondering how much he knew already. Talk in Dalaran had long speculated on Brann’s intent to find and open Ulduar. Had rumors of the Twilight cultists and their mad quest to unleash the old gods reached so far? Would she be able to soothe Jez’ral’s curiosity and concern with a convincing lie. Glancing quickly at his face and seeing the same implacable glare that had held her spellbound through many lessons, she sighed. As much as she hated it, she owed him the truth.

“It’s not the Lich King, is it?” he was asking.

“No,” she sighed, smoothing the wrinkles from the thick blanket and sitting down. She patted his foot beneath the sheets in what she hoped was a comforting and calming gesture. Jez’ral continued to glare at her, his feverish eyes demanding answers. “It’s something that even Arthas wouldn’t want to tangle with.”

“So of course you have to throw yourself right at it,” he snorted derisively. “I hate that you feel that you and your friends must fight every battle. And, I hate that so many stand back and let you do just that.”

“There’s no one else to do it,” she said softly.

“I know,” he muttered sourly. “Still, it isn’t right. And that is why I can’t just leave you to do this while I return to Shattrath or Nagrand. If anyone of us should be out there fighting, it should be me.”

“Jez’ral, no,” she protested. “You fought the Legion in the last invasion. You and Mir’el were at Mount Hyjal with Jaina Proudmoore and Thrall. You’ve done your part.”

“Alayne, you were little more than a child when that happened and here you are insisting on fighting a war that we started by not listening to that ‘wrangling prophet’ who tried to warn us of the dangers in northern Lordaeron and tried to send us overseas where the true battle took place. And now, you’re here in Northrend, seeking not only the Lich King but an old god? I’m assuming it’s something akin to the demons the other Legion-loyal cults worship.”

“I’m not sure exactly what it is other than that it’s powerful and it’s persuasive. It convinced a being who was created and tasked with the job of safeguarding Azeroth into working to destroy it. I’m sure that Brann or someone else can explain in depth at a later date,” she added, seeing the light of interest shine in his weary eyes. “For now, you need to rest.”

“I will,” he nodded, relaxing slightly and letting his head sink back further in the pillows. “However, I will not rest completely until you follow me through the Dark Portal

and leave this war to those who should be fighting it. It was wrong of me to involve you in this; I should have left you alone in Menethil. You'd be happier there. Safer."

"I would never have met Zerith or Ger'alín," she protested. "I'd be alone, among humans, still struggling to replace that which was taken from me. And safer?" she snorted elaborately. "The Alliance is in just as much danger as we are. More, perhaps," she amended. "We know who are true enemies are. Varian Wyrnn is still blinded by his hatred of the orcs."

"Humans," Jez'ral sighed. "Sometimes you think they won't stop changing and then, suddenly, you stumble across one who makes a dwarf look biddable." Closing his eyes, he looked as if he were gathering his thoughts to say something further. Alayne sat on the edge of the bed, staring at him for long moments, waiting for him to speak. She jerked when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning to glance at the person who had touched her, she saw Ger'alín looking down at her with concerned eyes that betrayed the carefully blank expression on his face.

"He's asleep," Ger'alín whispered, inclining his head towards Jez'ral. "Do you want to remain here with him while we go to Coldarra? One person more or less will not make much difference in this fight."

"No," Alayne replied, shaking her head and standing. "I'll be there. After all," she sighed, thinking about the discussion she'd just had, "if I'm not there, who will be?"

Jez'ral's soft but determined snores were ripping through the air as Alayne followed her husband out of the room. In the doorway, she glanced over her shoulder once more and whispered, "I wish you would go home. It's easier for you not to worry when you're here but it's easier for me not to worry when you're safe. One day, though, because I fight, you will be safe and none of us will have to worry about this again. I wish you would go home, though. If you leave this too long, you may never recover."

Ger'alín tugged gently at her arm, drawing her the rest of the way out of the room. The image of Jez'ral's pale and haggard face remained with her even as she lay down to rest herself, gathering her energy for the fight to come.