

“Rattle!”

“Hiss...”

“BOOM!”

“WE’RE ALL GOING TO DIE!”

“Calm down, Alayne,” Zerith muttered sullenly. Of all the things he wished he’d known about his sister beforehand, her fear of flying was currently top of the list. The two sin’dorei sat in the belly of the zeppelin, Alayne with her head tucked between her raised knees and her hands gripping Zerith’s against the top of her head in a death-like vise.

“THIS THING IS GOING TO CRASH!” she wailed at a particularly violent bit of turbulence. Summoning all the patience he possessed, Zerith thought back over the morning, trying to figure out where it had gone so wrong...

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“So, how long before you finally succumbed to sleep?” Callie asked Alayne over breakfast. “I heard Zerith come in just after me but I never heard you come in.”

Alayne said nothing. She didn’t even look up at Callie; she merely sat at the table, ignoring her tea, her head down and her fingers furiously rubbing her temples.

“Are you well?” Zerith overheard the Forsaken woman ask, concern apparent in her voice. Quickly wiping the last bit of shaving lather off his face, Zerith poked his head into the main room to see what was going on. The movement must have caught Callie’s attention because she looked up at Zerith and shrugged, pointing helplessly to Alayne. “She looks ill, but won’t say what’s wrong.”

“Hold on, Alayne,” Zerith said gently as he returned to his room and rummaged through his pouches. “I’ll have some tea ready for you soon.” Finding the leaves he wanted, the priest hastened over to the table, dropped them in a clean mug, and poured steaming water over them. “Drink,” he ordered, shoving the mug at the sin’dorei woman. She drank deeply, grimacing at the taste, but swallowing all the liquid. Callie opened her mouth to speak, but Zerith shushed her with a raised hand. The pair waited, staring at Alayne intensely, watching for any sign of improvement or worsening. Finally, after several minutes, the sin’dorei woman was able to look up, weakly open her eyes, and let her hands drop to her lap.

“Bad dream?” Zerith whispered, afraid to make any sound lest her headache return.

“No. General strangeness in the city late at night,” Alayne muttered. “This place is haunted.”

“Oh, is that all?” Zerith grinned. “Did the evil mean spirits get you? You look like one kind of spirit definitely visited,” he continued, “and I know how bad those hangovers can be.”

“What did you hear?” Callie asked urgently, shooting a glare at Zerith.

“Just sighing. There were words, but I couldn’t make them out,” Alayne answered.

“You’re serious?” Zerith shot in an undertone. Callie nodded.

“Did you see anything?” the Forsaken woman continued.

“I don’t know. I thought I did, but when I looked, there was nothing.”

“Hmph. Well, try to eat something. And remember; the spirits of people and events linger where ever emotion was strong. The ruins of this city are literally teeming with such spirits. They can have unpredictable influences upon the living.”

Zerith and Alayne stared at Callie, their faces twin expressions of consternation. “That information might have been useful in our tour of Undercity,” Zerith said dryly. The Forsaken shrugged as if to say “my mistake.” Alayne rolled her eyes at the pair of them and reached for a muffin.

“What is the plan for today?” she asked as she peeled the wrapping away from the muffin.

“I believe we should pay a visit to the Dark Lady’s official chambers to pick up her endorsement of us to the Warchief of the Horde, Thrall,” Callie replied. “Or, at least, that’s what the banshee I spoke with earlier said.”

“That sounds fine,” Zerith drawled, “and then I suppose we should probably set out for Kalimdor?”

“I do love sailing,” Alayne said happily as she bit into her muffin. “So, when do we leave for the docks? What are you two looking at me like that for?” she asked, feeling a thread of unease worm its way through her stomach as she looked at the shocked expressions on Zerith and Callie’s faces. “Kalimdor is *overseas*, right?”

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“Is she doing any better?” Callie asked looking at Alayne with concern. The three stood at the base of the zeppelin tower. Zerith wore an expression of longsuffering and Alayne was staring up at the top of the tower in open-mouthed horror. Her expression had not changed at all since learning about the wonders of goblin aeronautic technology.

“I think I may have convinced her to actually go up the tower,” Zerith sighed. “Did you get the letters?”

“I did,” Callie said, pulling out several sealed letters with a flourish. “Come on, Alayne,” she said soothingly. “It’s just a tower.” Taking hold of Alayne’s left hand, Callie motioned for Zerith to take her right and the two half-carried, half-dragged the elven woman up the spiraling staircase to the zeppelin platform. Once at the top of the tower, Alayne collapsed in a shaking heap, having made the foolish mistake of looking down.

“Have you ever been to Durotar?” Zerith asked Callie, keeping one eye on Alayne and the other on the sky for signs of the zeppelin. He hoped it would come soon. Otherwise, they might not be able to drag Alayne on to it.

“Yes. It’s very nice. Arid and warm. A bit dull, though. The features of Durotar consist of red rocks, red dust, red sand, and red clay. There is the occasional cactus to spice things up, however.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Zerith muttered, his voice thick with irony. “I wonder why the orcs settled there of all the other places on Kalimdor. I suppose we’ll find out soon enough, though. There’s the zeppelin on the horizon.”

Approaching the tower was the goblin-built zeppelin. The passenger carriage hung precariously from an enormous purple balloon-like structure that, according to Callie, was filled with some kind of gas that kept it afloat. A giant propeller in the rear of the passenger carriage moved the zeppelin through the air and acted as a rudder, allowing the goblin captain to steer the contraption.

“How ingenious,” Zerith sighed, his jaw dropping open in awe. The zeppelin pulled up to the tower smoothly and Zerith and Callie stood aside letting the passengers from Durotar get off. Glancing over at the huddle that was Alayne, Zerith sighed, reached down, and grabbed the back of her robes. He winced as he heard her nails scrape against the wooden platform. Callie had both her hands over her mouth, trying futilely to stifle her laughter. Once Zerith had Alayne settled, more or less, on the zeppelin, he moved over to try to take a look at the propeller and engine. Just as he had begun to move in that direction, the entire carriage shook violently as the zeppelin lurched away from the tower.

“There goes the zeppelin to Orgrimmar,” one of the goblins on the platform said loudly, “I hope there’s no explosions this time.”

“Ex-ex-explosions?!” Alayne shrieked.

Zerith sighed. This was going to be a very long trip.

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“We made it,” Zerith sighed gratefully. Once the zeppelin had pulled up to the tower in Durotar, Alayne had been off it like a bullet, racing down the tower, ignoring the indignant shouts and grunts of those she shoved out of her way in her excitement to be back on solid ground. Callie had hurried after her, tossing apologies for Alayne over her shoulder as she followed the elven woman down. Zerith could hear her guffaws of laughter from inside the tower. Smiling to himself, he hurried down and outside, joining Callie in her mirth when he saw the cause.

Alayne lay prostrate on the ground, dust hanging in the air around her as she tried to embrace the very land itself. “Land, beautiful, solid, not-up-in-the-air land!” she moaned ecstatically. Orcs, trolls, and tauren gave her wide berth, eyeing her warily as if wondering if her insanity was contagious. Shaking from laughter, tears streaming down his cheeks, Zerith reached down and pulled Alayne out of the dirt.

“Come on,” he wheezed between chuckles, “we have got to go get you cleaned up before we present ourselves to the Warchief.”

The trio walked, with Zerith and Callie having to stop every few steps until they mastered their laughter, into the orcish stronghold of Orgrimmar. The stone walkway leading into the city was covered in a thin layer of dust but provided blessed relief from the relentless glare of the sun. The city itself was laid out in a random, chaotic pattern and Zerith was forced to ask directions to the nearest inn from one of the guards.

“Over that direction,” the guard grunted, waving a hand vaguely to the north. Zerith bowed politely, thanking the guard for his helpful, albeit somewhat useless, directions. The guard’s eyes narrowed and, for a moment, it looked as if he would speak. Then, recalling himself, the guard returned to attention.

“They don’t seem to like us,” Zerith muttered to Callie and Alayne as the three moved towards the inn.

“I know,” Callie said, sighing. “It will be a long time before the orcs trust elves and the Forsaken. Everyone, regardless of race, carries scars of mistrust from the last several wars.”

“But we’re on their side now,” Alayne protested.

“Yes, but it will take time. It always does,” Callie answered softly. “Besides,” she said, a mischievous glint in her eye, “I’d have a hard time trusting a woman covered in dirt with mud on her face myself.”

Alayne’s face turned as red as the dust of the Durotar desert. Looking down at her robes, she tried futilely to brush the dust off, merely scattering it and smearing it around. “Let’s get to that inn,” she whispered hurriedly, “and pretend this whole thing never happened.”

Suiting action to words, the three hastened their strides and soon found the inn. Taking rooms for the afternoon, they went up and freshened themselves for their meeting with the Warchief. Zerith and Callie were soon ready to go but Alayne, understandably, took longer to make herself presentable. Once she had finally gotten almost all of the dust off of her robes, washed her face thrice, and straightened her jaw-length blond hair, Zerith and Callie had been waiting in the main room of the inn for a half hour.

“And so she arrives,” Zerith said grandly as Alayne entered the room. She shot him a glare that was meant to be annoyed but was spoiled by her own amusement at her earlier antics.

“Let’s be off?” she suggested, gesturing to the door. The three friends stepped back out into the street and, asking directions of passers-by, soon made their way to the Warchief’s fortress deep within the area of the city known as the Valley of Wisdom. Callie whispered

their business to one of the Horde servitors who nodded and motioned for them to proceed into the main room.

The room was large, spacious, dark, and cool after the heat of the mid-day sun. Braziers around the room provided flickering light and little heat. Representatives from the Darkspear tribe, as well as various orc clans, stood around the room, their attention divided between the impressive figure of the Warchief and the newcomers. Alayne and Zerith walked up to Thrall slowly, their strides respectful and their gazes downcast. Stopping before him, they made their obeisance. Callie, more familiar with the orcs and their leader, simply walked up to the Warchief and bowed respectfully.

“On your feet,” Thrall grimaced irritably, “speak and be quick. I’ve no time for elvish formalities.”

Startled by his brusqueness, Alayne and Zerith rose while Callie handed the letter from Sylvanas to the Warchief of the Horde.

“Sylvanas is a persistent one. So she’s sent some of Silvermoon’s own champions,” he muttered to himself, “how does this change anything?” Reading further, the orc’s brows rose in surprise. He glanced up from the letter and gave the two sin’dorei a weighing, penetrative look. With a harrumph, he returned to his reading.

