

Alayne watched Ger'alín sleep, glad that he had finally let his eyes close. He'd seemed so intent on making certain everyone returned to Naxxramas and that provisions were available for them that he'd barely glanced at a chair, regardless of the fact that he trembled with a hefty mix of exhaustion and frustration. Zerith had watched the paladin with eyes wide and filled with concern, wondering what had caused the sudden mania that gripped the normally calm and placid man. Alayne had heard a note in Ger'alín's voice when he explained Keristrasza's death to the dragonqueen that warned her where the tension sprang from. Once he was certain that everyone else was filling their bellies with the first meal they'd had in a while, he had let himself be persuaded to return to their quarters where he had finally collapsed, burying his face in Alayne's lap and sobbing with relief and release.

"Could hear the screams..." he'd shuddered, "when we got outside...after we killed her...too terrible...saw the bodies...Light help me, if one of them had been yours...that fall...endless," he'd wept brokenly, letting the fears and terrors he'd been holding at bay flow out of him. Alayne stifled a yelp when his fingers dug into her waist. "Such power...I wanted to...like Illidan...Light help me," he begged. "What he did to her...broken mind...Desolace..."

Alayne's eyes widened as she realized what had her husband so wound up and tense. In the past day, he'd had to face reminders of his worst fears, his worst memories that weren't fuzzed by drinking. She reached out and gently stroked his hair, smoothing it down his back and letting him vent his emotions. Finally, he rolled back on his heels and scrubbed his face with a hand that shook. His waist-length hair was spread out behind him where it had come loose from its holder and his eyes were red-rimmed and swollen. He hiccupped and panted, opening his mouth as if he were going to say something. His expression had changed from one of sorrow to one of anxious worry and he grabbed at her hands, his eyes pleading with her. Only then had she realized she was shaking, recalling the terrible few moments when she thought he was lost forever. She opened her own mouth to try to apologize, reaching a trembling hand of her own out to stroke his hair again. She was surprised to find her hand clutching his hair, pulling him off the floor and up beside her.

Alayne sighed and rubbed his eyebrows with a gentle thumb, smiling when he started muttering in his sleep. Her stomach rumbled lightly and she rolled her eyes. She wasn't ready to move away from him yet no matter how hungry she was. Glancing over at the ruined rags that had been their clothing, she didn't think Ger'alín would let her get away anymore than she had let him.

"I'm never doing that again," he muttered, flinging an arm over her chest. "I don't care how much sense it makes, I'm not fighting without you by me again."

"I'll be happy if our battles don't take place in mid-air ever again," she replied, turning on her side to face him. "Why don't you go back to sleep? You look exhausted still."

"I probably look about like you do but I'm starving. You are too. I heard. Sounded like you did last night every time I suggested that you go to sleep."

"What are you talking about?"

"Woman, you were growling at me every time I came up for air. I'm surprised you didn't tear out a plug of my hair the way you kept tugging on it."

"I do not recall doing that."

"Well, considering that the whole right side of my scalp feels bruised, I'm one hundred percent certain it happened. I have vivid dreams but not *that* vivid."

Alayne grinned and stifled a laugh. "I'm sorry about that."

"I'm not. I'm just wondering if you're going to snarl at me when I get up, light the fire, and go find something to eat."

"I'll try to restrain myself," she muttered sarcastically. "Why don't you take care of the fire and I'll go to the kitchens?" she suggested.

“Because you sound like a leaky drain and you’ll probably eat anything that looks vaguely edible,” he teased. “And because the bags under your eyes have suitcases of their own. Oh, don’t roll your eyes at me,” he snorted. “I feel like you look and I probably look it too.”

“You have looked better,” she said tolerantly.

“I’ve felt a lot better, too,” he muttered. Pushing himself up and eyeing the pile of rags scattered on the floor, he groaned. “I liked that shirt, too.”

“I’ll patch it for you.”

“I don’t think there’s enough of it left to patch.”

“I’ll make you another one. I still have some of that linen left over in Nagrand. I was going to use it to make a shirt like that for Jez’ral; he liked that shirt, too.”

“I wonder what’s going to happen next,” Ger’alin said as he pulled a pair of pants out of the wardrobe and stepped into them. “I feel like we’ve been doing nothing but fighting or preparing for battle for months now. First Azjol-Nerub and Ahn’Kahet. Then the attack against the Wrath Gate and the fight for Undercity. After that, we took Naxxramas and had a short break before we got dragged into those halls in Storm Peaks. Then it was time to defend Dalaran and fight Malygos.”

“I know how you feel,” Alayne muttered as she tried to push herself up. Ger’alin wadded the shirt he had been about to put on and tossed it on the bed, moving over to keep her from rising further. “I’m not that tired,” she snapped.

“Stay. Right. There,” he said between clenched teeth, glaring at her. She grumped and let herself fall back onto the pillows while he strode to the dresser and rummaged around for her hand mirror. Finding it, he walked back over to the bed and held it where she could see. “Did you think I was joking?”

Dark purple splotches stained the skin under her dull aqua-marine eyes. The skin of her face was pallid and sallow and her lips were bloodless. She nearly stared in horror at what she saw. “I look like someone who didn’t survive the Plague.”

Ger’alin held the mirror where he could see his own reflection, “Not that I’m much better,” he muttered before he placed it facedown on the table near the bed. “Just put my mind at ease and stay here. I’m just going to see what I can find for the both of us and then I think I’m going to sleep for a week.”

Alayne nodded slowly while he pulled his shirt over his head, combed his hair out with his fingers, and then padded barefoot out into the corridor. She closed her eyes, trying to block out the image of her own exhausted face. Before she could think about it, though, sleep bowled her under.

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“I’m not certain which one of you is more pigheaded,” Zerith muttered the next day when he worriedly checked in on them. “Did you think simple exhaustion would really mark you that heavily that quickly?”

“As soon as I get over this flu, I am going to hit you,” Alayne shivered.

“I must say, walking barefoot on an ice cold stone floor and reaching the kitchen in a state of total delirium would have been a definite warning sign for me,” the priest sighed, shaking his head and ignoring his sister’s glares. “I swear, the two of you are going to wear yourselves out one day.”

“It’ll be about two days after you manage it, Zerith,” Ger’alin said, his voice hoarse but full of acid. “Now, why don’t you tell me what it was I asked you about when you barged in here before I cough all over you and get you as sick as we are?”

“The Alliance and the Horde are fighting over the skies of Icecrown. Neither one of them can land any forces without being overrun by the undead or the vykrul. That’s what you keep hearing. We’ve drifted close to the border.”

“I am going to strangle Garrosh with my bare hands.”

“I wouldn’t,” Zerith sighed. “About half the Horde is on his side. I know, I know, it’s stupid. But, unfortunately, the Alliance has managed to provoke just about anyone who might have been interested in peace talks. There have been constant raids on Forsaken lands. The elves who remained with the Alliance have sent more spies against Silvermoon. The humans have been doing their best to remind every orc what it was like when King Terenas was still alive and running the internment camps. They’re even trying to refurbish the one over there near Hillsbrad. The Forsaken are giving them a hard time, though. However, I do have it on good authority…”

“Whose?” Ger’alin demanded.

“Callie’s. Indirectly,” he admitted. “She vouches for the new recruits we have who have come up from Undercity. They say that Sylvanas is imprisoning them top-side and they are getting better treatment than she gives to Forsaken criminals. I don’t think it’s going to carry much weight with Varian Wrynn, though. Apparently all he can think of is that Putress was Forsaken and that Sylvanas executed some Scarlets who were giving her people problems. He can’t see that Putress killed Saurfang the Younger or that Sylvanas has left an entire monastery filled with Scarlet zealots alone,” the priest groaned.

“After we finish up the work that the Alliance and the Horde should be doing here,” Ger’alin sighed, “how about we take control of both sides and beat some sense into them?”

“If only it were that simple,” Zerith sighed. “You both need to get some rest and get well first. Mir’el told me to tell you that Jez’ral is doing much better,” he added. “Once you’re well, you could go visit them in Dalaran. You know how they get if they go too long without seeing you, Alayne. Mir’el also said something about taxes that I didn’t quite understand.”

“I am not going to pay that stupid upkeep tax. Tell him that I want him to look over the letter I’m working on to Theron that says he can take that title and the rights and shove them up his ass,” Alayne whispered hoarsely. “I’m not interested in figuring out how to manage an estate.”

“I’ll be certain to pass that along,” Zerith muttered, rolling his eyes. “I do have some more good news, in a way. Sar’la wrote you both a letter. I gather she’s doing well with her uncle looking after her. Now, will the two of you rest and quit worrying about whether or not we’re going to land in a battle? The answer to that question is ‘of course.’ We’re always getting into a fight with someone.”

“I still want to know how they both managed to get airships over Icecrown,” Ger’alin grunted, coughing.

“I don’t know. Why is that so important?”

“It tells us where the refueling stations are. Gives us a chance to sabotage them both before they can do further damage to the uneasy peace we need in order to defeat the Scourge. Light, Zerith,” he choked. Zerith held a glass of water to the paladin’s lips so he could drink. Alayne patted Ger’alin on the chest and closed her eyes, falling asleep within seconds. Just as weary as his wife, Ger’alin had to think for a few seconds before he could recall his train of thought. “Those things don’t just float around forever. Admittedly, I don’t know much about them or how to use them in battle but it would be damned useful to acquire one for ourselves.”

“Couldn’t we just rig cannons to Naxxramas? Wouldn’t it amount to the same thing?”

“Maneuverability, Zerith,” Ger’alin whispered, letting his own eyes close. “A necropolis is slow compared to an airship.” Zerith waited for the rest of Ger’alin’s

explanation patiently. The paladin never opened his eyes again; instead, his mouth fell open and he launched into a round of loud, ragged snoring. Alayne gave a small jump in her sleep and Zerith shook his head, an amused grin on his lips. Setting the glass of water on the table near the bed, the priest left the room and prayed that the cannons that had woken them both earlier would not do so again. He had enough to worry about already.

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“You’re looking better,” Callie said with a smile when, a week later, Ger’alin and Alayne were able to make it down to the mess hall for breakfast. “For a day there, you both looked like you were trying to outdo me for pallor.”

“I never thought I’d say this,” Ger’alin replied, “but I’m so glad to be out of that bedroom.”

“You and me both,” Alayne added. “At least it was nothing worse than the flu.”

“I think Zerith will be glad to see you both up and about,” Callie continued. “While you two were burning up with fever, Brann figured out how to get into Ulduar. He was here, along with some of his Explorer’s league, the day before yesterday.”

“They managed to unlock the shield?” Ger’alin muttered. Callie nodded. “If that’s the case, why were they here? I’d have thought it would take an army of rabid wolves to tear Brann away from there once he got inside.”

“Well, apparently it didn’t go as he’d hoped,” Callie said softly. “He and the others were nearly out of their minds when they got here. It took Brann almost as much liquor as you two drank when you were trying to poison yourselves in Undercity to calm down enough to spit out to Zerith what happened. Zerith’s been closeted with those texts Alayne found ever since. He snarls whenever we try to pry him out of there.”

“I snarled because it’s difficult to try to teach yourself to read ancient runes and Alayne wasn’t well enough for me to bother her with this,” Zerith said, clearing his throat and making all three of his friends jump in fright. “By the way, it’s good to see you two both out of bed and coherent. I hope you’re up for a trip to Dalaran.”

“Why were you trying to decipher those books?” Alayne asked.

“Dalaran? What’s going on in Dalaran now?” Ger’alin said, speaking over his wife.

“Brann encountered something the likes of which we’ve never heard of before,” Zerith replied. “It’s locked deep within Ulduar. When he came across it, the whole place shook and monsters appeared. Brann barely escaped with his life. He came here hoping we could venture in with him and figure out exactly what is going on. I told him we would meet with him and with the others in Dalaran when you were both well.”

“Was it an old god?” Alayne ventured. Zerith shrugged.

“He’s not sure what it was. He’s hoping that the Kirin Tor will know and will be able to provide assistance. He’s also spoken with Ber’lon and the Knights of the Ebon Blade will send what they can. The Argent Crusaders are all still too busy looking for a way into Icecrown else Tirion Fordring would have sent a division right away.”

“I guess we’ll be up for a trip to Dalaran,” Ger’alin replied with a heavy sigh. “Tomorrow night?” Zerith nodded. “Remind me never to get sick again,” the paladin grimaced. “It never turns out well.”

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Brann nodded calmly at Ger’alin and the others as they entered the meeting hall in Dalaran. Night had long since fallen and the torches on the wall cast flickering shadows with the light they reluctantly gave off. The air inside the room was tense and thick, a palpable

taste of anxiety wafted in it. Alayne, Zerith, Ger'alín, Callie, and Dar'ja took their seats at the table while Rhonin paced at its head, his gaze distracted by inner turmoil.

"Thanks for meeting with us, lads and lasses," Brann whispered. He pulled his flat-brimmed hat from his head and began mangling it in his hands. "I was glad of your hospitality when we managed to escape that madness. Ye've saved my life again. I owe you a great debt."

"We're always happy to help our friends," Zerith murmured. "Now, could you tell us what happened exactly? You were not terribly clear that night. You looked as if you had just gazed into the hellish depths of the Twisting Nether."

"Aye, it was something like that," Brann nodded. "We entered Ulduar not sure what we would find. Some thought it would be an ancient city. Others thought treasure would be hidden within its depths. I was hoping to find more answers to how our world came to be and what its purpose is. Instead, we found something...something dark, powerful, and evil. When we prodded it, it nearly drove us mad. We ran and all behind us, all through the depths of Ulduar, sprang up enormous monsters shouting that their master would not be denied. The gates slammed shut as we were running through them; some of my Explorers did not make it out. We were able to reactivate the shield we penetrated but it's weaker than before. Now I see why the Titans had it sealed up so tight. My own curiosity might be the death of us all."

"It's better to know something than to fear that which is unknown," a human woman's lilting voice said from the doorway. The others glanced up to see Jaina Proudmoore standing in the shadows of the entry, her blue eyes clear and calm. Ger'alín rose and made a small bow to the woman he had once served and a smile graced her lips as she recognized him. "Captian Thomas will be happy to hear that you're doing well, Sergeant. He was quite unhappy when he had to accept your resignation from my force. But, I understand that you felt obligated to return to your homeland."

"You two know each other?" Brann muttered.

"Know each other is overstating it," Ger'alín said hastily, flushing with embarrassment. "I served as a guard in Theramore several years ago."

"Captian Thomas said you showed promise, Sergeant Sunrage. It seems that he was right if half of what I've heard of your group is true."

Alayne grinned and shook her head while Ger'alín grappled for a reply. Rhonin cut them off by finally standing still at the head of the table and pressing his fists against the smooth wooden surface.

"How? How could we have missed this until now?" the leader of the Kirin Tor demanded. He seemed oblivious to Jaina's presence until the other archmage cleared her throat and moved further into the room. Ger'alín and the others gasped and began searching for weapons that were not there when they saw the King of Stormwind, Varian Wrynn, striding in behind the young woman, flanked by an escort of guards. "Ah, King Varian, thank you for coming on such short notice," Rhonin said, walking around the table to greet the human king.

"What's this all about, Rhonin?" Varian demanded, glancing around the room angrily. Jaina sighed and began walking towards the window. Ger'alín and the others rose from the table to follow her, not wanting to remain in the room with the King of Stormwind. If the Alliance could send forces to help the Kirin Tor, Zerith was prepared to leave the Disorder of Azeroth out of it entirely if that's what it took to preserve the peace.

"I've called you here to ask for your help. While our efforts against the Lich King press on, Brann here has brought us frightening news of the horrors beneath Ulduar and its dark prisoner."

"Prisoner?" Brann snorted. "Ha. With its binding shattered, it's influence unchecked, it's gonna come after us, and we're gonna be the prisoners."

Ger'alín shivered when he heard this from Brann. He glanced at Zerith, a pleading glance that begged the priest to let them get involved even if it meant fighting alongside the Alliance and under the command of the King of Stormwind.

"You can see now what we're up against," Rhonin continued. "If this evil is not stopped, then this army will march on our doorstep."

Ger'alín heard Jaina gasp and mutter "Oh no." The archmage turned quickly back towards the room. "You'll have to excuse me," she said loudly as she teleported herself away. The elves and the Forsaken shrugged uncomfortably, feeling Varian Wrynn's hatred wash over them as he glanced their way.

"Well what do you propose we do?" Varian demanded, ignoring the Horde completely for the moment. Rhonin and the human king continued speaking with Brann explaining more and more about the horrifying presence he'd felt permeating the air of the great hall. Alayne shuddered and Ger'alín wrapped an arm around her, wishing he could calm her but feeling an overwhelming tide of fear himself. Suddenly the door flew open again and Thrall, followed closely by Garrosh, strode in. Jaina appeared in front of the two orcs.

"No, wait!" she shouted.

"What is going on here?" Varian growled, eyeing the orcs with utter hatred. "What are they doing here?"

"Let me explain," Rhonin tried to cut in.

"I thought I smelled the stench of Alliance pigs," Garrosh growled.

"Control yourself!" Thrall said angrily, glaring at Hellscream's son.

"You want my blood? Come then, dog," Varian taunted. He pulled his sword from its sheath and pulled his shield in front of him. Garrosh unsheathed his own twin waraxes and let loose a bloodcurdling cry. Ger'alín prepared to tackle the orc while Alayne began muttering the words to a spell that she hoped would immobilize everyone in the room long enough for them to calm down. Before anyone could act, the king of the humans and Garrosh launched themselves at each other, their blades meeting in a shield of sparks.

Rhonin raised his hand and a bolt of light shot out from his clenched fist. Varian and Garrosh were thrown to opposite sides of the room and a shield sprang up around them, preventing them from moving. "We have all lost a great deal in this conflict," the leader of the Kirin Tor said angrily, "but we stand to lose everything if we do not stop fight and work together."

"A true warchief would never partner with cowards," Garrosh spat, glaring at the human king, Thrall, and at the elves and Forsaken standing to the far side of the room.

"At the Wrath Gate, the Horde's 'partnership' killed more of our men than the Scourge!" Varian yelled. "I'm done with your Horde. May this death god take you all!"

With a flash of light, the king's guards transported him from the room. Thrall turned to Garrosh, his blue eyes blazing with anger. "You disappoint me, Garrosh," he growled. Garrosh snorted and stormed out of the room.

"The old god is laughing," Rhonin despaired, "toying with us. Who will be our hope? Who will stand and face Yogg-Saron?"

"We will," Ger'alín answered firmly. "We will stand and face him. We will destroy him or lock him back behind the walls of Ulduar. And we will work alongside anyone who wishes to do the same. After all," the paladin sighed, "if we don't stand together, then if Yogg-Saron doesn't destroy us, the Lich King will."

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"Ye're kind to let us use Naxxramas as a base," Brann said softly.

“It’s not good for much more than that right now,” Zerith sighed. “We tried to enter Icecrown but Arthas is ahead of us there. We were attacked by some strange kinds of beams. It nearly shook the ziggurat out of the air. Not to mention those damned airships,” he grimaced.

“Varian’s got a hard head.”

“Garrosh’s is harder.”

“They’re a matched pair if you ask me,” Ger’alin offered, smacking a fist into the stone wall. “I *do* hope they’ll invite me to the wedding. My life will just not be the same if I don’t get to see that.”

“Testy today, aren’t we, lad?” Brann grinned.

“Don’t mind him,” Alayne whispered, bending down to catch the dwarf’s ear. “He just cannot abide stupidity.”

“What’s eating him lately?” the dwarf whispered back.

“He doesn’t like that we’ve had to divide the forces so much,” Zerith answered, his ears twitching. “Our own fighters are fine with working with the Alliance if need be. However, some of the orcs from Orgrimmar think that Garrosh has the right of things and almost all of the humans are spoiling for a fight. Thank the Light that the dwarves and gnomes are being practical.”

“The night elves aren’t giving you any trouble?” Brann asked, sounding surprised.

“The night elves are pretending we don’t exist,” Alayne answered for him. “They won’t even stay here. They’ve decided to stay in Sholazar with the Oracles.”

“What a tangled mess this is,” Brann sighed.

