

“He’ll be fine,” Alayne reminded herself as she stepped through the portal that opened onto the Amber Ledge. Shimmering hazily through the corridors of magic, she could see the spiny white mountains that formed the circumference of the icy isle glistening in the pre-dawn haze. Stepping through the portal, she felt the rush of distance passing through her. The sensation lasted only a second before she found herself standing on firm ground in Borean Tundra. She moved aside quickly, leaving plenty of room for those behind her to catch their balance when they stepped through the shimmering portal. Glancing south, she could see the still-smoking pillars of Warsong Hold. Once the Horde had been surrounded and forced to evacuate it, falling back to the newly-taken stronghold in Wintergrasp, the Alliance had set Warsong Hold to the torch. She shivered as she pushed the thoughts of that war out of her mind. King Wrynn and Hellscream could fight each other all they wanted for all she cared. Just so long as they did not bring the rest of the Alliance and Horde into the battle.

“I hate this thing,” Ger’alin muttered, pulling the woolen scarf he wore wrapped around his chin and nose down. He scraped his tongue against his teeth and spat out the ticklish fibers. “I fail to see how my coughing up hairballs is preferable to growing a beard,” he glared at his wife. Alayne shrugged but said nothing. After the mishaps in Sholazar, she did not think Ger’alin would grow his beard out again for a very long time. She managed to hide the small smile that tugged at her lips when she thought about what Mir’el’s reaction to that story might be. She wished she’d found time to tell Jez’ral about it earlier.

“He’ll be fine,” she reminded herself again. Thoughts of Mir’el led inevitably to thoughts of Jez’ral lying abed, too sick and too weak to do more than turn his head. She’d never seen anyone so ill before in her life. Not even Ger’alin had been that weak and drained after falling through the collapsing portal with her and Kil’jaeden. She wished that he had turned to Shattrath where the naaru and the Aldor could look after him. But, sick though he may be, Jez’ral was stubborn as ever. As long as she remained adventuring in Northrend, he would remain on this side of the Dark Portal. She would not leave her husband, her brother, and her friends to face the Scourge alone while she fled back to her safe, snug home in the shade of the mountains of Nagrand. So, until the battle was done, she would just have to pray that Jez’ral survived the situation as best he could.

“How are we supposed to get onto the island?” Ger’alin was asking as he studied the cloud-capped peaks in the distance. He shaded his eyes with a hand and strained to see as far as he could. He could discern no landing site, no beaches, nothing but sheer steep rocky walls for the entire section he could see.

“There’s a cave,” Alayne muttered, forcing her mind away from its worries. “It’s on the far side over there,” she pointed to the northeastern face. “It’s filled with murlocs but we’ll make it through. The Cenarion druids have been doing their best to tame the fish-men and have managed to mostly get them out of the caves on Coldarra. The few feral ones we might face should be no trouble to take care of.”

“Murlocs,” Ger’alin snorted. “So cute when they’re little, so disgusting when they get old enough to wield a spear against you. Lady Proudmoore had a bounty on them in Dustwallow. The ogres did too. Still, we’ll leave the druids to take care of *befriending* them,” he shuddered dramatically, managing to elicit a small smile from Alayne.

“You do realize that getting into Coldarra is easy?” Alayne sighed. “*Staying alive* once we’re there is more difficult. The blues will be patrolling the skies and the ground, looking for anything that might threaten their master and father.”

“I know. That’s why we’re going to follow the plan as closely as the blues will let us,” her husband replied evenly. “There’s bound to be an area where we can hide ourselves, make our numbers appear less than they are, while we do something to make it a haven. That will have to be the first thing we search for. We’re not going to survive long if we cannot have a safe place to regroup, rest, and regather ourselves for the next attempt.”

Alayne nodded silently. She knew he was right. Still, there had been no hope of any kind of reconnaissance on the isle. The Alliance who had managed to sneak through using items of great power to hide themselves from the blues had not survived the attack against Malygos. The great Aspect had to know that another attack would be coming and coming soon. Still, he had defeated the expedition sent against him with ease. Perhaps he would underestimate the next band of attackers and, by doing so, give them the keys to victory. Nervously, she toyed with the bracelet Alexstrasza had given her. If all went well, she would use it once the battle was engaged and Malygos was sufficiently distracted in order to call all of the red drakes that could be spared to their aid.

Zerith walked up to the pair and tapped Ger'alın on the shoulder. Inclining his head slightly, he led the other man over away from the rest of the crowd and the two had a quick, whispered conference. Ger'alın nodded and returned to stand beside Alayne while Zerith hurried to Dar'ja's side. Ger'alın smiled at her sympathetically before raising his hands as the last of the Disorder of Azeroth poured through the portal. Waiting until he had everyone's attention, he cleared his throat and began speaking in a voice that carried across the gathering.

"We'll be walking down to the shore below us in a few minutes," he announced. "There are boats," Dar'ja groaned and began whispering fiercely at her husband, "waiting for us to carry us to the island of Coldarra. We'll regather at the foot of the mountain cave that will take us beyond the mountains. We cannot use the dragons to carry us over the mountains, nor can we climb them in any kind of feasible timeframe. The Cenarion Circle is kindly providing the boats and the torches we'll need to make the journey. Let's get moving." Suiting his actions to his words, Ger'alın turned and began following the rocky path that led down to the shore. Alayne walked behind him, clutching his outstretched hand until she was certain the bones must be creaking, staring hard at his back. Her breath came in heavy gasps that made her nostrils flare wildly. She could just see herself tumbling down the steep and rocky path to the beach. Behind her, she could hear Dar'ja moaning softly at the thought of being in a boat. She risked a glance over her shoulder and stifled a giggle when she saw that Zerith was carrying Dar'ja, a look of patient longsuffering on his face. He glared at his sister and mouthed a threat to have Ger'alın spank her if she so much as thought about rocking the boat. Alayne grinned and shook her head. She'd had her fun with Dar'ja once before as revenge for the awful zeppelin ride after her brother's hasty marriage. She felt no reason to rub it in further.

Arriving at the beach, Ger'alın directed the Disorder of Azeroth into the boats, putting Zerith and Dar'ja in the first one he could find. The rest of the day faded into dusk as the large gathering was rowed across the strait. Ger'alın and Alayne were the last to leave the beach below the Amber Ledge. Alayne was glad to be in the boat and headed towards their destination at last. The sooner this was over with, the sooner she could try to talk more sense into Jez'ral. Soothed by the gentle lapping of the water against the boat, Alayne leaned against Ger'alın and dozed.

Ger'alın watched her sleep and sighed. This battle would be most difficult on her. On any of the magi but on her most of all. Rhonin had explained the Alliance's reluctance to use magi at all in the group sent against Malygos. "The Spell Weaver knows the arcane better than anyone else alive on Azeroth," the fire-haired human had explained. "Our own magi would be useless against him. Paladins, priests, shaman, druids, even," he'd shuddered, "warlocks – those who draw their power from other sources stand at least a candle's chance in a snowstorm against Malygos. Those of us who draw our power from arcane energy don't even have that slim hope."

"All the more reason for her to remain behind," Zerith had argued. "Ger'alın, surely you can't be in favor of taking her along when she'll be deadweight and in danger?" the

priest had gasped when Ger'alın shook his head. Rhonin had eyed the paladin speculatively while Ger'alın weighed his answer.

"Ideally, yes," he'd replied, "I would opt to try to leave her behind. However, this is Alayne we're discussing. She's not going to let herself be left behind." Even Zerith had nodded, reluctantly as he could, at that. "And, she's got a talent for magic," Ger'alın pointed out. "I'm probably a cold-blooded fool for considering it this way but how many times has she done things like crossing currents or mixing streams or whatever the hell it is that has both Mir'el and Jez'ral ready to have kittens whenever they think about it? She can use other forms of magic," he'd sighed. "She could call in demons, cast curses, throw hexes if needed. She can hurl death and disease and all manner of contagion at her enemies. Not that she's done that since the Black Temple," he'd added, seeing the speculation in Rhonin's eyes turn to outrage. "But, if pushed to that point, she could do it. She would do it without batting an eye."

"She's powerful and gifted, yes," Zerith agreed. "But she goes into those blind rages and..."

"I don't think that's going to be an issue here," Ger'alın interrupted. "I think those blind rages are a thing of the past. She couldn't will herself into a frenzy when she needed to desperately. We're taking her because, as much as I hate the thought of putting her in danger, she's the most gifted and powerful magic-user we have. She's versatile. If we're going up against the Master of Magic himself, we're going to need someone like Alayne to help us counter his spells and force him to fight us hand-to-claw."

The force of his arguments had soon persuaded Zerith to agree to his terms. Alayne had been thrilled when he'd explained her role in the battle to come to her. While he did his best to grit his teeth and allow her in the fore of the fighting without much fuss, rarely did he put her in the center of the battle and force her to shoulder the burden of the worst part of the fighting. Glancing down at her sleeping face, he wondered if his idea had been the best one. Before he could reconsider, the boat scraped the rough sand of the snowy beach. Shaking her gently awake, he led her out of the boat and onto the dark beach.

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"What is murloc for 'do you have any idea where you're going?'" Ger'alın asked as the group turned around after coming upon the fifth dead-end in the tunnels that wound through the mountains.

The Cenarion druid dressed in the most ridiculous mockery of a murloc costume ever seen studiously ignored the paladin, croaking and gurgling in the fish-men's strange language. "Don't worry," he said in heavily accented Common, "they'll find the way out eventually. It's just that they don't get visitors that often. They're loathe to let you leave."

"I'm loathe to remain much longer in these stinking caverns," Ger'alın grumped. Alayne patting him soothingly on the arm and he forced his irritation back down to a more manageable level. He no longer wanted to gut every last murloc he saw. Now he would settle for throttling the trio who were supposed to be guiding them through this Lightforsaken snarl, not getting them more and more lost as the night progressed. "They do realize we that if they can't get us out of here before dawn, we'll have to stay with them all during the day, don't they?"

"They do," the druid admitted, dragging the admission out. "As I said, though, they don't get many visitors."

"Could you please tell them," Ger'alın growled, "that if we are forced to stay with them, we are going to eat all of their fish? Every. Last. Fish. Make sure they understand *that*," he spat.