“Your people suffered a great betrayal by the Alliance. You’ve succeeded in fending off attacks from your former allies, as well as defeating a powerful Scourge leader at the footsteps of your homeland. Not only that; you have put an end to Alliance incursions into Forsaken territory in Lordaeron and pre-empted any chance the humans had at launching a northern invasion. Your race’s worthiness is no longer in question. It is now apparent that you need us and we need you. Return to Lor’themar. Tell him I get the picture.” With a dark grin, the Warchief crumbled the letter in his massive paws. “Welcome to the Horde.”

“We thank you for your consideration, Warchief,” Zerith said, bowing. “We will return to Lord Lor’themar with your reply. However, is there anything the three of us could do for you or your people to further cement our allegiance?”

Grinning in startled amusement, the Warchief raised a hand to his chin, rubbing his lower jaw as he mulled over his answer. “From what Sylvanas writes, you three are the leaders of some kind of unofficial strike force. Gather your forces and return to Lordaeron. We have an outpost in the Arathi Highlands, Hammerfall. Report to Drum Fel there. Sylvanas may also have further instructions for you concerning operations she’s undertaken in the Hillsbrad Foothills. Now go. You are dismissed.”

Saluting, the three left the Warchief’s fortress with a feeling of accomplishment. “That went much better than our first meeting with one of the Horde’s leaders,” Alayne laughed in delight.

“Yeeeeeeeeesss,” Zerith said, dragging the word out, “our first meeting with the Dark Lady was...”

“...a complete and total disaster!” Alayne laughed. “I thought she was going to rip your head off.”

“Well, at least you’ve given a good account of your race,” Callie said, “and you’ve helped your people join the Horde. Now, let’s do as the Warchief suggested and report to Hammerfall. We’ll stop in Silvermoon for the night, of course,” she continued as the three walked back through Orgrimmar heading towards the southern gate. “Would you two rather go directly to Hammerfall or would you like to stop by our outpost in Hillsbrad to see if we can be of assistance there?”

“I think we should probably go directly on to Hammerfall,” Alayne responded. “We’ve established ourselves with the Forsaken,” she explained, “and we will definitely go to Hillsbrad and assist in whatever operations the Dark Lady has on-going there. However, we should probably take this opportunity to establish strong ties with the rest of the Horde.”

“I agree with Alayne,” Zerith seconded. “If we want to have any hope of changing the minds of the rest of the Horde, we will have to prove ourselves to them.”

“That sounds fine to me,” Callie nodded. “Now, we’ll just take the zeppelin back to...” she stopped when she heard a dull thud behind her. Turning around, she and Zerith saw Alayne crumpled on the ground, unconscious. Zerith bent down and lifted the elven woman into his arms with a weary sigh.

“All things equal,” he said, “it’s probably better this way.”

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The trip back to Undercity was peaceful. Zerith stood out on the balcony at the rear of the zeppelin, watching the land and sea pass beneath him and letting the wind whip his hair around his face. His enjoyment of the ride was spoiled only slightly by the scent of burning oil that trailed behind the zeppelin’s motor. The sin’dorei man would glance back over his shoulder every so often, checking on Alayne who lay sleeping peacefully, blissfully unaware of even being on the zeppelin. Callie was above, on the upper deck, watching the goblin crew as they monitored the mechanics of the floating vessel during its flight. Satisfied that he was alone with his thoughts, Zerith turned his gaze back out to the sea and his attention to the Light, praying silently as his father had taught him. He smothered the pangs of regret that he felt whenever he thought of his father.

“Land ho!” The goblin’s shout jerked Zerith from his reverie. Gathering his sister up, Zerith walked up the steps to the upper deck and stood silently beside Callie while the zeppelin pulled up to the tower overlooking Tirisfal. They descended the tower silently, Zerith feeling out-of-sorts from his interrupted thoughts.

“Is something bothering you?” Callie asked as they took the path to the ruined city of Undercity. “You are very quiet.”

“The only thing bothering me,” Zerith said, trying to make light of it, “is that Alayne is too heavy to carry like this all the time.”

“Are you saying that I’m fat?” she demanded. Zerith, startled by her wakefulness, nearly dropped her.

“No, no, not at all!” he stammered hastily, setting her on her feet.

“I was kidding,” she said. “But you have been quiet the last few minutes. I expected to wake up to you and Callie joking about my passing out. Is something bothering you?”

“How long have you been awake?” Zerith asked, his eyes glinting dangerously.

“Since you started going down the stairs. Now,” Alayne said, putting her hands on her hips and adopting her most stubborn look, “what is bothering you?”

“Do you ever think about your father?” he asked, his eyes lowered and unfocused and his voice indistinct and distant.

“Yes,” Alayne drawled warily, wondering if this was another attempted diversion.

“Well, I’ve just been thinking about my father lately. About what he and my mother would have thought about us, what we’ve done, the honors that have been heaped on our heads. I find myself wishing he were still around. That’s all,” Zerith said firmly, lifting his eyes to meet Alayne’s.

Alayne nodded in understanding. Callie cleared her throat and asked cautiously, “Would you tell us about your family, Zerith? I don’t believe you’ve said anything about them to me.”

Zerith closed his eyes, gathered his thoughts, and, with a sigh, began. “I’m the oldest of four children. My parents lived in Goldenmist Village; my father and uncle were the leaders of the local shrine to the Light. My mother was the village midwife, using her skill with herbs to help my father with healing that the Light couldn’t seem to cure. My family was

among the last to flee the village when the Scourge invaded. My mother and sisters fell ill and died just a few years after the destruction of the Sunwell. My father did not outlive them long. That's really all there is to tell."

Alayne said nothing, just looked at him skeptically. Zerith returned her look with one of his own that said she had gotten all the information out of him she was going to get at this time. With a sigh of understanding, Alayne changed the subject.

"So, how long would it take us to get to Hammerfall?"

Callie glanced up at the sun to gauge the time. It stood halfway down from its mid-day peak. Nodding to herself, she answered, "We'll get there in time to enjoy some lovely troll gumbo. We should go by Silvermoon first, though," she said, "since it is literally a three-minute trip."

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The old orc eyed the three newcomers in wary disbelief. "I told the Warchief we needed reinforcements," he muttered angrily, "but I meant warriors. Not a moldering corpse and two pretty-faced elves! We're fighting a battle, here, not having a tea party!" the veteran orc spat.

Alayne and Zerith drew deep, calming breaths. Callie sighed. They were getting used to this kind of reaction from their offers to help out.

"We understand, Master Drum Fel," Zerith said politely, "and while the three of us are not exactly what you had in mind, we would like to know what it is we can do to aid the Horde's efforts here in the Arathi Highlands."

"Oh, so the pretty-boy wants to know what he can do to help the big green orcie," Drum Fel sneered. "Well, let's see. First of all, if you could go down and convince the nasty Witherbark trolls to stop attacking our village, that would be nice. Oh, and after that, if you could see your way to doing something about the Boulderfist ogres who have taken over various parts of the Highlands, that would just be peachy! After you finish that, you could probably, ever so kindly, clean out the Alliance forces in the ruins of Stromgarde! Now, go away! I have work to be about," he grunted, dismissing the trio from his attention. The three saluted him as if he had given them actual orders and returned to the barracks. Once there, Zerith took another deep breath and smiled.

"Callie," he began, "would you mind returning to Undercity this evening? Alayne and I will remain here and will begin scouting the area around here in order to get a better feel for how to plan our attacks. You should be able to find Ger'alín hanging around the War Quarter. He will be most happy to see you and hear what you have to say."

"Of course," Callie laughed, knowing what was about to happen. "I'm sure that everyone will love to help out again," she said as she turned to leave. "I'll borrow a wyvern back to Undercity. I may have our forces back here by tonight."

"Tomorrow morning would be better, but tonight is fine," Zerith replied. The Forsaken turned again and began to leave. "Oh, and one more thing, Callie," he said. She turned around wondering what the priest had to add. "Pick up some salt, would you?" he smiled. "Our dear commander, Drum Fel, will need it when we make him eat his words."

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Ger'alín stood outside the Warrior's training center in the War Quarter of Undercity. He felt the glowing burn of a day spent in physical exertion spreading through his tired muscles. His long brown hair was slicked to his head with sweat and his sword arm shook with fatigue. All in all, it had been a productive day.

“The Forsaken certainly have some innovative combat techniques, don’t they?” Tau’re remarked as he left the facility and stood next to Ger’alin in companionable exhaustion.

Ger’alin smiled up at the tauren. The two had become fast friends in the past few weeks. Tau’re possessed the one trait that Ger’alin admired above all others: a passion for honorable combat. “Of course they do,” he said in response to the tauren’s question, “imagine if you did not have to fear physical death. You’d probably be much more inventive in combat as well.”

“Oh, they do fear it. They can die by being hacked to pieces.”

“Yes, but look at their physical traits. They can go long without sleep or food, they do not feel pain as keenly as living beings do. The undead are as close to an ideal fighting force as makes no difference.”

“Which, of course, is why they are so hard to drive out,” Tau’re sighed. “The chieftains sent me, along with several others, here to learn how to combat the undead. Thus far, we’ve had little problem with the Scourge in Kalimdor. The undead we face there are not the Lich King’s slaves; they are just the spirits of those who cannot find their rest.”

“So...why the concern, then? It should be easy to overcome unorganized rabble, even if the rabble is undead.”

“Because, while they are not Scourge right now, there is the fear that the Lich King just needs to reach out his hand and they will fall right into it,” the bull-man sighed. “But, enough unpleasant talk. Come, let us go to the tavern and wash away our weariness with ale, meat, and companionship.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” Ger’alin agreed, sheathing his sword. Tau’re looped his massive mace through its holder on his back and the two began to walk towards the tavern.

“You’ve never told me why you are always in the War Quarter,” Tau’re said after a brief pause. “Most of the sin’dorei keep themselves to the Magic Quarter. I have seen very few warriors among them. As a matter of fact,” he said, his deep voice thick with amusement, “you are the first sin’dorei warrior I’ve seen.”

“Well, I’m not exactly a warrior,” Ger’alin explained. “My father was a guard before Arthas invaded our homeland. I wanted to be a guard, just like him. When I was a lad, my mother made me a guard outfit that looked exactly like my father’s. I used to wear it all the time, following him around town on his patrols when I was supposed to be doing chores or attending to my studies.”

“He sounds like an honorable man.”

