

Thrall sat wearily behind his desk writing a letter he didn't want to write. No matter what Sylvanas said, he still didn't trust the so-called sin'dorei yet. It would be a long time, and take many deeds, before the Silvermoon government earned his trust. He remembered fighting elves when they were part of the Alliance. Even if they had abandoned their old ties once the humans betrayed them, Thrall still felt uneasy about allowing them entry into the Horde. Being forced to deal with them and their needless formalities, even if just by letter, was enough to irritate the normally unflappable Warchief.

"Warchief," came a voice from the entrance to Thrall's office, requesting admittance.

"Come in," Thrall grunted, glad to be distracted from such a distasteful task.

"Word has just reached us from the Arathi Highlands. A messenger arrived just a few minutes ago from Drum Fel. He would like to speak with you."

"Send him in."

A young orc stomped into the room and raised his fist to his chest, saluting his Warchief. "Make your report," Thrall ordered.

"The Arathi Highlands, save for a few remnants of farmers, belong to the Horde, Chieftain," the orc said evenly. "The ogres and their Witherbark allies have been driven out, as have the last of the humans holding Stromgarde. Drum Fel requests additional forces be sent to him to oversee the occupation of Stromgarde and its rebuilding. He has also sent his suggested plan for a campaign to completely remove any Alliance presence from Lordaeron," the soldier said as he handed a package over to Thrall.

The Warchief's eyes widened in shock and his jaw dropped lower with every sentence. After a moment of stunned silence, Thrall regained control and said gruffly, "How did this come about?" The Warchief managed to hide his shock as the orcish soldier recounted the tale of two sin'dorei and a Forsaken leading forces against the Horde's enemies in Lordaeron. He remembered when the three had come before him with news of Dar'khan's death and Argual's defeat. He had been impressed that such an unlikely trio could command warriors and develop the battle plans rumor had them designing.

"The Disorder of Azeroth?" Thrall muttered good-naturedly. "You may go," he said, dismissing the messenger. "Return tomorrow morning, early. I will have messages for you to deliver to Silvermoon, Undercity, and to this 'Disorder of Azeroth.'" The orc saluted his chieftain and stomped out of the room. Thrall turned back to his desk, crumbling the letter he had been writing and, pulling up fresh parchments, began penning new missives. This group of adventurers needed to be put on a leash. A light leash, to be sure, but leashed nonetheless. As the Warchief worked through the dusk penning orders, suggestions, and making plans to take advantage of the situation in Lordaeron, he would find himself smiling. Disorder of Azeroth indeed.

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Jez'ral guided his steed down the road into Tarren Mill. Word had reached him in Silvermoon the night before of the young Alayne, a promising warlock he had uncovered in Menethil some months before. She had risen high in such a short time for one so young. Before the destruction of the Sunwell, an elf maid her age would still be living in her father's home and attending school. But then, almost all of those who had answered the summons to return to Quel'Thalas were children, their elders having been slaughtered by the Scourge or succumbed to the loss of the Sunwell. Jez'ral dismissed his thoughts and focused on the present. Pulling up to a passing tauren, he hailed the fellow, asking "Where could I find a young elven woman called Alayne?"

The tauren eyed the blood elf distrustfully. "Who asks?" he replied.

“I have come on behalf of her teachers and fellows in Silvermoon. We merely wish to speak with her on matters related to her training.”

“You’ll find her over by the river. Her friends are with her,” the tauren said evenly.

Jez’ral held his tongue. If he had not been ordered to be cordial, he would have fried the oversized bull where he stood. With an overly formal bow, Jez’ral clucked to his demonic steed, urging him on to the river.

“All men snore,” he overheard a raspy female voice saying pleasantly as he neared a group of four. “Zerith just snores really loud.”

“Oh, let him sleep,” a familiar female voice replied. “Ever since we let him start getting up, he’s been wearing himself out in the mornings, running around finding herbs for the Apothecaries. And no, all men do not snore.”

“Yes, we do,” Jez’ral said pleasantly. The three who were awake jumped and turned in fright at the unfamiliar voice. “Ah, Alayne. I’ve found you at last.”