“Hopefully it will be less of a mess once we actually start fighting,” Ger’alin muttered. “I’ve worked out a plan that should keep everyone busy, helping, and, most importantly, far away from each other. I’ve decided to let the Kirin Tor handle the transport and the front rooms. The Alliance can keep an eye on the dragon you mentioned,” he said, looking at Brann. “I imagine your kinsmen and the gnomes can help with the contraptions that will bring that beast down to the ground. I’m going to send the Horde forces to deal with that Furnace Master.”

“Those aren’t exactly far apart,” Brann said helpfully.

“I know. I’m actually somewhat hoping that having to see each other struggling and fighting to overcome common enemies will knock some sense into the more stubborn fighters on each side. If that doesn’t work, the Kirin Tor is close enough to hand to deal with anything. The only ones I’m taking beyond the staging grounds are those who can stay focused on the goal. Everyone else can rot for all I care. I am not going to have us doing Arthas’s work for him.”

“Speaking of Arthas,” Ber’lon said, pushing open the door to the conference room. “Icecrown has been strangely silent since the doors to Ulduar were opened. We suspect that the Lich King may even be worried about Yogg-Saron.”

“Arthas? Worried?” Alayne said, her voice thick with disbelief.

“He’s always been paranoid about powers greater and older than his own,” Ber’lon pointed out. “That’s why he gave Illidan the advice that helped lead to the Legion being cast out of Azeroth. And that’s also why he turned on Illidan and tried to kill him at the foot of Icecrown glacier. It was his own haste and arrogance that led him to leave the Betrayer alive at all. He honestly believed the man couldn’t have survived that wound.”

“Illidan is no threat to anyone any longer,” Ger’alin said firmly. “But why would Arthas fear Yogg-Saron? I would think they’d be on the same side considering they both want everyone dead.”

“Yogg-Saron doesn’t want everyone dead,” Brann replied. “He wants them enslaved to his will. He wants the Titans to return so he can destroy them and spread his madness

throughout the universe. In the times before the Titans, Yogg-Saron and his brothers ruled the chaos that was Azeroth. The Titans tried to banish him and the others, I suppose, but were unable to do so. The old gods then tried to twist and pervert what the Titans had created, hoping to use it against them or to lure them into battle – perhaps both.”

“Then why didn’t the Titans destroy them?” Ger’alin growled.

“Because the old gods had infected the very matrix of Azeroth. Destroying them would have meant destroying Azeroth.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Zerith interjected. “If we go in there and, by some miracle of the Light, manage to destroy Yogg-Saron ourselves, will we destroy the world?”

“I don’t know,” Brann sighed. “But, we can’t risk letting him grow any stronger or gain any further freedom than that which I, in my own arrogant ignorance, granted him.”

“If only we could somehow get in contact with the Titans,” Alayne sighed. “Maybe they could come back and fix everything.”

“I’d talk to the dragonqueen about that were I you,” Brann replied. “The Aspects remember the Titans well. And, they would be the first to tell you, as they told me, that the Titans do not see things the way mortals do at all. The Titans might decide that the only way to cleanse Azeroth would be to remove all life from it. Or they could decide to destroy it themselves. I wouldn’t bet on them deciding to involve themselves in insignificant mortal trifles such as a Lich King running amuck and an old god causing problems. Don’t delude yourself into thinking that the Titans would see things like we do. They operate on a much grander scale.”

“If Icecrown is silent,” Ger’alin said, directing everyone back to the original subject, “perhaps General Fordring could...”

“He can’t,” Ber’lon answered before the paladin could finish the thought. “They’re finally making inroads into Icecrown itself. In another few weeks, they’ll have all the explosives they need to blast a tunnel through the mountains that form the border. Tirion is hoping to save his own forces, to keep them fresh, so that he can use them as a shock attack against Icecrown. Highlord Morgraine is sending a quarter of our number to aid him. The rest of what he can spare he’s sending to you under my command.”

“That’s more generous than I had expected,” Ger’alin mused. “Are your own forces fighting amongst themselves over whether they are Horde or Alliance?”

Ber’lon grinned. “No. My own men recall well that they’re not much welcome on either side. Perhaps if they can prove themselves here, they’ll earn some measure of greater tolerance. That’s what unites them – they want to prove themselves once more.”

“Then consider yourselves welcome,” Ger’alin chuckled. “Now, let’s get to planning.”

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“Why oh why couldn’t they label these things in Orcish?” Alayne groaned as she watched yet another one of their number sail through the air.

“Oh, quit fussing,” Ger’alin growled. “Why are there six pedals if there are only four directions? Now you stop that!” he shouted when the siege engine shuddered violently as Alayne accidentally pressed the button that launched a molten ball into the distance ahead of them.

“Sorry,” she apologized, blushing furiously.

“I think I’m finally getting this thing figured out,” he said a few minutes later. The engine lurched unsteadily forward and then veered sharply to the right. Alayne yelped as it ran over lumps in the snow mounds, jouncing her in her seat. When the vehicle stopped so

suddenly that she was thrown forward, just barely catching herself before she planted her face into the console in front of her, she heard Ger'alın mumble, "oh, that's what those pedals do."

"Not having too much trouble, are you?" a gnome, his tabard declaring him part of the Kirin Tor, asked in a friendly manner. "Your friends seem to be enjoying themselves with the catapults."

Alayne winced as she heard yet another person whoop while they sailed through the air. "The Kirin Tor and the Alliance are going to think we're the biggest group of idiots ever created."

"Then I suppose I'll call everyone to order and we'll get started," Ger'alın laughed. "Light, woman, relax. This is just a skirmish. It's the first time we've seen these vehicles. Let everyone get acquainted with what they can do and it will be much easier to use them in battle."

Alayne opened her mouth to reply but Ger'alın pulled himself out of the hatch in front of her and leapt lightly to the ground. Striding towards the center of the field, he cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted to be heard over the din. Slowly, everyone turned to pay attention to him, clambering out of their own vehicles to hear his instructions. Alayne prayed that everyone would remember what they were instructed to do. Ger'alın, Zerith, and Brann had only allotted the Disorder of Azeroth one day to learn how to use these strange contraptions that would fight for them against the first guardian of Ulduar, the Flame Leviathan. Dwarven explorers milled around the courtyard, most focusing their attention on the holographic projection standing in the middle of the large room. Brann stood nearby, watching both gatherings at the same time. Ger'alın lifted his arm and pointed towards the stairs, explaining about the four defense towers that would activate when the shield was lowered. Alayne rolled her eyes as she listened to him list the controls and their functions once again. Knowing what to do wasn't the problem. Getting the vehicles to cooperate was the issue.

"Oh shit," Ger'alın groaned loudly, his voice carrying over the suddenly silent courtyard. The large holographic projection of Norgannon, one of the devices left by the titans to keep the old god sealed away, began muttering commands. The shield overhead dissipated and the magi of the Kirin Tor scrambled to try to reconstruct it. Standing up and glancing over the top of the siege engine, Alayne could see the iron dwarves beginning to pour out of the towers. "I hope everyone paid attention," Ger'alın shouted, "because the battle has just begun!" Running back to his siege engine, he climbed down into the steering room and turned the unwieldy machine towards the stairs. Alayne fell back into her seat with a teeth-rattling thump and tried to reorient herself as the gunner column spun wildly. "I'm going to hang whoever did that," Ger'alın muttered into his radio.

"Sorry about that, lad," Brann's voice crackled. "I thought ye were ready."

"We weren't but we will be," Ger'alın muttered sourly.

"The iron dwarves have been seen emerging from the bunkers at the base of the pillars straight ahead of you. Destroy the bunkers and they will be forced to fall back. Watch out, though. Our air scouts report that the generators for the missile silos are coming online! There are four generators powering the defense structures. If you sabotage them, the missile attacks will stop!" Brann warned.

Ger'alın gunned the engine, jolting them down the stairs. "Focus on the towers. I'll worry about the dwarves," he shouted up to Alayne. Alayne spun the gun around and pulled down on the lever, jerking the rifle up. Pounding on the buttons, she fired round after round into the towers, sweeping the air whenever she saw strange flying contraptions heading towards them. The others did the same and soon the towers and machines were smoking rubble. The siege engine lurched awkwardly over the debris, bumping and jostling the passengers. Alayne tried not to think about what they might be riding over as she prepared for

another volley. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a thick domed tower on the rise beneath them. She spun her turret to face it just as Brann came back on the radio.

“You’re approaching the tower of Freya. It contains the power to turn barren wastelands into jungles teeming with life overnight,” the red-bearded dwarf explained.

“That’s probably one of the four defense generators we need to destroy,” Ger’alin said over the radio. “Gunners, focus on it. The rest of you, watch for incoming attacks.”

As the gunners wheeled and began firing on the tower, waves upon waves of gigantic steel golems began rushing towards them from within the tower. As the golems drew closer, the gunners focused on them, alternating between trying to bring the tower housing them down and trying to destroy the monsters before they could reach the vehicles. Alayne lurched forward, her chin hitting the steel control panel as Ger’alin spun and drove them straight for one of the largest constructs. She pressed the shield button quickly and began berating her husband with a slurred, profanity-laced rant.

“Calm down, woman,” Ger’alin said, his tone far too reasonable. “I’ll look at it when we’re finished here.”

“I am going to bite you. Hard,” she swore, her lips bruised and her jaw aching. She felt her nose with one hand while using the other to unleash rounds against the giant. Ger’alin deftly drove out of its path as the golem swayed and collapsed. Returning her attention to the tower, she was relieved to see chunks of mortar and stone raining down as the base of the tower gave way and the upper levels toppled over, raining down dust and debris on the level below. “One down, three to go,” she muttered. “Where’s the next one?”

Ger’alin glanced down at the mechanical map near him and then turned the siege engine the other direction. Giving orders through the radio, he directed the drivers to follow him towards the other tower. “I’m not sure which one this one is,” he added as he shut off the radio. “Be ready for a repeat performance,” he shouted to his wife.

Alayne groaned and braced herself. The siege engine lumbered over the rocky ground, moving slowly while Ger’alin and Alayne busied themselves with activating the alternate power units. As they neared the second tower, Brann’s voice came back over the radio on the general channel.

“This generator’s powers Mimiron’s Gaze. In moments, it can turn earth to ash, stone to magma – we cannot let it reach full power!”

“How much power is it at?” Alayne wondered.

“If this blasted thing is correct,” Ger’alin replied, “about three-quarters.”

“Great,” Alayne muttered as she aimed and fired. Golems and iron dwarves swarmed down the ramp towards them again as the tower fell apart under the onslaught. Prepared for the counterattack, the gunners focused their fire on the tower itself to prevent reinforcements from being able to escape while the drivers used their short-range abilities to thwart those who managed to reach them. Soon, Mimiron’s Gaze was a pile of rubble just as Freya’s tower was.

“Halfway there,” Ger’alin said over the radio, giving encouragement to the rest of the forces. “Brann, what should we expect next? The bunkers are taken care of and we’ve got which towers left?”

“Across the bridge is the tower that powers the hammer of Hodir. It’s said to have the power to turn entire armies to ice,” Brann explained. “Down the corridor to your north is the tower of Krolmir. It’s said that the power of Thorim has been used only once. However, when it was used, it turned an entire continent to dust.”

“Oh,” Ger’alin said, his stomach dropping to his boots. “That’s not so bad, then. Let’s split up,” he ordered the Disorder of Azeroth. “Half of you head north. The rest of us will go over this bridge and take care of the last tower. We’ll reconvene back here when it’s over and prepare for the last part of the fight.”

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“Thoughtful of them to do this for us,” Zerith sighed as he stretched his legs.

“I’m just glad we’re too far away for them to notice us,” Dar’ja shuddered.

“Don’t worry,” the priest grinned. “They’ll be down soon. It is fun to be part of the attack instead of forever in the back rows trying to keep our side in good condition. I can see why Alayne likes it so much.”

“Alayne isn’t enjoying this so much. Her driver is almost as bad as mine,” Dar’ja grimaced, rubbing her back where she had slammed back into the seat when Zerith spun the siege engine too quickly.

“For someone who has had only a few hours of real practice, I think I’m doing rather well,” Zerith said defensively. “Maybe we should look into taking some of these back with us. They’d be useful in case Garrosh or Wrynn succeeds in sparking an all-out war.”

Dar’ja shuddered again, both in fear of riding with Zerith in the giant metal machine and in fear of the war he joked about. “I truly hope that both sides will realize that there are more important and far more dangerous enemies lurking about than each other.”

Zerith was about to echo her sentiments when Ger’alin came jogging down the line.

“Everyone, back inside!” the paladin shouted. “There’s a chance we can just break through the door. Brann says that his sensors indicate that the Flame Leviathan is currently inoperative. In plain Orcish, that means we might not have to fight it because it’s broken.”

Cheered by the news, the Disorder of Azeroth clambered quickly back into their vehicles. Feeling more light-hearted than they had in a while, the fighters moved their vehicles into position behind Ger’alin’s siege engine, following closely behind him as he moved closer to the last pack of monsters guarding a massive gate. Alayne jerked her gun up and let loose a volley. The other gunners did the same, sending fiery missiles plummeting down upon the golems and dwarves. Within a few moments, as the Disorder of Azeroth advanced further into the courtyard, focusing on the metal gate, the monsters were rubble.

“You’ve done it!” Brann exulted over the radio. “You’ve broken the defenses of Ulduar. In a few moments, we will be dropping in to... What is that? Be careful! Something’s headed your way! Quickly, Evasive action! Evasive act...” the radio cut off suddenly.

Alayne glanced over her rifle to see that the metallic gate was trembling. With a jolt, it gave way and a massive mechanical monster rolled quickly into the courtyard. The Disorder of Azeroth redeployed itself around the room, drivers speeding away from the new creature while the gunners spun to fire upon it.

“Hostile entities detected,” a mechanical voice whined from the gargantuan machine. “Threat assessment protocol active. Primary target engaged. Time minus thirty seconds to re-evaluation.”

“What does that mean?” Ger’alin wondered as he turned the vehicle so that he could see what was going on.

“It means that that thing is coming after us!” Alayne yelled. “Drive faster, drive faster!”

Ger’alin slammed his feet down on the pedals and the siege engine lurched forward. Alayne grunted as she whipped the gun back around and unloaded on the monstrous machine. The others were moving away as well, careful to try to keep out of the thing’s path while it lumbered after Ger’alin and Alayne. Rockets flew from the turrets atop it and burning oil sprayed from its pipes. The thing shuddered to a halt for a moment and seemed to consider something.

“Alert! Static defense system failure. Orbital countermeasures disabled,” the same mechanical voice whined.

“Someone get up there and shut down those damned rocket launchers!” Ger’alin shouted.

From the catapults, several members of the Disorder of Azeroth flew through the air, landing on top of the creature and hammering away with weapons and spells at the rocket turrets.

“Unauthorized entity attempting circuit overload. Activating anti-personnel countermeasures,” the mechanical voice intoned. The creature lurched violently, trying to shake off the attackers while it continued to lurch after Ger’alin.

“That’s done it!” one of the attackers yelled as the last of the turrets was destroyed.

“System restart required. Deactivating weapon systems,” the mechanical voice whirred. The massive construct shivered to a halt as lightning began coursing over its shell. Ger’alin gaped as he watched the smoking and smoldering turrets begin to repair themselves.

“Stop sitting there and move us closer!” Alayne shouted down to him. “The thing is standing still!” She blasted rounds at the tank, feeling a rising satisfaction as more and more pieces broke away from it. For every part the creature was able to repair, two more pieces fell away, destroyed by the onslaught. The thing shuddered, trying to restart itself and recommence the attack but the toll was too great. With a groan, it collapsed upon itself, it’s mechanical voice whining, “Total systems failure. Defense protocols breached. Leviathan Unit shutting down.”

“Stay where you are!” Ger’alin shouted over the radio when he saw others beginning to exit their vehicles. “That was, apparently, the Flame Leviathan that we were warned about. Let’s make certain it’s inactive before we start poking at it.”

“What do you want us to do?” Zerith asked, sounding irritated as his voice crackled over the air.

“I want you to go back to the base camp and fetch the gnomes. Once I’ve seen that thing taken apart, then I’ll feel confident. Besides, maybe the Kirin Tor can help us prepare for the next battle. Something tells me they’re not all going to be nearly as easy as this one was.”

“Why do you say that?” Alayne whispered. Ger’alin turned and glanced at her sadly through the small hatch.

“The gate,” he pointed towards the ruins of the gate the Flame Leviathan had destroyed. “It’s not nearly big enough for us to fit these things through. For the rest of the way, we’re on foot and on our own. And I was just starting to get the hang of this, too,” he added wistfully.

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Tau’re heaved a sigh of relief as he trotted up the long corridor. He had been wondering if they would manage to convince the Horde and the Alliance forces to fight their assigned enemies instead of each other. It had taken the magi of the Kirin Tor threatening to turn the whole lot of them into sheep for both forces to begin making their ways down the stairs on opposite sides of the hallway, both grumbling about being given “make work” while the “vagabonds” did the “real fighting.”

“Maybe if you could see who was the true enemy and who was not, you’d be wise enough to join in the real fight,” Tau’re muttered to himself as he came up to the closed gate.

“Tau’re,” Ger’alin called out, turning to face the tauren. “I’m glad you’re here. I take it our friends are busy with the monsters up front now?”

“The dwarves and gnomes are setting up their harpoons and the orcs are working their way through the furnaces,” Tau’re reported.

“We’ll leave them to it,” Ger’alin nodded. “For now, we need to figure out how to get this blasted gate open.”

Tau’re glanced at the gate. High and built out of a strange, shining metal, it rang like a bell when he tapped against it. “Alayne’s been muttering about resonant frequencies again,” Ger’alin sighed. “I’m starting to wonder if a battering ram might not be better.”

“Maybe some of those blasting charges?” the tauren suggested uneasily.

“We may wind up doing that if we can’t figure out what’s holding this thing shut,” the paladin grimaced. “Not that I’m looking forward to that. My ears still remember the last time I used those.”

“I think…” Alayne said loudly, staring at the gate. “Yes, I think that’s it.”

The gate shivered violently, sending down aeons worth of dust down on the gathering. Ger’alin and Tau’re sneezed violently as the metal doors swung away, opening. The Disorder of Azeroth ducked to either side of the corridor, hiding from sight while Ger’alin poked his head around to see what awaited them in the room.

“I don’t believe it,” he growled. “That is just not possible. It’s impossible in about eight different ways at once.”

“What is it?” Tau’re asked, feeling a trill of anxiety at something that would make the leader of the Disorder of Azeroth sound so amazed and angry.

“It’s enormous,” Ger’alin muttered. “Some kind of gigantic robot.”

“What are we going to do about it?” Tau’re asked.

“It’s guarding the stairs that lead further in so I guess we’re going to have to fight it.”

“That sounds like a plan to me.”

“XT-002,” Ger’alin said, reading the letters emblazoned on the creature’s chest. “I wonder what it was made for originally. No matter. Let’s go!” he roared, sprinting into the room. The others followed him, the casters standing near the rear of the room next to massive piles of melted and twisted metal. Tau’re and the other close-range fighters hung back for a second, watching the paladin rush the creature and waiting for an opening for their own attacks.

“New toys?” the creature said gleefully, his metallic voice ringing through the room and making him sound like a young human child. “For me? I promise I won’t break them this time!”

Tau’re glanced at the piles of scrap metal, his eyes widening and his nostrils flaring in fear. If that was what the creature was capable of doing, he wondered if they would be able to destroy it themselves before they became scraps of bone and flesh to join the metal in the trash heaps.

Ger’alin’s leaping strides had placed him just in front of the creature. The giant mechanical monster bent at the waist and tried to scoop the paladin up with an oversized hand. Ger’alin dodged out of the way and ducked under its legs, looking for an opening. XT-002 turned, its eyes focused on the paladin, and tried to scoop him up again. Ger’alin struck the creature’s hand with his hammer, batting it away while he looked for a way to disable it entirely. The creature sucked in air in a shuddering sob and began hammering its fists in the ground, causing the entire room to shake as if the earth itself were quaking. Behind him, Tau’re could hear the casters and the healers stumbling to keep their balance while he and the other fighters knelt down, absorbing the shock of the miniature earthquake.

“NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!” XT-002 whined, sounding like a petulant child throwing a temper tantrum. In front of him, Ger’alin was knocked flat on his back by the force of the blows to the ground. The mechanical child saw this and swooped his hand back down before Ger’alin could regather himself. Lifting the paladin in a metal fist, the golem began toying with him. Ger’alin groaned and strained, trying to push himself out of the creature’s metal fist and dodge the pointing finger it poked at him at the same time.

“Argh! Dammit! My leg!” Ger’alin screamed. “Let go of me!” he shouted at XT-002.

“I... I think I broke it,” the robot said, sounding like a child in fear of punishment. He dropped Ger’alin to the ground where the paladin curled up, clutching his broken leg and swearing profusely.

Tau’re rushed to stand over the fallen paladin, placing himself between Ger’alin and XT-002. The golem studied him for a moment, seeming to analyze him and curious about the differences between its two “toys.” Meanwhile, the magic users had collected themselves and began hurling their spells at the oversized childish robot. XT-002 turned, seeking out the cause of its sudden pain. Tau’re took one of his axes and aimed at the strange tubes near the creature’s metal knee. Slicing them with a mighty blow that nearly shattered his axe when the blade hit the metal joint, Tau’re was relieved when the creature staggered, one of its legs disabled, and turned its face back to the tauren.

“The chest,” Ger’alin groaned. “There’s something pulsing there. I saw it when it had me,” he said between clenched teeth. “It may be the control to the thing. See if you can get it open.”

Tau’re nodded and tried to study the creature’s chest while dodging its massive fists. Zerith and Dar’ja ran forward, weaving between XT-002’s legs to grab Ger’alin and haul him out of the way. The robot swooped down, trying to scoop any of them up for further play. When it bent nearly double, Tau’re saw the pulsing light that Ger’alin had spoken of. Tossing his axes down, the tauren leapt up and grabbed at the creature’s chestplates, wrenching them apart. XT-002 grabbed the tauren and flung him across the room. Its eyes blazed, changing from white to red.

“Time for a new game! My old toys will fight my new toys!” the mechanical golem said, anger clear in his tinny voice.

Small robots and bombs on legs began assembling themselves from the four metal trash piles at the corners of the room. Once assembled and upright, the creatures tottered towards the Disorder of Azeroth. The robots tried to tangle themselves in the legs of the fighters. Easily fended off, they were soon piles of scrap scattered haphazardly around the room. The bombs, however, wandered around, exploding and sending the forces reeling and flying through the air. XT-002 giggled whenever one of his “new toys” was disabled by his “old toys.” Wails and groans filled the air while Tau’re watched as the force tried valiantly to fend off the bombs and the giant robot.

“Enough of this!” Alayne shouted, pushing herself up from where an explosion had flung her. Deep gashes marked her face and chest – she had landed in one of the trash piles. Pulling herself to her feet, her robes ripped and tattered from fighting her way clear of the metal, she focused on the creature’s heart. A ball of fire shot from her hands and slammed into the robot’s chest. XT-002 screamed and began beating at his own heart, trying to extinguish the blaze. Alayne hissed and hurled another spell. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth, finding fresh heart in her outrage, staggered back to the attack. Ignoring the small scrapbots and bomblings that wandered in their midst, they focused their spells and missiles on the heart. Tau’re looked around for his axes and sprinted to gather them back up before rushing in for another attack. Hacking away at the cables that held the heart in the chest cavity, the tauren bellowed in triumph when the creature lurched, shuddered, and then fell still, its heart tumbling down to the ground.

“You are bad... Toys... Very... Baaaaad!” it screamed as the rest of its body fell apart under the assault.

“I’ve been called a lot of things in my life,” Ger’alin gasped, his voice audible in the sudden stillness that came after XT-002’s demise. “But toy wasn’t one of them.”

“How’s the leg?” Tau’re asked, turning to survey the rest of the damage.

“I think as long as I don’t get picked up by any more insane and enormous robots, I should be fine,” Ger’alin quipped as Zerith helped him back to his feet. “Come on. Let’s heal what we can, catch our breaths, and then press onward.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Zerith muttered. “We’re worn out, Ger’alin. Let’s camp here for tonight, give the Kirin Tor a chance to see if they can get the teleporters working, and pray that the Alliance and the Horde forces we left back there are fighting their targets and not each other.”

“Fine,” Ger’alin sighed, rubbing a hand over his face as he limped towards Alayne. “We’ll rest here tonight. Tomorrow, we’re moving forward and if the Horde and the Alliance can’t get their priorities straight, I may just feed them to Yogg-Saron myself.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Zerith hissed. “I’ll go see how they’re faring while you take charge here. If they’re fighting each other, I’ll have the Kirin Tor send the whole lot of them to the far ends of the earth. But we are not even going to joke about doing anything that might strengthen this old god. We’ve got problems enough without inventing anymore.”

Not giving the paladin a chance to answer, Zerith swept off down the corridor to check in on the battles behind them.

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“Feed them to the old god,” Zerith mumbled, rubbing his eyes. “He’s eating his own words now,” the priest snorted, recalling Ger’alin’s reaction when the Horde and the Alliance fighters had quite peacefully, and with good-natured bantering, made their camps among each other, laughing and bragging about each other’s bravado in battle. The Horde had managed to bring down Ignis but were overwhelmed with golems. The Alliance had grounded Razorscale but were unable to deal with her fiery breath. Seeing this, the Horde had rushed in, dragging the metal golems in their wake, letting the fires of the dragon’s breath heat them to searing hot. When they were molten, the Alliance struck. The resulting explosions had torn enough chunks from the dragon’s hide that the rest of the fight was easy. In the warm camaraderie that followed, both sides seemed to have set aside their mistrust for each other. Zerith prayed it would last.

Rolling on his side, he snuggled closer to his wife. She muttered something indistinct and moved closer to him. He smoothed her long black hair back from her face and closed his eyes, trying to get some sleep. The day had been long. Tomorrow would be longer. Ulduar was massive and Brann’s hasty recollections were colored with the panic he’d felt fleeing Yogg-Saron.

A sudden scream jerked Zerith to his feet. The clang of weapons ringing against armor rang in the air. The priest blinked, confused. He could have sworn that everyone was bedding down for the night. Had some enemy come upon them unawares? Where were the scouts? He opened his mouth to shout out but the words died on his tongue.

In the midst of the chaos swirling around him stood Alayne. Dressed in the black dreadplate that had once been her own, she strode through the gathering, her runeblade in her hand. She swung the massive two-handed sword with ease and where she swung, people fell dead. Human, orc, blood elf, night elf; none were spared from the blade’s bloody edge.

*If you do not cease your meddling, this is what awaits you,* a voice growled in Zerith’s mind.

“Arthas?” he muttered, confused. “She’s not under your control anymore, false prince!”

*Again and again I have warned you against meddling with the being imprisoned within Ulduar. You will hand me victory, for a time,* the voice hissed. *But it will be an empty victory. Yogg-Saron will tear the world apart. The Titans will return and remake creation.*

*Then the Legion will come again to destroy it. You are toying with that which is far beyond your capability to handle. If you would side with me, if you would join with me, living or dead, together we could defeat it.*

“My sister foreswore you forever. That is not her doing this!” Zerith shouted as Alayne focused on him, her eyes blue, dead, and cold.

*Your sister has her weaknesses. I know them well. I will play a song for her and she will dance to the tune as she always has. She has never been free of me. She will never be free of me. For all that she puts on her old life and her old trappings, she is mine, now and forever. I have but to reach out my hand and take her. Follow her, and you will be saved. Refuse me, and you will destroy her.*

“Your lies will not shake me from my path,” Zerith growled. “That is not Alayne. That is a pale, pallid shadow of Alayne. Her blade was shattered; her soul no longer bound to it. She is not yours to do your bidding and she never will be again.”

*Think, you fool! If she does not serve me, then who does she serve? Your sister, your precious little Alayne, is your greatest danger. She is uncontrolled. She casts off that which can save her because she fears it. She is two sides of a coin but she strives to be neither. When she was under my command, I took great care to see that her soul would be forged into a might weapon. But you let her go her way. You let her split herself into pieces. She tries to be your sister, Ger’alin’s wife, her mother’s daughter. She tries to be so many things at once but she is neither and she is all. Brave and cowardly, strong and weak. Bringing her here, you have wrought your own doom if you continue to keep her from the one person who can fashion her into a weapon of worth!*

“What are you saying?” Zerith asked, a tremor in his voice.

*That you are right. **She is not** your sister.*

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Zerith sat bolt upright, his chest heaving and his heart pounding violently against his ribs. The world swam dizzily before him and he felt as if he might be sick. Next to him, Dar’ja muttered something and seemed to try to snuggle against him, seeking the warmth of his body in the chill night air. Zerith glanced around, surprised to see that everyone was asleep and that only a few sporadic bonfires lit the darkness. Letting himself sink back down, he ran a hand over his face, still gasping for breath. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead as he tried to sort out the strange and vivid dream he had just had.

“**She is not** your sister,” Arthas had said. He knew that Alayne was not Valara. They resembled each other a great deal, especially when he’d first seen her on Sunstrider Isle. In the years since, he had learned to appreciate his adopted sister for who she was instead of who she reminded him of. Valara had been far more even-tempered than Alayne. Little could provoke her. Zerith knew that well; he had watched his other sisters do their best to get a reaction from the youngest only to have her turn her slightly-bored eyes on them and sigh as if to say “this is a bit much.”

“She’s not Valara. I know that. But she is Alayne and Alayne *is* my sister,” Zerith muttered to himself. “We chose each other that day outside of Windrunner Village. Is this another one of your tricks?”

In his dream, she’d been dressed in the dreadplate armor and wielding the shattered runeblade that marked her as a death knight. Zerith knew that armor had been destroyed. Mir’el had had it melted down and donated to the Blood Knights. The blade was likewise gone, reforged and repurposed into a set of jewelry he’d ordered made to celebrate Alayne and Ger’alin’s marriage. Knowing his sister, it was probably still gathering dust in her jewel box back in Nagrand. She’d told him how runeblades were forged, how death knights bound

part of their souls to the blade. The spells that allowed the Lich King to control them through blade and armor so that even if, in their madness, they turned on the Scourge, he could...

...madness. That was the key. Zerith's head pounded as he tried to recall the brief "plague of insanity" that had broken so many sin'dorei to the Lich King's service. Recalling things Alayne had told him during her convalescence, he thought of how she described feeling split apart, as if she were different people. That fit with something the Lich King had said. And, Alayne did struggle with the different roles she had to play. Zerith had gone through a period much the same as she when he was not certain just who he was supposed to be. He'd been thankful to have his father and his uncle there to help him make the transition from child to awkward youth to young man. Alayne had not had either of her parents there to help her with advice or just a sympathetic ear. Instead, she'd been relying on him and others who were not much older than she. No *wonder* she got so confused.

"But, would that cause her to...no, she would not turn away from us and serve the Scourge again. She'd have to be completely insane and, if she did go mad again, Ger'alín would pick her up over his shoulder and get her the hell out of here if I didn't beat him to it," Zerith thought aloud. The priest sighed, closed his eyes, and tried to unravel the tangle his dream had left him as he fell back asleep.

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Alayne stared at the ceiling. It was a nice ceiling, as such things went. High, domed, and made of solid rock. She could see the gold-plated pillars in her peripheral vision. She thought about trying to sit up again but her head convinced her that remaining where she was would be a better idea. Her ears were still ringing from the explosion and her legs still twitched from the strange golden lightning that had struck her.

The ceiling vanished, replaced by Ger'alín's face. He was trying to hide a rueful grin while he smoothed her hair down. "Feeling better?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," she admitted.

"What's the last thing you remember this time?"

"You yelling at me to get out of the rune. And golden lightning from a floating ball."

"You're going to be fine."

"If you'll just let me stay here until I can figure out why I want to scream whenever I move, I will be," she agreed.

"I'll see what I can do about that," he muttered, sounding a trifle smug. Laying his hands on either side of her head, he called upon the Light, letting its healing energy flow through him and into her. The damage was not nearly as bad as he had initially feared when he'd seen her collapse.

"How is she?" Zerith asked, leaning over Ger'alín's shoulder.

"Dar'ja had it worse, I think," Ger'alín replied. "This is nothing compared to what she went through back in Ahn'Kahet."

"I would say 'good' but she still looks completely confused."

"You two realize I'm right here, correct?" Alayne asked.

"She'll be fine," Zerith chuckled. "She's surly already. Do you want to try standing up now, Alayne?"

"I'm liking the 'laying down' option at the moment, thanks," she muttered, closing her eyes. "Except for the floor being cold, hard, and uncomfortable, it's pretty nice. What happened?"

"We were fighting one of those Etymidian-type golems. Do you remember?" Ger'alín asked.

"Those things that can destroy the world?" she muttered.

“No. It just looked a lot like it so that’s what we’re calling it,” Ger’alin explained.

“That I do not remember. I remember the lightning.”

“The lightning was part of it, yes,” the paladin sighed. “You flew pretty far when it spun around and knocked a bunch of you back. You’ve hit your head pretty good. That partially explains your confusion.”

“Partially?”

“Yes, only partially. You really don’t remember the rest?”

“I told you. I remember the lightning.”

Zerith started laughing and walked away, clutching his sides. Ger’alin stared at his wife, his face contorted with disbelief and amusement. “You really don’t remember picking yourself up and running at the Etymidian, climbing up it’s back, and trying to slap it? Or it plucking you off it’s shoulder, throwing you across the room and into the wall a second time?”

“I remember the lightning.”

“Alayne, that happened after you rushed it a third time. Light, woman, if you’re going to go berserk, use your magic next time. It generally gets you hurt less severely.”

“Maybe I forgot about that,” she muttered. “Can I stand up now? The floor is hard and cold and not terribly comfortable.”

“You’re making about as much sense as me when I’m drunk right now so I think you need to stay down there for a bit longer.”

“I’m getting up now,” she glared.

“You do that, then,” he sighed, helping her to her feet. Alayne tottered unsteadily and surveyed the damage. Several metal and rock creatures lay around the hallway. She winced, trying to recall a single battle. She could not. Rubbing the back of her head, she stared at her husband. Ger’alin was biting his cheeks as if he were trying to keep from laughing out loud at her confusion. “You do remember where we are, right?”

“Ulduar,” she muttered sullenly. “Near the Iron Council’s chamber if what Brann told us is correct.”

“That’s right,” Ger’alin nodded. “The Iron Council controls the rest of Ulduar. We’ll have to get past them in order to access the rest of this place. There’s supposed to be a walkway up there,” he gestured towards a set of stairs, “that would let us cross over into the Watchers’ domains. It’s gone, though. Brann said that it may have been deactivated when he fled.”

“Ger’alin, I remember what happened this morning at breakfast,” Alayne growled. “I’m just not terribly clear on what happened here,” she motioned down the corridor. “Other than that we survived it.”

“Some of us more than others,” he quipped. “You honestly don’t remember...right, I’ll drop it,” he sighed when she shot him an annoyed glare.

“What are they doing here?” she muttered as they strode down the next corridor. Dozens of Alliance and Horde fighters stood along the edges, speaking softly amongst themselves.

“They’re going to help us with the Iron Council. After we nearly had to retreat from the hallway, we decided we could use every hand we’ve got. Ah, here’s Callie now to tell us what we’re up against.”

The rogue seemed to pop out of the shadows. Her normally cheerful face was a mask of fear and worry. Her sword-arm twitched nervously. “It’s not going to be pretty,” she said flatly, pointing back the way she had come. “There’s three of them in there. Steelbreaker is the largest one. Mogheim is an iron vykrul. Brundhir is the dwarf. They’re bracing for an attack and they are not going to go down easily. I’m not sure those explosives we got from the Alliance are going to be enough.”

“What do you recommend?” Ger’alin asked, levity gone and replaced by seriousness. “Retreating is not an option.”

“I know that,” she sighed. “I would recommend that we let the Alliance handle Brundhir and the Horde take on Mogheim. Brann agrees with me,” she added, waving around the radio she carried with her. “The Alliance is melee heavy and so is the Horde. We’re the only ones with real ranged support. That leaves us looking after Steelbreaker while lending whatever aid we can to the others.”

“I don’t like it,” Ger’alin sighed. “But I don’t see anything different we could do. Pass the word along. I want to get a look at this council myself.”

“Just be careful. They’ve been moving in and out of the back room. We only opened the door a crack but it’s wide enough for sound to travel through.”

“I do know how to be quiet,” Ger’alin muttered. “You act as if I never spied on ogres. You wait here,” he said to Alayne, pointing down the corridor. “I still don’t think you’ve quite got your legs under you and if Callie says ‘no sound,’ then we’re not going to risk anything.”

Alayne rolled her eyes but held her peace. Ger’alin crept slowly down the corridor, careful to keep his mace from clanking against his legplates. Peering through the crack in the door, his stomach lurched, falling down to his knees. The Iron Council was only three beings but one of them was easily the largest creature he had ever seen in his life. More than triple XT-002’s size, Steelbreaker was going to be a tough one to bring down. Mogheim was easily three times larger than a normal human and the ‘dwarf’ was as large as most sin’dorei. Creeping back the way he had come, Ger’alin sighed. Fighting them was not going to be easy.

“You look like you’ve just been told the day of your death,” Zerith muttered when Ger’alin walked back into the main foyer. “What’s going on?”

“Go get the Alliance and the Horde commanders,” Ger’alin said tersely. “We’ve got one hell of a job cut out for us.”

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“What are your actual estimates for surviving this?” Callie muttered after Ger’alin and Zerith finished explaining their plan to her.

“If you’ll do what we’re asking, we should mostly survive this,” Ger’alin replied calmly. “If you ignore us like you just threatened to do, then no, it’s not going to go so well for us or for you.”

“I’m just a bit confused as to how you expect us to actually climb over that thing while holding ropes and pull him down. He’s enormous.”

“The explosives should knock his feet out from under him, making him easier to bring down.”

“Provided, of course, that he doesn’t fall right on top of us while we’re climbing up him. And let’s not forget his hands and the fact that Alayne’s proven that rock solid walls are not exactly comfortable landing zones.”

“You are such a pessimist,” Ger’alin grunted. “It’s going to work. We’re going to be fine. This is the safest way to handle him. We’ve got the best team for this job and we’re going to do it, come what may. Just stick with the plan.”

“I will,” Callie sighed. “I just hope I don’t get stomped flat.”

“You’re quick and agile. He’s slow. His sheer size makes him slow. All you have to do is weave around him. I’m the one with the hard job. I’ve got to fend off his blows.”

“You’re strong.”

"I don't think strong is going to cut it but we each have our task. Now, let's get moving," Ger'alın muttered. Callie nodded, conceding her arguments, and followed after him. The rest of the group stood lined up in the corridor, each part having its assignment. The most agile and rapid members of the Disorder of Azeroth stood together, lengths of rope wrapped around their arms while they waited for the attack to commence. Those, like Ger'alın, who were stronger and could carry heavier armor, moved to the front of the lines. The noise in the hallway was small for a group of such a size. Callie prayed that the Iron Council was too busy with its own concerns to notice the sounds they were making.

At a signal from Ger'alın, the doors to the council chamber were shoved open and the fighters ran in. The three iron beings stood braced, waiting for the attack. The Alliance veered after Brundhir, their swords and battlecries ringing through the air while the Horde chased down Mogheim, quickly forcing him away from his brothers. Steelbreaker started to run after the Horde, his massive iron fists clenched and glowing with the beginnings of a spell. Ger'alın hurled the power of the Light at Steelbreaker, catching his attention and slowing the gigantic creature down for a few seconds. Those crucial seconds gave the Disorder of Azeroth time to spread themselves in an arc around the giant. Ger'alın was one of the first to reach Steelbreaker. Bracing himself for the blow, Ger'alın hammered his mace into the giant's leg. Steelbreaker stepped backwards, glancing down and trying to figure out which one of the insects swarming around him was responsible for the pain in his ankle. Ger'alın dodged and batted at the golem, his mace shining with the power of the Light as it gave the giant a target to focus his anger upon.