“He was,” Ger’alin sighed, “anyway, long story short; as soon as I was old enough, I joined the Theramore guard force. Then, several months later, I heard about Kael’Thas and his plans to rebuild our homeland. I resigned from the guard and returned to Quel’Thalas, thinking I would join the army or the guards there. Instead, I was told that physical might wasn’t enough; I needed to be able to use magic. I should have studied more as a child, eh?” he laughed. Tau’re nodded with a smile. “Well, I’m not so good at the arcane so mage training was off the list. Warlock training was never a consideration. I enjoy the good life too much to make it as priest. Back-stabbing and sneaking are dishonorable, so I could just tick ‘rogue’ right off. That left training as a hunter or a paladin,” he sighed. “And, while I love animals, I don’t love them that much. So, paladin it was. Only, I wound up irritating my teachers so much with my inability to learn how to siphon off divine energy from this thing they’ve got back there that they gave up, told me to practice swinging my sword, and to pray that I would never need anything other than that. So, here I am. The lone sin’dorei warrior.”

“It is a path with much honor,” Tau’re stated. Ger’alin nodded in agreement.

“I haven’t had many chances for honor since I don’t seem to fit into the mold our people prefer,” the sin’dorei sighed. “Frankly, until Zerith and Alayne recruited me into their force, I hadn’t had any chances. All of the plum assignments went to others.”

“Alayne and Zerith...I seem to have heard those names before,” Tau’re mused.

“I’d be surprised if you hadn’t,” Ger’alin muttered. “Looks crowded tonight,” he said, pointing to the main room of the tavern. “But there are a few empty tables over by the stairs.” The two made their way carefully across the crowded room and sat down at one of the few empty tables. Placing their orders with one of the maids bustling about the room with drinks, they turned back to their earlier conversation.

“Aren’t those the two elves who managed to kill the Scourge leader over near Silvermoon City?” Tau’re asked after a few moments of silent thought.

“Alayne and Zerith? Yes. Those are the two who had the idea of putting together a force that could launch a quick, hard strike. According to Zerith, the idea came to them after some guard in Ghostlands made an off-hand comment that made Alayne mad as a wet cat. I’m part of that force. We brought Dar’khan to justice,” he said proudly, “and we put an end to the Alliance threat in Silverpine as well. I’ll tell you, Tau’re,” he confided, “all either of them has to do is send word and I will go where ever they need and do whatever they ask.”

“I would like to meet these friends of yours,” Tau’re said, his eyes bright with eagerness. “And I would like to join their force. Any group you are part of must be a group with much honor. What is it?” he asked seeing Ger’alin’s face suddenly light up as he stared at the doorway of the tavern. An undead woman stood in the door, looking around the room. A smile crossed her face as soon as she found Ger’alin.

“Well, my friend,” he replied with a huge grin, “you may be about to get your chance to do just that.”

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“I wonder how Callie is faring,” Zerith wondered aloud as he and Alayne crept quietly over the rough terrain that formed the border between the Arathi Highlands and the Wetlands.

“She’s probably doing better than we are,” Alayne muttered, limping behind Zerith. “If I stub my toe on just one more rock...”

“We’ll be heading back soon, Alayne. Our reconnaissance work is almost done.”

“It’s not like there was much to do. Once we convinced some of the orcs back at the camp that we were serious, they gave us a pretty good map of Stromgarde and its forces. The ogre camps are about what you’d expect from the beasts; random patrols who are as likely to be asleep or eating as not.”

“They are in caves, though, which worries me,” Zerith sighed. “It’s not like we can scout out the caves without giving ourselves away. For all I know, those caves could meet underground somewhere.”

“They don’t. Trust me on that one. Remember, I grew up just south of here. The Highlands are rockier than the Wetlands but not by much. Caves in this area won’t go very far underground and will not be very long. They have nothing on the ones you can find down in Dun Morogh.”

“I’ve never been here or to Dun Morogh. I keep forgetting that you and your mother lived in Menethil, though. Let’s stop for a bit,” he sighed. “It looks like the trolls here are getting ready for a change of the guard. At least they aren’t sleeping on the job.”

“Of course they aren’t, silly,” Alayne giggled quietly as she and Zerith settled down in the shadow of a large rock. From where they sat, they could see a good part of the troll village that dotted the southeastern corner of the Highland’s plateau. The moon was just reaching its zenith in the inky blue sky above them and the troll guards had the look of men

shaking off lethargy in preparation for leaving their posts. "I remember my father telling me stories about the fierce Amani trolls who are still holed up in the ruins of their great city, Zul'Aman."

"I remember those stories. My father used to tell them to me," Zerith said, a smile of nostalgia spreading slowly across his face.

"Will you tell me what happened to your family? I don't mean to pry," Alayne said hastily, "but I just feel strange; I've told you about my family, but you've been silent about yours."

Zerith sighed heavily. "It's not that I'm trying to hide anything from you, sis," he said affectionately, "it's that talking about them is hard for me because of the unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable question of 'why?' Besides," he pointed out, gesturing towards the troll village, "now is hardly the time to engage in lengthy conversation. Let's take advantage of their settling in for a routine night to finish our reconnaissance and then head back to Hammerfall. I'm about ready to fall asleep out here on the cold, hard, wet ground."

"Okay, brother dearest," Alayne said in a tone of fond tolerance, "I'll let you dodge the subject this once. Next time we're alone together, though, you're telling if I have to sit on you and pluck your leg hairs out one by one."

"Note to self: let cannibal trolls have me over for supper before angering Alayne," Zerith muttered. Alayne punched him playfully on the shoulder before steeling herself and returning to their spy work against the Witherbark trolls.

As the pair skirted around the perimeter of the village, moving with graceful stealth through the night's long shadows, Alayne's lips moved as she kept a silent count of the numbers of trolls out and about in the darkness. After an hour's worth of spying, the pair were satisfied that they knew as much about the trollish village's layout and disposition of forces as they would learn short of infiltrating. Continuing to move quietly, the two made their way back north towards Hammerfall. Once they were out of eyeshot, and earshot, of the troll village, Alayne picked up the threads of their previous conversation.

"So, tell me at least where you and your family fled to after the invasion," she teased.

"You just are not going to leave me alone until I tell you everything, aren't you?" Zerith said in mock annoyance.

"That's right. I'm your annoying little sister."

"Annoying is right," he laughed. "We fled to the Hinterlands after the Scourge invaded. My father and uncle managed to get most of the villagers onto boats and rafts that we kept moored on the coast. We skirted the northern coast and came down the eastern side of Lordaeron, avoiding the worst of the fighting by staying on the water."

"So you were in Quel'Thalas just as the Scourge came through?" Alayne asked breathlessly, her eyes wide with wonder. "My father managed to convince my mother to take me and flee to Menethil days before the Scourge broke through."

"If my family had been anyone other than who they were, we probably would have done the same. Getting you and your mother out of there was the wisest, most loving thing your father could ever have done for you. Believe me, Alayne, you were spared the horror of seeing those..." he trailed off, unable to continue, shaking with rage at the memory of the last sight of his village being overrun by the Scourge, the few guards remaining slaughtered and then raised and forced to fight on, this time against their former comrades.

Drawing a deep breath, Zerith closed his eyes to blot out the horrors. With a weary smile, half fond, half apologetic, he looked down at Alayne who had put her hand on his arm in support. "Anyway, you were spared a lot. We got as far as the Hinterlands before our supplies and ships wore out. We managed to sneak past some of the troll villages in the area. I guess you could say we were successful," he sighed, his voice flat. "Only a few dozen of us got killed. We made it to Aerie Peak where the Wildhammer clan took us in and let us

establish a settlement nearby; the Quel'Danil Lodge. Many of our people are still there. I was one of the few who decided to return home when our prince called.”

Zerith looked as if he were about to continue his tale when he suddenly cut off. He raised his hand peremptorily at Alayne when she opened her mouth as if to speak. Cocking his head to the south, Zerith listened intently. Without an explanation, he shoved Alayne off the road, dragging her into the undergrowth nearby and smothering her half-hearted protests with his hands.

After a few minutes, Alayne was grateful for his rough treatment. As the two watched from their hiding spot in the brush, a small band of trolls stalked up the road, headed towards Hammerfall. Zerith stared after them, his hatred plain on his face, not moving until the band was well up the road. Only then did he remove his hand from Alayne's mouth and help her up out of the brush, offering abject apologies for his rough handling.

“So, are we going to let them attack Hammerfall?” Alayne asked, cutting off his excuses.

“I don't want to, Alayne, but five of them versus two of us?”

“Actually, five of them versus three of us,” she corrected him as she focused inward, reaching through the nether and grabbing hold of the first demonic presence she sensed that she could compel. Zerith's jaw dropped as the demon took shape before him. If the demon had been less demonic, she would have been an attractive woman.

“Excellent,” Alayne grinned, noting the distracted look on her brother's face. “If a civilized male like you has trouble, those trolls don't stand a snowball's chance in Molten Core.”

Before Zerith could offer an explanation, or even question whether or not this was a wise course of action, Alayne and her succubus were chasing off after the troll band. With a sigh, he prayed that the Light would be with them and set off after her.

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“Well look at what the cat dragged in,” one of the orcish guards outside of Hammerfall sneered when he saw the two sin'dorei stumbling up the road. “What happened? Did the meanie ogres not want to play with you? It's past your bedtime anyway, elfies.”

“Say nothing,” Zerith whispered to Alayne. “Callie's getting the salt.”

““Callie's getting the salt?”” Alayne quoted, trying not to burst into laughter. “That is a new one.”

“Well, she is,” Zerith answered defensively. “Whatever,” he sighed after a brief pause, “I'm tired and I'm sure it made more sense earlier. Let's just go wash the dust and troll stench off and find some place to curl up and sleep. I still cannot believe you just rushed them like that,” he muttered. “Were you trying to get yourself killed?”

“No, Zerith, I was not trying to get myself killed. And, I hardly 'rushed' them. I sent the succubus in first to distract them and then, when they were good and distracted, then and only then did I go after them myself. By then, you were with me so I was hardly alone.”

“I know, but Alayne,” he said, a slight whine of fatigue worming into his voice, “we were lucky that time. Trolls normally carry charms and wards to protect them from curses and hexes. They are extremely superstitious. Next time, instead of trying to take on a group of trolls on your own, can we just settle for beating them to the village and giving a warning?”

“I suppose we can,” she sighed, “but I just kept thinking that if we let them get to Hammerfall, Drum Fel and the others would never let us live it down.”

“Better that we live it down than die trying to prove a point.”

“You're right,” she said. “I'm sorry. I will attempt to curb my late-night impetuosity in the future.”