“What do you want and who are you?” the other elf, a male swordsman asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Hush, Ger’alin,” Alayne ordered, eyeing her companion in annoyance. “Jez’ral, why have you been looking for me?” she said, standing and offering a polite curtsy.

“Word has reached us in Silvermoon of what you’ve accomplished, Alayne. Your teachers and I feel that it is time for you to advance further in the Art. You are to return with me immediately so we can get started. Don’t worry. We won’t keep you long,” he said, smiling inwardly. The elven woman had paled at his first sentence and her expression grew more and more uncertain with each word.

“I see,” she said when he finished. “Callie, you and Ger’alin look after the others. Keep an eye on Zerith. Tell him where I’ve gone and that I’ll be back soon.”

“Of course we will,” Callie and Ger’alin said as they stood up to hug their friend good-bye. Once the hasty farewells were finished, Alayne started to head back to the inn to gather her few belongings.

“You won’t be gone long enough to need anything,” Jez’ral told her. “Just come up here and we’ll be off,” he said, sticking out a hand to lift her up on the demon horse. Once she was seated behind him, her arms around his waist so she would not fall off, he clucked to the horse again and laughed when she gasped at the speed. “Don’t be surprised, my dear,” he chuckled. “You’ll be commanding one of these soon.”

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“Wake up, Zerith. You’ve slept most of the afternoon away,” Ger’alin laughed as he roused his friend.

“I’m awake,” Zerith muttered, squeezing his eyes more tightly closed. “No need to dislocate my shoulder.” Opening his eyes, he glanced around. “Did Callie and Alayne get bored listening to me snore?”

“Callie did. She went off to see if she could sneak up on something good for supper tonight. I’ll never understand why she won’t just learn to use a bow or a rifle for hunting,” he muttered absent-mindedly, “so she’ll be back along shortly. Alayne was summoned back to Silvermoon by some fellow wearing velvets and riding a horse out of nightmare. Oh, don’t look at me like that. She knew the man. I think he was a teacher of hers. He mentioned something about her needing further training.”

“Thanks, Ger’alin, but in the future, leave scaring centuries off my life to Alayne. I adopted her with that in mind. She won’t like you doing her job while she’s away. Did she say when she will be returning?”

“Honestly, I half expected her back by now the way that fellow was saying it wouldn’t take long. Tomorrow, maybe,” he shrugged.

“Hmph,” Zerith replied, acknowledging the statement without commenting further. “We can’t just keep sitting here,” he said after a long pause.

“I know. I was just about to suggest getting up and going to see if Callie’s come back with supper.”

“No, not that. Light, Ger’alin, do you think about anything other than food or fighting? I meant that we need to find something useful to do. I’m almost completely healed now; I need to rebuild what stamina I lost convalescing. And, while we did pretty much hand the Arathi Highlands over to the Horde, there’s still more we could be doing to prove ourselves.”

“I think of plenty of things other than food and fighting,” Ger’alin laughed, “but I agree, we do need to stop sitting around watching the clouds pass by. There just isn’t much to do around here. The Apothecaries don’t want us to clean out the farmers in Hillsbrad because they’re using them to test some of their concoctions on. The only other real threats here are bears, mountain lions, and yeti and good luck getting rid of any of those. I doubt the Scourge could do it. There are ogres up in Alterac, though, but we’d need the whole Disorder of Azeroth to clear them out and most of the others have gone their own ways. It would take time to reassemble them.”

“Well, where else could we go to be of use?”

“Are you two bored?” Callie asked as she walked up behind them.

“Yes,” Zerith said simply as he turned to face her. “Oh, hello there,” he said, greeting the sin’dorei paladin standing next to the Forsaken.

“This is Dar’ja,” Callie said, pointing to the elven woman beside her. “She’s bored too.”

“Dar’ja!” Ger’alin laughed as he stood up and held out his hand in greeting. “I remember you. Do you remember me?”

“Who could forget you?” she said frostily. “Still up to nothing, I see.”

“Same old Dar’ja,” Ger’alin laughed again, an edge of sarcasm sharpening his humor. “Still thinks she’s the greatest sin’dorei since Kael’Thas. So, what has you in such a mood today?”

“Like Zerith, I am tired of sitting around here being of no use. I had hoped that the leader of our forces would have some insight on where we could be of use, but I guess I was mistaken.”