Seeing Steelbreaker distracted by Ger'alın's attack, Callie began weaving around the giant's legs, trailing her rope behind her. Others leapt, grabbing Steelbreaker's iron-woven clothing and pulling themselves up his back. In the distance, Callie could hear the Horde and the Alliance hammering at their own targets. Cries of victory mingled with groans of pain as the battle surged onward.

Watching from afar, Alayne grit her teeth against the anger she felt welling inside of her whenever Steelbreaker levied a blow at her husband. She could hear Zerith next to her, muttering the words of a prayer that provided shielding and augmented Ger'alın's strength and endurance. She forced herself to turn and watch the fight between the Alliance and Brundhir, even going so far as to launch a bolt of fire at the iron dwarf. After a few minutes, Brundhir began summoning in electrical currents and unleashed them in a massive wave of energy. The Alliance fighters were thrown through the air, their feet knocked out from under them by the enormity of the smallest council member's attack.

"Get out! NOW!" Ger'alın roared as the last of the ropes came down from Steelbreaker. Running under the giant's legs and pulling the ropes as they fled, the Disorder of Azeroth tried to keep themselves from being pulled off their own feet while they worked to hold the giant in place. From the back lines, people hurled the explosives given them by the Alliance and the Kirin Tor. Bombs rained down on Steelbreaker. Timed to explode together, the bombs let loose a shockwave that stunned and staggered the steel giant, making it easier for the Disorder of Azeroth to pull him down and pin him with the myriad ropes they had looped over his body.

Ger'alın waded back in as the giant fell to the ground. Steelbreaker flung his arms out, his hands searching for purchase as he tried to push himself back up. Ger'alın hammered at the giant's fingers, causing Steelbreaker to jerk his hand away and nearly knocking the paladin to the ground. Reeling, Ger'alın regained his balance just as the giant's hand flew out again, seeking to grab his pint-sized opponent. Hammering away at it, Ger'alın fended off the blows, keeping the giant distracted while the others moved in and swarmed over his chest. Using weapons enhanced by magic, they stabbed at the giant. Dark, oily blood began leaking from his wounds and Steelbreaker roared in anger. His hands swept his chest, knocking his

attackers off him and sending them rolling across the floor. Ignoring Ger'alín, the giant placed his hands back on the ground deliberately and began working to push himself back up.

Steelbreaker's head was flung backwards and a shriek of pure agony was torn from his throat. Ger'alín's eyes widened as he noticed that the giant's head was changing color. Changing from dark bluish-black to purple, then reddish-yellow, Steelbreaker's face began sweating and melting. Molten metal pooled on the floor. "What in the name of the Legion?" Ger'alín wondered as he glanced around for the cause of the giant's sudden agony.

Alayne and the other casters stood together, their energies focused entirely on Steelbreaker. Ger'alín could sense his wife weaving a spell that pulled all of their energies into it. Steelbreaker continued to thrash in agony as his body heated up, the force of the magical fire coursing through him and breaking his body down. Ger'alín felt the searing heat rising from the golem, radiating out from him. The paladin stepped back, confused but content to let the magi pour their energies out as long as it brought the giant to bay.

"What is going on?" he muttered to Callie.

"I overheard them saying something about Steelbreaker pulling in arcane power. I guess he uses it to supplement his physical force," the rogue shrugged. "Alayne said they would just use that against him. Still, we did get him on the ground," she chuckled.

Ger'alín nodded and surveyed the rest of the battle. The Horde had brought Mogheim down and were working with the Alliance to ground Brundhir. Steelbreaker was down, his massive body twitching as the Disorder of Azeroth swarmed back in to ensure he would never rise again. Within moments, Brundhir was brought down and the Iron Council lay decimated in their own chamber.

"What did you do and why?" Ger'alín asked Alayne after the final tally had been counted.

"The same thing that worked in the Halls of Lightning," she replied. "Ger'alín, I could sense a swelling of arcane energy within him. He was about to lash out with it the way Brundhir had. If he had done that, considering his own strength and the amount of power he was amassing, we would all have died. I couldn't risk letting that happen."

"I understand," he sighed. "Still, do you think you could do it again?"

"Only against something like Steelbreaker," she nodded. "We used his own reserves against him. If we had to try to call in that amount of power ourselves...it would be like trying to channel the entirety of the Sunwell itself."

"I'll keep that in mind," Ger'alín said. "For now, let's contact Brann and let him know that the Iron Council is no more."

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Brann, flanked by magi of the Kirin Tor, strode into the Council chamber, swaggering with pride. He stumbled, catching himself, when he saw the brave men and women who had fought the Council scattered around the room. Healers moved among them, laying on hands and offering comfort where they could. The fighters looked worn out. Brann sighed, feeling guilty for dragging so many into another one of his adventures. Still, he prayed that the answers he could find here would help lock Yogg-Saron back away and usher in a new age for the entire world. Who knew but that the seeds of cooperation planted in this dread place could blossom into a harvest of peace between all races?

Glancing through the room once more, he saw Ger'alín standing in the far rear of the chamber. Next to him where a pair of massive tauren. The men had discarded their armor and weapons and were struggling to open yet another door. Brann could hear faint echoes of their curses from where he stood in the entryway. Shaking his head ruefully and giving his long red beard a tug, the dwarf plodded over to them.

“What are ye doing?” he asked, startling Ger’alin.

“We’re trying to open this blasted door. We’ve gone all over this room. Whatever control panel there is that would let us get past that shattered walkway is either somewhere else...”

“Or behind this door,” one of the tauren, Tau’re, Brann recalled his name, sighed.

“Ye need a key to get in there,” Brann pointed out.

“We tried the left over explosives,” Ger’alin muttered sullenly. “We’ve had Alayne cast every spell she can think of.”

“I said ye need a key, lad,” Brann repeated.

“We don’t have any keys,” Ger’alin sighed. “All we found were some strange-looking platters on Mogheim.”

“Bring ‘em here,” Brann sighed, affecting a frustrated air. “What do they teach you lads these days?”

Ger’alin eyed the dwarf with a bit of confusion but said nothing. He motioned for Alayne to come to the door. Zerith had to reach down and shake her out of her weary trance. She stood, stretched, and then stumbled towards the door, her brother a half-step behind her, ready to catch her if she fell. “Brann wants to see those platters,” Ger’alin muttered.

“Discs,” she corrected. “Does he think he can translate them? They don’t match any runic structure I’ve ever come across.”

“Let me see them, lass,” Brann grinned. Alayne reached in her belt pouch and produced the discs they’d found on Mogheim. Brann studied them for a moment before nodding to himself. He gave them all a pleased grin and tugged happily on his beard. Lifting the discs over his head, he walked up to the sealed doors. Glancing for the keyhole, he motioned for Ger’alin to lift him up so he could press the discs into an elaborate pattern of whorls. The doors shimmered, shivered, and then pulled open, granting access to the room within.

A large control panel, twin to the one found in the Halls of Stone, stood against the far wall. Three metal faces watched over the room from above, their eyes dark and empty but their golden faces filled with wisdom and patience. Ger’alin groaned between clenched teeth, bracing for a repeat of the chaos that had followed the encounter in the Halls of Stone. Brann sucked in a self-satisfied breath as the paladin set him back on his feet. Brann stomped self-importantly into the chamber clutching the discs to his chest. He set them on the control panel and began pressing buttons. Zerith, recalling what Ger’alin and Alayne had said of the encounter with the archive in the Halls of Stone, motioned for the Disorder of Azeroth to join them and prepare for another fight.

“Now, this is what we call a nice find!” Brann exulted as he pressed keys on the control panel.

“Entry denied. Access level insufficient,” one of the faces on the wall intoned. The three heads lit up. Light-filled eyes glared down on the intruders. Ger’alin groaned and began praying beneath his breath. Alayne sighed, closed her eyes, and began going over the beginnings of a spell.

“I’ll show ye access, ye wretched machine. Here it is again: Norgannon’s key!” Brann shouted as he shoved the discs into the machine.

“Access to the Archivum granted. Intrusion protection mechanisms suspended,” the metallic voice announced. Alayne and Ger’alin heaved twin sighs of relief and Zerith murmured a quick prayer of thanksgiving.

“Looks just like all the other titan archives me lads have found... only older... and bigger,” Brann muttered, his voice carrying through the chamber. “Wait a second: this doesn’t look right! Next to this blinking light... what’s this Algalon signal?”

“Initiating query. The Algalon Failsafe is an automated emergency signal following a Prime Designate's demise.”

“Oh shit,” Ger'alın gasped.

“Light preserve us,” Zerith muttered.

“We're in trouble,” Alayne groaned.

“Prime Desigate? Where have I 'eard that before?” Brann mused, stroking his beard. He snapped his fingers as he recalled the memory, “By my grandfather's beard, Loken is Azeroth's Prime Designate. Loken's death triggered this!” Brann shouted, waving his arms and gesturing at the blinking light.

“Affirmative. Timestamp of Prime Designate Loken's destruction coincides with signal activation.”

“Well? Who's on the listening side of the signal? What's going to happen?” Brann demanded, turning to face the three heads watching over them.

“Searching... Destruction of Prime Designate is considered the first warning sign of systemic planetary failure. Algalon observer entity's arrival is followed by planetary diagnostics resulting in one of two possible reply signals. Reply-code Alpha, signaling "All is well" and Reply-code Omega, signaling planetary re-origination.”

“I don't like the sound of that one bit,” Ger'alın muttered, crossing his arms over his chest. Alayne huddled next to him and he wrapped an arm around her shoulder, kissing the top of her head. Zerith just stared, stunned, trying to piece together what the machine had said and translate it into something comprehensible.

“Planetary re-origination? Speak plainly, ye blasted machine!” Brann roared angrily.

“The decomposition of the planet and its living organisms into base elements: metals, rocks, gases. This is followed by a period of reconstitution of each element into the original planetary blueprint.”

“I told you it wouldn't be good,” Ger'alın sighed.

“Hear that lads? It's only the end of the world!” Brann shouted, agitated, “Well, what are ye waiting for, ye rusty machine? Initiate Reply-code Alpha, all is well! Pints are on me!”

“It's not going to be that simple,” Alayne moaned. “Fifty gold on it.”

“I'm not taking that bet,” Ger'alın replied. “I don't have fifty gold on me.”

“Request denied,” the metallic voice sighed.

“Told you,” Alayne whispered. “I wonder how much longer we have?”

“Reply-codes built into Algalon observer entity. He is both messenger and message,” the machine finished its explanation.

“Well, what's this Algalon going to be looking for with his diagnostics? What are our chances?” Brann screamed, running his hands through his red hair and knocking his hat askew.

“Algalon diagnostics assess danger of systemic Old God corruption in planetary vital functions. Calculating chance of Omega Reply-code...” the metallic voice paused, seeming to gather its thoughts. “Ninety-nine point nine nine percent.”

Ger'alın appeared to be trying to do the sums in his head. “So there is some chance it won't send the ‘please, come destroy this world’ signal?”

“That's repeating of course,” the metallic voice added helpfully.

“Blast it, lads,” Brann sighed, turning to face Ger'alın and the others. “Looks like we've got a fight ahead of us. New orders!” he shouted at the control panel, “Unlock the entry to the Celestial Planetarium.”

“Request denied. Access requires manual verification of the four watchers' sigils.”

“Four watchers? Sigils? Could ye be a little less cryptic, confounded machine?” Brann demanded.

“The four watchers of Ulduar: Freya, Thorim, Hodir and Mimiron. The sigils are tied to their physical and mental integrity. All four sigils are required for access to the Celestial Planetarium.”

“How do we get the sigils from them, then? Just walk up to them and ask them nicely?” Brann muttered sarcastically.

“Analyzing watchers status. Please wait.”

“Blasted machine,” Brann grimaced. “First it tells us that we’ve set off the beginnings of an apocalypse. Now it tells us to wait while it calculates what we need to do to undo that,” he muttered, slamming his fist into the console.

“Should I survive this,” Ger’alin announced, “or should we be recreated and come back as we are, I want to leave a message to myself saying that I am never getting mixed up with you again, Brann.”

“I’d like to leave a similar bloody message meself,” the dwarf agreed, tapping at the console.

“Corruption found. External influence gaining control over watchers. Sigils compromised,” the machine said after a lengthy pause.

“You’re going to tell us how to... "un-compromise" the sigils, aren't you?” Brann asked sheepishly.

“Sufficient use of force would trigger a reset in watcher functions, removing the external influence.”

“We’re going to have to fight the Watchers,” Ger’alin sighed, slumping against the wall and pulling Alayne with him. His legs went out from under him, dropping them both to the floor. He began kissing her frantically, ignoring her protests that others were watching. “We’ve got maybe a few hours left to live. I intend to enjoy them,” he growled. Zerith smacked the paladin on the back of the head, snapping him out of his momentary panic long enough for Alayne to get away. “Light help me if I just want to go out on a high note,” Ger’alin grimaced, rubbing the back of his head.

“We’ll figure something out,” Zerith said firmly. “And, if we don’t, we’ll go down standing and fighting. Not panicking and mourning. We are not going to just give up. No matter the odds.”

“You’re right,” Ger’alin sighed. “My apologies.” Standing up, the paladin pulled his face into a mask of endurance.

“As for not endangering the sigils during this process, I can analyze each watcher's status and make that information available to you upon completion of calculations,” the machine chimed in.

“I’ve dreamed of roaming the halls of the titans for years. I never thought I’d be pitted against their creations,” Brann moaned, tapping at another series of keys. “Pull up the data on the Watchers in this order: Freya, Hodir, Mimiron, Thorim.”

The machine sat silent for several long moments before lighting up again and chirping out the explanation. “Commencing Watcher Freya status analysis. Watcher's powers augmented by presence of Elder servants. Analyzing Elder Brightleaf enhancement. Persistent area defenses powered by solar amplification. Elder Stonebark analysis reveals a sonic defense that disrupts use of magic. Elder Ironbranch scans have uncovered plant based immobilization mechanisms. In addition, my analysis links each Elder to an increase in Freya spell-casting, physical or summoning capabilities. Destruction of Elder servants will result in lost of enhancements of Watcher Freya. However permanent damage to Freya's person and possessions including her Watcher sigil highly probable.”

“I suppose that means that we’ll have to fight Freya without damaging anything else,” Ger’alin sighed.

The metallic voice rang through the chamber again. “Commencing Watcher Hodir status analysis. Hodir's sigil appears to be located inside a cache of artifacts. Watcher Hodir's temperament and behavior highly unstable. Destruction of cache highly probable during prolonged combat. Allies imprisoned in the field of battle are likely to provide synergies and minimize combat duration. Preservation of cache is essential to recovering Hodir's sigil.”

“We'll have to figure out a way to defeat him quickly, then,” Zerith muttered, lost in his own thoughts.

“Commencing Watcher Mimiron status analysis. Watcher Mimiron's sigil is linked to a self-destruct mechanism connected to entirety of the Corridors of Ingenuity. Trigger for self-destruct mechanism is code named "Big Red Button," Mimiron's own creation. To retrieve Mimiron's sigil, initiate self-destruct sequence and defeat Mimiron before its completion.”

“I will pay if anyone can translate that into understandable Orcish,” Alayne grunted.

“Commencing Watcher Thorim status analysis. An external influence under illusory guise of Thorim's deceased mate Sif has been detected. Mental interference from this presence dangerously close from triggering partial memory damage. analysis suggest approaching the arena from the front and splitting secondary force through a side passage at the ground level. This will maximize odds of reaching Thorim's outlook before mental domination by external presence is complete.”

“Extra gold to anyone who can explain that one, too,” Alayne quipped.

“Enough sarcasm,” Zerith muttered angrily. “Let's sit down and see if we can figure this out.”

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Ger'alín peered over the edge and into the abyss below. “I thought there was supposed to be a bridge here now,” he shouted. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth stood spread along the wide entryway. Alayne clutched the pillar near the door, terrified of coming any closer to the edge.

“Well, there isn't,” Zerith sighed from a few feet behind the paladin. “Any ideas on how we get from here to there?” he pointed at the platform over fifty feet away.

“None whatsoever,” Ger'alín grimaced. “It would take some time to construct a bridge between the two and time is not something we have in adequate supply of late.”

“Magic?”

“Why don't *you* go suggest that to Alayne? But wait before you do,” he muttered. “I want to try to see how much I should charge for entrance to that particular spectacle.”

Zerith snorted but said nothing. The further they pressed into Ulduar, the more irritable and frustrated everyone seemed to grow. He prayed he would be able to keep his head since it seemed that Ger'alín was beginning to waver between the stolid, stoic nature he normally carried and a panicked, frightened, sarcastic carouser. Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, Zerith wondered at the changes he had begun noticing among the Disorder of Azeroth as they moved further towards their goal. Alayne was once again blacking out and flipping between calm and crazed. Had he not been watching Ger'alín, he would have suspected the man was drinking heavily again. Callie was dispirited and Dar'ja was acting as if she wanted to smash something. Tau're had grown noticeably less placid as well. Shrugging, Zerith ran his hands through his hair. It was not like him to worry so over everyone else. Stepping to the edge near the center of the platform, Zerith looked over into the abyss.

The room began to rumble and shake. The priest danced back from the edge and glanced at Ger'alın. The paladin had fallen on his rear, hands splayed to keep him from landing on his back. Smoke and confusion filled the air between them and the platform as a gigantic stone man emerged from below.

"None shall pass!" he roared. Massive arms swept over the room. Those not fast enough to get out of their way were knocked off their feet and flung against the walls.

"Oblivion!" he screamed.

"What in the nine hells is that?" Ger'alın demanded as he pushed himself to his feet. Legs pumping, he raced towards the creature's torso. Unslinging his hammer and pulling his shield in front of him, the paladin began chipping away at the creature's chest while looking for an opening that would let him climb up to the ever-vulnerable face. The rest of the group regained their footing and began wading in to the fray or flinging spells and missiles as best they could while keeping an eye on the massive arms.

A choked off-scream caught Ger'alın's attention as the creature reached down with his right hand and grabbed Zerith. The priest began struggling against the stone grip, fighting to free himself. "I will squeeze the life from you!" the titanic creature bellowed.

"Get me out of here!" Zerith shouted, his voice thick with strain as the stone fist tightened around him.

"Focus on the arm! The arm!" Ger'alın ordered, following his own commands. Fire and ice, shadow and Light were hurled at the stone hand gripping Zerith. Ger'alın leapt as high as he could while keeping an eye on the other arm. Using his strongest attacks, he chipped away at the upper arm, praying it would be enough to free the priest from the creature's grip.

"Let go of him!" Alayne and Dar'ja roared at the same time. Dar'ja threw herself into the chaotic melee, her blade flashing as she sawed at the creature's wrist. "It's killing him!" she screamed as she caught a glimpse of her husband's purpling face. From the back lines, Alayne began channeling as much arcane energy as she could muster. Throwing out her hand, she sent bolts of pure magic at the creature's wrist, augmenting her sister-by-marriage's attacks.

"Only a flesh wound!" the creature roared as its hand fell away, crumbling into dust on the floor. Zerith fell out of the broken fist and nearly plummeted into the abyss below. Dar'ja grabbed his robes as he fell past her and then fell flat herself, her grip keeping him from falling further. Praying that she would be able to hold on long enough for one of the others to get to her, Ger'alın turned his attention back to the creature's torso.

"Focus on the torso now!" he yelled. Bereft of his right arm, the creature glared down at the insects annoying him. His eyes flashed and beams of light erupted from them. Ger'alın heard one of the tauren yelp and begin cursing as the eye beams centered on him and seared his flesh. Running, the eyebeams followed him, burning anyone he ran past. "Focus! Focus! For the love of the Light, focus!" Ger'alın screamed as he heard the sounds of agony behind him. His mace moved in a blur of light and rage as he hammered away at the creature's torso. Whenever the left arm swung out, Ger'alın threw himself back to his feet, renewing his frenzied attack. Great chunks of rock fell away as the melee fighters focused on weak spots in the torso. The left arm trembled and fell into rubble to join the right as the ranged fighters destroyed it.

"Just a scratch!" the creature taunted.

"At least it can't hit us anymore," Ger'alın muttered, coughing on the dust that flew into the air. "Focus!"

Within moments of the second arm's destruction, the creature crumbled into massive shards and fell backwards. When the dust cleared, Ger'alın snorted. The corpse made a crude

walkway between the platforms. Glancing around, Ger'alín saw that Zerith had been pulled back up and was busy healing the tauren who had been the focus of the creature's eyebeams.