“You’d better,” he said lightly. “Otherwise, I will have to ask the Brotherhood to assign you some monstrous penance for making me worry so much about you.”

Alayne snorted derisively and walked on into the barracks. Zerith followed her silently and the two began readying themselves for bed. Just as he was about to drop off the edge into unconsciousness, he heard Alayne giggle and say, “I wonder what the orcs would have thought had we brought back trophies. I’ll bet salt goes great with troll flesh.”

~*~*~*~

“Clang! Clang! Clang!”

“He is a sound sleeper.”

“CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!”

Zerith rolled over, pulling the sheet over his head. Ger’alin sighed and set the pot and wooden spoon he’d been banging down.

“Maybe if we got a cannon?” Alayne suggested helpfully.

“No, I have a better idea,” Callie laughed as she dashed outside. Moments later, she returned with a bucket filled with water. Bits of ice floated in it. “Davril chilled it for me,” she explained. Then, without another word, she tossed the bucket on Zerith’s still-slumbering form.

The sin’dorei man leapt out of the bed, tangling himself in his soaking sheets and robes, and landed heavily on his rump. Alayne, Callie, and Ger’alin burst out laughing at the irritated expression on his face.

“You wouldn’t wake up,” Alayne explained once her breath had returned. “We tried everything. Shaking you, pulling your eyes open, shouting, banging a pot next to your face.”

“Cold water was our next option,” Callie interjected. “If that hadn’t worked, I would have tried putting your hand in warm water.”

“That doesn’t wake you up,” Zerith muttered in annoyance as he untangled himself and stood up.

“No, but it would amuse me greatly,” the Forsaken laughed.

“Okay, enough of that,” Alayne said, putting an end to the antics. “Zerith, wash up and get dressed. Everyone’s outside waiting on you. And I do mean *everyone*,” she said happily. “Apparently, Ger’alin here, among others, decided to brag about what our groups had done in the Ghostlands and in Silverpine. We have more people outside than we really need.”

“How many?” Zerith asked.

“About a hundred,” Ger’alin answered.

“Catch him!” Alayne screamed as Zerith’s knees buckled. Ger’alin sprang over and managed to grab the unconscious man before he hit the ground. Alayne hovered over her brother protectively, chaffing his wrists and gently slapping his cheeks by turn.

“So, should I go get that warm water?” Callie asked nonchalantly.

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“Feeling better?” Ger’alin asked when Zerith finally stepped out of the barracks. The sun was well overhead, yet still far short of its noon-day peak. Any answer Zerith may have made was lost in the roar of applause that rolled through the encampment once the mass of people noticed his presence. Blushing with embarrassment, Zerith raised a hand asking for quiet.

“No need to let everyone know we’re here,” he said in a carrying tone. The crowd quieted with a few murmurs of amusement. “It looks like we have a lot of people. In a bit, I will be asking you to sort yourselves by specialization and report to either myself, Alayne over there,” he said, pointing to her, “or Callie,” again, he indicated the person. “Alayne and I

have done some initial recon work on the ogre and troll settlements outside of Stromgarde. Once we know more about what everyone here can do, we will come up with a plan to attack these areas and drive out any who would oppose the Horde's control of the Arathi Highlands!"

The orcish guards were jolted as the crowd roared in applause. *Perhaps*, some of them were thinking, *there is more to these elves than we first believed*. Zerith raised his hand again for silence.

"Would those of you who are primarily combat-trained report to Callie and tell her your weapon specialty and any additional skills you might have? Casters, report the same to Alayne. Healers and other non-combat forces, report to me over there," he said, pointing to the far corner of the settlement. The crowd began sorting itself out. The group lining up to report to Callie was, by far, the largest. Alayne's group was none-too-small either, boasting at least three dozen magic users of various stripes. Zerith's group was small and quickly dealt with, consisting mostly of a few elven and Forsaken priests and a pair of shaman. Once he was satisfied that they knew what would be expected of them, he left them to wait for his further instructions and went to help Callie cull through her group. Seeing that Ger'alın was ahead of him on that, Zerith stepped over to Alayne's group to wait for her to finish. After several more minutes, the three stepped off to one side to discuss the forces they had.

"We've got plenty of combat fighters," Callie said with a chuckle. "Most of them are rogues or hunters; used to stealth or distance. But, Ger'alın and his friend, Tau're have several warriors with them, not to mention a paladin who I think is going to run Alayne a close second for recklessness."

"Hmph," Zerith sighed, "well, let's get started planning a few skirmishes then, shall we?" Motioning to Ger'alın and Davril, two of the veterans he knew could be trusted in this kind of work, Zerith squatted down, drawing a rough map of the southeastern portion of the Highlands in the dirt. "There are two major areas of interest to our south," he began, filling in those who hadn't been scouting with him. "One is the ogre camp. We'll be ignoring it for now. I'll set a small force out to keep an eye on them in case they decide to try to flank us. Our primary target will be the Witherbark troll village."

"The village is open with huts built randomly throughout the area," Alayne said, picking up the thread from Zerith. "The trolls build their homes in depressions in the ground so any groups advancing will need to keep an eye out; you can stumble over the huts before you realize it."

"What about their guard forces?" Davril asked.

"They are spread out, mostly along the road with concentrations around the huts. A fair number patrol back into the mountain. I suspect there is a cave or path of some sort hiding more trolls. We couldn't check it out last night," Zerith explained, "because the path into the mountain pass is very narrow and twisty. One advantage we have, though, is that the mountain walls there are very steep. The trolls will not be able to get up above us and pelt us with arrows at will."

"How many trolls do you think are down there?" Ger'alın asked after a moment of thought. "And do they seem to be mostly hand-to-hand fighters or voodoo magicians?"

"The village houses at least fifty trolls. Most seem to be warriors of one kind or another but I wouldn't rule out shamans or witchdoctors," Alayne answered. "Most of them were wearing mail and pants last night but I did see a few in robes. As for how many are hiding in the pass: your guess is as good as mine. I'd say at least another two dozen."

"Mm-hmm," Ger'alın agreed as he stood in thought. "Your plan?"

"Tell off ten people, five fighters, four magic users, and one healer, to keep an eye on the ogres. The rest of us form three groups of," Zerith stopped, pausing to calculate, "twenty-

five for the main force, another twenty-five to act as a holding force, and the last group to act as a reserve.”

“No,” Ger’alin said flatly, “ten won’t be enough to do anything other than die if the ogres decide to move on us. Put as close to twenty as you can there. Mostly magic users, if you can spare them. Ogres aren’t too bright – Light knows we had enough of them in Dustwallow to learn that – so a few spells can hold them at bay long enough for the fighters to pick off the leaders. Ogres tend to fear anyone who can overcome the strongest among them. If you put twenty to watch the ogres, how many does that leave you?”

“Sixty-two.”

“Right. Split that group three ways as you planned. Twenty-one, twenty-one, and twenty. No reserve. Or, rather, the reserve is the force watching the ogres who are just as likely to do nothing as they are to attack.”

“Would you like to finish this?” Zerith laughed. “Because I like the way you think.”

Ger’alin grinned at the priest. “I’ve had too much time to think and study battle planning. I did little else in Silvermoon. Let’s hear what you have and then we’ll argue?”

“The three groups will attack in waves. The first group will sneak up close to the mountains, their backs to the ogre camp. The reserve group will go with that group and break away before they reach the mountains. The first group then moves in from the west and takes out the guards on the southwestern side of the village and moves towards the pass. Once that group has engaged, the other two move in, from the south and from the east, both making their way to the pass. All three groups will converge on the pass with the third group holding the mouth of the pass while the first two go further in.”

The sin’dorei warrior stared at the priest in shock. Zerith stared back at Ger’alin with a look of annoyed consternation. “That is, if that plan is fine with you, General.”

Ger’alin threw back his head and laughed. “That is almost the exact plan I would have suggested. My only changes are that the eastern group engage at the same time as the first group. Place a hunter with the first group who can shoot up a flare when the advance is given.”

Zerith nodded in acquiescence. It was a good idea. “Ger’alin, you lead the first group. Callie, you take the second. Alayne will take care of the reserve group while I lead the last attack group.” Alayne looked as if she would protest for a moment but Zerith stopped her with a look that would brook no argument. “Questions? No? Now, let’s figure out who goes with what group.”

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“We always seem to attack at night,” Davril noted to Alayne as the two kept their eyes on the ogre compound to their west. The sun had been midway between its peak and its fall when the final assignments for each of the four groups had been made.

“The few hours after the evening meal and before bed are the second best hours to launch a surprise attack,” Alayne said, quoting Ger’alin.

“The second best?” Davril muttered absent-mindedly.

“The best time to attack is when no one expects it,” Alayne replied in the same tone, her occupation absorbed with observing the east, watching for signs of a messenger. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Davril start and turn to stare at her in irritation. “Of course,” she continued, “since no one knows when exactly that will be, we’ll settle for the second best time.” Davril relaxed, smiling sardonically at the joke.

“They’ve engaged,” he remarked when he saw a bright flare light up the twilight shadows above. “Any movement from the ogres?”

“None,” Alayne sighed bitterly. “If Zerith wouldn’t skin me alive for it, I’d say we could probably go take them now and save him the work.”

“If it were only the ogres that we saw out wandering around their campsite earlier, I’d say go for it,” Davril commented. “But there is that cave.”

Alayne nodded. She disagreed with the assessments about the cave but did not think it was worth the risk or facing her brother’s anger if she were to go haring off on her own. With a sigh of impatience, she sat down, folding her legs beneath her, and glanced back at the ogre encampment from time to time. The rest of her attack group milled about, some sitting, some standing, other pacing, all waiting for word to come from the east or for an attack from the west. Hours dragged by while they waited, each passing moment adding the tension of its crawling seconds. The bone-white moon climbed overhead. Stars began dotting the darkening sky and still they waited.

“I can’t stand this,” Alayne muttered as the moon neared its summit. “We should have heard something by now.”

“I think we’re about to,” Davril said, pointing to a sparse grouping of trees near the border of the troll village. A person was approaching them from the trees, his gait confident and sure and his eyes glowing faintly green. Both features marked him as a blood elf and thus, one of their comrades. Alayne motioned for her group to get to their feet and waited for the messenger to reach them with ill-concealed impatience. *Obviously, there’s no rush*, she thought to herself. The messenger was taking his sweet time.

“We have taken the village,” the messenger announced without prelude once he reached the group. “Zerith says to move into the village. After the three attack groups have had a bit of rest, he plans to clear out the ogres.”