“Wait just a minute,” Zerith said, pulling himself off the ground and glaring down at the woman, “I do not appreciate your implication that I’m some lazy oaf. Now, no, I don’t have any specific plans for the force at this time. I don’t like acting without some level of forethought.” He shot Callie a withering look when she snickered at that. “But if you want something to do, why don’t you drop the little-miss-high-and-mighty act and come along with me to see if there’s anything we can do to help the Royal Apothecary Society in their endeavors here in Hillsbrad? Or is that too lowly a task for someone following in the great Uther’s footsteps?” he sneered angrily.

Dar’ja stared at him, her eyes twin icy green flames and her face a picture of tightly-controlled outrage. “Certainly, my Commander,” she replied in a tone matching his own. The two stalked off to Tarren Mill side by side.

“Okay, that wasn’t such a good idea,” Callie muttered to herself as she watched them storm off. “I had wanted their help hunting. Stupid deer keep getting away before I can stab them.”

“Oh, it was a good idea. The best you’ve had in a while,” Ger’alin said with a faint smile. “Come then, my undead friend, if there isn’t any deer to be caught, we can always try for fish.”

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“I don’t know why you have to be so stubborn,” Dar’ja muttered. “I could have climbed that tree just as well as you. My aim is probably better, too,” she sighed as she rubbed the side of her head.

“Well, my aim has suffered since I was shot,” Zerith said half-apologetically. “Still, I did warn you to move.”

“At least we got this...whatever it is,” she sighed, picking up an oversized cone. “Did they say what they wanted it for?”

“No. I know the uses of a cone similar to this one, though. There’s one like it that grows on the trees in the Hinterlands near Aerie Peak. That one, once boiled down into a thick paste, makes an excellent local anesthetic. My mother used to use it in cases where she or my father needed to cut the skin to remove some growth or embedded object. The person would never feel a thing.”

“Are you an Apothecary as well?”

“No. My parents just taught me herb-lore along with my other lessons.”

“That’s amazing,” Dar’ja said sincerely.

“Not really,” Zerith said modestly, “herbs are not that hard to learn. I’m sure your parents taught you things that I would find incredible as well.”

Dar’ja’s face clouded over for a second before she forced it back to her normal, closed expression. “My parents didn’t have time to teach me much of anything,” she said, trying to make light of it. “They were too busy being dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why apologize? It wasn’t you that killed them,” Dar’ja snapped.

“Well I’m sorry for apologizing!” Zerith retorted angrily. “Light, woman, what is it with you and your attitude?”

Dar’ja said nothing as she strode on ahead angrily. Zerith took off after her, grabbing her arm and forcing her to a stop once he caught up with her. “I’m serious,” he snarled. “For the past few hours, whenever I have done anything that any other normal person would consider ‘polite’ or ‘courteous’ or just ‘nice,’ you’ve taken offense. No,” he corrected himself, “whenever I’ve done anything, you’ve found some way to get angry about it.”

“You priests are all the same,” she spat, reaching up and pulling his hand off her arm.

“Just what is that supposed to mean?” he called out after her as she staked back into Tarren Mill. With an angry sigh, he followed after her. The Apothecaries, at least, would be glad to see him return.

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“You’re not serious,” Callie said incredulously as she cast her line back into the river.

“I’ve never been more serious in my life,” Ger’alin said, hiding a grin.

“I don’t believe you,” she replied, watching the bobber on her line intently. “You’re just trying to get me to look away so I won’t catch that fish that’s been teasing me for the past hour.”

“I would never lie to a lady,” he returned courteously. “The entire tale is true, from beginning to end. Except for the parts that aren’t,” he amended.

“The whole thing stinks of fabrication,” she laughed. “Which parts aren’t true?”

“I did exaggerate the bit about the fight with the threshdon at the end. It was probably only fifty feet long and not seventy.”

“Bah! No fish...” she started to say.

“That woman is the most infuriating, irritating, defiant excuse for a servant of the Light I have ever come across in all of my life!” Zerith shouted, cutting Callie off. The Forsaken woman leapt to her feet at the first words, looking around as if expecting an attack.