A gurgled and strangled conversation ensued and, moments later, the Disorder of Azeroth found itself on a completely different path moving at a much quicker pace. Ger'alín managed to keep the smug grin off his face but it was a close thing. The stench of the murloc guides helped.

"Eat all their fish?" Alayne whispered, staring at him in horror. "Ger'alín, the sea is pretty big, you know."

"And murlocs are pretty dumb," he grinned, chuckling. "Look, I would have said or done anything to get away from that seaweed and salted fish stench. Don't blame me for being effective."

The sounds of their footsteps echoed through the cavernous tunnels, filling the silent night with ominous sounds. Ger'alín groaned when the tunnel stretching out before them began to lighten. "We're too late," he muttered sourly. "We'll have to camp in the tunnels for the rest of the day and strike out after dark."

"Wait," Alayne said quickly, placing a hand on Ger'alín's arm to stop him from going back to inform the others. No one wanted to remain in a cold, dank, stinking cave to try to rest and gather their strength and wits for a battle. "I think...yes, I should be able to do it."

"Do what?" he demanded, eyeing her warily.

"The currents emanating from all of the ley-lines that Malygos has pulled here are strong. I'd be surprised if he could sense any kind of mortal spell-casting. We'd be lost in the noise to him."

"Nevertheless, the Kirin Tor warned us..."

"I know," she said, cutting him off. "Still, I think I can raise a small shield here in the trees where the tunnel opens up. We could set up tents and rest outside of this cave. It would also give us a better chance to watch for dragons coming and a position to move to in order to keep them from overflying or overwhelming us."

Ger'alín sighed, seeing that her suggestion had strategic merit. Nodding, he gave her his permission to continue and hurried back to tell Zerith what was going on. Alayne moved out of the tunnel, nodding politely to the murlocs and the druid. The disguised night elf's posture radiated his distaste for what she was doing so palpably that Alayne felt his disapproval as hard as a slap across the face. She glared at him and, with a snort of derision, he guided the murlocs back into the cave. Blotting the image from her mind, Alayne pulled some of the loose threads of wild arcane energy around her, forming a dull, dome-like shield. She held it hovering over the entrance of the cavern and gestured for the others to move under it. Tweaking the size a bit, she settled it around them and nodded in satisfaction when, moments later, no dragons came seeking them. The sheer density of arcane activity in the vicinity had shielded them from prying, paranoid eyes. Ger'alín grunted in weary satisfaction and began setting up the small lean-to he'd packed, intending to have to use it in the caves. The others quickly imitated him, setting up tents or unrolling bedrolls. Digging down into the snow and piling it up into domed structures, most of the living were able to create snowdens if they had not thought to pack tents. Alayne helped him roll out their thick, fur-lined sleeping roll and curled up inside it with him, setting her snow-dampened boots behind her where their shared body heat would dry them while they napped. Ger'alín closed his eyes and prepared to fall asleep quickly, a trick he had learned first in Dustwallow but had perfected in the years spent with Alayne and Zerith. Alayne placed a chilly hand on his cheek, causing him to open his eyes and meet her gaze with a frank and tired one of his own.

"I want Diami and GrognaK backing me in case it goes wrong," she whispered.

Ger'alín grunted and rolled his eyes. Ever since he had told her of the plan they had developed for this fight, she'd been trying to persuade him to put those two with her in case something happened to her. "Every good plan should have a fall back," she pointed out. "A contingency. You shouldn't pin everything on one point."

“I am not going to plan for you to fail,” he said evenly, closing his eyes and affecting to be too tired to continue this conversation. “You’ll pull it off. You always have in the past and you’ve given me no reason to doubt your ability now.” Letting his breath return to deep, even gasps, Ger’alin was soon asleep. Alayne stared at his sleeping face with a mix of consternation and irritation. He was usually one of the most thorough and detailed planners when it came to any kind of fight. He could and did make their limited resources stretch, enabling a group that would barely fill a company in one of the Horde’s armies to do far more than larger, more well-supplied groups could do. And yet, for some reason, this time he was putting her in the center of the fight, hinging the entire battle on her abilities alone, without a secondary plan. It was completely unlike him to put her in the spotlight unless he absolutely had no choice and she badgered him into it. It was also unlike him not to have at least two contingencies worked out, usually alternatives he would have tried to convince her were better than her endangering herself until she had managed to bring him around to her way of thinking.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” she whispered to him, hoping that her low-pitched tone would waken him so he would argue with her, reassuring her that there was some greater plan at work. “Ordinarily our positions would be completely reversed. I’m wondering what is going on in that mind of yours right now and why, all of a sudden, I feel like maybe I have bitten off more than I can chew.” With a weary, annoyed sigh, she let her head slump, her cheek resting against his chest. Closing her eyes, she fell into the same light, restful sleep shared by the entire group who could sleep. They would need their energy and their wits about them for tonight’s battle, regardless of whether or not she thought Ger’alin and Zerith had worked out the best plan possible.

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“I don’t like it either, Zerith,” Ger’alin sighed, “but we have to know. Too many times in the past she’s been so unsure of her own mind that we couldn’t know if she was lying or just didn’t know what she was capable of doing. Don’t worry. Diami and Grognaak will be hanging back to cover for her or to provide assistance to her if it’s needed. She just doesn’t know it.”

“I hope you’re right about this,” the priest replied. “She is going to chew you up one side and down the other when she finds out about this.”

“I look forward to it,” Ger’alin said simply. “It will mean we survived.”

“I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

“Hush now,” the paladin ordered. “They’re returning.”

Alayne, Tyrious, and Nishi were striding back along the fissure, careful to keep themselves hidden from anyone flying over. Their steps were accented by murmured curses; the sun having long since set and the adventurers, afraid to use torches or magic to guide them, were forced to rely solely on the light of the moon and stars to guide them over rough, rocky terrain. Ger’alin waited until they were just a few feet away before lifting his hand out of the shadows to stop them. “What did you find?” he asked.

“Two entrances,” Nishi said, his voice low so that it would carry only a few feet. Ger’alin had to strain his ears to hear it clearly. “Exactly what the reds and the Alliance claimed we would find. In order to access his lair, we’ll probably have to go through one or the other.”

“Go back to the others. Tell them we’ll follow the plan to the letter,” Ger’alin said. “Alayne, you can wait here,” he added when she started to walk back towards the outcropping where the rest of the group waited, hiding from the eyes in the sky. “Did you sense anything?”

“Ger’alin, the area is so inundated by the ley-lines that Malygos has torn asunder and dragged here that it’s difficult to sense anything at all. All I can tell is that the area beneath the spike is a place filled with intense magic. Also, I sense something much like...I guess a nursery is the closest thing I can think of. Hatchery, perhaps would be a better description. I think there are young dragons around. We’ll have to be careful of them. If they’re young enough, they’ll be no threat to us and would not be able to follow Malygos’s orders if he bothered to send any to them. Not that I think he would,” she added quickly. “From what Alexstrasza said, Malygos would be doubly careful of his young. His entire flight was almost extinguished by Deathwing.”

“One day, we’ll have to pay him a visit too,” Ger’alin muttered sourly.

“Don’t say that,” Alayne gasped. “I’d hate for that one to actually happen. The Earthwarder was the strongest of them all, on par with Alexstrasza. Fighting him would make fighting Malygos seem like child’s play.”

“I wonder if there is something about being so powerful and living so long that drives male dragons insane,” Ger’alin mused.

“Be quiet,” Alayne warned as the others drew closer. Ger’alin nodded and ran a gentle, affectionate finger over her cheek before letting her join the group that would be working to open the upper chamber. Forcing himself to swallow the bile rising in his throat, he joined the group that would take care of searching through the lower chamber. Both groups would be on the lookout for Alexstrasza’s missing daughter, Keristrasza. Moving carefully along the edges of the canyon, the groups made their way unseen to the dungeons that guarded the Spellweaver’s lair. Ger’alin felt a twinge of relief when he saw Zerith press through the crowds to stand next to Alayne. He also felt a twinge of regret when he remembered that Dar’ja would be following him. Callie, seeing the look on his face, chuckled beneath her breath as Ger’alin’s group made their way down the spiraling ramp to the entrance of the lower dungeon. Regardless of whatever else happened, tonight would be an interesting night for them all.

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Alayne gasped when the transporter lit, teleporting them far above the upper platform and onto the open rings that floated high above the ground, revolving around the central beacon. Nestled carefully in nooks and crannies on the platform were dozens and dozens of blue dragon eggs. A lone dragonkin guardian, looking up to see what had triggered the transporter, studied Alayne and Zerith for a moment. Hissing something in the dragon’s ancient tongue, the guardian tensed when no reply was forthcoming. Then, as Tau’re stumbled through the teleporter, the guardian lunged, no longer under the illusion that perhaps the entrants were dragons in mortal seeming. Alayne hastily threw out her spells, snaring the dragon for a second while Tau’re regained his balance, unslung his axe, and rushed to the attack. She and Zerith moved up the pathway, leaving room for the others to enter behind them and being especially careful of the eggs. Small dragons, infants of a long-lived race, fluttered around in the distance, some stopping to watch the fighting, cocking their heads in confusion as their guardian cried out in pain. Alayne winced when several of the little drakes began flapping towards them. She prayed that it would not come to fighting babies, even if they were dragon babies at that.

Tau’re grunted and snorted, shaking his head to get the scent of dragon blood out of his nostrils. The blue dragonkin had collapsed in a bloody heap. He started to toss it over the edge of the platform but a quick word from Alayne stopped him in his tracks. “No need to advertise that we’re here,” she muttered. By then, the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth had made their way inside. “I suppose this is the Oculus,” Alayne said, pitching her voice so that

it would barely carry over the crowd. “Be careful of the eggs. Alexstrasza has no desire to see an end to the blues; only to the threat they pose to the living. And, try not to kill. I know it’s difficult,” she said, hearing the sighs of frustration from those behind her. “But, we’ve been over this. Better if we can incapacitate them until after we’ve taken care of Malygos. Then, Alexstrasza will be able to enter this area and she can explain to them why this had to be done. However, if we give them more reasons to side with the Spellweaver against the mortal races, then we’re dooming more of them to death later on when Alexstrasza is forced to act to prevent them from destroying our peoples.”