“There aren’t that many,” Alayne said. “See for yourself,” she pointed over to the ogre camp. Less than two dozen ogres stood or sat around camp fires, most dozing. “We could take them now. Just us.”

“I’m afraid that’s not up to me,” the elf said, “and I think Zerith means to clear out all of the ogres from the Highlands tonight. Not just those few over there.”

“I see,” Alayne said with a sigh. “Very well. Let’s fall out to the village.”

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“I still say that my group should lead the attack,” Alayne argued. Zerith, Ger’alin, and Callie had just wakened after a few hours’ sleep. “None of us were involved in any fighting earlier. My force is completely fresh.”

“I know that,” Zerith sighed, “but your force consists mostly of distance fighters. How exactly are they going to be of use in a cave?”

“He’s got a point, Alayne,” Ger’alin said. “You’d need hand-to-hand specialists for combat in a cave. Magical attacks are too dangerous in confined quarters. Too much a chance of having your spell backfire right on you.”

“I understand that, Ger’alin,” she said slowly, “and I’m willing to concede the point that I would need some melee fighters. But I do not understand why Zerith is trying to leave me out entirely. You will need all four groups if you want to take both locations at once.”

“She’s right, Zerith, and you know it,” Callie muttered beneath her breath. “Put her group with Ger’alin’s or mine and be done with it.”

The sin’dorei priest sighed heavily. He did not relish the thought of being unable to keep an eye on Alayne. “Fine,” he conceded after a lengthy pause. “Ger’alin, you and Alayne take the ogre compound over by Stromgarde. Callie and I will move on the group immediately to our west. Once we’re done there, we’ll send word to Hammerfall requesting

that they send an occupation group to keep the area clear. After that, we'll regroup where you are, rest, and plan our next attack."

The three nodded. The plan was a good one. "I've not noticed that the ogres communicate much between their camps," Callie added. "Each area seems to be fairly self-contained and independent of the others. If that's true, that may give us more time to rest before attacking their stronghold in Stromgarde."

"Normally, I'd agree with you," Zerith replied. "But you've forgotten that the trolls do keep track. The Witherbark are allied with the ogres from what we've heard. Once they hear what happened here, they'll be preparing for an attack."

Callie mulled over that information for a second before nodding in acquiescence. She, Alayne, and Ger'alın moved to gather their forces and march on to their objectives while the sky was still darkening with the deepening of night. "Ger'alın," Zerith called to the man. The sin'dorei warrior turned and glanced at the priest. The two women turned to look as well but went on to their forces when Zerith signaled that he only wanted to speak with Ger'alın.

"If anything happens to her," the priest said through his teeth, "you'll..."

"I get the idea," Ger'alın said smoothly. "Nothing will happen to her. If she tries anything, I'll tie her up and send her back to you as a package. Now, stop worrying about one of the most capable women I've ever seen and start worrying about how we're going to clear out Stromgarde without pulling the entire Alliance down on our heads."

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"Watch your step," Alayne cautioned as she led her group down the steep drop off from the road. She moved slowly, keeping her eyes trained on the ground and trying to shut out the white glare of the moon. She winced at every sound she heard from her and Ger'alın's forces, her imagination amplifying the sounds until she wondered why the ogres weren't rushing down on them.

"Keep low," Ger'alın ordered his group once everyone was safely off the road. "Pull your cloaks about you. You're shining," he warned his warriors. "The glint of the moon on your armor is all we need to give us away."

Moving as quietly as they could, the group made their way towards the ogre camp. A handful of ogres slept outside the entrance to a cave that was bored back into the hill behind them. Stalking as quietly as cats on the high savannah, Ger'alın's and Alayne's fighters snuck up and massacred the ogre guard force before many of them even woke up.

"Now for the tricky part," Ger'alın muttered. He and Alayne had agreed on a plan of battle regarding the cave before they had set out. Motioning for his best hand-to-hand fighters to move forward, Ger'alın led them into the cave, the magic users and ranged forces moving in a second wave with a space of about ten strides between the two groups. Within seconds of entering the cave, the sound of crude alarms and coarse battle shouts filled the air. Ogres surged from hidden twists in the tunneling cavern. Ger'alın's fighters pressed their attack, forcing the ogres back further into the twisting earthen maze. Alayne's fighters hung back, doing what they could to help the frontline fighters. Arrows, bolts of ice, fire, and shadow flew through the air over the warrior's heads to strike down the ogres. Sweat trickled down Alayne's face, half-blinding her and stinging her eyes. She's long since lost count of the twists in the tunneling path that they'd taken or the number of ogre corpses they'd left in their wake. Her breath came in short gasps and she could feel the burn in her muscles that spoke of the effort her casting took out of her. Looking around, she could see the same feeling on the faces of those around her; a determined exhaustion that would not permit itself to be fully felt until the battle was won.

Ahead of her, Ger'alın stopped and looked around for a moment, seeming to be seeing somewhere else. She felt his primal scream of victory in the base of her spine as he shook his sword triumphantly over the bodies of the dead ogres. "We did it," he shouted over and over again. The group burst out in applause and cheering. They had achieved their objective; the ogre compound was clear.

Alayne turned, feeling pleasantly intoxicated from the victory. Knowing she needed to clear her head, she began to walk back up towards the entrance of the cavern. Ger'alın followed her, their forces following both of them, and threw an arm around her waist. "Have I ever told you what a wonderful warrior you are?" he asked, his face still flushed with the same intoxication Alayne felt. She smiled up at him in confusion, knowing that this was not right. Blinking her eyes and trying to force her thoughts to clear, she pulled away from him and stopped dead when she saw the silhouette of a troll on the hill above them. Without a second thought, she hurled a bolt of shadow at the troll, hoping to disable him long enough for the others to finish him off.

Ger'alın released her as soon as he saw what she was aiming for and ran up the hill, his warriors following after him. They made short work of the few trolls that were within reach but were not able to stop several from reaching the road to Stromgarde.

"I never thought the trolls would be watching this camp," Alayne repeated brokenly. "We never saw them last night."

"I should have thought of it myself," Ger'alın said, blaming himself. "But there's nothing to be done about it now. At least we know they know. We can plan around that."

"Right," Alayne said. She glanced around at their forces. "Who here thinks they can run and deliver a message to Zerith and Callie's group telling them we're attacking Stromgarde and why?"

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"I should have gone with her," Zerith muttered to Callie as they jogged down the road to Stromgarde. "I shouldn't have let her go off without me."

"And you would have led the fighters?" Callie replied. "Ger'alın was the best for that job and you know it. It's not his fault – or hers – that they didn't anticipate spies."

"Still I..."

"Can it, Zerith. Focus on the current crisis and worry about the self-recriminations later."

The pair continued on in silence, the stillness of the night broken only by the heavy breathing of their forces as they hurried on to their goal. The runner from Ger'alın and Alayne had met them on the road near the fork leading into the Wetlands. Zerith's moment of victory over the ogres had been short-lived, dashed into a million shards of worry as the runner recounted the tale of troll spies carrying word of the attack back to Stromgarde.

"We're almost there," a sin'dorei paladin said as the shadow of Stromgarde drew up on the horizon to the west.

"Halt," Zerith ordered. They were close enough to their goal to stop and catch their breath. Even with his bowels clenched and twisting with fear, Zerith knew that reaching Stromgarde out of breath and exhausted would do no one any good, least of all Alayne and Ger'alın. Most of the group dropped down on their haunches, fighting to bring their breathing under control and to slow the rapid thudding of their hearts. "We'll need to be as silent as mice crossing a meadow with hawks overhead," he warned the group. "Humans still live in part of Stromgarde. We do not need to bring them down on our backs. We will sneak up in groups of no more than five and hide in the shadows until we are past the human-occupied area. You," he said, pointing to several fighters from Callie's group, "will go first. For the love of the

Light, be silent! I do not want so much as a squeak of your chain armor to give us away.” Those he had indicated nodded in understanding and, wrapping their cloaks about them, moved silently into the night. After several minutes of tense waiting, Zerith signaled another group to follow the first. Straining his ears to catch any sound that would indicate that a group had failed, Zerith sent one group after another until only he, Callie, and a few priests were left. Once the last group had disappeared into the shadows of Stromgarde, Zerith motioned for those remaining to follow him. As silent as the spring wind that brings rain, they tiptoed past the gates leading in to the area still settled by humans. Stalking in the shades, they sneaked down into the area of Stromgarde that the orcs had indicated was inhabited by a mix of ogres and trolls.

The sound of steel clashing against steel came to them as they made their way further into the ruins of the city. With a slashing gesture, Zerith signaled for his group to split up and go see where they were most needed. In the distance, just outside of a tower, he saw Ger’alin and Alayne battling with a pair of ogre shaman. His heart leapt in his throat as he ran to them. Before he reached them, one of the ogres was engulfed in flames forged from shadow. The stench of burning flesh made him stop and he watched in shocked awe as the ogre thrashed about, trying to stifle the magical flames. Ger’alin was finishing off the other of the pair, his sword cutting cleanly through the shaman’s body leaving nothing but a welling streak of red blood as a testament to its passage.

“There are more in the tower,” Alayne gasped as Zerith hurried up to her. “We’ve gotten most of them beaten. Just a few last left in the tower.”

“They can wait. Fresh forces have arrived. Let’s go back,” Zerith said. “We’ll talk about this later.”

Alayne nodded, motioning for Ger’alin to continue on with his fight while she remained behind the front lines with Zerith. Soon the sounds of combat faded with the failing night as the last of the ogres holed up in the tower were slain. Warriors, magi, and healers regrouped once the battle was finished and Zerith took a moment to count heads.

“Any losses?” Callie asked as she worked her left arm. Just moments ago, it had hung at her side, useless, broken by an ogre’s club. One of the Forsaken priests had healed it though the memory of pain remained.

“None, thank the Light,” Zerith sighed.

“Should we stay here or try to return to Hammerfall?” Alayne asked wearily. “It’s daybreak; the humans will be stirring and I don’t think we’re up for yet another battle.”

“I don’t think we should risk staying here,” Ger’alin sighed. “None of us are up for keeping watch. While we didn’t lose anyone, several need the kind of healing that only a good night – or day’s – sleep can bring. The humans will surely have heard the sound of fighting and will be coming to investigate. I say we leave now and make it clear we want no fighting. Maybe that will keep them off of us long enough for us to get back to Hammerfall or Tarren Mill.”

“Let’s move out,” Zerith said, concurring with Ger’alin. “Put your weapons away, keep your hands out in front of you, and everyone carry some white cloth. That’s a symbol of truce among humans. Perhaps they’ll honor it.”