“I see you had a pleasant afternoon with Dar’ja,” Ger’alin said smoothly. “She’s a wonderful girl, isn’t she? Really knows how to make a fellow feel useful.”

“Shut up, Ger’alin,” Zerith muttered. Callie sat back down, careful to keep her back to the priest so he wouldn’t see the laughter lurking in her eyes.

“Have a seat, Zerith. We’re just trying to catch supper,” she said, patting the ground. “Ger’alin can tell you this wonderful story about how he and the Theramore guard force fought some oversized fish that was eating ships. It’s a pack of lies, but it’s an entertaining pack of lies.”

“I’m not in the mood to hear it,” the priest said sullenly.

“Well, what are you in the mood for?” Ger’alin asked politely. “After spending more than five hours picking flowers with Dar’ja, I’d be in the mood for a nice, rousing bit of being stretched on the rack by those Scarlet Crusaders. But then, that’s just me.”

“Ger’alin, how can anyone so arrogant, so self-absorbed, so...pig-headed ever wield the powers of the Light?” Zerith asked in annoyance.

“Beats the hell out of me,” Ger’alin answered as he recast his line. “The fish just are not biting this afternoon.”

“There you are,” the object of discussion said snidely from a short distance behind the three. “Did you manage to get that oversized cone to the Apothecaries before returning to these wastrels?”

“Good afternoon to you too, Dar’ja,” Ger’alin said, careful to keep his gaze on the river. “I thought I heard your dulcet tones calling out a warm greeting. Please, feel free to join us. We’re just trying to reel in supper.”

“I didn’t come here to talk with you, Ger’alin,” she said arrogantly. “I came to see if Zerith finished what we set out to do. I won’t stand for some priest making me look bad.”

“I gave the cone to the Apothecaries right after I got back,” Zerith snarled, jumping angrily to his feet. “I also gave them the moss they wanted after that. And the herbs they needed to counteract the side effects of the moss. I managed to get all of that by myself. Without your help,” he specified sarcastically.

Dar’ja stared down at him, her face expressionless. “I see,” she said calmly after a pause. “It seems I misjudged you somewhat, priest.” Zerith just stared at her angrily. “Allow me to make amends,” she said after another pause. “I’ll buy you supper.”

“That would be nice,” the priest muttered as he stalked up the hill. Callie and Ger’alin held their breath, and their laughter, until the pair were long gone.

“Five gold on it,” Ger’alin said, laughing until tears ran down his face.

“I’m not taking that bet,” Callie replied. “I’ve seen the same thing too many times myself. Now, I think we have enough fish. Let’s get them frying, shall we?”

“That sounds like a good idea. While they’re cooking, I’ll tell you about this old witch who lives in the Marsh. They say she can...”

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Zerith glanced around the room, feeling somewhat out of place. He’d rarely eaten here when he was pursuing his studies in Silvermoon, feeling that such extravagance was

unbecoming a servant of the Light. His fellow novices had felt differently; often teasing him about his refusal to visit what was considered one of the finest establishments in the city.

“Did you come here often?” Dar’ja asked, trying awkwardly to break the ice.

“No.”

“Oh.”

“Did you?”

“Not really.”

“Oh.”

The two sat in uncomfortable silence for several minutes longer.

“I’d like to...” Dar’ja began.

“Why did you...” Zerith started to say at the same time. “You first,” he said, motioning for her to continue.

“I’d like to apologize,” she began, looking down at the table.

“Apology accepted,” he said. Again, they sat in awkward silence.

“So...” Dar’ja tried again, “what is a priest like you doing hanging around someone like Ger’alin?”

“Why do you hate him so much?” Zerith asked, forcing himself to remain calm and civil.

“I don’t hate him,” Dar’ja replied simply. “He and I just don’t get along.”

“I can’t see why. You’re such a lovely person.”

“Zerith, I know how I am. I don’t see why you are judging me so harshly, though. You’re no better. You priests are worse, actually. Going around mouthing platitudes about obedience and the like to the Light when you know that it has forsaken our people.”

“What are you talking about?” Zerith asked in confusion.

“Come on, you can be honest here. There are no outsiders. Only Blood Knights and priests come here. The others aren’t welcome.”