Walking ahead, her eyes darting along the edges of the platform to the tiny drakes who fluttered around, Alayne prayed that guardians would be few and far between. Rounding the bend, she groaned in frustration. A trio of dragonkin were rushing towards the entrance. Apparently, the scuffle had been enough to alert the guards to the presence of intruders in the Oculus. Calling in the arcane currents that floated on the air around her, she wove snares around their legs, slowing them and buying the others time to let the fighters get to the front line and charge in. As the melee stepped closer to the eggs, Alayne began grinding her teeth, her bile rising in her throat at the thought of an accidental sword or axe swing slicing through the delicate eggs. The dragonkin guardians obviously felt the same way, shoving and pushing their way back to the center of the platform, unwilling to risk their young in the fighting. The rest of the casters with Alayne were likewise on edge, fearing that their spells might rebound or be reflected onto the defenseless. Weaving with more caution and care than she had before in a fight, Alayne focused her spells solely against those who would bar their path further, forcing herself to concentrate on keeping her spells debilitating instead of fatal. She could feel the strain in her shoulders from the way she clenched her jaw, willing herself to disable instead of kill. She moaned when one of the guardians fell, its eyes glazing in death. The blues set to watch the eggs were not going to surrender their wards or their watch easily.

After what seemed like endless hours of fighting, the three guardians were dead. Alayne wanted to weep in frustration. Zerith put a comforting hand on her shoulder and pulled her into his embrace. Kissing her on the crown of the head, he patted her on the back. “It’s always difficult to win when the conditions of victory require that the enemy cooperate with you,” he whispered.

“That sounds like something Ger’alin would say,” she muttered sourly.

“He has said it. Many times. He heard it from one of his own commanders. That doesn’t make it any less true.”

Alayne pushed herself out of her brother’s embrace and quickly wiped her eyes. Nodding, she told him wordlessly that she would be fine and that she understood what he was trying to tell her. The conditions she and Alexstrasza had set on the battles to come would be nearly impossible to meet. Failing to be less than perfect was not a flaw. Squaring her shoulders, she continued around the platform, her stomach doing flip-flops whenever she let her gaze wander over the edge to see the drop to the ground. Praying fervently that they would be able to continue on without further fighting, she reached the end of the platform, her breath exploding out of her lungs with a gasp that was both relief and irritation. Another teleport pad stood before them, leading them Light alone knew where.

“Let’s keep going,” Zerith said gently. “Hopefully, that was all of the guards. After all, how much watching could eggs need?”

“Plenty,” Alayne replied. “Especially if they were your race’s only hope of survival. But, you’re right. Let’s keep going.”

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Zerith wished, just for a moment, that Alayne was not terrified of heights. She could ignore the fact that they were floating high above the ground while in Dalaran or in Naxxramas. However, let her catch a single glimpse of the drop and her stomach nearly swallowed itself in its rush to empty its contents through her throat. He didn't know which was worse; her constant attempts to force herself to face her fears stoically or her near-gibbering-idiocy when those attempts failed. Right now, he was hovering towards the latter as he steered her back towards the center of the platform.

"Come on, sis," he said gently, teasingly, whispering in her ear. "Pull yourself together and let's get out of here so we can be back on the safe, solid ground."

"Yes," she agreed with him, stammering and trying to will herself to calm down. It was difficult with the night sky swirling around her. She stared at the platform, wishing there were a way to blind her peripheral vision.

"Focus on the task at hand," Zerith advised. "Don't let yourself think of anything other than what we're here to do."

Alayne nodded and forced her body to stop trembling. Holding herself firm and upright, she gestured in front of her where a thin, almost invisible bridge connected the platform they were standing on to a domed platform housing a massive blue drake. The creature had raised the dome and shouted something in draconic the moment she and Zerith had transported to the platform upon which they stood. A burst of arcane energy had followed the drakinoid's shout, covering the upper levels of the Oculus.

"Just one step at a time," Zerith said, praying that she would not panic the minute she had to step onto the bridge.

"Just one step at a time," Alayne repeated, walking stiffly onto the connection between the platforms. Moving at a snail's pace, she managed to make it most of the way across the bridge before fear sapped the strength from her legs and she fell, hands splayed to catch herself, and crawled the rest of the distance. Zerith hovered near her, ready to jerk her into his arms if she began to panic further. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth accompanying them followed close behind, focused on the creature in front of them.

The drake leered at them, feeling invincible behind his magical dome. His expression spoke of his certainty that no mere mortal creatures could reach him, let alone defeat him. Behind him were the three mystical caches that were their key to advancing further towards their goal. Alayne had spotted them almost at once; three gateways leading into prisons were dragons from the other flights were held against their will. The answer to what had happened to the dragons sent to reason with Malygos and the key to victory all wrapped up in one neat location. Zerith gritted his teeth and squatted down beside his sister, placing a gentle hand on her back to steady her as she forced herself to stand up. Placing her hands on the magical dome, she began muttering in the language of magic. Zerith hoped she was not doing something Mir'el or Jez'ral would consider foolish but knew too little of the path she walked to be able to tell. When the drake's expression changed from one of smug certainty to irritation, the priest knew that whatever Alayne was doing, it was effective.

Moments later, the dome crystallized and fractures appeared in the faint luminescent glow. With a tinkling sound, the dome shattered, the magical threads holding it together vanishing in a few seconds. The drake roared and let his spear whirl through his claws.

"The prisoners shall not go free!" he shouted. "The word of Malygos is law!"

Zerith felt himself being sucked into the whirlwind of magic that was suddenly surrounding the drakinoid. Struggling against it was useless. Within seconds, he was staggering, stumbling to keep on his feet, with the drake's spear inches from his head. Tau're lunged in, his axe blocking the blow and his massive arms shaking under the strain of holding the drake away from the priest. Zerith darted back out, nearly bowling over Alayne as the casters rushed out of the way of the melee fighters.

The drake was quickly surrounded. He whirled his spear to try to hold his attackers at bay but several broke through his guard. Concentrating on them, he could not focus on blocking the magical attacks coming at him from the edge of the platform. The bolts of arcane, fire, ice, and shadow that hit him were as effective as mosquitoes. However, like mosquitos, they distracted far more than the pain inflicted merited. When he tried to wave the magical attacks off, his guard against the weapon wielding fighters around him dropped slightly and the drake let out a bellowing roar when Tau're's axe buried itself firmly in the blue-scaled creature's hip. Waving a clawed hand, the drake hurled arcane energy out onto the platform. The threads coalesced, forming themselves into bright orbs that danced around the platform, careening off one another and exploding whenever they touched anything. Several casters and healers, Zerith included, found themselves laying on the ground, stunned from the force of the small explosions going on around them. Alayne alone seemed to ignore them, her focus so intent upon the drake that sweat trickled down her face as she hurled every spell she had. Gaining power from her anger, her spells began to sear the drake's scaly flesh, weakening it in places so that the weapons of the warriors at the fore could punch through. Zerith picked himself up and began helping others to their feet, pausing only to heal those who needed it most. A last thundering roar was wrenched from the creature's mouth and it gasped, staggering and collapsing to the floor.

"The war...goes on..." the drake said with a last, shuddering breath.

"It ends tonight," Alayne said quietly, staring blankly at the corpse laying prone a short distance away. "Zerith, heal those who need it. I'm going to try to figure out how to open these prisons."

Zerith nodded and fell to his task, glad to see that Alayne was putting her own worries aside and focusing on the task at hand. He prayed that Ger'alain and the others were having an easier time of it than those who had entered the Oculus.

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"You are safe on the ground. It's just very windy. You are not flying on a dragon's back," Zerith repeated over and over again into Alayne's ear while he kept one of his hands planted over her eyes and the other gripping her wrists in front of him. He had learned, the hard way, that Alayne did not understand what deadly weapons she had at the tips of her fingers. He sighed, feeling the tension in her face from the way she had her jaw clamped shut to keep from screaming in terror. The bronze drake beneath them seemed amused at her terror but, thankfully, did not fly wildly or erratically. Moving as slowly as he could through the air, careful not to disturb either of the mortals on his back, the drake carried them up to the next platform just beneath the shield that protected the highest levels. Arcane golems stood around the central, circular platform and on the islands floating at a level with it, their energy being channeled and directed by the dragon magi around them to maintain the shield from outside. Focused on their task and desperate to protect the entrance to their master's lair from the invaders, the dragon magi across the platform largely ignored the Disorder of Azeroth while those closest to their landing place ran in, spells backed with the power of their fear and anger flying on the icy currents of the open night air. Zerith finished helping his sister find her way down from the dragon's back and watched as he flew off to join his brethren in the fight against the other drakes circling the platform. The magi on the islands shifted form, transforming from humanoids into drakes, and rushed to attack. Zerith's attention was torn away from the aerial battles to the one near him when he heard Alayne hiss and begin cursing beneath her breath.

One of the golems, at the command of the dragon magi, had rushed forward, its crystalline hands filled with arcane energy. It levied a blow at Tau're, nearly throwing the

tauren warrior off the platform when the magical energy in its fists exploded with a thunderous crash, knocking everyone nearby to their backs and throwing those who managed to keep their feet high into the air. Alayne reached out with her own magic and jerked the flying members of the Disorder of Azeroth back to the ground, too frantic to be gentle. Tau're's hooves hit the floor with an audible clack and he glared at Alayne for a moment while he tested his footing, satisfied that he was not too bruised to walk further. His face filled with regret when, a moment later, his axe bounced off the arcane golem's crystalline skin, reverberating violently in his hands. Switching his target to something less likely to use his own strength against him, Tau're waded into the fray against the dragon magi. Alayne focused her attention on the first golem, unweaving the spells that held it together. Ripping the threads of magic apart with little concern for what they might fall into, she tore apart the spells powering them, leaving a pile of crystal rubble in their place. No sooner did she destroy one than another came to take its place.

As the golems fell into piles and the dragon magi were killed or subdued, the shield guarding the upper levels began to thin and falter. As the last golem collapsed, Alayne glanced up and probed the shield, testing for weakness. With a little more effort, it would fade entirely, opening the way for their force to reach the pinnacle of the Oculus and gain entry to Malygos's private domain.