"Well, at least now we know how we're getting across," Ger'alín said loudly, gesturing to the crude corpse-bridge. "From now on, let's keep our mouths shut in this place. It seems that whatever is here can hear us and has a sense of humor to make Callie's look normal."

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"The titans really didn't like flesh creatures, did they?" Alayne wondered as she rubbed her ankle.

"Those cats were pretty fleshy if you ask me," Ger'alín winced as GrognaK rubbed a healing salve over the paladin's back. "That is cold."

"Better the cold than the fever you could get from those scratches," the shaman muttered.

"I don't think an army of seamstresses could salvage this shirt," Alayne said breathlessly as she stared at the rips in the undershirt her husband had been wearing. Balling the blood-stained and torn garment up, she tossed it aside and wiped her hands on her skirts.

"My armor is shot," Ger'alín said, taking toll of his losses as he lifted his arms and let the tauren wind bandages around his chest and back. "I hope that we'll be able to get some more before we go much further. It will take months for the blacksmiths to patch that set. I've never seen a cat with claws that could shred reinforced plate!"

"I think I'm going to be sick," Alayne whispered as she stared at the scraps that had been her husband's breastplate. His shield was likewise ruined and his legplates were mangled beyond salvaging. GrognaK, Zerith, and the other healers moved quickly among the wounded, laying on hands or spreading healing salves.

"Alayne, where are you going?" Ger'alín asked as he glanced at her leaning over the balcony. "You know you don't have a head for heights." He stood up to follow her, limping where his armor had been shredded and had cut into his thigh. He felt a little embarrassed at having to stand up in his underwear but most of the rest of the gathering was too busy being healed or trying to recover to notice. "I've got a few spare pieces back at Naxxramas," he continued. "It's not the end of the world. I'm sure we can send some of the battle magi after them. We've earned a brief respite. Alayne? What are you staring at?"

Alayne had leaned over the railing to let the contents of her stomach flow. However, before she could sick-up, she'd caught a glimpse of something that horrified her. Down in the middle of the empty open space yawning beneath her, she had seen a strange woman – a vykrul servant of the Lich King, no doubt – speaking with a familiar shadow. "Arthas?" she whispered, her heart thundering against her ribs in terror.

"Alayne?" Ger'alín asked, confused. "Alayne, what are you staring at?"

Alayne waved him to silence and continued to stare. Opening her eyes as wide as they would go, she willed herself to see what was going on in the nearly impenetrable shadows beneath them. She caught a glimpse of light flashing off armor, the jingle of weapons rattling in their holsters, and incoherent whispers. Ger'alín watched her with mounting concern as she leaned further and further over the railing. "Alayne? Alayne!" he shouted, reaching out and grabbing her arm, pulling her back from the abyss. "What in the name of the Legion are you doing?" he hissed.

"I saw something down there," she muttered defensively.

"We'll set watches," her husband replied firmly. "If anything is down there, we'll see it coming. But, there's no need to throw yourself down there from up here. Come on. We're not going anywhere with so many of us cut up from those cats and most of our armor ruined."

Let's find a likely spot and get some rest. I've a feeling we're going to need it now more than ever."

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Callie was glad of the levitation spells the magi had placed on the crates of armor. She still had no idea how Ger'alín or the others were able to lift the heavy plate armor, let alone wear it and walk around in it. The chainmail was heavy enough on its own in her mind. Add on the plate they bore so effortlessly and the Forsaken wondered just how strong the warriors would be if they were less encumbered. Shaking her head silently, she gestured to the piles of discarded armor.

"Light save us," one of the humans muttered. "What did you fight that did this?"

"Some rather nasty kittens," Callie returned good-naturedly. "They got the worst of it in the end."

"We'll take these back and have our smiths work on repairs. For now, what we have should be sufficient. We've placed enchantments on them to aid the bearers."

Callie nodded and left the battle magi to their work. She glanced over at Diami who held up four fingers. Waving at the warlock, Callie began moving among the sleepers, rousing them for the next round of fighting. She prodded Ger'alín with a foot and stifled a laugh when the paladin grabbed her ankle and jerked her off her feet. "I told you not to kick me," he growled sleepily.

"Wake up," she chuckled. "You've gotten your four hours. The Kirin Tor scrounged up some replacement plate."

"It won't be as good as what I had but what I had is barely worth the scrap now," Ger'alín grouched sourly as he rubbed at the bandages. Lifting one, he peeked under it and grimaced. "They'll need replacing before much longer unless the others can find the energy to heal these. I'm not sure that'd be wise though," he added, forestalling Callie from waking Zerith or Dar'ja. "They're nearing their limits as is. It'd be better if they could have a full day of rest but with Algalon bearing down on us, we haven't got the time."

"You'll just have to be careful," Callie muttered. "Though, honestly, Ger'alín, you look terrible. You look as if you've not slept at all."

"I feel as if I haven't," he agreed wearily. "I had so many strange dreams...this place...I hate it here. I don't see what Brann found so fascinating about it."

"I'm not so fond of it myself. Sure, it's majestic, grand, and interesting," the rogue admitted, "but after a few hours, I was ready to head back to some place less intimidating."

"I'd like to meet the Titans who built this place and have a few choice words with them," the paladin sighed. "Alayne, wake up," he whispered, shaking his wife gently.

"I'm awake. I swear, I feel like I didn't even get to close my eyes good," she groaned, rubbing her eyelids with the back of a hand. "I'm so tired."

"Alayne, I swear to you, I am going to take you on a real vacation when we're done here in Northrend. Sunny beaches. Hot weather. Cool waters...and not a hint of snow or Scourge for hundreds of miles," he whispered, wrapping his arms around her soothingly.

"I thought you were never going back to Stranglethorn again," Callie teased. A withering look from Ger'alín stopped her in her tracks. Muttering to herself, she continued on, waking the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth. By the time she finished her task, she glanced over to see Ger'alín pulling on thick woolens and eyeing full-length chain mail. Alayne sat on the stairs nearby, ready to help him if needed. The healers staggered through the milling milieu, healing those whom they had not been able to heal the night before and looking as if they were ready to keel over themselves. Callie clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and slashed at the air with her arm-sword. Their group was in no condition to press on

into battle. They were exhausted far beyond what they should normally have been in this case. Even she could feel the effects of it and she had far more endurance than any of the living beings. "What's happening to us?" she wondered aloud.

"It's this place," Zerith muttered angrily, irritable at having awakened before he truly wanted to get up. "This nightmare of a city. I swear, there's something in the air. It's watching us, waiting for us to slip up."

"Yogg-Saron?"

"Possibly," the priest shrugged. "It's driving me up the wall. I can't wait to be done with this and to get out of here. I want to go some place where they've never even heard of the Scourge or snow or cold."

"If you go there, keep an eye on Ger'alain," the rogue said flatly. "I think he's looking for a place like that himself."

Zerith snorted and pushed himself to his feet. Dar'ja groaned and rose as well. None of the Disorder of Azeroth looked refreshed from their short sleep. Even the Forsaken looked worse for wear. As the priest surveyed the damage, he wondered just how they were going to continue on in this state. Shoving the morose thoughts to the back of his mind, Zerith waded through the waking sleepers, offering healing only where it was most needed. Each bit took more and more energy from him and by the time he'd finally argued Ger'alain into accepting it, Zerith was unsteady on his feet.

"Where to now?" the priest asked wistfully.

"Let's just take them in order, starting with that one," Ger'alain muttered, pointing down a corridor filled with ice and snow. Zerith shivered and pulled his cloak tighter around his body. "From what little I know, I can guess that's probably leading to Hodir. The green garden in the back is probably Freya's. I'm not sure what the other two are. We'll figure those out when we get there."

Ger'alain hefted the last bits of armor and tightened the cinches. Pulling his tabard over his head, he reached for his helm and then discarded it, muttering that the eyeslots were out of alignment for a sin'dorei. Strapping his mace to his belt and picking up a shield emblazoned with the Eye of the Kirin Tor, the paladin made his way through the milling throng and stood in the midst of the icy hallway. The rest fell in behind him, ranking themselves in a ragged order. Ger'alain walked at a brisk pace, trying to ignore the frigid winds howling past him.

"Where in the name of the Legion did those come from?" he heard someone shout. Spinning on his heel, he saw several jormungars, giant snakes with long tusks, bursting out of a snowmound. He rushed towards them, hoping to make short work of them. The magi near Alayne beat him to it. Drawing in the icy currents surrounding them, they froze the jormungars in place while others rained fire and ice down on the venomous creatures. Ger'alain and the other fighters positioned themselves around the snakes in case any managed to break free of the spell trapping them. Luckily, they were not needed.

"What. Happened. Here?" Ger'alain demanded, biting off each word as he spoke it.

"Someone walked past a snowmound and suddenly those things began jumping out of it," Alayne answered, gesturing.

"Stay in the middle of the corridor. Don't touch anything. Don't look at anything. The last thing we need is to have to fight a half-dozen battles while we're still exhausted and working our way up to fighting one of the most powerful beings in existence!" Ger'alain roared, his fatigue stamping down his normal even-keeled nature. The rest of the group eyed the paladin sullenly but lined themselves up in the middle of the corridor, taking care to stay far away from any snowmounds. Zerith shot the paladin an irritated glare before shaking his head and falling into line himself.

"You're tired," Tau're muttered into the paladin's ear.

"I'm exhausted," Ger'alın admitted. "I'm sore. I'm cold. I hate this place."

"Don't let the chill and the darkness take hold," the tauren said calmly. "Just picture some place else. It'll help keep you sane."

"Someplace else," Ger'alın muttered. "Stranglethorn is looking damned good about now. Let's get moving."

Leading the others down the hallway, relieved when they were able to sneak past several more snowmounds, Ger'alın came to a dead end. Branching out on either the left or the right, the corridor split. Down the right, the snows melted and faded into a strange library of sorts. Up the hill on the left, the snows and ice continued. Gritting his teeth, Ger'alın began wading through the snow, carefully pressing himself against the wall when he came near a snowmound. He waited, motioning for the others to pass him, his eyes focused on the mound until the last person passed him. Satisfied that they had not woken anymore jormungars, Ger'alın crept up the snowy hallway. He grunted softly when he saw that the others were pressed against the wall, hiding behind massive pillars that formed an arch leading further in. When he glanced inside the room, he ducked into the shadows himself. His heart pounded in his chest and he wondered, once again, what they had gotten themselves into.

Standing at the far end of the room was Hodir. He resembled the frost giants who called themselves his sons. Ger'alın had briefly encountered them while exploring the Storm Peaks with Alayne and Brann. He wore a massive horned helm that covered most of his face. A snowy beard flared down his chest, the tip reaching his waist. Buckled over a massive girth was a chestplate of ancient stone and ice. The frost giant turned periodically to study four ice blocks arrayed in a line before him. Peering closely at them when the giant had his back turned, Ger'alın was surprised to see that the ice blocks imprisoned people. He could not tell if the prisoners lived or had died trapped in the ice. Sighing, he motioned for Tau're and some of the other fighters to move closer to him.

"At my signal, I'm going to rush in there and try to keep Hodir distracted," the paladin explained. "I want you to try to free the people imprisoned in those ice blocks if you can. If they're dead, try to get their bodies out of the way. If they're alive, maybe they can help us. We're going to need to hit him hard and fast."

The others nodded and Ger'alın sent one of them to spread the message down the line. Watching Hodir pace back and forth, Ger'alın waited until the frost giant turned his back and walked farther away from the door. Then, with a quick gesture of his arm, the paladin ran into the room, pulling his shield in front of him and unsheathing his mace in one smooth motion.

The pattering of feet on the icy stone floor caught the giant's attention. He turned to see the Disorder of Azeroth pouring into the room. Ger'alın reached him before he could do more than grasp the situation. "You will suffer for this trespass!" Hodir roared angrily.

Ger'alın ignored the angry giant for the moment. Pouring divine energy into the ground and heating it, the paladin began hammering at Hodir's legs. Annoyed by the attack, Hodir swung a mighty fist at the mortal who dared approach him so insolently. Ger'alın dodged out of the way quickly, letting the giant smash his fist into the ground. Such was the force behind Hodir's blow that the room trembled ominously and an icicle crashed to the ground, nearly impaling the paladin. Ger'alın stared at Hodir in shock as the ice crashed and shattered next to him. Hodir's gaze was malevolent. Gritting his teeth, Ger'alın searched for another opening through which he could press his attack.

Light flashed behind the frost giant and Ger'alın could see that the prisoners in the ice blocks had been freed and had joined the attack. A mage joined Alayne's ranks and began hurling the strongest fire spells she could. The rest of the magi with Alayne did likewise. The heat from their spells caused yet more icicles to melt and crash to the ground. Ger'alın almost shouted for them to stop but held his tongue. The sooner the fight ended, the better it would be for everyone.

Hodir continued to level his strongest blows at the paladin but, periodically, he would turn towards the magi and suck in a deep breath. Exhaling heavily, he breathed a beam of icy air at them, hoping to trap them back in the icy prisons. The fighters broke off their attack then to free their comrades from the ice blocks while Ger'alín fought to keep the Watcher focused on him.

“Winds of the north consume you!” Hodir cursed as the magi managed to set his ice-caked beard on fire. Flailing with his hands to smother the flames, he gestured and the icy air in the room began to solidify. Ger'alín and the others rushed to the sides of the room, moving as quickly as weary and near-frozen legs would carry them. Some did not make it in time and were trapped in blocks of solid ice. Grunting, the paladin raced back into the fray the moment the air began to warm, throwing himself at Hodir while the others worked to free their flash-frozen comrades.

“We have to do enough damage to knock some sense into him,” Ger'alín muttered to himself. “Sure, that’s easy.” Growling softly beneath his breath, Ger'alín watched for an opening. Hodir swung down and this time, instead of dodging his blow, Ger'alín let it land near him. Grasping the giant’s fist, he flew into the air and spun, nearly stabbing himself with one of the points on Hodir’s helm. “Hit him hard!” the paladin roared as he slammed his mace against the giant’s helm. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth fired their heaviest spells and directed their attacks at the giant’s backside. Hodir staggered as the force of many blows at once landed against him. Ger'alín continued to pound, no longer worrying if Hodir would survive this encounter. All the paladin cared about was ending the fight quickly. Fatigue, worry, and anger washed over him as he hammered again and again at the Watcher’s skull. Ger'alín sensed a lessening of power flowing around him. A gentle hand grasped him and plucked him from his awkward perch. He found himself hovering in front of an ancient, craggy face. Calm eyes regarded him with relief and a hint of amusement.

“I am released from his grasp at last,” Hodir said softly. “I thank you.”

Ger'alín nodded dumbly as the giant set him back on the ground. Alayne rushed over to her husband and flung her arms around him. “You wouldn’t stop,” she said over and over again. “We kept shouting that it was over but you didn’t hear us.”

“I’m sorry,” Ger'alín said, speaking to both Alayne and Hodir at the same time. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“It is Yogg-Saron,” Hodir said simply. “His pollution, his madness is infecting everything. I suspect the other Watchers suffer as I have. But, I will fight you no more. Instead, I will return to my post, keeping guard on the creature housed within Ulduar.”

“Wait,” Ger'alín said, holding up a hand. “Algalon is on his way or may even be here already. We killed Loken,” he added when Hodir raised his eyebrows in surprise. “We had to. Loken was insane.”

“You’ll need my sigil and the sigils of the other Watchers to access the Planetarium,” Hodir nodded. Reaching into his belt pouch, he produced a massive ice block. As he handed it to Ger'alín, it seemed to shrink until the paladin could carry it easily on his own. “Here it is. When you are done with it, return it to me. You will find me at my post,” he gestured towards the circular hallway. “Should you require my aid, I will give it.”

Then, without another word, the Watcher turned on his heel and strode down the stairs.

“One down,” Ger'alín whispered as he tucked the sigil into his own pouch. “Three more to go.”

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“That’s Thorim,” Alayne agreed. “But who is the woman with him?”

“She looks like some of those female vykrul we saw in Sifreldar Village,” Ger’alin mused.

“She can’t be...” Alayne trailed off. “That can’t be his wife, Sif. He told us that Sif was murdered millennia ago. Loken killed her!”

“We’ll worry about who she is later,” Ger’alin sighed. “For now, we’ve got to figure out how to get up there to them.”

“There’s a door on the side of the room,” Alayne pointed out.

“Yes, I see that,” her husband replied. “And, perhaps the lever next to it controls the gate. Still, we’re going to have to take down those fighters in the arena while another group tries to open the gate and follow the hallway around. Hopefully it will open up behind Thorim and we can take him from behind. If we’re quick enough, we can maybe force him over the edge and surround him in the arena. That would help.”

“It would,” Alayne agreed.

“I want Tau’re, Zerith, Nishi, and Diami to take the hallway. The rest of us will stay in the arena and try to bring down those creatures there,” he said, pointing to the giant jormungar and the rows of fighters pitted against it. “When you get to Thorim, shout. If I haven’t heard you by the time I’ve made a count of two hundred, then Alayne, Dar’ja, Callie, and I will head through the hallway ourselves.”

Those named nodded in acceptance and Ger’alin motioned for the others to come up the stairs. Once everyone was in position, the paladin rushed into the arena, lining up with those fighting the jormungar and attacking the giant snake.

“Interlopers! You mortals who dare to interfere with my sport will pay!” Thorim roared angrily. He hefted his hammer over his head and made as if to strike with it. Zerith and the others were at the gate, fighting with the lever to try to force their way into the hallway. The jormungar fell to the ground with a wet thud and the other fighters turned on the Disorder of Azeroth. Ger’alin glared at them but wasted no time turning his attack on those who had seconds ago seemed like allies. “Wait--you...” Thorim muttered as the gate to the hallway opened and the first group disappeared down the corridor. The Watcher stared at Alayne. “I remember you... In the mountains... But you... what is this? Where am...”

Alayne moved as if to answer, to try to dispel some of the Watcher’s confusion. But the woman standing next to him cut her off. “Thorim, my lord, why else would these invaders have come into your sanctum but to slay you? They must be stopped!”

“Stop them, then!” the Watcher roared. Ger’alin’s jaw dropped as he saw iron vykrul and iron dwarves leap from the audience chamber surrounding the arena. He rushed to attack them, working to keep them from reaching the spell casters and healers stacked together in the center of the room. Spells rained down on them while the paladin gave a count beneath his breath.

“Fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five,” he panted to himself as he hacked and hewed at the attackers. Whenever one slipped past him to attack the casters, he rushed in, heating the ground beneath them with holy fury, slowing the vykrul or the dwarf until it could be killed. Meanwhile, from the platform above the arena, Thorim would periodically hurl his hammer. Where it landed, deafening thunder boomed, momentarily startling and silencing those nearby. Ger’alin glanced over his shoulder to see Alayne picking herself up off the floor and shaking her head as if to clear it. Gritting his teeth, he continued to try to keep the audience members from overwhelming them all.

“One hundred and twelve, one hundred and thirteen,” he counted.

“Here!” he heard Zerith cry out. Glancing up to the platform, Ger’alin saw Thorim turning and leveling his hammer at the group coming up behind him. Tau’re rushed him, sweeping at the Watcher’s legs with one of his axes. Thorim grimaced and stared at the upstarts who were attacking him.

“Impertinent whelps! You dare challenge me atop my pedestal! I will crush you myself!” he shouted as he bent his knees and leapt down into the arena below. Tau’re and the others followed quickly behind him.

“Impossible! Lord Thorim, I will bring your foes a frigid death!” the woman posing as Sif shouted as she leapt down to join the fight below.

Ger’alin and the others quickly dispatched the remaining audience members and focused on Thorim. Sif flitted around the room, weaving spells of ice and storm down on them. Ger’alin could feel the joints of his armor stiffening from the cold and his fingers began to feel numb. He had hoped that they would be done with such cold after taking down Hodir. Alayne began trying to focus her spells on Sif, hoping to interrupt or at least disrupt the woman’s spells. However, she moved too quickly for Alayne to be able to strike a single blow. When Thorim noticed that the sin’dorei was targeting his wife, he roared and raced towards her, his mace raised high over his head and his anger blazing from blue eyes that shone with the light of madness.