“Keep the words to spells on your lips in case they don’t,” Alayne said in a carrying undertone. “For all we know, these humans would make Garithos look warm-hearted.”

“We have enough troubles as is, Alayne, without you inventing more,” Zerith muttered under his breath.

“Don’t get angry at me,” she returned as the group began moving out of Stromgarde. “It is not my fault that we were spied out by a bunch of cannibals. I had no choice, Zerith. If we’d let them get to Stromgarde and given them time to warn the others, we would have had a real problem on our hands.”

“I know,” Zerith said, his irritation lessening, “but I still don’t like that...”

“ZERITH!” Alayne screamed as she saw the point of an arrow bloom from his chest. The sin’dorei priest looked down at it in shock as his knees gave way. Alayne caught him before he could fall face-first on the ground. One of the other priests began trying to staunch the flow of blood using the white cloth he carried as a crude bandage.

“Alayne?” Ger’alin asked, concerned. “Let the healers handle it, Alayne. Alayne?”

Looking down at her trembling hands, she saw that they were covered in her brother’s blood. The white cloth, meant to symbolize a wish to avoid fighting, was stained red as well. Glaring up at the wall, she saw the human who had launched the arrow.

“They’ll pay for this,” she swore, her vision tinged with fire and shadow.

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“Someone stop her!” Ger’alin cried out. Alayne had run into the human area, throwing spells at anyone and everyone in her path. The human guards who rushed to try to stop the sin’dorei warlock burned in their armor as the enraged elf let loose a holocaust of flame, rage, and shadow. “We’ve got to get him out of here,” he said, pointing to his fallen leader. “Will he be all right?”

“I think so,” said the priest who hovered over Zerith. “The arrow missed his heart. We’ll need to get it out before we can heal the wound, though.”

“Then go and do that. I’ll take all but ten of the fighters and magi with me to see if we can pull Alayne out of there before she gets herself killed. The rest will escort you back to Tarren Mill. It’s closer than Hammerfall and there are Apothecaries there. Go!”

The priest nodded and a crowd of fighters and magi formed around him, using their bodies as shields while the young priest prepared Zerith for travel. Ger’alin motioned for the rest to follow him into the human-occupied area of Stromgarde.

Alayne stood in the midst of a rain of fire and blood. Ger’alin directed his followers to give the sin’dorei woman wide berth, uncertain if she could tell friend from foe. The agony-filled cries of guards rang through the air where the Horde forces moved through. Inside the houses, women and children huddled in terror. Ger’alin saw one human woman staring out of her window in horror. He grimaced; they were not like the humans at all. The Horde would not storm into homes and kill civilians indiscriminately as humans had done to them in the past. Alayne had been right; these humans were so much like Garithos that they assumed his tactics were universal. They understood nothing of honor.

“Alayne!” Ger’alin cried out as the battle drew to a close. The few guards left alive had thrown down their weapons and raised their arms in the air, surrendering. Forsaken, sin’dorei, and tauren surrounded them, kicking the humans’ weapons well out of their reach. Ger’alin’s eyes widened in shock when he saw what Alayne was planning as she smiled darkly at the disarmed humans. Rushing her, he knocked her to the ground, pinning her there with his own body.

“You’ve more than avenged Zerith’s injury, Alayne,” he growled, his face twisted in anger that she could even contemplate killing those who had given up combat. “You will kill no more today. Do you hear me? No! More!”

Alayne glared up at him in blood rage and struggled to force him off of her. With an oath, he pulled a hand back and slapped her hard across her face. The bloodlust left her eyes, replaced by normal anger. “Get off of me,” she said coldly.

“Not until you’ve calmed down.”

“That will happen when you get off me.”

“It had better happen before then. Otherwise, we will be laying here like arguing newlyweds for a long, long time.”

Alayne took a deep breath. Then, her eyes widened in shock as she saw the smoldering remains of a guard in her peripheral vision. “What have I done?” she asked in confused wonder.

“Turned this place into a slaughterhouse,” Ger’alin said mildly. “Are you calm, now? At least calm enough that I won’t have to kill you to stop you from doing a damned-fool dishonorable thing?”

“I did all this?” she said, rolling her head around to see the carnage her rage had wrought.

“Well, not all of it,” Ger’alin smiled, “but enough of it. Now, the few survivors have surrendered. I’m going to order that they leave Stromgarde and that they never again fire on those carrying signs of truce. I will, regrettably, have to get off of you to do that. Can I trust you to stay calm long enough for me to do that?”

“Where’s Zerith?”

“He’s fine. They’ve taken him to Tarren Mill.”

“I’m going after him now,” she said, trying to shove Ger’alin off her. The sin’dorei fighter rolled off her and helped her to her feet. Without a word to anyone, Alayne took off running towards Tarren Mill. With a faint smile, Ger’alin watched her go before turning back to the human prisoners.

“By the laws of combat, you are our prisoners,” he said to the humans. “do you understand what that means?”

“We do,” one of the humans said. A scar slanting across his face marked him a veteran of combat. “What do you intend to do with us?”

“Right now, nothing,” Ger’alin admitted, “nothing except ask you to leave here and go south. We no longer wish to have you here in Lordaeron. We will give you safe passage to the Wetlands.”

“Stromgarde has been our home for centuries!” one of the younger guards shouted. “We’ll not leave just for some elf!”

“You will leave or we will be forced to kill you and drive your women and children out,” Ger’alin said quietly. “It was you who forced this fight by firing on us while we carried emblems of truce. We had come to these ruins only to drive out the ogres and trolls who have caused us some trouble. We had no intention of moving against you.”

“We’ve paid for young Farin’s mistake,” the scarred human said. “Paid in blood.”

“Indeed you have,” Ger’alin agreed. “Now, will you pay more, or will you accept the terms I’ve laid out for you? You will get no others.”

“We accept. For now, at least,” the human muttered. “You may drive us out for now, but we will return.”

“I look forward to it,” Ger’alin said simply. “Go, gather your women and children. We will see you to the Wetlands safely. Tau’re,” he said, pointing to the tauren, “gather their weapons. We will return them once we’ve reached the border.” Shocked gasps came from throughout the group. “They’ll have need of them when traveling through the mires and swamps. Or would you have me send women and children to certain death? Let’s get moving.”

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“How is he?” Alayne gasped as she stumbled into the inn in Tarren Mill. She would have fallen had the sin’dorei priest who brought Zerith caught her.

“He’ll be fine. We got the arrow out without doing any further damage and the wound healed cleanly.”

“I want to see him. I have to see him.”

“You can go in and see him, Alayne, but he is still asleep. He lost a great deal of blood and it will be a few days before he can be up and about.”

Staggering on rubbery legs, Alayne clambered up the stairs and crawled through the door to the room where Zerith lay. One of the apothecaries jumped in fright when the door banged open and he saw no one until he looked down. On shaking limbs, Alayne managed to make her way over to the other side of the bed and pull herself up onto a stool. She reached over and took one of Zerith’s hands in her own, staring at him and rocking back and forth.

“Are you well?” the apothecary asked, raising an eyebrow in concern. Alayne either did not hear him or ignored him, her attention focused completely on Zerith. Her brother lay sleeping peacefully, his chest rising and falling in deep, even breaths. A bandage had been wrapped around his chest. His face was pale, but not drawn with pain. Alayne exhaled a gust of breath she did not realize she had been holding. Tears of gratitude and fear averted leaked down her face. The tears were the trickle that broke the dam. Soon body-wracking sobs drew her to her knees by the bed where she shivered in fear, sorrow, and remorse for the events of that morning.

“Forgive me,” she whispered over and over again between her gasping sobs. From whom she was begging forgiveness, not even Alayne knew.

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“Eat or I’ll force it down your throat,” Ger’alin whispered pleasantly in Alayne’s ear. The sin’dorei woman woke with a start, momentarily confused at finding herself kneeling near a bed. Memory rushed in and with it threatened to come the tears that had been wrung from her earlier. Turning her head, she looked up at Ger’alin.

“Here, sit, eat,” he said, his normal mischievousness fading as he looked at Alayne’s tear-stained face. “You’ve been up here with him for most of a day. No one wanted to disturb you when we got here. Then...no one wanted to wake you.”

Alayne said nothing. Turning, she collapsed on her rump, glancing disinterestedly at the stool. She still held her brother’s hand though her own arm was forced across her neck as if she would strangle herself. With a sigh, Ger’alin settled down on the floor in front of her and put a spoonful of soup near her lips. “I wasn’t kidding about forcing it down your throat. If you fall ill, he’ll be after me for letting it happen.”

“Why are you here?” she whispered, staring off into the distance.

“Because I said I would come here. Because I owed it to Zerith to see that he was safe. Because I would follow you and him into the Nether for the chances at honor you’ve given me.”

Alayne continued to stare off into space dully. “Come on, eat,” Ger’alin pleaded, waving the spoon beneath Alayne’s nose in hopes of tempting her appetite. With an irritated sigh, she knocked the spoon out of his hand and sighing, let go of Zerith’s hand and buried her face on her knees.

“Alayne, you can’t do this to yourself,” Ger’alin muttered. “It won’t help Zerith at all.” She muttered something incomprehensible. “What?” he asked.

“I’m a monster,” she said flatly. “I’m a monster and Zerith will hate me for it.”

“What makes you a monster?” Ger’alin asked in confusion.

“What I did,” she said in a slashing whisper. “How I felt when I was doing it. When I got here and saw him, I realized...” she stopped, forcing herself to swallow her sobs, “I realized that I am a monster and that I should leave.”

“What did you do?”

“Light! Ger’alin, you were there! You saw me! I would have put the entire town to the torch if you hadn’t stopped me. I wanted to, too. When I was burning them, broiling those

humans in their own armor, I wanted nothing more than to see the entire area burning in fires so hot that even the stones and mortar melted!”

“So did I, Alayne. Does that make me a monster?”

“No, you don’t understand,” she said in frustration, tears leaking back down her cheeks. “I was enjoying it!”

“Alayne, you are not a monster.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Shut it,” he said coldly, “and listen. Those humans had just shot Zerith, your brother. Someone you care about deeply. You wanted vengeance. That’s normal. Sure, you went a little overboard there at the end but, when it was all over, you restrained yourself. You didn’t do anything monstrous.”