A roar ripped Alayne from her thoughts. A hulking drakinoid wearing gold-plated spiky armor ran towards them, pointing with his massive claws. Orbs of arcane lightning encircled the fighters, penning them in while the blue drakinoid made his way towards them. Whenever one of them attempted to find his way out, by means physical or magical, the orbs unleashed magical lightning that stunned the would-be-escapee.

"Intruders, your victory will be short-lived. I am Commander Varos Cloudstrider. My drakes control the skies and protect this conduit. I will see to it personally that the Oculus does not fall into your hands!" the drakinoid shouted as he reached the hemmed-in mortals. Purple lightning flared from his claws, connecting with several of the orbs and increasing the power of his attack. Anyone caught in the wash of power fell to the floor, their bodies overloaded with arcane electricity.

"Tau're, keep him distracted!" Alayne called out as she shoved Zerith aside. "Stay away from the orbs!" she warned. Tau're carved a space of safety with his axes, keeping Varos far enough away from him to catch his breath but no so far away he would be unable to dodge the lightning spell.

"There will be no mercy!" Varos shouted, turning to cast his bolts behind him. Tau're took advantage of the split-second distraction and sliced at the drakinoid, carving away a chunk of blue-scaled flesh at the creature's hip. The blue dragon commander roared with fury at his own mistake in underestimating the mortal attackers and waved his clawed fists. The orbs encircling the group began to multiply and flew across the space of the magical prison cell. Where ever they made contact with another orb or a mortal body, they exploded in a cacophony of arcane magic. Alayne saw one coming for her and hit the ground, knocking the wind out of her own lungs, scarcely breathing to replace it until the orb had flown over her, missing her entirely. She winced when she saw another one headed for Zerith but he, seeing her method, followed suit and managed to squeeze his body against the floor low enough for the orb to pass safely overhead. Alayne scrambled to her feet, calling in arcane currents and spinning the threads into a shield around herself. She noted that others were doing the same, shielding themselves so that the careening orbs could not touch them. Focusing her attention on the orbs at the perimeter, she channeled fel fire into them, weaving fel and arcane threads together in a manner that would have had Jez'ral climbing the wall were he able to do so. The orbs began exploding in a rain of crystal and magic, allowing the Disorder of Azeroth to pierce the perimeter and distance themselves from the drakinoid and his orbs of attack. Safely

away from the threat of his lightning, the magi were able to focus on their spells. The fighters surged around him, penning him in and clipping at him fiercely whenever he attempted to cast lightning at them.

“They are... too strong! Underestimated their... fortitude,” Varos groaned as a spear pierced his chest and one of Tau’re’s axes chopped at his leg. Collapsing with a platform-shuddering thud, the blue drakinoid commander fell silent and the shield on the upper levels vanished entirely.

“Signal the dragons to return for us,” Alayne muttered to Zerith, her stomach turning over at the thought of flying. “The war’s not over yet.”

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Alayne sighed in relief as the crazed human wizard calmed down and ran a hand over his disbelieving face. “Many pardons,” he sighed. “I’m not certain what came over me.”

“Malygos is a being of great power,” Alayne replied gently. “If he ordered you to guard the access to his lair, you could do little other than obey.”

“I know,” he said, his voice hollow. “But my fellows... I remember turning against them. I was so certain that my own skill would protect me from manipulation. And now...”

“In time, the Alliance will understand,” Zerith said quietly. “Time will help you to overcome what was done to you and to those who came with you. For now, rest. We will return for you once our battle is concluded. You can make your way back down to the ground. Sneak out, use the cliffs to mask your movements. Follow the cave back to the shore. The wizards of the Kirin Tor will be there and can help reunite you with your own people.”

“Beware of the Spell-Weaver,” the human warned as he nodded in acceptance of the sin’dorei priest’s words.

“We will do our best,” Alayne promised. The human took one last glance over the gathering, nodded again to himself, and began weaving the teleportation spells that would see him back safely on the ground. “We have no choice,” she whispered so that only Zerith could hear her.

“If you would prefer to remain here,” her brother began.

“No,” she said firmly. “I will... fly up there with you. I’ll be of more use there than I would be here.”

“As you will.”

Zerith helped her climb back aboard the bronze dragon’s back, hoping that her focus on the battle to come would keep her calm. As he glanced back down at the floating concentric rings that made up the focus of the Oculus, his own stomach leaped to his throat. It was a long drop from where they had entered. And, learning just what the Oculus was doing made him even more wary of the glowing threads that lit the interior. He climbed up behind his sister, wrapping his arms around her waist to steady her and to signal to the dragon that they were both ready for the flight to come. The dragon lifted off from the platform where they had fought the human Mage Lord, a victim of Malygos’s powerful spellwork. Zerith almost wished that Alayne and the other magi had listened to the human and had opted to remain behind where, while they might not be of use, they could at least not be used against their own allies.

The dragon pumped his wings and the final ring fell away beneath them as they flew higher and higher, striving towards the pinnacle of the Oculus. A thin shield still kept them separated from their goal. Alayne motioned for him to guide the dragon closer to where the other casters waited, focusing their own spells and waiting for Alayne to join her energies to their own and break the final shielding. Zerith kept one eye on the faintly glowing shield and one on his sister while she let the power she held move with the power gathered by the

others. Then, drawing a thick thread from the central lightwell, she flung it at the shield. Zerith gasped as the shield fell. One second it was there, a faint purplish light. The next, it was gone. Not even an afterimage remained. Before he had a chance to do more than gape, the dragons were in flight, moving to hover over the perimeter of the central isle.

A massive blue dragon, easily four times the size of the ones the Disorder of Azeroth rode upon, stood on the island. Alayne heard the dragons muttering in the common tongue. The name Eregos was repeated several times. One of the dragons moved in closer, screeching out in their own language, speaking with Eregos, the giant blue.

“Simpletons!” Eregos roared. “You cannot comprehend the forces you have set in motion. The ley line conduit will not be disrupted! Your defeat shall be absolute!”

Pushing off the island with his mighty legs, Eregos beat the air with his wings. A gusting gale coursed over the dragons and their riders, forcing them back several feet.

“You brash interlopers are out of your element! I will ground you!” Eregos swore. The blue dragon drew a deep breath and let it out with a roar. Arcane energy flew from his maw, engulfing the dragons in front of him and their riders. Shrieks of pain filled the air as the dragon laughed. Lashing out with his tail, he tried to swipe the rest of his attackers out of the air. Only swift reflexes saved them from a fatal plummet to the ground far, far below. The smaller dragons began circling, lashing out with their own breath weapons. Some of the reds, bolder than the others, flew in, tails and claws ripping for the blue dragon’s soft underbelly. Eregos seemed amused as he lazily reached out with a massive claw and batted them away the way he might a gnat. The dragons’ riders fell the short distance to the island below and gazed up in horrified awe. If Eregos landed, he could easily crush them with his massive weight alone. However, the blue did not seem to notice the insignificant creatures gathering far beneath him. Instead, he continued to focus his attacks on the circling drakes, seeking to drive them out of the air.

The bronze dragon carrying Alayne and Zerith began muttering in the language of magic. Calling upon the power of the Aspect of Time, he unleashed a massive spell that froze the blue dragon in his tracks. Eregos’s eyes darted wildly as he hovered in mid-air, unable to move anything else.

“Now!” Alayne shouted as she began hurling her most powerful spells. Balls of fire and ice slammed into Eregos, followed by bolts of shadow, searing fire, and even lashes of the Light. Arrows joined their magical comrades, slowly weakening the blue dragon’s natural armor.

“Such arrogance must be punished!” Eregos shrieked when the bronze dragon’s spell was broken. Flapping his mighty wings again, the blue circled quickly, looking for the dragon who had petrified him. Enraged, the blue dragon began hurling arcane magic at any dragon his gaze fell upon. The smaller dragons began flying faster, darting in and out of range like hummingbirds. Alayne’s stomach roiled and she took firm hold of herself to keep from panicking and falling to her death. Zerith’s grip around her tightened. Eregos shrieked again and turned transparent. Alayne gaped in awe; only the blue’s faintly glowing outline could be seen. Eregos continued unleashing spells of greater and greater power, knocking several more dragons out of the sky. Zerith winced when he heard the wails of those who had been struck from their dragons and were falling all the way back to the ground. Alayne leaned as far to one side as Zerith’s grip would allow her and vomited, thinking about those who they had led to their deaths.

Eregos shifted back, a malevolent grin on his toothy maw. “It’s a long way down...” he taunted.

Zerith began cursing softly as he glared at the blue beast floating before him. Channeling his own anger, he hurled the Light at the behemoth. The dragon screamed as holy fire began burning the sensitive skin of his wings, slowly rendering them useless. Alayne

muttered something and began hurling fire at the blue dragon's wings. Speaking a word, Zerith pointed at the dragon and watched with a sense of satisfaction as the dragon wilted, weakening and falling onto the island below. Pain wracked the massive beast as the priest's spell gripped him, inflicting both the condemnation of the Light and the torment of the Shadow onto him. Falling flat, Eregos could not defend himself against the swarming attacks of the smaller dragons still in the air or the weapons of the mortals who had been grounded when their own dragons fell.

"Savor this small victory, foolish little creatures," Eregos panted as a sword pierced one of his eyes. "You and your dragon allies have won this battle. But we will win the Nexus War."

As Eregos breathed his last, Alayne replied, "No, we will win it. As we will win every conflict that comes our way. I'm fine," she muttered to her brother as she scrubbed an arm over her mouth. "Let's round everyone up and see if we can find a way to bend this energy through the focus. We'll need it to open Malygos's lair and remove his protections. I just hope that the others are faring better than we have," she sighed as she began counting the numbers of those left.

"Six," Zerith said softly, seeing what she was doing. "We lost six. Light see them safely on their journey and keep the rest of us safe while we finish this battle," he prayed softly as he began moving among the wounded, laying hands and channeling healing energies into them. Dawn could be seen over the distant mountains and they had far more to do before the day was done. He just prayed that, unlike the earlier expedition, they would survive the encounter to come.

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Ger'alín wiped the ichor off his hammer and sighed. Dragons, demons, and magi. He'd had more than enough of all three of them in the past hour. He prayed that the Alliance forces they'd found encased in ice would survive their confinement. They had tried to break them out of the ice but, being magical in nature, their weapons were ineffective.