“Leave her alone!” the Watcher screamed. Alayne winced and tried to throw herself out of the way of the blow she saw coming. Ger’alin sprinted over to Thorim as the Watcher struck the ground where Alayne had been standing. Slamming his own mace into Thorim’s wrist, Ger’alin felt a satisfying crack where his blow had broken the bones in the Watcher’s wrist. The gigantic mace dropped from a nerveless hand and Thorim turned to glare at the paladin. Reaching out with his good hand, he pointed at some of the orbs lining the arena. Ger’alin felt the air crackling around him. His long brown hair began rising of its own accord. He felt something slam into him, knocking the wind out of him. Blinking, he found himself staring at the ceiling, a worried Alayne hovering over him while casting spells at the enraged Watcher. “Pathetic!” Thorim shouted, pointing again.

Reacting as quickly as she could, Alayne pulled the power of the Watcher’s spell into herself. Redirecting it, she twisted the magic into a different spell. Hurling it at the Watcher, she felt a moment of satisfaction when the resulting backlash exploded against Thorim’s chest. Coupled with the blows from Tau’re’s axes and the spells from the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth, the giant staggered, his knees going out from under him. The light of madness began to lift from his eyes. The woman posing as Sif hissed angrily and continued to weave her own spells. Alayne prepared for another attack but Thorim shook his head and stared at the sin’dorei woman for a long moment. Then, suddenly, he rose to his feet and pointed at Sif.

“My lord!” the woman shouted. “They will kill you! Aid me!”

“You! Fiend! You are not my beloved! Be gone!” Thorim shrieked. The woman froze, her visage twisting. A cleansing wind coursed through the room, swirling around her. In her place stood a writhing tentacle. Alayne could sense the rage and madness flowing from it, trying to reach into her mind, to twist her as it had twisted Thorim. The Watcher noticed it and hurled another of his spells at it, destroying it utterly. “Behold the hand behind all the evil that has befallen Ulduar! Left my kingdom in ruins, corrupted my brother and slain my wife!” Thorim sighed, pointing at the pile of ash that remained. “And now it falls to you, champions, to avenge us all! The task before you is great, but I will lend you my aid as I am able. You must prevail! I will return to my post now. I should never have abandoned it.”

Thorim started to walk down the corridor to the circular chamber where Hodir stood watching. Glancing down to assure herself that Ger’alin would be well, Alayne rushed over to the Watcher.

“Thorim,” she said breathlessly, uncertain as to how to address one of the great beings of the world.

“I remember you,” he chuckled. “In the mountains...what is it, girl?” he asked, kneeling down so he was on a level with her.

“We killed Loken. We have avenged your wife’s murder,” she said, the words tumbling out of her in a rush. “But now Algalon is coming for us...”

“You need say no more. Here is my sigil,” he replied, holding out his hand and summoning the object that had been intertwined with his very being. It glowed and crackled with a faint memory of electricity. “And, your husband will be well. Though Freya is the most gifted of us in that area, I can undo what I have done,” he muttered, waving his hand and dispelling the static spell that kept Ger’alin on the ground. Before Alayne could thank the Watcher, he rose and strode down the corridor, resuming the post he should never have left.

“Two more to go,” Zerith whispered as he reached down to help Ger’alin to his feet.

“Two more to go,” the paladin agreed wearily, still shaken from the experience. “Light that hurt,” he grimaced. “What took you so long?”

“We had to fight our way through the hallway. There were iron dwarves everywhere, not to mention to huge golems guarding the doors. I wasn’t sure we would make it in time myself. I kept looking for you to try to join us.”

“It was all I could do to keep from being overwhelmed by the eager-to-join-in audience members,” Ger’alin gestured to the empty amphitheater above them. “Still, it’s over now. Just two more to go.”

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Alayne stepped gingerly out of the strange tram. Her robes still smoldered from the fires that had exploded around her in Mimiron’s chamber. She was glad that fight was over. The mechanical gnome had been difficult to bring out into the open. He’d spent most of the fight hiding within his machines.

“Just Freya left,” Ger’alin muttered wearily as the Disorder of Azeroth disembarked from the tram. “I’ll be so glad when this is over. I could use a good nap.”

Alayne nodded absently, not really paying attention. She was still shaken from the previous fight. As the group made its way through the dark corridors that led back to the circular chamber, she wondered for the last time if they would be quick enough to bring Freya back to her senses. Perhaps, with the Watchers back at their posts, they would not need to fight Yogg-Saron. Perhaps the old god could be contained safely behind Ulduar once more. Brann would have to give up his dreams of mastering the mysteries of the Titans, but better that than the alternative.

“It’s going to be fine,” Ger’alin whispered in her ear, kissing her lightly on the cheek. “We’ll take care of everything here and then we’ll go finish Arthas and the Scourge. Then, we’re going on a real honest-to-Light vacation. We won’t even leave a forwarding address. If the world needs heroes after this, let them look elsewhere for a while.”

“You know we can’t do that,” she muttered too softly for her husband to hear. “Let’s go,” she said more loudly. Walking past Mimiron, she suppressed a shudder again. The mechanical gnome noticed and sighed, his tinny voice cutting through the silent air.

“I am operating within normal parameters now thanks to you,” he said softly for something so large. “I thank you for that. If you had not forcibly reset my matrix, I would still be Yogg-Saron’s mindless slave. Also, I thank you for showing me the flaws in my creations. Next time, I will make them better.”

Not bothering to hide the shudder that gripped her at the thought of the Watcher’s “better” creations, Alayne strode past him and headed into the green vista that was Freya’s realm. The air of the conservatory was clean and fresh. Warmth suffused the area, reminding Alayne of just how long it had been since she’d enjoyed the warm eternal spring of Nagrand and Quel’Thalas. Trees loomed in the distance, their leaves filtering the sunlight and bathing the entire area in a welcoming emerald glow. Dryads, treants, and living flowers danced

about, ignoring the Disorder of Azeroth completely. Peace washed over Alayne and she could feel the tensions of the previous battles and the battles to come evaporating like fog on a sunny morning.

“It feels so nice,” Zerith muttered, stretching his arms above his head, “to relax again. I’d almost forgotten what it was like.”

“You’re not the only one,” Ger’alin sighed. “Even my armor feels lighter.”

“It’s a shame that we must bring violence to such a peaceful place,” Alayne whispered. Ger’alin put an arm around her shoulders and Zerith patted her on the back.

“It will be over soon. This is the last fight before we take care of Algalon. Just think,” he said softly, “if we don’t defeat Freya and retrieve her sigil, not only will this place be destroyed; the world will end with it.”

“I know. I’m not saying we should stop,” she replied. “I’m just sorry to disturb the peace of this place. And I’m sorry that we have to fight Freya. She was so helpful to us in Sholazar. Maybe, when this is all done, she can go back there and tend to the gorlocks and wolvar we saw.”

“Yes,” Zerith nodded. “For now, we need to focus on bringing her to her senses.”

“Have everyone hang back a bit,” Ger’alin said suddenly, spotting motion in the distance. “The less fighting we have to do in here, the better. I think I see something moving in the far back of the area. I’m going to go check it out.”

Before either of them could stop him, Ger’alin was sprinting through the verdant growth, using it to camouflage his movements as he spied out the area where he’d seen the motion. The creatures scattered around the conservatory paid scant attention to the gathering as long as no threat was detected from the mortal invaders. Several packs of wandering flowers passed through the Disorder of Azeroth’s ranks, spreading their sweet scent through the room. Callie reached out and patted a flower fondly. For all that they were wild and savage, there was a strange beauty to them. The dryads and nymphs scarcely seemed to notice the mortals. Alayne watched them patrol past the Disorder of Azeroth, noting an odd blindness to their vision. She prayed that the guardians of nature would remain oblivious to them even when they began the fight against Freya. She had a feeling, however, that once the battle was begun, they would turn on the mortals, no longer oblivious to their doings in the conservatory.

“Perhaps it would be better to fight them now rather than later,” she whispered to Zerith, gesturing towards the inhabitants of the conservatory.

“Perhaps,” he agreed. “Let’s wait for Ger’alin to return from where ever it is he ran off to.”

A few moments later, the paladin returned. Leafy vines were caught in his hair and his armor bore pollen stains. His nose and eyes were slightly red and he sneezed violently several times. “All of the good things about spring and all of the bad ones as well,” he muttered, his voice thick. “Freya’s back there. She can’t see us up here, though, because the undergrowth is too thick. She’s fairly preoccupied with something in the back of the room; I couldn’t see what.”

“Do you think we should attack these guardians first?” Zerith gestured around at the creatures still wandering about peacefully.

“No,” Ger’alin shook his head. “Once we’re on the other side of that thicket, they won’t see us. They might hear us but even for plants, it will take some time for them to break through. Freya’s surrounded her area with thick growth. There’s not much moving in or out.”

“I see,” Zerith said quietly.

“Actually, you don’t. That’s the whole point,” the paladin quipped. Gesturing for the others to gather around, he explained the plan to them. Then, lining up in the order he specified, they followed him through the thick wilderness that led to the back of the room.

Zerith and the others struggled through the thick growth, sneezing and eyes itching as the pollen and the poisonous plants scratched at them. Itchweed, remembered from Zangarmarsh, brushed against Zerith's cheek and it was all the priest could do to keep from scratching his face bloody. He grinned thinking that at least this time, it wouldn't be all over his body.

Breaking through the jungle, they saw Freya standing at the far end of the room, her attention focused on a waterfall that flowed down the back wall. The Watcher didn't even seem to hear the noise that the invaders made as they pushed their way through her wall of forest growth. The Disorder of Azeroth quickly reorganized itself into its accustomed ranks. Once everyone was in position, Ger'alın gestured for Tau're to join him and then rushed at the Watcher.

Freya did not turn around until Ger'alın's mace slammed into her rock-solid calf. Spinning, she glared down angrily at her attacker.

"The Conservatory must be protected!" she shouted, lifting her arms high above her head. Three thick vines sprang out, forming a ceiling that nearly shut out the light from the sun. "Elders, grant me your strength!"

Light suffused Freya, making her rocky body glimmer and shine like a prism. Ger'alın squinted against the glare, nearly closing his eyes entirely so he could block out the light enough to strike at her. The Disorder of Azeroth continued its assault against the Watcher while keeping their eyes and ears open for signs that the other creatures in the conservatory were coming to their mistress's aid.

"Children, assist me!" Freya shouted, gesturing towards the river where the wall of growth was thinner. Elementals sprang from the river and the growth. Giving the Disorder of Azeroth barely enough time to realize what was going on, the trio of elementals rushed them, knocking several of the casters back into the living wall surrounding the area.

Leaving Tau're to keep Freya's attention, Ger'alın rushed towards the elementals. Focusing through his shield, he hurled a beam of Light at the creatures Freya summoned, stunning them as the holy power coursed through them, momentarily disrupting the magic that held them together. The trio regathered itself and began pummeling on the paladin, watery fists splashing over his shield while vines lashed out at him. Winds kicked up, blowing his hair in his eyes and almost blinding him. Seeing that he was about to be overcome, Callie raced to his side, slashing wildly with her sword-arm while cutting at the viny limbs of the savage flower. From the back ranks, Alayne directed the casters at the other elementals, working to tear the heart out of the spells that kept them animated and coherent.

Ger'alın heaved a sigh of relief when the elementals were finally overcome. Shaking his arms to lose the last of the vines clinging to him, he prepared to rejoin the fight against Freya. Instead, he felt the ground go out from under him as a giant treant, nearly an ancient in its own right, crashed through the forest wall. The paladin rushed to attack it, giving the casters time to reform their lines.

"Fire!" Alayne roared, flinging her own fiery spells at the treant.

"That's obvious," Nishi grunted from nearby as he hurled his own spells. Within moments, the near-ancient roared with fire, his head a mass of flames and smoke. He staggered, swayed, and fell into the forest wall. The fires of his death began to cinder and smoke against the wet, green growth. Smoke billowed around the casters, nearly choking them and blinding them as they ran for the river and clear, clean air. Callie felt a moment of panic, remembering the battle she had led in Borean Tundra where smoke had killed many of her fellows. She was relieved when she saw Alayne and Nishi working to channel the contents of the river at the quickly-spreading forest fire. Meanwhile, Ger'alın and the others rushed Freya, ignoring the fire while they worked to beat the Watcher into submission. Freya tried to extricate herself from the melee, summoning iron-tough roots from the ground to wrap themselves around the legs of her attackers. Turning their weapons on the trapping,

tangling vines, they freed themselves quickly, keeping up the press of assault against the stone woman. After what seemed like hours, Freya finally stopped, reaching her hands up to her face and rubbing the rocky skin as if waking from a nightmare.

Ger'alın gestured for the others to hold off their attacks for the moment while the Watcher gathered herself. She blinked and stared down at the mortals surrounding her. The hint of smoke in the air caught her attention and she glanced over to where one of her own creatures lay, still smoldering while thick grey and black smoke wafted from the corpse and the remnants of the forest fire. The Watcher's had shot out and the fires disappeared, thinning the smoke.

"His hold on me dissipates," she whispered, still sounding confused. "I can see clearly once more. Thank you." Glancing back down at Ger'alın, her eyes widened. "I remember you from Sholazar. My avatar there..."

"We recall her," Ger'alın said mildly. "We worked to help repair the shield over Sholazar that was weakened, letting the Scourge into the basin."

"Yes, of course," Freya nodded. "I fear, however, that the Scourge will continue its attacks against the basin. But, I am needed here. Yogg-Saron...he must be defeated."

"We are working towards that end," Zerith said calmly. "However, we were forced to kill Loken a short time ago. Loken's death has triggered..."

"Say no more," Freya nodded. Closing her eyes, she summoned forth a wooden token inscribed with an arcane emblem. "This is my sigil. You will need the sigils of the other Watchers in order to..."

"We already have them," Ger'alın interrupted, plucking the sigil from Zerith's hand and shoving it into his belt pouch. "Your brothers have returned to their posts."

"Yes," Freya sighed. "I see. I will join them. Perhaps the four of us will be able to contain Yogg-Saron. I pray that his madness does not take us again. May Eonar's blessing go with you all," she added as she began striding out of the conservatory. "We will hold back Yogg-Saron while we can. You must deal with Algalon yourselves. Good luck, mortals. May you fare better than we who were created to watch over you."

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Ger'alın was glad that the Watchers had been able to talk them into taking a brief respite from the battles. They sensed that Algalon was nearby but was still studying the "problem" that was called Azeroth. Bedding down in the grassy areas of the conservatory, the Disorder of Azeroth had slept better than they had in a long time, dreaming of warmth, peace, and an end to battles. When the Watchers had wakened the mortals a few hours later, Ger'alın and the others felt as if they had had a week's rest. Freya smiled slyly when the paladin suggested that perhaps she had something to do with that.

"I can't believe it," Zerith said, awestruck at the sight before him. "You said it would take an army of smiths to repair it all."

Ger'alın grinned and nodded. It would have taken an army of smiths...or four very motivated Watchers...to repair and refurbish the armor that Ariaya had destroyed. Strapping his breastplate on and stamping his feet to settle them into the greaves he had normally worn, the paladin glanced down to eye himself critically. Everything seemed better than it ever had before. He could sense the spells the Blood Knights had woven into the armor reaching out to protect the weaker joints, buffeted and aided by the Watchers' own magics.

Leaning against the wall once he buckled his cloak around him, Ger'alın watched and waited for the others to finish equipping themselves. The four Watchers stood at their posts once more, gazing down into the broken crystal prison that held Yogg-Saron away from the world for a time. Their initial analysis of the prison indicated that it would hold. For now.

However, the day would soon come when it would shatter completely and they would be unable to contain Yogg-Saron within the confines of Ulduar. Word had already gone out to Dalaran, to the Alliance, and to the Horde requesting aid in dealing with the old god. As word of Yogg-Saron went out, word of C'thun, another old god imprisoned in Ahn'Qiraj, came in. The bronze dragonflight had retreated to the southern reaches of the world to aid the Cenarion druids and the rest of the night elven race in defeating C'thun. As Ger'alín motioned for the Disorder of Azeroth to assemble itself into some semblance of order, he spared a second to pray that C'thun would be defeated and Yogg-Saron to join his brother soon.

Walking with a calm elation back towards the Planetarium, Ger'alín felt more confident than he had since they began this mad adventure in the titan city. Surely, if they had overcome the Watchers, they could take care of Algalon. After all, with less force than this, they had defeated Loken himself. Algalon couldn't be so much more powerful...could he?

Shaking his head and banishing his doubts, Ger'alín focused on the certainty that they would emerge victorious. He had given into despair once already, nearly panicking when he'd heard what awaited them. He refused to allow that to happen again. If they tried and failed, then he would do his best to make peace with that. But, he would not allow himself to fail from fear. Glancing over his shoulder, he caught Alayne's eye, praying that his wife shared some of the enthusiasm and confidence he'd felt returning to him as Yogg-Saron's vile influence was checked by the return of the Watchers to their posts.

Striding down the corridor that led to their objective, Ger'alín retrieved the four sigils from his pouch. Inserting them into the control panel where they were indicated, he pressed the single button that lit up in response. Massive stone doors shuddered and then opened, granting access to a room Ger'alín found to be impossible in at least eight different ways. The floor was pitch black. Glancing down, the paladin would have sworn he could see millions of different galaxies swirling around in the infinity surrounding him. It reminded him of the Eye of Eternity where Malygos had made his lair. Only, this time, they walked out directly on to the darkness of eternity. No friendly stone platform presented itself, allowing them some hold on a fragile reality.

Over to one side of the vast, star-filled chamber stood a translucent being. His outline glowed with a vibrant blue light. Ger'alín winced when the being turned and regarded them evenly. It looked more like the echo and outline of a man than an actual man itself.

"Trans-location complete. Commencing planetary analysis of Azeroth. Stand back, mortals. I am not here to fight you. It is in the universe's best interest to re-originate this planet should my analysis find systemic corruption. Do not interfere," it intoned in a calm, baritone voice.

"Like hell we won't interfere," Zerith said loudly, his voice echoing and reverberating throughout the chamber. "You're going to destroy our world!"

Taking the priest's shout as his cue, Ger'alín rushed to the attack. His bounding strides carried him quickly across the room and he smashed his hammer into Algalon's waist, stunned when the creature stepped backwards and regarded him the way he would look at an insect buzzing around his head.

"Your actions are illogical. All possible results for this encounter have been calculated. The Pantheon will receive the Observer's message regardless of outcome," Algalon sighed tiredly. "See your world through my eyes," he continued. Ger'alín had a glimpse of a vanishingly small dot in an incomprehensible infinity of unempty, teeming blackness. His head began to throb at the distance his brain was trying to absorb. "A universe so vast as to be immeasurable - incomprehensible even to your greatest minds," Algalon said calmly. Then, with a speed that left him floundering, Algalon dismissed the vision from his mind. Ger'alín glimpsed at the others, ascertaining that the vision had been shared. Turning

back to face the Titan's messenger, Ger'alın opened his mouth to protest, to argue. "Your actions are illogical," Algalon repeated. Unsheathing twin weapons that glowed with the same blue luminosity that sufficed his own outline, Algalon attacked quickly.

Ger'alın barely had time to bring his shield around to block the blows. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth spread out around the room, hurling spells and missiles or wading into the fray, seeking to do their best to destroy this envoy from the cosmos before he could send off the signal that would destroy their world. Algalon ignored them. Their blows were like the minor stings of wasps or ants to him. Each one of them would be reoriginated, reclaimed by the matrix that the Titans had built aeons ago, and made perfect. Why such imperfect, limited creatures would resist the chance to be cleansed and remade rightly was beyond his comprehension.