“But I…”

“Here. Eat,” he said, cutting her off. Fumbling around until he found the spoon, he thrust a spoonful of soup at Alayne’s face. For a moment, she stared at him in total confusion. He returned her look with a level one of his own, his green eyes cold as leaves caught in an early spring freeze. With a sigh, she leaned forward and let him put the spoon in her mouth. Reaching up, she took it from him and held out her other hand for the bowl. Ger’alin passed it over to her and sat, watching her in intent silence until she finished the soup. Once she finished, she handed the bowl back to him. “You should go get some real rest,” he said softly, his gentle tone a contrast with his implacable face.

“Later. I want to be here when he wakes up.” With a sigh, Alayne lifted herself back onto the stool and, pulling it closer to the bed, took up Zerith’s hand and her vigil once again.

Ger’alin watched her for long moments from the doorway, the look on his face unreadable. After a time, he turned quietly and took the empty bowl back to the kitchen.

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“So close…” a man whispered, his deep voice sending chills up Alayne’s spine. She looked around, wondering who had spoken. Night had fallen on Tarren Mill. The only lights were the torches carried by the Death Guards from Undercity. “You were so close…” the voice whispered again, caressingly.

“Who’s there?” Alayne said, hoping that the tremor in her voice would be taken for anger and not fear. With hands that shook, she reached for the candle on the nightstand and the flint and iron to light it. Once lit, she held the candle up and tip-toed around the room, looking for the mysterious speaker.

“He’ll come to me in the end. They all do, little Alayne,” the speaker sneered. Just then, a gusting wind broke through the window and extinguished the candle. Alayne felt a dread presence behind her and, turning to look she…

…fell off the stool and landed on the floor. Sunlight streamed through the window into the room, bringing light and warmth. Larks and nightingales sang joyfully in the pearl twilight of the early morning sun. Alayne lay on the floor for several minutes more, letting herself enjoy the warmth of the rough wooden floorboards. Then, gingerly, she pushed herself up off the floor and sat back down on the stool. She watched Zerith sleep, trying to ignore the pounding in her head. She seemed to be having strange dreams more and more frequently of late.

“You feeling better?” came Callie’s rasping voice from the doorway. Alayne glanced up and smiled at her friend. Nodding – something she instantly regretted – Alayne motioned for Callie to enter the room.

“I’m sorry if I worried you,” Alayne began.

“Worried me? After seeing how well you handled that human scum yesterday, I doubt I’ll ever worry about you again.”

“Yes,” Alayne winced, “about that...”

“What about it?” Callie asked blankly. “They shot Zerith. You gave them exactly what they deserved. No more and no less.”

“I see,” Alayne said quietly. She raised her hands to her temples and began rubbing them, trying to rub away some of the pain.

“Do you want me to ask one of the apothecaries for something for you?” Callie asked. “You seem to be having a lot of headaches lately. Is that normal for a sin’ dorei woman?”

“Thank you. I would appreciate that very much.”

Callie left the room. Alayne listened for a moment, hearing her footfalls echo down the wooden hallway. Then, alone with her thoughts, Alayne tried to puzzle out what was causing her to feel so differently about the attack on Stromgarde than the others seemed to feel. *Had it been just Zerith being hurt?* “No,” she thought. “There was more to it than that.”

A loss of control?

“Possibly.”

Actually seeing humans, like those she’d grown up with, die? And knowing that it was she who had killed them?

“Closer. Getting closer,” she thought.

All of that and actually feeling the thrill of triumph – of righteousness – the justified pleasure of an executioner carrying out a long-deserved sentence?

“Yes,” Alayne whispered to herself. “That’s what it is. That’s what the others don’t understand.”

“What others don’t understand?” Zerith whispered weakly. Alayne’s eyes shot open and she leaned forward, her face breaking into a smile.

“Are you feeling better?” she asked. “Don’t try to sit up. Just stay there and rest.”

“Of course I’m feeling better,” he muttered. “I don’t have an arrow sticking out of me anymore. This isn’t Hammerfall.”

“No. We had you carried to Tarren Mill. There are Apothecaries here and we feared you might need them.”

“Hmph. How did you manage to get out of Stromgarde unscathed?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about that now,” she said. “Do you want me to get you something to eat?”

“No. I want some answers.”

“Well, you aren’t getting them until you’re completely healed. I will not be responsible for telling you something that will make you want to beat me black and blue when you’re too weak to do it properly,” she teased. Standing, she moved towards the door. “I’ll be back in a few minutes with some stew for you.”

“Alayne...” he said weakly as she left the room, “what is it that the others don’t understand?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said over her shoulder. “I was just being needlessly introspective.”

Zerith let himself sink further into the bed, shifting around to get more comfortable. Alayne ignored the others who were sitting out in the hallways, watching her pass by with open questions on their faces. *They can never know*, she thought to herself. *I must never let them know. Above all, I must never let him know. Never.*

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Alayne looked up as Callie brought in a basin of warm water and several lengths of soft toweling. "We could put his hand in it," the Forsaken joked, trying to elicit a real smile from the sin'dorei woman. Alayne gave her a tight-lipped smile that did not reach her eyes.

"How did Drum Fel take the news?" she asked in a low whisper so as to not wake Zerith.

"Quiet well. After we reattached his jaw, that is. Here, see if you can untangle his legs from the sheets while I get the pillows."

"I'll never understand just how he tangles himself in bedding so thoroughly," Alayne muttered as she and Callie worked to take the linens off the bed without disturbing the sleeping man. "It's got to be some kind of perverse gift."

"It'd be nice if we could get his command of sheets to be useful outside of sleeping. Imagine the confusion on the faces of our enemies when we throw blankets on them and then Zerith uses his magical tangling talents to bind them. Ugh, we should change the bandage while we're at it."

"Did you bring fresh bandages?"

"Yes, and some of the poultices the Apothecaries recommend using to prevent infection as well. This would be a lot easier if you would let us wake him up and put him in the chair over there."

"It would, but difficult tasks build character."

"Well, you've got the title 'Goddess of Character' wrapped up then. Seriously, Alayne, why do you always do things the hard way?"

"I don't. Sure, this is hard for us," she said as she gently raised Zerith up so that Callie could unwind the bandages wrapped around his chest, "but it'd be really hard on Zerith to have to wake up from restful sleep and move over to a chair while we change the sheets. He was shot in the chest with an arrow, after all."

"Point taken. The wound has healed pretty cleanly. A few more days and we can let him leave the bandage off, I think. Here, let's go on and give him his bath while we've got the sheets off the bed."

"We should really wash his hair," Alayne grimaced.

"We should. Think we could do it without waking him up?"

"The effort will net you the 'Demi-Goddess of Character' title. Let's give it a try. You finish scrubbing his back and then I'll take care of the rest while you get some more water for his hair. The water in this basin isn't going to be clean enough," she sighed. The water had already taken on a dirty red tinge from the blood that had crusted around Zerith's wound. Callie quickly finished washing and drying Zerith's back, giving Alayne the chance to lay him back down on the mattress. The Forsaken woman hurried back out to get another basin of water while Alayne scrubbed away the last of the residue from the battles. "You smell a hundred times better now," she whispered to her sleeping brother. "And you'll rest better now that you're clean." Just as she finished bathing him, Callie returned with another basin of water.

"Ger'alín's saying he's going to drag you out of this sickroom kicking and screaming soon," she informed Alayne. "And the rest of the group seems to agree with him. You know you haven't left for more than a minute since you got here four days ago?"

"I'd like to see him try," Alayne replied, her eyes narrowing. "Here, set that basin down over here on this nightstand and then help me lift and turn him so we can get his head in it." Callie did as requested and then watched in attentive silence as Alayne finished cleaning Zerith up. The elven woman's ministrations were so gentle that the man never woke up during the entire treatment. Soon, the two had wrestled clean sheets on the bed and tucked the priest back in. Alayne knuckled her back and stretched tiredly as she walked over to take up her vigil again.

“Alayne, you shouldn’t stay inside all the time like this, worrying,” Callie said as Alayne began to sit back down on her stool at the side of the bed. “You only leave to get food for him. You eat only if one of us brings something up to you and watches you eat it. Making yourself sick won’t help him at all.”

“I can’t leave him,” Alayne muttered. “Not when it’s my fault he got hurt so badly.”

“Alayne, listen to yourself,” Callie sighed. “It is not your fault. You didn’t fire the arrow that hit him. You didn’t do anything to provoke an attack. The only person responsible for Zerith being hurt is the human who launched that arrow.”

“I can’t leave him.”

“Yes, you can. For an hour, at least. I’ll stay here with him if you want. If anything happens, I’ll have someone get you. But please, just go outside in the sun for an hour,” she pleaded.

“Alright, Callie,” Alayne sighed. “I’ll be right outside.” Shoulders slumping in tired defeat, Alayne dragged herself out of the inn and laid down on the warm grass outside, staring up at the sky. She could see the window into Zerith’s room from where she lay. From time to time, she would see Callie peer out the window and shake her head in frustration when she saw Alayne. After a while, Ger’alin walked up to her and stood over her, looking down in the same frustration Callie felt.

“This is hardly getting away for an hour,” he said baldly.

“I’m not moving from this spot for another half hour,” Alayne returned, her voice chill as ice.

“Yes, you are,” Ger’alin said as he reached down and grabbed her arm. Ignoring her squirming to get away, he tossed her easily over his shoulder. “We can do this one of two ways,” he said calmly, in the manner of one stating facts. “You can either keep your dignity or I can carry you off kicking and screaming like a little child. Either way, you are getting away from this inn.”

“Put me down!” she ordered. “If you don’t, I’ll...”

“You won’t do anything,” he said, cutting her off. “So, kicking and screaming it is.”

Ignoring her protests and keeping a firm arm around her so she wouldn’t fall off his shoulder, Ger’alin carried Alayne out of the village and down towards the river. After a few minutes, Alayne stopped fighting and just let him carry her, fuming. Members of their band chuckled as the pair passed them. For all that they respected Alayne and Zerith, everyone agreed that someone needed to get Alayne out of the sickroom before she collapsed and most were content to let the sin’dorei warrior do it.

“Now, here we are,” he said pleasantly once they’d reached a small campsite near the river. “I will let you down,” he said to the woman bundled on his shoulder, “if and only if you promise to go down to the stream and wash up first. You haven’t bathed since the battle and, frankly, I’ve smelled corpses that were fresher than you. Stop kicking!” he said sternly, “you know it’s true. Callie figured you would be stubborn so she and I carried some clean clothes and soap down here for you.” Turning around so that Alayne could see the river, he continued, “They’re over there in that bundle by the bushes. You go there and clean up while I fix something for you to eat that isn’t soup. I don’t think you’ve eaten anything other than that – and not much of that at all – for days now. Do I have your word? Or do I have to toss you in the river myself?”