"What is that?" he grimaced, seeing an enormous entity floating on the highest platform. Whatever it was, it was channeling energy that ran along a conduit leading into the central room. When they had first entered the underground dungeon, the central room had been sealed off by a magical shield. Thus far, they had killed one of the channelers. Ger'alín prayed that this one would be the final one standing between them and the access to Malygos's lair.

"If it were black, I'd say it was a demon," Dar'ja replied.

"Does anyone sense anything from it?" Ger'alín asked.

"It's arcane in nature," Diami offered. "It's one of the largest concentrations of arcane energy I've ever come across."

"We've fought magi. We've fought arcane golems. Light help us, we've fought demons of all kinds," Ger'alín sighed. "We can fight this. Let's go."

The Disorder of Azeroth followed the two paladins as they ran up the ramps leading to the arcane anomaly. As soon as they set foot on the upper platform, the creature roared, his demonic cry reverberating through the cavernous room. Springs of arcane magic leapt up from the floor beneath them, forming vortices into the nether. Swarms of smaller arcane creatures surged out of them, quickly overwhelming the fighters.

"Fall back!" Ger'alín shouted, urging them to descend to the middle platform. Calling upon the Light, he filled the ground beneath him with holy power, slowing the small arcane creatures and burning them with righteous fire. Forced to move down the narrow platform, the few who managed to move past him could not overwhelm the Horde fighters. The magi,

led by the warlock Diami, hurled spells, focusing on the gigantic anomaly still hovering on the upper platform while the fighters occupied themselves with the smaller ones.

“The rifts!” Diami shouted, pointing. “Destroy them and they’ll have no reinforcements!”

Ger’alin nodded and began moving forward slowly. Keeping the ground consecrated so that their enemies could not rush down the platform, he levied his hammer at the rift closest to him. Focusing as Alayne had taught him to do, he found the heart of the spell and attacked it with his hammer and with his own magic, ripping it away from the rest of the rift and causing the rift to collapse.

As the rifts closed in a shower of arcane sparks, the creature roared and lifted an ethereal claw. A new rift opened and the creature shrank, a golden line connecting it to the rift. Ger’alin and the others continued to press their attack but their weapons and spells were constantly deflected. Not wanting to move away from the ramp, Ger’alin gestured for Callie to sneak past him and shouted for her to focus her attacks on the rift itself. He could sense the magic users working to tear the heart out of the spell that held the rift open. A cry of victory warned him that the creature would soon lose its invulnerability. The rift slammed shut and the anomaly was back, increasing in size by the second. Ger’alin threw himself into a frenzy of attack while the creature gathered itself. Behind him, he could feel a surge of magic as the magi began hurling their strongest spells. The creature continued to grow, dwarfing the gathering. Diami muttered something and made a ripping gesture with one of her hands. The creature exploded, throwing the Disorder of Azeroth far across the platforms. Ger’alin roared when he heard several cries dwindling, growing fainter and fainter as a handful of his fighters and magi tumbled into the empty space beneath the floating disks. Ger’alin let his head thump back against the lowest platform as the cries were silenced by distance and death. He squeezed his eyes shut, gritting his teeth against his own rising scream of frustration. He was fiercely glad that Alayne was not here. If she had been one of those thrown off into the nothingness beneath them, he didn’t know what he would have done.

“Ger’alin?” he heard Dar’ja’s shaky voice calling out to him. “Ger’alin, are you hurt?”

“Only my pride,” he sighed, pushing himself up. Masking his anger and frustration in action, he began moving among the shocked and the wounded. As he prayed for healing and strength for the others, he also prayed that the rest of the Nexus would be less fatal to them all.

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Ger’alin was relieved when he saw that the ground beneath them would remain solid. The crystalline halls were lined with trees and small flowering plants flitted around, occasionally wrapping one of the survivor’s ankles with their roots, tripping them up until they were able to rip them off and fling them away. Dryads and ancient guardian trees stood guard further down the passage, seemingly content to leave the fighters alone as long as they themselves were left alone. Ger’alin sighed, wondering how many battles they would have to face until they found the being channeling the last stream of magic into the central shield. All of the other halls were clear now; this was the only one left to explore.

“I’m glad Alayne’s not here,” Ger’alin muttered to Dar’ja. “She would have an absolute fit over killing trees like this.”

“She admires the night elves far too much,” Dar’ja replied in an undertone.

“Not as much as she used to. The night elves and the humans are the worst for keeping bad blood stirred up, it seems.”

“If only they would listen to Velen more often.”

“You might as well pray for wings while you’re at it,” he grimaced. “Let’s get going. The longer we wait, the greater the chance we’ll be found up.”

“Provided, of course, we haven’t been found out already.”

“You’re rather cheerful, Dar’ja. Why trouble trouble before it troubles us?”

“Just being practical,” she sighed.

Ger’alin sighed tiredly and rushed down the corridor. His action took the watchers by surprise. The dryads and the ancients gaped for a moment, trying to understand why something was rushing in among them. Ger’alin staggered to a halt, staring at them likewise. They had seemed much smaller from further down the hallway. Ger’alin barely hefted his mace in time to parry a blow from one of the dryads. He could hear the others pounding down the hallway behind him, hurrying to catch up and join in the battle. Spells began flying back and forth through the air, whistling past each other with the speed of falcons. The ancients groaned loudly as fire spells caught hold of them, the flames of magic feeding on their barky exteriors and leafy heads and spreading quickly over the rest of their bodies. The dryads, sensing that their enormous protectors were on the verge of collapse, cast their own spells. A wave of peace and tranquility flowed over Ger’alin. He felt woozily weary, his feet seemed to want to go out from under him. He smiled drunkenly at the dryads, aware that they were the cause of this blissful fatigue washing over him. His smile shrank when he saw a familiar sword fly end-over-end to bury itself in the chest of the dryad next to him.

“Shake it off!” Dar’ja shouted from several feet behind him. She was racing forward to yank her sword from the dryad’s corpse.

Ger’alin shook his head to clear it and focused on the other dryad. Without her sister and the ancients to protect her, she fell quickly. The last ancients were pulled down moments later, black smoke curling from their burned and battered bodies. The Disorder of Azeroth continued down the corridor, encountering relatively few things taller than their knees. A low buzzing hum began ringing in Ger’alin’s ears as they neared the end of the crystalline passageway. Glancing up at the ceiling, he saw the final conduit that fed magic to the shield surrounding the central room. Following it around, he sighed when he saw what appeared to be an enormous crystalline creature standing on a dias. It channeled into the conduit, acting as the source of power for the remnants of the shield. Ducking back around the corner, thankful he had not been seen, Ger’alin sighed. He could just imagine the rebound that would come from his mace hitting the rock-solid shell of that creature.

“You don’t look happy,” Dar’ja muttered as she caught up to Ger’alin.

“The last thing we have to fight before we can bring down that shield,” Ger’alin replied dryly, jerking his thumb towards the corner, “is a giant rock. If we’re lucky, it will be quartz and not diamond. But, I don’t think we’re lucky today.”

Dar’ja ducked her head around the corner and sized the creature up. She turned back to Ger’alin with a defeated look and shook her head. “How are we supposed to bring that thing down?”

“I wish we had some explosives like we used in Warsong Hold’s quarry,” Ger’alin sighed. Dar’ja’s face turned from pessimistic to pensive. “But, we don’t.”

Dar’ja lifted a hand to silence him while she thought. She closed her eyes and tried to recall what she had seen in that room. Night elves, draenei, humans...and dwarves. Out of all the races of the Alliance, only the gnomes were more likely to carry something that would blow up rock – usually by complete accident and not design – than the dwarves.

“I think I have the answer,” Dar’ja said, a grin spreading across her face.

“Let’s hear it,” Ger’alin replied.

Dar’ja outlined her idea and Ger’alin shook his head several times. “We can’t be certain that they’ll work with us,” he pointed out. “For all we know, they could turn on us the

minute we free them from the spell – provided, of course, that we actually can free them from the spell without killing them – and then we’d have to fight them.”

“It’s better than standing here doing nothing except wishing we had something to use against that beast,” Dar’ja muttered sullenly.

“It is,” he conceded. “I’ll think it over. For now, that thing doesn’t seem terribly aware of anything other than the magic it’s channeling. Let’s take a few moments to rest, wash off, and prepare for the next stage.”

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Ger’alin sighed and rubbed his jaw again. He hoped that the ache and the ringing in his ears would dissipate soon. He turned to glance and caught the eye of the night elf hunter who had punched him, thinking he was one of her captors. She still glared at him, not liking having to work with the Horde at all. He met her glare with a flat one of his own.

“Let it be, Elem’a,” their commander, a dwarf called Stoutbeard, muttered. “Ye shouldn’t have punched him. Don’t go getting mad because he grabbed yer arm to keep ye from doin’ it again.”

The night elf muttered something beneath her breath. Ger’alin could guess that it was not an apology but was content to let it lie. For now. “Are ye ready, lad?” the dwarf asked, peering around the corner. “It’s a big hunk of rock.”

“It is,” Ger’alin muttered.

“We’ll do what we can to soften him up a bit for ye but no promises. Our charges were encased in the ice with us. No telling if they’ll even light. But, we owe ye for rescuing us.”

Without another word, the dwarf stumped back to his own group and began giving orders in a tone that brooked no argument. The Alliance forces placed themselves in with the casters and the ranged fighters among the Horde. The handful of healers and warriors stood just in front of them. The Horde fighters would bear the brunt of this fight; the Alliance would only join in if needed. Seeing how stiffly many of them moved, Ger’alin wondered if they would be able to join in even if their lives depended on it. From what little he had been able to glean from Stoutbeard, they had been incased in ice for over a week now. Only the magic of the blue dragons kept them from being dead or seriously maimed. Ger’alin wondered why the blues would have taken any mortals prisoner. It didn’t seem to fit in with their plan to destroy all the magic-using races other than their own. Still, he wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth. The blues had saved the Alliance who would aid them in opening Malygos’s lair. It was an irony that they would appreciate, one day.