Though their blows were minor to him, added together, the injuries began to annoy Algalon. Raising his hand, he summoned the power of the cosmos to him. "The stars come to my aid," he said calmly, pointing around the room. Vortices of heavy light appeared, the force welling from them nearly pulling those close by off their feet. The Disorder of Azeroth moved warily away from them, eyeing these new additions to the fight with distrust. When one exploded, knocking the entire group flat, they did their best to keep their distance from the others. One by one, the vortices of light exploded leaving behind a vacuum in their wake. Zerith peered into one of the dark holes in reality and shuddered, seeing something even more lifeless and fearsome than the Twisting Nether itself. Exchanging a terrified glance with Alayne, Zerith tried to focus on channeling the Light's healing energy into a shield to help Ger'alın. The priest gasped when he saw the paladin beginning to fade, his body turning translucent like Algalon's. Alayne saw this as well and redoubled her efforts. Hurling fire and ice at her husband's attacker, she prayed she would be able to do enough damage to end the fight and reverse whatever spell Algalon had used against Ger'alın that had him fading from reality itself.

"Beware!" Algalon roared, his titanic voice making the very room shake. Four holes of darkness appeared around the room and void-creatures began to form out of them. The melee fighters left off the fight with Algalon, intercepting the void-creatures before they could overwhelm the rest of the group. The casters continued their frenzied assault against the luminescent being. Alayne's spells grew more and more frantic as she watched her husband seemingly bleed away from reality. Then, suddenly, Algalon shuddered and knelt down. Balancing himself with one fist, he shook his head. The black holes vanished and the void creatures with them. Ger'alın's outline began growing stronger and Alayne rushed towards him, throwing herself into his arms with little concern as to whether or not she would be caught up in an embrace or collide with the floor.

Ger'alın caught his wife and heaved a sigh of relief into her hair. He had felt himself growing more and more distant from the fighting though he never once disengaged from the struggle with Algalon. The whole world had seemed hazy from his point of view. Whatever strange magic the creature had used against him, the paladin prayed he would never encounter its like again.

Algalon drew himself back to his feet and stared in shocked amazement at the gathering. He could scarcely believe that any creatures so far short of the Titans had been able to overcome him. Never in all of the long aeons he had spent wandering the galaxies, pruning away fallen worlds so that others might bloom in the vast oasis the Titans had planted, had he encountered any creatures so determined to overcome his visit and survive in spite of what the Titans saw as better for them. "I have seen worlds bathed in the Makers' flames," the blue being said slowly, haltingly. "Their denizens fading without so much as a whimper. Entire planetary systems born and raised in the time that it takes your mortal hearts to beat once. Yet all throughout, my own heart, devoid of emotion... of empathy. I... have..."

felt... NOTHING! A million, million lives wasted. Had they all held within them your tenacity? Had they all loved life as you do?"

"Perhaps they did," Ger'alın replied, still short of breath from the exertion of battle. "Perhaps they just wanted to live without the Titan's interference. Here on Azeroth, we killed the Prime Designate because he had been subverted and was serving Yogg-Saron; one of the Titan's enemies. Whatever our weaknesses, whatever our imperfections, they are ours to overcome, ours to accept, and ours to perfect. We are many here," he gestured, the sweep of his arm encompassing the many different races gathered to try to stop the holocaust of their world. "There is little we agree on. But one thing we do agree on is that we will serve no tyrants. Whether it be that Light-forsaken Lich King, Loken, a death god, or the Titans themselves, we decide our fates. Not someone else."

Algalon nodded, recognizing the names the young mortal spoke. "Perhaps it is your imperfection that which grants you free will. That allows you to persevere against cosmically calculated odds. You prevailed where the Titans' own perfect creations have failed. I've rearranged the reply code. Your planet will be spared. I cannot be certain of my own calculations anymore."

Ger'alın was not the only one to heave another sigh of relief when Algalon sent the code that told the Titans that Azeroth was well. "Thank you," the paladin said. Algalon nodded and gave a small grin.

"I have only saved your world from destruction by the Makers. It is up to you to save it from destruction wrought by other agencies. Farewell, mortals. I am returning to my place where I may observe you...and many others...to learn more."

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Ger'alın was glad that he had let the others talk them into a brief respite after the impossible success against Algalon. Smiling softly at Alayne as she lay curled up in a ball beside him, he wished that they could have more time to spend lazing about the Conservatory with four near-immortal Watchers standing guard over their slumber. It felt nice to know that, for once, he could relax. Someone else was watching over him. Someone else was protecting him. To be able to just lay aside his cares and his burdens and worry about nothing more than what insanity might spring from his tongue while he slept was something he had not been able to do since he was a child.

Filled with a warm lassitude, the paladin curled up around his wife. She smelled faintly of flowers and scented soap from the bath she had taken in the hot springs the night before. If only they didn't have to continue the battle against Yogg-Saron...

"But we have to," he whispered into her hair. "It's nice to be able to relax for once, but we can't sit around waiting for those who ought to be out here to get over their petty angers and hatreds and face the real threat. There is no one to protect us, no one to stand for us, except ourselves."

"Just let me sleep a little longer," Alayne murmured, her voice thick with sleep.

"I wish I could," Ger'alın replied, nuzzling her neck fondly, "but, we need to get on with the rest of this battle. I swear to you, though. Once this is all over and done with, we are taking a real..."

"...vacation," she finished for him. "The only problem is that you're exiled from Stranglethorn Vale."

"Just Booty Bay," he corrected. "I'm certain we can find some place to stay there. It's not like staying with the goblins is much more civilized than our normal rough sleeping."

"Callie said..."

“Callie exaggerates,” he temporized, knowing full well that the rogue had exaggerated very little about his not being welcome back in Stranglethorn. Though, the reason had less to do with his reaction to waking to see Tasia next to him and more to do with the damage he had done while trying to drink away the guilt. He closed his eyes and rolled over on his back, wishing that he had done as Alayne requested and let her sleep. He felt and heard her move next to him and then grinned when he felt her stroking his face. “We’ll go there. If any goblins bother us, I’ll sic Tau’re on them.”

“Tau’re...” Alayne trailed off, lost in thought. “I wonder if Ta’mara would let him leave Northrend.”

“What?”

“Ta’mara.”

“The young pacifist taunka? She’s still following him around?”

“Yes. I think he likes her.”

“I wish they’d get on with it, then,” Ger’alin grimaced. “Nothing is more annoying than having to deal with an unrequited – or so you think – love while you’re in the middle of a warzone. I speak from experience, here,” he added, seeing the sardonic look on his wife’s face. “Let’s get on with it ourselves,” he sighed, wishing they could remain abed for the rest of the day. “We’re not getting any closer to Yogg-Saron like this.”

The pair rose from their blankets and dressed quickly. Ger’alin let Alayne help him strap on his armor while he bounced some suggested strategies for fighting Yogg-Saron off her. Sighing ruefully at the wasted day, the paladin ducked out of the small tent, his wife right behind him. Most of the rest of the camp was still in their blankets, enjoying the well-deserved rest they had earned from the furious fighting. Steeling himself, the paladin walked over to Zerith’s tent and scratched on the flaps. The priest’s broken snoring greeted him and Ger’alin rolled his eyes. It would be just like him to wake up early the one morning in history when he could have stayed asleep. Squatting down and reaching gingerly through the tent flaps, Ger’alin took hold of what he prayed was a foot and gave it a shake. The broken snoring broke off with a muttered oath.

“What the...is it morning already?” Zerith asked thickly.

“Yes,” Ger’alin replied. “We need to rouse the others. We’ve still got a lot ahead of us.”

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“Really?” Ger’alin asked, his eyes wide with shock. “I wouldn’t have believed it possible.” He shared an amused chuckle with the Argent Crusader who had just brought word of the latest in the struggle against the Lich King. “I will pay good money to see that.”

“What?” Zerith grouched, still irritated at being awoken long before he would have wanted to be. “I could use some good news right now.”

“The Argent Crusade is organizing a formal joust open to everyone. They’ve managed to get King Varian Wrynn to agree to come. And, Garrosh Hellscream will be there. With Thrall watching his every. Last. Move,” Ger’alin snorted. “This is probably the best news I’ve heard in a while.”

“A joust? With lances and horses?” the priest asked.

“Yes,” the messenger nodded. “And, Lord Fordring says that Thrall wishes to speak with you about representing the Horde in the tournament.”

“I can’t say that we’ll be able to do that,” Zerith muttered sullenly. “We’re still a little too busy fighting the battles that the Horde and the Alliance should be fighting. Besides, I do well not to fall off E’la when I ride. Hand me an oversized stick and you’re asking for trouble.”

"I'm not must interested in jousting myself either," Ger'alın admitted. "A waste of a good horse. But still, if it will keep Wrynn and Hellscream in line, I am all for it. Sign me up."

"Was there any other news from Dalaran?" Zerith asked as the messenger turned and left.

"Nothing of great import," Ger'alın answered. "The Argents and the Ebons are still working on finding a way into Icecrown. The red dragons say that the Wrathgate is quieter than it's been in ages. The Cenarion druids were able to defeat and destroy the old god in Silithus. The Watchers say that its defeat will mean that Yogg-Saron will be weaker as well. Oh, and Alayne is planning something involving Tau're, Ta'mara, and itchweed."

"I'll stay away from all three of them, then," the priest grinned. "Now, what do the Watchers say about proceeding further into Ulduar? Into Yogg-Saron's lair?"

"The way should be clear," Ger'alın answered. "But that doesn't necessarily mean easy. The Watchers think that Yogg-Saron could have guardians watching the entrance to his lair. We should proceed with caution and be prepared for a battle at any time."

"So, business as usual, then."

Leaving the Conservatory and venturing around the walkway, the pair headed towards the door the Watchers had indicated would lead further into the dungeon, towards Yogg-Saron's prison. The dome covering the circular gap in the center of the walkway was dark and murky. Glancing at it, Ger'alın thought he could see movement in the clouds far below. Curious, he walked over to it and pressed his hands against the glass as he strained to make sense of the swirling darkness below.

"Ger'alın! Get back!" Zerith shouted, hearing the glass crack. Long, deep crevasses formed at the top of the glass down, worming their way down while Ger'alın backpeddled, staring at the dome in horror. With an explosion, the top of the dome blew away, the force of the blast sending it crashing into the stone ceiling high overhead. The two sin'dorei stared at each other in horror as the clouds of darkness swirled violently, sweeping over the walkway, spreading shadow throughout the Titan fortress.

"He is trying to break free!" Freya shouted, her voice dimmed by the fog and Ger'alın's own rising fear. "He knows he does not control us any longer; he knows Algalon is gone. He is trying to break free!"

Blinded by the thick fog, Ger'alın stumbled, trying to make his way back to the Conservatory. He could hear the others staggering around. The clank of armor and weapons rang in the dense air around him. He waved his hands in front of his face, desperate to dispel the clouds around him, praying he could find his way back to the others. He stepped carefully, wondering how far he was from the stairs. "Damn this fog!" he roared angrily. "Where is everyone?"

He strained his ears and his eyes, listening and watching for some sign that he had drawn closer to his friends and allies. Instead, he heard nothing. Had he moved farther away from them instead of closer? Stopping and turning around, trying not to lose his orientation in the fog, he took several tentative steps, still afraid he would stumble onto the stairwell and crash to the ground. Glancing down, he could not even see his feet through the swirling clouds. "Zerith? Alayne? Callie? Anyone?" he shouted.

His own cries echoed back to him, sounding distant to his ears. "Where in the name of the Light is everyone? Answer me!"

"It's just us here," a strange, yet familiar voice answered from behind him. Ger'alın whirled around, searching for the speaker. He could see a dim, shadowy outline in the fog ahead of him. He stepped towards it only to have it appear further away.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What have you done with the others?"

“I am the one who was cast out and scorned. I am the one you feared and hated. I am the one you tried to destroy though I saved you from Illidan by summoning the dead to your aid. I am the one who saved you by betraying you. I am the one you tried to kill. And now, I have come back to kill you,” the figure said calmly, coldly.

“Who are you?” he demanded again.

The figure laughed, a deep, throaty chuckle of ironic amusement. “You’ve been fearing my return, being so careful to keep things tempered so I wouldn’t come back and the whole time she’s been praying I would return. She won’t be rid of me so easily and neither will you. I have come back to claim what is rightfully mine and to put an end to all you simpering weaklings who would hold me back from my destiny.”

“Who in the name of the Legion are you?”

Other figures began appearing in the thick mist. The jingle of armor and the sickening crackle of bones warned Ger’alin that Scourge were approaching. He tried to rush towards the strange speaker but the figure melted away in the fog. Skeletal warriors rushed him; he could barely see to strike for the swirling mist surrounding him. Lashing out near-blindly, he swung, feeling a satisfying crunch against his mace. Slamming with his shield and calling out for the Light to send its wrath upon the unholy horde closing in around him, Ger’alin fought, calling out to his allies for aid the whole while.

After long minutes of frantic fighting, the field stood clear. Ger’alin turned, his gaze sweeping the near-horizon a few feet in front of him, searching for the woman who had spoken to him earlier. He jogged a short distance away, eyes peeled to find her. He heard a soft, amused laugh behind him and, as he turned to face it, felt something sharp slide into his side where the armor was weak at a joining. Warm blood splashed down his leg and his vision began darkening. The last thing he caught sight of was a face he knew as well as his own with a stranger’s eyes staring out from behind it...

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“C’mon, Ger’alin,” Zerith growled while his sister hovered over her husband, her expression stricken with worry. “Come on, man, snap out of it,” the priest muttered, shaking the paladin roughly and slapping his face.

Ger’alin’s eyes flew open and he gasped in shock. “Alayne!” he shouted.

“I’m here,” she said, taking his hand in her own. He jerked away from her, staring at her suspiciously.

“She looked just like you did when... what in blazes happened?” he demanded, confused and angry. Adrenaline still pumped through him and he felt shaky and uncertain of his surroundings.

“The dome broke open,” Zerith explained, gesturing towards the glass that had capped Yogg-Saron’s prison. The four Watchers had returned to their posts overlooking it. The strange fog was once more contained. A shell of magic glimmered over the broken dome, holding it back. “The new seal will not last long.”

“Indeed, it will not,” Freya sighed. “We must go to the prison chamber ourselves and try to contain the old god there. We will transport ourselves now. Follow the hall there,” she gestured towards the corridor that had been Ger’alin’s destination before the strange vision overcame him. “It will lead you down into the depths of Ulduar. But, be careful. Yogg-Saron has gained much power over the lower levels of Ulduar. His mind-twisting may affect you as you move closer to him. Do not let yourselves be overwhelmed by his insanity.”

Before Zerith or Ger’alin could reply, the four gestured and, with a flash, were gone. “So, what happened?” Zerith asked, helping the paladin to his feet. “The mist flashed over us

all. When the Watchers managed to contain it and clear it from this area, you were on your back and nothing would wake you up. You scared the hell out of your wife.”

Alayne still crouched nearby, hurt and fear shining in her eyes. Ger’alin sighed and shook his head. Lifting a shaking hand, he rubbed his forehead and then reached out to her. “I was trapped in the mist,” he sighed. “I heard a woman speaking to me. She was angry. She said she was the one we were trying to destroy and that she was going to destroy us instead. Then, there were Scourge...and then she stabbed me. She looked just you did when I tore your helm off during the first attack against Undercity.”

“But...how?” Alayne asked, confused.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “It was probably Yogg-Saron, playing on my fears, toying with some of my worst memories. Let’s not think about it,” he said glumly.

“We’ll have to be very careful proceeding on,” Zerith muttered, sounding uncertain of the idea of just ‘not thinking about it.’ “If Yogg-Saron can use our own minds against us...”

“Let’s just go put an end to him before he can do it again,” Ger’alin snapped. “Come on. They said to take this corridor, right? Let’s go.”

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Alayne clutched her head and tried to look only at the floor. After fighting their way past several insane guardian monsters and one of the faceless, the corridors had grown silent and twisted. Stained glass windows were contorted in impossible angles and the sunlight shone through, casting strange, broken rainbows and shadows on the floors and walls. Glass from shattered windows hung suspended in the air. The walls themselves were warped, bent, and twisted as if the architect behind them had been stark raving mad. Alayne bumped into the person in front of her. Running fingers through her disheveled hair, she was glad it was Nishi and not Ger’alin. Up ahead, her husband surveyed something she could not see. Steeling herself against the dizziness that threatened with the walls and ceilings bent by insanity, Alayne strode forward and gasped at what she saw.

“I don’t like it,” Ger’alin muttered, gesturing. The floor was broken. Fallen pillars and twisted trash made a rough ramp of sorts. Narrow, it would permit them to walk down only one at a time. “This here,” he said, pointing at the archway where he stood, “is a perfect defensive position. But...Yogg-Saron may be crazy, but he obviously isn’t stupid. I sense nothing ahead of us or drawing closer. We’re going to have to walk down that,” he pointed at the ramp, “and we’re not going to waste any time with it.”

“Then let’s get going,” Zerith nodded. “The sooner we can leave this place, the better.”

Ger’alin sighed as he saw Alayne trembling at the distance between where she stood and where the next safe flooring was. Picking her up in his arms, he strode rapidly down the ramp. The steady clodding of boots against stone calmed her while the others made their way down the ramp to the next level. Once there, Ger’alin set her back on her own feet and surveyed the area once more. “Great,” he growled. “We’re going to have to jump.”

“Jump?” Alayne winced.

“It’s only ten feet,” he pointed out reasonably.

“Ten feet?”

“I’ll hold you, then,” he sighed, sweeping her up in his arms before she could yelp in protest. Leaping down gracefully, he set her back on her feet with a glance that warned her not to scout ahead. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth made their way down one at a time, each person giving the one ahead of them more than enough time and room to catch themselves after the jump down. Ger’alin walked over to Tau’re and the two had a quick, quiet conversation that resulted in the tauren hiding several coils of rope under some of the

rubble. "Just in case," Ger'alın replied to the look his wife gave him. "Let's get moving again."

Winding their way down the broken remnants of what must have been a once-grand entryway, the Disorder of Azeroth came to a dark archway that led deeper into the basements of Ulduar. Ger'alın bit off an oath at what he saw through the doorway. "Legion-damned cultists," he muttered beneath his breath.

Dozens of cultists, their garish robes standing out brightly in the fire-lit darkness, were scattered through the cavernous room. They numbered members of every race from night elven to orcish. Bent in worship of the tentacle monster who guarded the door, their paeans to Yogg-Saron and his general, Vezax, were sickening to hear.

"This is going to be one hell of a fight," Ger'alın said. "We've got all of those crazy cultists, two faceless ones, and something that I don't even think Kil'jaeden was cruel enough to dream up."

"It's not moving," Zerith said, staring at the massive, tentacled faceless one. "I think it's not really alive."

"I see what you mean," Ger'alın replied after a lengthy study. "Still, I can feel something emanating from it."

"I know. It's like...it reminds me of a person in a coma. They are there but they are not completely there."

"Perhaps the Light favors us still," Ger'alın quipped mirthlessly. "We'll only have to fight a few dozen cultists and two creatures that, if they're anything like their brother upstairs, will have a penchant for exploding."

"Let's move in quickly and quietly. Perhaps, if we can get to the edge of the balcony without being noticed, we can keep the initiative."

Nodding in agreement with the priest, Ger'alın gestured for the others to hunker down low to the ground. Creeping through the shadows, their weapons held tightly to keep them from clattering against their armor, the fighters made their way to the edge of the broken balcony. Behind them came the ranged and magic-using forces with the healers spreading themselves through the ranks. The cultists, their minds given over to the religious escatsy that came from being so close to the object of their veneration, noticed nothing. The hulking giant in the rear of the room, standing sentinel over the door, did not move. Ger'alın raised his arm and the ranged fighters nocked and drew. The magi and warlocks began readying their spells. Letting his arm fall, the back-line fighters launched their attacks, spells and missiles landing heavily on the cultists.

The cultists, now aware of the presence of invaders in their sanctum, scrambled to fight back. Many had been felled by arrows or by the blasts of magic that rained down upon them so suddenly. Still, at least a dozen remained standing, sprinting quickly out of magical blizzards, rainstorms, and falling fire. Conjuring up their own spells, they returned fire against the invaders. Ger'alın and the others launched themselves off the balcony, landing lightly on their feet and springing to the attack. Several cultists fell quickly to the hammers and blades of the front-line fighters. Still, enough remained to summon the power of the faceless ones who had, until now, remained motionless near the general Vezax. As the last cultists fell, their blood staining the stone ground like an offering to their insane god, the faceless ones awoke. Moving towards the invaders with deliberate steps that radiated menace and terror, they shook the room, shattering the few stained glass windows that remained, as they advanced.