“You have my word,” she said frostily. Bending his knees, Ger’alin let her down and smiled pleasantly at her fierce scowl.

“Wash up first. I promise, I won’t peek,” he said as he turned to tend the small fire. Alayne stalked over to the river angrily and snatched the bundle up. Moving to the other side of the bushes, she removed her filthy and tattered robes and checked to make sure no one was watching. Ger’alin had his back to her, still tending to the fire. Satisfied that she wouldn’t be

seen, she quickly washed herself in the river and put on the robes Callie had bundled up for her. Flinging herself down on the bank of the river, she attacked her wet, but clean, hair with the comb provided. Outraged as she was, she did have to admit that she felt, and smelt, better than she had for days.

“Are you decent?” Ger’alin called out from the campsite. Alayne ignored him. “If you’re not, it’s your own fault if I see what I shouldn’t!” he said, his voice growing louder indicating that he was walking towards the river.

“I’m fine!” Alayne called out to him.

“Ah, good,” he said from the other side of the bushes. “Just in time for lunch. Will you come back and eat some real food, or do I have to drag you back there and shove it down your throat?”

“I’ll come,” she sneered coldly. Standing up, she dusted herself off and stalked back to the campsite. Ger’alin followed her, still affecting the pleasant air of a good host.

“Have a seat,” he said, pointing to a grass-stuffed pad near the fire. “I hope you like roast venison because I made plenty. Enough to feed an army,” he laughed as he cut a chunk off and put it on a plate. “I’ve stewed some greens for after.”

“Why are you doing this?” Alayne asked dully as she took the plate.

“Because someone has to. Normally, it’s Zerith but he’s incapacitated for the moment. So, I’ll do it in his place.” Alayne stared at him blankly, then looked down at her food without appetite. “Alayne, you have a responsibility now,” Ger’alin said with a sigh as he sat down on the other side of the fire. “Light knows you probably didn’t ask for it, but you have it now and you have to own up to it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Back when you and Zerith put together a group of people to take out Dar’khan, you never thought you’d be looked up to as a leader, did you? No, of course not,” he said, seeing her shake her head. “No one does in things like this. But then, after you asked the first person to join you, you became a leader. After all the victories you and Zerith have led us to, you can’t stop leading. Even if you want to; even if you’re tired of it. You owe it to those who follow you to be the leader they need you to be.”

Alayne said nothing. After a moment, she picked up a knife and began eating. She noticed Ger’alin staring at her as she lifted the first bite to her mouth. “You should eat,” she said simply, “otherwise, you won’t have the strength to talk sense into a stubborn woman.”

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“You’re looking a million times better,” Callie remarked as Alayne walked back into the room. The sin’dorei woman just smiled and nodded. “He’s slept the entire time. I was thinking about waking him up to see if he wants something to eat.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Alayne said firmly. “You go down to the kitchens and see if they can make up some thick stew for him. Actually, see if they have any meat and vegetables. He’s probably had enough sick-food.” Callie nodded and left the room, elated at the sudden positive change in her friend. For the past several days, Alayne had seemed to be torn in two with guilt over what had happened. Now, her earlier confidence not only seemed to be back in full force, but an air of command that required, and got, immediate respect settled around her. *Ger’alin must have some kind of gift for handling Alayne*, Callie thought to herself as she set about preparing a hearty supper for the ailing priest.

Upstairs, Alayne settled down on the bed next to Zerith and shook him gently until he woke up. “Do you feel like eating?” she asked.

“Yes!” he said groggily. “Unless it’s that Light-forsaken soup you’ve been shoveling down my gullet for the past week,” he amended with a tired smile.

“I think we can arrange for something different,” she replied with a grin. “And, I think you should be able to get up and go outside for a bit tomorrow. Four days on your back is enough.”

Zerith nodded in agreement. Inwardly, he'd felt like he could have been up and about today but had not wanted to press the issue with Alayne being so distraught. “What happened to you,” he asked mildly, “to change your mind when you were so firm on me resting this morning?”

“Someone talked a little sense into me,” she said with a mysterious smile. “Of course, I'm not going to let you wear yourself out. You can go out tomorrow and get some sun and start moving around a bit, but no worrying about anything until that wound is completely healed.”

“Yes, mother. Speaking of worrying about things; what has been bothering you lately?”

“Nothing,” Alayne said firmly. “I was just being a silly girl. Ger'alain explained a few things to me and I see that clearly now. And no, I'm not going to tell you about it,” she said, forestalling him, “because it *was* silly and you don't need to worry about me. You need to worry about yourself.”

“I see. Will you at least tell me how the news of our attacks was received?”

“No. I'll let Callie tell you that,” she said as the Forsaken re-entered the room with a plate of roasted chicken and a pile of steamed greens.

“Tell you what?” Callie asked as she set the plate on the table next to the bed. Zerith pulled himself up and, with a little help from Alayne, was soon sitting up comfortably and digging into his meal with zest.

“He wants to know what Drum Fel thought when you reported that the ogres, trolls, and humans will no longer be a concern in the Highlands.”

“Well, like I told Alayne earlier. Drum Fel took the news well. Especially after we reattached his jaw. Alright, alright, I'll be serious,” she said in response to an annoyed look from Zerith. “After we finished escorting the prisoners to the Wetlands, Ger'alain, Davril, and I returned to Hammerfall. Drum Fel thought we were the only survivors at first and was getting ready to put us in our places for our foolishness. Davril cut him off, though. The look on that old orc's face was priceless. ‘Master Fel,’ he said in that raspy, sarcastic tone he's got, ‘you may want to request reinforcements from Undercity, Silvermoon, and Orgrimmar. There's a rather large human city that needs a Hordish occupation.’ It was all downhill from there. Ger'alain told him that the Witherbark trolls had been run out of their village and that the ogres would think twice before returning to Arathi. I think that alone would have been enough to shock a few decades off Fel's life but when Ger'alain started in on the attack against the humans, I thought the old orc's eyes were going to pop right out of his skull. By the time we finished giving our report, I think everyone in Hammerfall was gathered around. Those green hulks let out a cheer that I figured you would have heard back here and Drum Fel muttered that he would send word to the Warchief about our victories. I told him to where we would be and why and he ordered for wyverns to be set aside for all of us to use to get here. He was actually smiling when we left. Whether it was because we cleared out the Highlands or because we were leaving, I couldn't tell you.”

“I wish I could have seen it,” Zerith laughed as he lifted the last bit of greens to his mouth. “Tell me about the battle in Stromgarde. I was somewhat unconscious for most of it.”

“There's not much to tell,” Alayne interrupted smoothly. “One of the guards shot you. Some of the priests and fighters got you back here. The rest of us moved in, attacked the guard force in Stromgarde, and defeated them. Ger'alain ordered the survivors to leave as part of the terms of surrender. He escorted them to the border of the Wetlands while I came back

here to see how you were. That's all there is to tell," she said, shooting a look at Callie that promised dire consequences should the woman contradict her.

"Well, I will have to watch for archers from now on," Zerith said as he leaned back against the pillows propping him up. "But I'd much rather watch for dessert if there is any."

"We'll go and get you some," Alayne said, motioning for Callie to follow her. Zerith sighed contentedly. There was more to it than Alayne was telling him but pressing the issue would do no good. She would open up to him when she was ready. All he could do was wait.

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"It feels so good to be outside again," Zerith said happily. "Really, I don't think I'm going back to bed for a while now."

"We'll see how it goes," Callie replied in the same tone. "But you have been laid up too long, I think."

"Don't start," Alayne said warningly. "All I did was follow the Apothecaries' orders. I'm no healer to know when a person is healed enough or not."

"No one's blaming you, Alayne," Zerith said soothingly. "You did what you thought was right. Now, let's just sit out here in the wonderful, warm sunshine and enjoy it."

The three sat down on the soft grass just outside the village of Tarren Mill. Zerith closed his eyes and turned his face to the light, drinking in the warmth and fresh air that had been tempting him from his bedroom window. Alayne lay on her stomach next to him, idly flipping through a book on arcane magic. Callie had brought a few whetstones with her and was honing the edge of her daggers. Occasionally, one of the number who had fought alongside them would stop by to chat for a few moments, delighted to see the three up and about. Any inquiries about the next conquest were met with "We will discuss it when the time comes," from Alayne who never looked up from her reading.

"Now here's a sight for sore eyes!" Ger'alain called out to them as he strode across the village. "So you finally talked the ladies into letting you out, Zerith."

"I think you had more to do with it than I did," he laughed in return. "Come join us? I think I might ask them to let me have some of the food we dragged out with us."

"I'll take you up on that offer. I had wanted to come and speak with you anyway."

"What about?" Alayne asked, glancing up from her reading.

"About us," he replied, gesturing to encircle the entire town. "Some of us were talking and thinking that maybe we should have a name for ourselves. Something to strike fear into the hearts of our enemies and command respect from our allies."

"That sounds very official," Zerith whistled. "I mean, having a strike force consisting of a few adventurers is one thing. You sound like you're wanting to start an army. I don't know that the powers-that-be would like that."

"I don't think they'll mind, Zerith," Ger'alain argued. "After all, you've already organized a group. Giving it a name just gives people a way to refer to it other than 'that group of people that Zerith and Alayne put together who have overcome Dar'khan, Arugal, the Alliance of Lordaeron, Dalaranian meddlers, ogres, the Witherbark trolls, and Stromgarde.'"

"I rather like that name," Callie interjected. "It's nice, short, and to the point."

"Do you have something in mind already, Ger'alain?" Alayne asked, setting her book aside and sitting up.

"Not really," he admitted. "You and Zerith are the idea people."

"Hm," Zerith mused. "How about 'Children of Quel'Thalas?'"

"That kind of leaves me out," Callie pointed out.

"Followers of Kael'Thas?"

“Same problem.”

“Random group of sin’dorei, Forsaken, tauren, trolls, and orcs?” Alayne joked.

“Too long.”

“How about ‘Order of Azeroth?’” Callie suggested.

“That sounds too official,” Zerith said dismissively.

“Okay, then,” Alayne retorted, “how about the *Disorder* of Azeroth? It doesn’t sound too official, it’s short, inclusive, and hopefully the powers-that-be won’t take it too seriously.”

“I can live with that,” Ger’alin acquiesced.

“Me too.”

“Then I guess we’ll go with that,” Zerith agreed. “So, shall we eat?”