Ger’alin raised his arm to signal the others to prepare for the charge. Giving himself a slow count of ten, he lowered his arm and began running towards the creature atop the dias, unslinging his mace and pulling his shield around in front of him. The others hurried to their positions and Ger’alin could hear Stoutbeard giving the orders for the first wave of bombs to be unleashed. The sin’dorei paladin heard the missiles ping off the giant rock creature and clatter to the ground. The creature roared and began rushing towards him just as the few working bombs went off.

The roar that was torn from the creature’s throat rattled the halls and reverberated along Ger’alin’s bones. When the smoke cleared, there were chunks of stony flesh missing from the creature’s arms and legs. Liquid like sap oozed from the wounds. It wasn’t as much as Ger’alin had hoped for but he wasn’t going to complain now. Meeting the creature half-way up the ramp, he smashed his hammer against one of the wounds and was satisfied to hear a shattering crack and to see shards of stone fly away.

“Aim for the cracks!” Ger’alin shouted, praying that the others would hear him over the creature’s incessant roaring.

Spells, missiles, and yet more bombs flew through the air. Some of the bombs exploded, knocking the fighters to the ground and causing the creature’s body to crack up further from the concussive force. The sap-like blood flowed more thickly and quickly now, becoming a hazard to the Horde warriors as it threatened their balance. The creature continued to pummel at them with its rocky fists, stomping on cracking legs, further weakening the crystalline stone skin on them. Ger’alin hammered away relentlessly at the creature’s legs until, at last, it tumbled to the ground. Its arms flailed wildly as it tried to shove itself back up on useless legs. Ger’alin and the others waded in as close as they could, focusing their attacks on weak points in the creature’s stony hide until, after a long while, it shuddered into rubble.

“It worked,” the dwarf said, sounding surprised.

“Of course it worked,” Ger’alin nearly growled. “Why wouldn’t it have worked?”

“It’s just that...well, there’s really no reason why it wouldn’t have at that,” the dwarf muttered. “The central room, now? Maybe that giant red dragon they captured could help us.”

“Giant red dragon?” Ger’alin stammered.

“Aye. They caught her and brought her back here. We saw them drag her through the walkway. She put up a good fight. We thought perhaps we could rescue her and earn a bit of the dragonqueen’s favor by it.”

“That must be Keristrasza,” Ger’alin mused.

“I think it is. She was a brave one. We heard the blues say she killed Malygos’s consort. That’s why they captured her alive and imprisoned her.”

“I would have thought they would have killed her for that.”

“Nae. Malygos decided that since she killed his consort, she could take her place.”

Ger’alin winced and bit his tongue to keep from cursing. The very idea that anyone, let alone a dragon Aspect as powerful and ancient as Malygos, could conceive of such a thing was enough to enrage the sin’dorei. “I pray we find her alive and well.”

“I do too, lad. She’d be a valuable ally against Malygos. If she was strong enough to take out his consort when it was just a fight, imagine how much stronger she’ll be to take out Malygos himself after...”

“I get the picture,” Ger’alin said quickly, harshly. The dwarven commander stared at him for a second before he nodded his bearded head. “Let’s go see if she’s in there.”

The group turned itself around and began heading back to the entry way. The shield that had held the doors to the central room closed was gone. Instead, they could see three blue dragonkin standing in front of icy orbs. In the center of the room was a massive icy prison, much like the ones that had held the Alliance captive. A young red dragon stood encased in the ice, her ruby scales marred with strange blue runes. As soon as the first member of the band entered the room, the three blue dragons launched towards them, claws outstretched and forked tongues babbling the words of magic. A few moments later, the dragonkin lay dead and Ger’alin and the others stood around, studying the icy prison and wondering how to go about freeing the red dragon inside.

Ger’alin spun when he heard someone cry out in shock. The orb next to him shimmered and the ice encasing the dragon visibly thinned. Nodding, Ger’alin directed the others to begin studying the orbs. A few moments later, the last of the ice encasing the red dragon was beginning to melt away as the magic holding it in place failed. Ger’alin moved to stand in front of the dragon, motioning for the others to stay clear in case she was confused by her sudden freedom. Considering the nature of her imprisonment, he was especially concerned if her gaze fell on any other elves or orcs but would not risk anyone besides himself.

As the last of the ice fell away, the red dragon gave herself a shake as if waking from a long sleep. Mist steamed out of her nostrils and her tail lashed behind her wildly. She glared down at Ger'alın. The paladin raised a hand and opened his mouth to explain but the runes on her skin flared and her eyes filled with the anger of insanity. Ger'alın flinched and let his hand drop to grip the hilt of his mace.

"Why?" she roared, her angry voice filling the cavernous room and echoing down the empty corridors. "There's no truth in it!" The runes on her scales flared and she trembled, clawing the ground as if in pain. "No, no, no!" she screamed, "...only in the taking! I see that now!" Her gaze fell back on Ger'alın and she grinned, baring her teeth. Moving faster than he thought possible, the red dragon lunged for him. Her teeth narrowly missed him but her clawed backhand sent him sprawling across the room.

"Stay," she said, grinning maniacally, her tone a mockery of hospitality, "enjoy your final moments." Keristrasza drew a deep breath and began exhaling, whipping her head from side-to-side, blowing icy air across the room. Where her breath touched flesh, it formed crystals of ice against the skin, freezing and immobilizing the mortals who had struggled to free her. Ger'alın watched in shock as the maddened red dragon began walking, almost casually, around the room, swiping at her rescuers and snarling in fury. He tried to roll and push himself to his feet but her frigid breath made his blood sluggish and his muscles tighten. From behind one of the orbs, Dar'ja saw him struggling to regain his footing. She shook with fear and cold as she watched the dragon strike out in a mockery of playfulness. Ger'alın groaned as he tried to force his legs to move, to break apart the ice crystals that had formed on his skin and the chill that ran through his veins. Even without the dragon continuing to breathe on them, the would-be rescuers grew colder and colder, their bodies slowly becoming incased in ice.

Dar'ja took a deep breath and closed her eyes to blot out the scene in front of her. This is so much easier when Zerith is with me, she thought to herself as she sought the warmth and comfort of the Light. Reaching out to it, she felt the cold being driven from her body. She warmed her hands in its Light and sent the holy power on, beseeching it to aid her friends. Ger'alın's groans grew softer as the ice melted and heat returned to his limbs. He pulled himself to his feet, looked around for the source of the spell's reversal, and then, not finding it, sped after the dragon.

Keristrasza had made a slow circuit of her prison room, rolling her rescuers around, pawing at them the way a kitten would a piece of string or a ball of twine. She batted them about effortlessly. Her pleased gaze at her new playthings made Ger'alın's stomach clench. When she began to realize that the mortals surrounding her were breaking free of her spell, she opened her mouth and sucked in a huge gulp of air, preparing to unleash her attack again. Ger'alın rushed to her and slammed his mace into her snout with all the force he could muster. Blood and broken teeth gushed from the wound and Keristrasza glared at him, the madness in her eyes flashing from annoyance and confusion to rage. Flapping her wings, she raised herself onto her hind legs and swiped downward with a scaly claw. Ger'alın rolled to the side and reached around to sling his shield in front of him.

All around the room, others were rising to their feet and beginning to move, shaking off the chill that threatened to pull them under. Dar'ja continued to send out holy energy, praying that they would survive this encounter. Spells were the first missiles to fly after Keristrasza but arrows and weapons soon followed. Whenever the red dragon seemed on the verge of going after her other attackers, Ger'alın bore in on her, slamming his mace and his shield against her snout in a fury of offense, forcing her to keep a watchful eye on him and to expend her energy trying to attack him. After long moments of combat, the red dragon roared, her bellow splitting the air and ripping it to shreds like a rotted cloth. Ger'alın nearly dropped his mace in his haste to cover his ears against her pitiful shrieks. The blue runes on

her skin flared and, for a moment, when she stared at the fighters, recognition seemed to flicker in her eyes. Her body contorted and she swelled, growing larger by the second.

“Finish it! Finish it!” she roared, her eyes cold and focused, the prior madness draining away. “Kill me, or I swear by the Dragonqueen you'll never see daylight again!” she pleaded. The wicked icy runes flared again and the red dragon began a frenzy of attack, snorting and gasping out breaths of icy fire, flailing wildly with her claws and tail. Ger'alín waited, biding his time until she brought her head in low and close. Then, calling on the Light to lend him strength, he brought his hammer down with both hands, aiming for the weakest part of her skull, just between the eyes. His blow was true and the dragon staggered, legs turning to water beneath her. The paladin bore in, slamming his attack again and again while the others hit, cut, hacked, and hammered away at the red scaly flesh. Finally, the dragon drew a shuddering breath and gasped, “Dragonqueen... Life-Binder... preserve... me.”

The room grew silent as the mighty red grew still. Only the echoing drip-drip of distant icicles melting broke the perfect stillness of the air. Ger'alín drew a shuddering breath and ran a hand over his face as he stared at the corpse laying before him. Without saying a word, he spun on his heel and stormed out of the Nexus.

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Alayne closed her eyes and nestled her head in the hollow of Ger'alín's shoulder. High above them, red dragons, green dragons, bronze dragons and even the mistrustful black dragons fought against the blues who were the last line of defense for Malygos. Meanwhile, agents of the Kirin Tor guarded by warriors from both the Ebon Blade and the Argent Crusade worked to carefully weave the magic that would create a portal to the Eye of Eternity, Malygos's lair. By opening the Nexus and the Oculus, the Disorder of Azeroth had provided access to the twin keys that would help bridge the gap between Azeroth and the place the Aspect of Magic called his own. Snuggling closer to Ger'alín, glad to feel his arms around her and wishing she could do something about the troubled and vacant look haunting his eyes, Alayne was content to find what rest she could before the next battle began.

“We'll have to hold a memorial,” Ger'alín muttered dully, his voice as blank as his eyes. “Too many good...beings have died today. Why we had to come here and put an end to Malygos I'll never understand. I don't think I'm ever going to forgive Garrosh for refusing to do his duty. This is a battle for an army; not a group of ragtag fighters. We should be working with the Argents and the Ebons to find a way into Icecrown Citadel and put an end to Arthas and his damnable Scourge. Instead, we're playing fighting battles we're not equipped for with little support from home.”