Ger'alın nodded to Tau're and the pair rushed to engage the faceless ones. Keeping them spread well apart, they fought furiously, keeping the demonic creatures focused on them while the magi and the other ranged fighters unleashed yet more spells and missiles. The melee fighters hung back; anyone who was close to the creature when it died would be

thrown across the room by the resulting explosion. Ger'alın called upon the Light to infuse and shield him as the creature tumbled to the ground. The shockwave of the blast still took him off his feet. Standing back up, he was thrown back to the floor when the second creature died. Pushing himself back up for the last time, he grimaced and prepared to rush for general Vezax as soon as the giant started moving. The paladin was thrown off-balance when the creature continued to stand there, impassive and unmoving. He could still sense something foreboding coming from the creature but General Vezax seemed oblivious or asleep.

Gesturing for the others to spread out around the back of the room, Ger'alın crept forward, his shield in front of him and his hammer hanging back, ready to strike. He managed to make it up almost to the creature's clawed and taloned feet before the General moved, swinging its massive arms over its head and roaring.

"Your destruction will herald a new age of suffering!" General Vezax shouted, his cry echoing off the distant walls of the massive chamber.

Ger'alın's arm groaned in protest as General Vezax landed a blow against his shield. Swinging his mace wide, he smacked it against the creature's armored abdomen, instantly regretting it when his hammer vibrated wildly in his grasp. Too close to the creature to see more than its feet, he tried to step back to get a better view. General Vezax pressed forward as well, not giving the paladin a chance to get a better shot at him. Grunting in frustration, Ger'alın wheeled, calling on the Light and letting it flow from his shield. The blinding brilliance of the Light's anger stunned Vezax momentarily, giving Ger'alın an opening. The paladin hammered away at the weak joining between the creature's lower abdomen and its armor plating. When Vezax recovered, he swept forward, knocking Ger'alın to the ground. Tucking and rolling over his shoulder, the paladin quickly regained his footing and continued on.

"The black blood of Yogg-Saron courses through me!" Vezax roared. The shadows of the room swelled and poured into the faceless creature. He seemed to grow where he stood. "I. AM. UNSTOPPABLE!"

Zerith saw the creature's fist hurtling impossibly fast towards Ger'alın. Flinging a shield of the Light around the paladin, the priest signaled for the magi to redouble their efforts in casting. Glancing back at them, the priest was startled to see that his strongest casters looked haggard and hard-used. Had they not had adequate rest after the fight with Algalon? Trotting over towards Alayne and Nishi while keeping a watch on Ger'alın and the other fighters, the priest raised an eyebrow in silent question.

"I don't know what's wrong," Nishi panted softly, wiping sweat from a pallid forehead. Dark circles ringed his eyes. "I just can't seem to find the energy to keep casting like this."

"It's him," Alayne grunted, forcing herself to cast another bolt of arcane energy at Vezax. "There's some foul aura around him. It's drawing away our energy. We'll have to pool our energies and hope that one big spell will work where dozens of smaller ones aren't."

"Do it," Zerith agreed. "And quickly."

"I'm tired, not stupid," Alayne grimaced. "I know that my husband can't take those blows much longer." Gesturing for the other casters to come closer, Alayne quickly issued her orders. She gathered herself mentally and physically before drawing upon the prowess of those with her. Pulling their energies into her own body, she channeled, unleashing a snowstorm that filled the vast chamber with frigid blasts, hail, and a chill that nearly froze blood in the veins. Forks of wild lightning glinted in the roaring clouds, striking out at Vezax as the winds she summoned buffeted him and the chill began to slow him down, cooling the rage he had tapped into to power his assault. Ger'alın and the others took advantage of the chill, letting the snow fall into the crevasses in the creature's armor. The cold weakened the joints further, allowing the heat of the Light Ger'alın called upon to blast it open, exposing

the soft flesh beneath. Boring in with his hammer while Tau're jabbed with his axes, the paladin and the warrior brought the General of Yogg-Saron to his knees.

"Oh, what horrors await..." Vezax sighed as Ger'alın's mace smashed in the faceless one's skull. With a sickeningly wet thud, the giant collapsed.

"Earth Mother preserve me," Tau're muttered, staring in horror at his axes. Where the creature's black blood stained them, the metal was corroding. Deep pits formed along the biting edge of both axes, rendering them fragile and useless. Ger'alın hastily wiped off his hammer, praying that it would not be ruined. He grinned when it shone all the more brightly. Whatever blessings Sar'la had woven into it were more powerful than anything the shadow could throw at him. He walked towards the side of the room where the casters had been positioned, chuckling to himself. His amusement was wiped away when he saw how haggard and weary they were. Alayne lay with her head lolling against Zerith's shoulder. The other magic users were in a similar state of collapse.

"What happened?" Ger'alın asked, his voice tight with concern as he knelt down to take Alayne into his arms.

"She said there was an aura around Vezax that sapped the magic-users' strength," Zerith replied.

"It's gone now," Nishi said wearily. "We should be fine with a bit of time to catch our breath."

"We may not have that time, Nishi," Ger'alın sighed. "We can't risk leaving the Watchers alone with Yogg-Saron for too long. Light knows what would happen if he managed to warp their minds again. We had a hard enough time defeating them one-on-one. I don't want to imagine fighting all four of them at once with an old god thrown into the mix."

"We'll have to take some time," Zerith pointed out. "There's no way we can go into battle with half our forces unconscious or barely able to sit up, let alone walk or fight."

"True enough," Ger'alın sighed. "Let's just pray that this is the last time we have to catch our breaths so quickly."

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Alayne was glad of the cool water she could splash in her face. The chill braced her, invigorating her and washing away the last vestiges of extreme fatigue. She no longer felt as if she needed to sleep for a month. A week, perhaps, but no longer a month. The other magi had likewise regained some of the energy. Whatever aura General Vezax had projected was gone, dissipated by his death. Alayne prayed that they would not face a similar aura with Yogg-Saron.

"More likely, we'll all be driven mad," she muttered morosely. Shaking her head and letting the last droplets of water fall from her eyelashes. Wiping her face with her hands, she combed her hair back with her fingers and stood upright.

"Feeling better?" Zerith asked.

"I suppose you could say that," she replied. "Let's get going."

She rejoined her group and followed the others down a long, twisting corridor. The walls and floor seemed to writhe and seethe with some barely-hidden madness. Dark whispers echoed through thick, heavy air. The smell of madness, of bedlam, seemed to well around her as Alayne walked with outward calm. They paused before a small arched doorway that led into a wide open chamber. Bright light streamed down despite the heavy clouds that had obscured the dome overhead of the prison. Standing at the four corners of the chamber were the Watchers of Ulduar. Their eyes shone with focus and concentration. In the center of the room surrounded by strange green clouds was a woman. She appeared to be a vykrul woman. She wore the furs and leathers common to many of those loyal to the Lich King.

Alayne studied her and shook her head. Whatever guise that was, it was no true humanoid. An ancient, dark power lurked within the skin of that woman.

“Who is that?” Ger’alin was asking. “I thought they were guarding an old god. Not some strange-looking woman.”

“Don’t let your eyes deceive you, sweetheart,” Alayne whispered. “That is Yogg-Saron.”

“But...”

“It’s him,” she nodded firmly. “Let’s not waste anymore time. The sooner he is defeated, the sooner we can get out of here.”

“But it’s a woman. She’s unarmed,” Ger’alin protested. He fumbled for his mace without thinking. When he realized what he was doing, his eyes widened in shock and his hands fell to his sides.

“Ger’alin, it’s him,” Alayne repeated. “He’s trying to worm his way into your mind. Use the tricks I taught you to block him out. It’s the only way.”

Ger’alin nodded and focused his concentration. Blocking out the influence of the old god was difficult but he managed to break the illusion. When he gazed back upon the vykrul woman again, he recoiled. He could see whorls and seams of insanity flowing out from her. Some of the webs of madness she spun were finding prey among the Disorder of Azeroth. Stepping forward before Yogg-Saron could ensnare him or anyone else, Ger’alin launched his attack.

The vykrul woman appeared startled that anyone was attacking her. Quickly, she summoned the power of the shadows to her aid, casting her curse upon the mortal foolish enough to rush into her prison, her trap.

“The time to strike at the head of the beast will soon be upon us! Focus your anger and hatred on his minions!” she said, seeming to cheer her attackers on. Hulking faceless ones appeared out of the clouds swirling around her, rushing to attack the Disorder of Azeroth. Ger’alin roared, drawing their attention and dragging them to the center of the room. The Disorder of Azeroth spread itself out in a circle around the vykrul woman. The melee forces rushed in and helped Ger’alin dispatch the faceless creatures. Whenever one of the summoned beings died, its body exploded, sending a wave of dark magic across the room. Ger’alin winced as the shadow magic rushed over him. Meeting its holy opposite in the paladin’s own spells and prayers, it crackled and singed him. “Yes! YES! Show them no mercy! Give no pause to your attacks!” the vykrul woman cheered them on. Ger’alin stared at her for a moment in shocked horror. She herself was growing weaker as the explosions from the faceless ones took their toll on everyone nearby. Why would she egg on her own death? Whatever reason the insane old god might have for such a choice, Ger’alin was more than glad to oblige her.

Once almost a dozen of the faceless ones had been brought down, the vykrul woman shuddered. Drawing upon herself, she let her body explode outward. A mystical dome erupted from where she had been standing, knocking everyone back to the sides of the room.

“I am the lucid dream,” Yogg-Saron’s throaty, whispering voice said through the minds of all standing in his prison cell. “The monster in your nightmares. The fiend of a thousand faces. Cower before my true form.”

Ger’alin gaped as a monstrous head appeared out of the floor. Surrounded by the dome the vykrul woman had created, it could not be attacked. Instead, tentacles of all sizes sprang up from the floor. Some seemed to cast debilitating spells on the attackers. Others seized them around the waist, flinging them far and wide. The largest tentacles swayed almost knowingly. Red lights shone from their tips and where they drew close, red lightning forked out, exploding and seeking the flesh of mortals to sear.

“BOW DOWN BEFORE THE GOD OF DEATH!” Yogg-Saron roared, flailing out with his tentacles. The Disorder of Azeroth quickly gathered itself together and began focusing their spells and weapons on the tentacles. As they destroyed one after another of the twisting, writhing claws, it vanished, sinking back into the ground from whence it had come. As the tentacles vanished, the dome shielding the old god from direct attacks thinned visibly. The Watchers in the corners of the room focused, their spellwork penetrating the old god’s defenses with his energy sapped.

“Tremble, mortals, before the coming of the end! Suffocate upon your own hate!” Yogg-Saron shouted. The room shivered and, in place of the old god was a scene most of the Disorder of Azeroth knew only from tale.

The Disorder of Azeroth blinked, confused. Instead of standing before the dreaded old god, Yogg-Saron, they found themselves in a human fortress. Grey stone walls surrounded them and a window nearby overlooked a prosperous human city. Callie shuddered when she recognized it as Stormwind from the days of her father’s youth. A guard for one of Lordaeron’s merchants, her father had traveled throughout the human and dwarven lands often before her birth. He had described Stormwind to her as it had been before the orcs took it over and sacked it. The Forsaken looked around once more, startled to see that her friends had vanished. Now, instead of standing inside the great room of a keep, she stood in what appeared to be a study. King Llane was standing at the desk, studying some maps while Garona Halforcen stood behind him, her face grim.

“Bad news, sire. The clans are united under Blackhand in this assault. They will stand together until Stormwind has fallen. Gul’dan is bringing up his warlocks by nightfall. Until then, the Blackrock clan will be trying to take the Eastern Wall.”

“A thousand deaths... or one murder,” a mocking, sinister voice whispered in Callie’s head. Before her, King Llane nodded absently, continuing his study of the maps. Callie realized she must be witnessing the moment that turned the tide of the invasion of Stormwind towards the orcs. King Llane would die at Garona’s hand. His murder and her betrayal had ramifications that lasted until the present day. King Llane was Varian’s father. Murdered by an orc, the betrayal would make it all but impossible for his son to find a way to live in peace with the orcish Horde.

“Not that Garrosh is helping matters himself,” Callie muttered. “A thousand deaths...or one murder...” she mused to herself, wondering if there were a way to replay the course of events or, failing that, alter them herself in the present time. She could see herself sneaking up behind Garrosh, planting her dagger in his side...

“We will hold until the reinforcements come,” King Llane said suddenly, snapping Callie from her dangerous reverie. “As long as men with stout hearts are manning the walls and throne, Stormwind will hold,” he added confidently, smiling at the half-orc he considered a friend and trusted adviser.

Garona moved closer to the human king. Her hand flashed as fast as light. Her dagger found its way into his heart. King Llane had barely a moment to realize what had happened before he slumped to the ground, a look of shocked disbelief on his face. “The orc leaders agree with your assessment,” Garona muttered as she jerked her dagger free.

“Your petty quarrels only make me stronger!” Yogg-Saron roared in triumph. Springing up all around Callie were writhing tentacles. She slashed with her swords, cutting them away as they reached for her body, seeking to twist and poison it the way Yogg-Saron’s words were twisting and poisoning her mind. She could hear, but not see, others around her. Battle cries and the sickening sound of swords slicing through flesh echoed off the stone walls. Then, the walls vanished and she found herself, along with the rest of the Disorder of Azeroth, standing inside a strange, dark room. Something that looked like a brain hung over them.

“Attack it!” Ger’alin roared. “We’re in his mind! He’s weakened! Attack!”

No sooner did the Disorder of Azeroth begin obeying his command than the room shifted once more. Again, they found themselves standing outside, facing Yogg-Saron once more.

“What in the name of the Light just happened?” Zerith demanded breathlessly. “I thought I saw...”

“No matter. Keep fighting,” Alayne muttered as she hurled spells at the creature hiding beneath his magical dome. At the four corners of the room, the Watchers continued their own fight, using their magic to augment, protect, and heal the fighters.

Callie thought she could see fractures appearing in the dome that protected Yogg-Saron from their direct attacks. Once again, tentacles sprang from the floor, seeking to ensnare the fighters, to keep them from defeating the old god. Hacking away at them, the Disorder of Azeroth tried to keep them at bay while chipping away at the old god’s shield.

“MADNESS WILL CONSUME YOU!” Yogg-Saron roared angrily.

“Not this again,” Callie groaned as the room shifted once more. She found herself standing in the midst of a familiar setting. Dark stone walls, chill and dank, rose up around her. She could see Scourge minions standing silent vigil around their master as he tortured a human warrior. The frigid runeblade, Frostmourne, shone in the faint light as the Lich King stood before a burning man. Callie shuddered. In the dreams that sometimes haunted her wakeful sleep, she could recall scenes like the one before her.

“Your resilience is admirable,” the Lich King said calmly.

“Arrrrgh!” the human screamed as his torment increased. “I’m not afraid of you!”

“I will break you as I broke him,” the Lich King chuckled, gesturing with his sword towards one of the undead standing guard around the room.

“Yrr n’lyeth... shuul anagg! He will learn... no king rules forever. Only death is eternal!” Yogg-Saron whispered. Callie screamed as shining skulls danced in the air around her, laughing at her attempts to break free of the Lich King’s control. She clawed at her face with her one good hand while the other arm waved wildly, trying to cut away the visions springing up before her eyes. Where the Scourge had been, now stood strange faceless creatures. They attacked each other randomly. Some even seemed to turn on their master or themselves. Screaming with reckless abandon, Callie bore in, her swords flashing as she hammered at them. She felt one of their tentacles smash against the back of her head and she turned to see one of the creatures staring at her. Its posture spoke of confusion and uncertainty. Whirling on it, she pressed her attack once more. One of its tentacles slammed into her chest, knocking the wind out of her. Tears filled her eyes as she gasped for breath. She rose, growling, seeking out her foe once more. The scene wavered again and where the faceless one stood, she thought she saw Ger’alin staring at her, confusion and concern in his emerald eyes. She blinked and staggered. Ger’alin kept turning into a faceless one. She lifted a trembling hand to her forehead, trying to regain her sanity and composure.

“Do not let his madness blind you, young mortal,” Freya’s voice whispered in her head. “Resist his visions. Resist the temptation to give into your anger and your hate.”

“Get her out of here,” she heard Ger’alin growling. “Take her and anyone else who have been affected and get them out of our way.”

“No,” she protested, feeling Yogg-Saron’s taint flow out of her mind. “I can fight still.”

“If it happens again, Callie,” he said, rushing past her to hammer away at a tentacle, “we may not be as fortunate as we were this time.”

The Forsaken nodded in acquiescence and rushed to help the paladin. Tentacles once again filled the room, sweeping many fighters off their feet and breaking the concentration of

the magi. "I am so sick of seeing these things," the rogue muttered as she and Ger'alín sprinted to yet another tentacle.

"The dome is almost broken. Perhaps this time...oh not again!" Ger'alín swore angrily as the room faded and reformed around him. He glanced around, his mace and shield held ready, expecting an attack at any moment. The room forming around him appeared to be part of the Wyrrest temple. He recognized Alexstrasza standing near a human male dressed in dark clothing. The human had black hair and dark, flashing eyes. He held a strange disc in his hands, offering it to the dragonqueen. Standing near him were others. An elven mage with shining blue eyes and an amused expression on his face, a night elven woman, her eyes closed though she walked as if she could see quite clearly, and a gnome holding an hourglass watched as the pair spoke.

"It is done... All have been given that which must be given. I now seal the Dragon Soul forever..." the dark human said, his voice caressing the strange name. A light flashed as he poured his power into the disc. A strange glow began to shine from it. The night elf sniffed and took a step back in apprehension.

"That terrible glow... should that be?" she asked uncomfortably.

"For it to be as it must, yes," the human said soothingly.

"It is a weapon like no other. It must be like no other," the amused-looking elf said.

"His brood learned their lesson before too long. You shall soon learn yours!" Yogg-Saron roared in Ger'alín's mind. Ger'alín could see Malygos, the proud patriarch of the blue dragonflight, falling in battle. Screaming in defiant rage, Ger'alín struck hard at the vision with the power of the Light. Writhing tentacles appeared in place of the actors of the scene once more. Cutting them down, he found himself inside the strange room that housed the monster's mind again. He struck hard, glancing around only to see if any of the others had once again been overwhelmed by the old god's mind-twisting. Satisfied that everyone had retained their wits, Ger'alín slammed his hammer against the old god's mind. He heard the faint tinkling of glass shattering and then a loud roar of anger. The mind room vanished and he found himself standing back in the main chamber of Ulduar.

"Look upon the true face of death and know that your end comes soon!" Yogg-Saron screamed as his head rose further out of the floor. Ger'alín winced and clutched his head as the sound of a thousand keening wails filled his mind. The screeching shrieks announced a flood of faceless ones rushing towards the Disorder of Azeroth. Standing his ground and calling upon the Light to sanctify and purify the ground beneath him, Ger'alín flung out his shield and met the onslaught head-on.

Alayne pulled the ice from the air and wove it in a storm that hovered over the faceless ones, slowing them down and pelting them with snow, ice, and hail. Then she and the other magi focused their magical attacks against the unprotected head of Yogg-Saron. She could feel the strength of the Watchers' protection flowing around her, supplementing and supporting her failing energies. The melee fighters focused their attacks on the faceless ones, keeping them from reaching the casters and the healers. Alayne rallied her own strength and the energies of those around her, hurling spell after spell at the old god and praying that it would be enough.

"Eternal suffering awaits!" Yogg-Saron roared, his shout so loud that it temporarily deafened Alayne. She shook her head, waiting for the ringing in her ears to dissipate enough so that she could continue her incantations. Then, with a violent shudder that almost knocked her off her feet, Yogg-Saron screamed in agony. "Your fate is sealed. The end of days is finally upon you and ALL who inhabit this miserable little seedling. Uulwi ifis halahs gag erh'ongg w'ssh!" he shouted as he shuddered and grew still.

Alayne sank down and put her head between her knees, gasping gratefully while she waited for her ears to open back up. When she glanced up, she could see Ger'alain standing before the corpse of the old god, laughing with relief.

"It's over," he said triumphantly. "It's finally over."

"No," Callie said too softly for the paladin to hear her. "The real battle has only just begun."