Alayne stirred slightly, turning her head to gaze up at Ger'alín's chin. “What do you think A'dal would advise?”

“To focus on our objective,” he muttered, shifting slightly and tightening his grip on her. Pulling her into his lap, he sighed when she grimaced at the chill of his plated legguards.

“And what is our objective?”

“The Scourge.”

“No,” she said softly. “Our objective is to make the world a safer place. The Scourge is a major part of it but Malygos is and this Ulduar might help as well. I wonder if Brann's had any luck getting into it.”

“The magi from Dalaran say he's still working on figuring out how to lift the final barrier. He did finally get the doors to open but he can't move beyond the courtyard. The gnomes and the goblins are both up there now building some kind of infernal devices to blast down the barrier, as if explosives have ever worked against magic,” he snorted.

“There’s a first time for everything. But, for now, we need to focus on Malygos. What happened that has you so upset?” she asked, running her thumb along his jawline. She could feel him stiffen and she gripped his chin in her hand, wrenching his face down to look at her. “Tell me what happened.”

“I can’t say,” he said softly, sadly. “It was what I suspect...I’m probably imagining worse than the reality would have been. I just...don’t want to think about what must have been done to...that anything that powerful could...it’s...” he struggled to find the words. “I think Malygos was torturing Keristrasza. She was insane by the time we got her out of that prison. We had to kill her or we would have been killed by her.”

“How was she tortured?”

“She just was,” he said harshly. “In what I imagine must be the worst possible manner for a woman to be tortured.”

Alayne let the subject drop and took Ger’alin’s hand in her own. She felt ill that, in some ways, dragons were little better than mortals. All her life she had grown up on stories of the great and powerful dragons. Her mother had told her tales of the wisdom of the ancient Aspects and the love they had towards the mortal races under their care. Only Deathwing was evil. To think that the one Aspect she had revered above the others as a child was capable of anything foul, let alone what Ger’alin was hinting at, was like finding out one of her parents was a murderer. She shivered slightly and Ger’alin held her more tightly with one arm while he pulled his thick woolen cloak around them both. Tucking it under her chin, he kissed her forehead. “Get some rest,” he whispered. “It’s going to be one hell of a fight.”

Alayne sighed and settled back against him, letting the shared warmth lull her into an exhausted sleep. Ger’alin’s own eyelids drooped, and he let his head fall forward, resting his cheek against the crown of her head, praying he would be able to get some sleep without any disturbing dreams. Bad enough to have to kill the creature he had intended to rescue. On top of finding out what had happened to the poor thing, he left the Nexus to learn that several more comrades were dead. Dar’ja and a few others who were not too tired were working to retrieve the bodies of the fallen and ensure that they would be properly buried. Smoothing back Alayne’s ear, Ger’alin willed himself to sleep.

It seemed that no sooner had he let sleep overtake him than he was being gently shaken awake. Zerith knelt beside him and the light of predawn had long since given way to day’s brightness. Dark circles under the priest’s eyes spoke of a night without any sleep and Ger’alin wondered if the other man had so much as sat down. He opened his mouth to remind his brother-by-marriage that he would do little good if he keeled over from exhaustion in the midst of the fight against Malygos.

“They did it,” the priest said, cutting off Ger’alin’s warning before the paladin could do more than yawn.

“They did what?” Ger’alin muttered, meeting Zerith’s satisfied gaze with a watery one of his own.

“The Kirin Tor. They managed to open a portal into Malygos’s lair. They can’t hold it open much longer; we need to get moving *now*.”

“Then let’s wake up the others and get going,” Ger’alin growled. He began gently shaking Alayne, pulling her out of sleep. “Why are you still squatting there?” he muttered at Zerith as Alayne began blinking and rubbing her eyes.

“Because everyone else is already awake,” the priest said cheerfully enough that Ger’alin considered strangling him. “Get up you two and let’s get this finished. Then, you can sleep all you want.”

Alayne was glad for the tea that the magi of the Kirin Tor had with them. Whatever it was made from must be powerful. No sooner had she drunk a cup of the thick, dark liquid than she felt herself waking up completely, her senses on high alert. She wondered what was in it that had hit her stomach like a ton of bricks, though. Moving along the lines to stand next to Ger'alain and Zerith, she watched the shimmering portal that would take them to the scene of their next major fight.

"Ready?" Zerith asked.

"As ready as we'll ever be. I think everyone's just hoping we'll be of some use in this fight. Fighting the Master of Magic with his own element might be tricky."

Ger'alain winced when he heard the doubt in his wife's voice. He prayed that whatever they were able to do, it would be enough. He had no desire to wind up dead or imprisoned as the Alliance forces had been. Standing up straight, the paladin raised his hand to signal that the advance was about to begin. Silence fell over the gathering and, with a decisive motion, Ger'alain threw himself through the portal. The pathways of magic swirled violently around him and he felt as if he were being torn apart. He opened his mouth to scream but no sound came out. Pure arcane energy washed over and through him, thrilling and exhilarating him as it ripped and cut through his very essence. Then, as suddenly as it began, he found himself falling through empty space. He landed with a violent thump, a cold metallic platform beneath him. In the center of the platform was the focusing crystal the Kirin Tor had mentioned might be there. From here, within the heart of his realm, Malygos could control the ley-lines that normally criss-crossed the world.

A profanity-laced shriek warned Ger'alain to roll out of the way quickly. Alayne landed where he had lain, the breath knocked out of her. He grabbed her arm and jerked her to the side to keep her from being flattened by the next several people streaming through the portal, their cries filling the still air of the Eye of Eternity.

"We're here," he said mildly as the last of them dropped onto the platform. Groans and curses came from the pile of warm bodies laying beneath the portal's opening. "Perhaps we should allow more time between jumping through portals in the future."

"The way you ran in," Zerith muttered from the side, pulling himself out from under an orc who was laying stunned, "we assumed you were preparing for an attack the instant you set foot in here."

"I was," Ger'alain replied, reaching out a hand to pull the priest the rest of the way to his feet. "I wonder where the brute is."

"He's around," Alayne muttered, rubbing her chest. "I can sense a being of great magical power...somewhere."

Ger'alain began peering around the crazed nightscape that surrounded the platform. His emerald eyes widened in shock as his mind tried to take in the seeming infinity that swirled around them. Inky darkness was pricked with the twinkling dots of countless stars. Only in his deepest meditations had Ger'alain ever contemplated anything like what he saw around him and even then, even with the aid of the Light, he had been unable to absorb the vast emptiness and his place within it. He felt the blood rushing from his head as he swallowed hard. Then his ears began ringing and he felt heat rushing to his face. His head wrenched to one side and he realized that someone had slapped him. He glanced down to see Dar'ja standing in front of him, her lips pursed with frustration.

"Don't look beyond the platform," she growled. "Light, you didn't hear a word that was said, did you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"While you were gawking," she hissed, "Alayne said she and the others sensed that Malygos is coming to investigate us. He's been drawing closer by the second."

“Then let’s get ready for him,” Ger’alin muttered, rubbing his sore jaw. “And Dar’ja,” he added as she began to turn away from him. She glared at him, an annoyed expression on her face. “Nice left hook. You’re getting better.”

With a snort, the other paladin stalked off, her affected annoyance failing to hide her pleasure at the compliment. Ger’alin shook his head; try as they might, he didn’t think he and Dar’ja would ever really get along. Alayne watched them both with an amused smile and shook her own head, well aware of her husband’s thoughts. Her face turned serious as she sensed the presence of one strong in magic drawing ever closer to their position. Turning, she glanced off into the distance, watching as an impossibly small spark of light began to grow larger and larger as it moved swiftly towards them.

“Lesser beings, intruding here!” a deep, resonant voice chuckled, sounding amused. “A shame that your excess courage does not compensate for your stupidity! None but the blue dragonflight are welcome here. Ah,” the voice said, growing louder, “perhaps this is the work of Alexstrasza?” The bracelet on Alayne’s wrist grew chill. “Well then,” it continued, sounding disappointed, “she has sent you to your deaths. What could you hope to accomplish? To storm brazenly into my domain? To employ *magic*? Against *me*?”

The spark which had been growing larger on the horizon suddenly vanished. Then, floating over the platform was Malygos, a blue dragon who rivaled Alexstrasza in size. His scales sparkled with arcane magic and his eyes twinkled with a hint of amusement that just barely masked his insanity. “I am without limits here...” he said as he vanished and reappeared behind the gathering. “The rules of your cherished reality do not apply. In this realm, I am in control. I give you one chance. Pledge fealty to me and perhaps I won’t slaughter you for your insolence!”

“Were we do to that,” Ger’alin said, staring at the dragon with the most placid look he could find. He was determined not to show the Aspect just how in awe of him the paladin felt. All around him, Ger’alin could see others in various states of shock at the sheer size, majesty, and might of the creature they were planning to fight. “would you restore the world to its natural state? Would you cease your war against the mortal races who use – and are dependent upon – magic?”

“What I have given, I can take back!” the dragon growled. “For too long the mortals of the world have abused the gift of magic that I taught them. For too long I have let it go on. Pledge fealty to me and renounce your ignorant use of my gift and I will, perhaps, allow you to continue on your lives in peace. But hurry, my patience, unlike my sister’s, is not infinite.”

Ger’alin turned his back on the Aspect with a deliberateness that made Malygos’s eyes bulge in disbelief. Arcane streams snaked out of the dragon’s nostrils as Ger’alin made a show of walking through the gathering, whispering to each member. The ancient dragon flapped his wings impatiently, his eyes flashing red as his patience at the arrogance of the mortals waned. Then, with a motion that caught him completely by surprise, Ger’alin tore his mace free of its holster and smashed the hammer into the delicate crystal that was the focal point for the ley-lines of the world. Malygos roared in rage as the magic washed over him, burning him. The magi in the Disorder of Azeroth were likewise affected by the rush of the world’s strongest magical lines sweeping over them, jerking themselves free of the un-natural contortions to return to their native places over the world.

“My patience has reached its limit: I will be rid of you!” Malygos raged. Landing on the platform with a crashing thud, the dragon launched himself towards Ger’alin. The rest of the group scattered, letting the dragon focus on the paladin. Ger’alin moved towards the edge of the platform as Malygos reached out a scaled claw, intent on swiping the belligerent elf off into the never-ending nothingness that surround them. Ger’alin dodged the swipe, throwing himself flat as the Aspect’s claw sailed over him. Pushing himself back to his feet, he pulled his shield around and launched into a flurry of attack, forcing the giant blue dragon to focus

on him and allowing the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth to position themselves to his side. The front-line fighters moved to the Aspect's flank and began attacking, their weapons pummeling his rear leg, seeking his tender underbelly. From further away, the magi began launching their strongest spells, praying that they would be able to even hit the creature, let alone inflict any damage.

Snarling with outrage, the dragon tried to turn to burn the mortals who dared use his own powers against him. Fel fires seared his scales and bolts of arcane magic began penetrating his defenses. Ger'alın increased the pace of his frenzied attacks, never giving the Aspect an opening that would allow him to turn his focus from the paladin for one moment. Holy power flooded through the paladin as he reached out to the Light and let it power his attacks. The ground beneath Malygos became unbearably hot as the paladin infused it with the rage of the Light seeking to protect the lives of those the Aspect would see dead.

Malygos inhaled deeply and exhaled, waves of pure arcane power washing over Ger'alın. The paladin reeled, feeling the exhilaration and giddiness that had come when Illidan had done much the same to him. Taking firm hold of himself and refusing to give into the ecstasy, he staggered back, listing as if drunk. Rolling forward and springing back to his feet, he hammered the Aspect on the front shoulder, forcing the beast to turn and preventing himself from falling off into the darkness that seemed to go on forever.

Malygos growled deep in his throat; he had been certain that such a tactic would have rendered his sin'dorei attacker incapacitated. Shoving off the platform with all four feet, the Aspect pulled himself a little ways up into the air and took stock of his injuries. Spells backed by nature, shadow, holy magic, and even the arcane that was his own domain flew at him while those who were not given to spell-casting hurled whatever weapons and missiles they had at hand. The paladin, the focus of his momentary ire, channeled the Light through his shield and threw it at the Aspect, dazing him for a few seconds. Irritated by the annoyances, Malygos reared his head and glared at the insect-like creatures.

"I had hoped to end your lives quickly, but you have proven more...resilient than I had anticipated. Nonetheless, your efforts are in vain, it is you reckless, careless mortals who are to blame for this war! I do what I must...And if it means your...extinction...THEN SO BE IT!"

"Oh shit," Ger'alın groaned as he saw and sensed what Malygos was preparing to do. Drawing upon all of the magic that was his birthright, the dragon was preparing to unleash an attack that would make his breath attack look like an infant's touch. As the Aspect drew his power together, several figures descended from high above on floating discs. They flew at the gathering, hurling spells of their own to keep the Disorder of Azeroth from breaking the Aspect's concentration. Ger'alın and the others rushed to engage them, hoping to knock them off the platforms and use them to evade Malygos's next focused attack. "Alayne, what are you doing?" he demanded when he saw his wife staring ahead blankly. Her brow furrowed in irritation and she shook her arm, the bracelet from Alexstrasza twinkling slightly.

The paladin had little time to wonder what exactly his wife was trying to pull off. Malygos's malevolent eyes opened and he turned to face the gathering, glaring down on them from above the platform. "Few have experienced the pain I will now inflict on you! YOU WILL NOT SUCCEED WHILE I DRAW BREATH!"

Alayne closed her eyes just as Malygos began his attack. A shield sprang up over the platform, lessening the intensity of the Aspect's deadly deep breath. Inside the shield, Ger'alın stared in awe at his wife. "How did you?" he asked. Again she rattled the bracelet at him.

"I didn't. The dragonqueen did," she replied. "They are on their way. They'll be here soon and we should be able to destroy Malygos together."

“The sooner the better,” Ger’alin muttered. Malygos cut off his attack quickly, seeing that he could not penetrate the shield. Changing tactics, he began fluttering around the platform, seeking for a weak point in the spell. Meanwhile, his allies on the discs swooped down on the gathering; the shield held them in as much as it kept Malygos out. Ger’alin shouted orders and the Disorder of Azeroth focused their attacks on the occupants of the discs. Within moments, they were brought down and several fighters took their places, prepared to rush the giant blue dragon if he succeeded in penetrating the shield.

Malygos continued his work, deftly probing the shield and unraveling the magic that held it together. Alayne gasped as the shield shuddered and failed. She sent a plea through the bracelet to Alexstrasza but the dragonqueen had her own worries. As she and her flight drew nearer to the Eye of Eternity, the blue dragons swarmed at them, desperate to prevent them from reaching Malygos and aiding the mortals against him. Malygos resumed his concentrated attack. Only one volley would be needed to rid himself of these pesky mortals and allow him to focus on his true enemy; the other dragons.

Ger’alin saw Malygos begin the preparation for another deep breath attack and launched himself into the air. Grappling up onto Tau’re’s back, he gave brisk orders.

“Get me over there to him and I’ll keep him from casting that spell,” the paladin said quickly. Tau’re nodded and let the disc carry them upwards. Shifting his weight carefully, he steered it towards the Aspect. When they were close enough, Ger’alin flung himself onto Malygos’s back and grabbed hold of the blue scales there to keep from being thrown off. Malygos shuddered, shaking like a dog trying to dry his fur, hoping to dislodge the paladin clinging to him. Ger’alin pulled himself further up the Aspect’s serpentine neck and aimed his hammer at the weak point at the back of the skull. Letting the fury of the Light flow through him, Ger’alin bludgeoned the Aspect of Magic with a stunning blow.

Blood spurted from the wound and the head of the hammer was buried in the dragon’s flesh. Malygos roared in surprise and anger and redoubled his efforts to shake the creature off his back. Blood slickening his hands, Ger’alin had little grip to keep himself from being pitched off. The Aspect gave a final, violent shake and the paladin sailed through the air, his shout dwindling as he fell into the vast emptiness.

“Your spirit will linger here forever!” Malygos taunted. Another choked off scream caught his attention just as his scales began to heat up. A sudden pressure began closing in on him from all sides and shadows bit down on him, seeking the soft flesh beneath his scales and devouring him in agonizing pain.

On the platform below, glaring at Malygos almost as hard as he had once glared upon the others, Alayne fed power to her spells, no longer caring if she or anyone else survived this fight. It wasn’t the frenzied fury she was capable of in past times but it was still far more than she could pull off normally. Her grief fed her rage and, disdaining the arcane spells she had coveted for so long, she wove powerful curses and hexes against the Aspect, intent on seeing him suffer as much as Ger’alin. Malygos roared and tried to shake off the fel magic. Demonic energies mixed with the arcane currents surrounding and permeating the Aspect, feeding upon his magic like a fel parasite.

“Calm yourself, young one,” Alayne heard a woman’s gentle voice say. “We have come.”

Flying up from below were many red dragons. Their ruby scales sparkled in the distant starlight. Alayne nearly wept with relief when she saw her husband clinging to the back of one of the drakes, a look of stupefied relief on his face. The dragons circled the Aspect, eyeing him with a mix of respect and regret.

“Now your benefactors make their appearance,” Malygos growled, “But they are too late. The powers contained here are powerful enough to destroy the world ten times over! What do you think they will do to you?”

Now it was Ger'alın's turn to watch in horror as the Master of Magic wove a blast that destroyed the platform. The others plummeted, shrieking and screaming in terror. Dozens of red dragons dove, noses forward and wings flapping furiously, scrambling to catch the mortals before they died of terror falling in the endless void.

Sensing his rider's distress and anger, the red dragon carrying Ger'alın wheeled on Malygos while others circled the Spellweaver, giving him no chance to focus his powerful spells on any one of them.

"SUBMIT!" Malygos screamed as he dove, scattering the red dragons, breaking their careful formation around him. Pulling power from the distant twinkling stars, the Aspect hurled a beam of burning fire at one red, searing its scales and cooking its flesh. The dragon's eyes rolled back in its head and it plummeted, soon lost to Ger'alın's sight entirely just as the others returned, bearing the shaken Disorder of Azeroth. Alayne rode at their head, Zerith sitting behind her on the same red dragon. She appeared so focused on her anger that she did not notice she was flying.

"Still standing? Not for long," Malygos taunted, glaring at the woman who had dared cause him pain. Alayne continued to work her own spells along side the others while the dragons circled the Master of Magic at all angles, flying deftly to avoid the surges of power he wove in their midst. Their fiery breath hit the gigantic blue right along with the spells of flame, ice, arcane, and shadow that their mortal companions threw. Ger'alın felt those who followed the Light hurl its anger at Malygos and added his own spells. Around and around the dragons flew, those carrying mortals especially careful not to place themselves in harm's way. After what seemed to be hours of fighting, the powerful Aspect of Magic began to weaken. Sapphire scales flaked off of him, falling into the distance. His face was a ruined wreck where spells and dragon's breath had seared it, burning the scales and flesh away from the bone. The flapping of his wings was slowing and he seemed to struggle to stay afloat. The attacks slowed while the attackers watched Malygos.

A shadow in the darkness passed over the gathering and, looking up, they saw Alexstrasza in her true form. The massive red dragonqueen floated down slowly, with a regal dignity, to hover in front of the Spellweaver.

"UNTHINKABLE!" Malygos gasped, glaring at Alexstrasza. "The mortals will destroy... e-everything... my sister... what have you..."

"I did what I had to, brother. You gave me no alternative," she said calmly but with a hint of deep sorrow in her voice. Reaching out a ruby scaled claw, she gathered the other Aspect into her arms while he gasped and panted his final breaths. When his eyes began to film over, she gently closed them and whispered a word that only the Titans would have been able to utter after hearing it. Malygos's body flashed and transformed into a blue crystal that floated in the midst of the Eye of Eternity. Alexstrasza sighed and gave herself a shake. "And so ends the Nexus War," she muttered, more to herself than to anyone else. "This resolution pains me deeply, but the destruction, the monumental loss of life had to end. Regardless of Malygos' recent transgressions, I will mourn his loss. He was once a guardian, a protector. This day, one of the world's mightiest has fallen. The red dragonflight will take on the burden of mending the devastation wrought on Azeroth. Return home to your people and rest. Tomorrow will bring you new challenges, and you must be ready to face them. Life...goes on."