“I honestly have no idea what you are hinting at. The Light has never abandoned me. The Sunwell; yes. It was destroyed. But the Light was with me and helped me handle the withdrawal until Kael’Thas sent out word on how to control our arcane addiction.”

“This is why I can’t stand you priests,” Dar’ja muttered sullenly. “You lie even to those of us who know the truth!”

“Dar’ja, I swear by the Light, by the sun, by my father’s name; I do not know what you are talking about.”

The paladin stared at him intensely for several long minutes, a weighing look that seemed to try to bore into his mind to determine whether or not he was being honest. He returned her gaze with a frank and open look of his own.

“You really don’t know,” she stated flatly.

“I really don’t,” he agreed politely. “So could you please enlighten me so we can clear up whatever misconceptions you have?”

“How did you manage to keep your faith after all that the Light let happen to our people?” she asked.

“You can’t blame the Light for that,” he replied. “All people are free to make their own choices. For the Light to have prevented the destruction of Quel’Thalas during the last war, the Scourge would have had to have been slaves of the Light instead of the Lich King. But, slavery is contrary to the Light, as you should know.”

“You are...very different than what I expected.”

“I can’t say that you are exactly what I expected to find in a paladin either. Why all this theological discourse?”

“Because I thought your powers came from the same source as my own and I hated your hypocrisy.”

“Dar’ja, we’ve been down this path already.”

“I know. I’m still surprised that you don’t know about the Blood Knights. I thought everyone knew.”

“What is it that you think I knew?” he asked, a tinge of exasperation entering his voice.

Dar’ja took a deep breath and, starting at the beginning, told him about the naaru being held by the Blood Knights in Silvermoon. About its mystical Light-driven energy. About how the Blood Knights had learned to wrest the powers of the Light away from it and use them without having to undergo the intense training and study that the paladins of the Alliance undertook before receiving their blessing from the Light. Zerith’s eyes grew wider and wider in horrified shock as she drew closer to the end. Once she finished, he was staring at her, aghast.

“And you thought I would do anything like that?” he said breathlessly.

“Oh come on,” she muttered irritably. “Your best friend is a warlock. You associate with the Forsaken quite merrily. What else was I supposed to think other than you were just like us, like so many other sin’dorei priests who have found sources other than the Light for their powers?”

“Don’t drag Alayne or Callie into this. Alayne turned down the path she’s taken out of desperation to help our people. Callie was infected with the plague. You, on the other hand, help hold some poor being hostage and torture it for powers that don’t belong to you.”

“It’s not really a being,” Dar’ja protested. “More like some object that acts as a nexus for Light energy. I, too, was desperate for some way to help our people. That’s why I studied under Lady Liadrin. Don’t condemn me for the very thing you forgive others for.”

“Well, that explains your whole attitude towards everyone except Ger’alin,” Zerith muttered finally, seeing her point.

“Ger’alin and I just don’t get along.”

“I can see that.”

The two stood up from the table, having finished their meals during the course of their conversation. They walked in uncomfortable silence through Silvermoon, heading back towards the orb that would take them to Undercity. Zerith would peer around from time to time, as if looking for someone. Dar’ja questioned him about it after a while.

“I’m half expecting to see Alayne,” he replied. “I wonder where she is.”

“I’m sure she’s fine,” Dar’ja said politely. “I’d like to...thank you for an interesting evening.”

“My pleasure,” Zerith returned lightly. “Perhaps tomorrow we could look around Hillsbrad and Alterac for ways to help our people and the Horde? Callie and Ger’alin must be going crazy from inaction.”

“That would be nice,” Dar’ja said with a smile. “Thank you.”

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“You are back rather late,” Ger’alin said groggily. “Callie gave up and left to sleep an hour ago. Alayne still hasn’t returned.”

“I didn’t see her in Silvermoon,” Zerith replied. “Go on. I don’t need you to watch me sleep no matter what Alayne made you promise.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” Ger’alin said as he rubbed his eyes and forehead. “But I’d like to know why you’re all lit up. Did Dar’ja get eaten by crows or something?”

“No,” Zerith laughed. “She and I had a pleasant dinner and cleared the air between us. She really is a fascinating person once you get her to drop the Queen of Ice act.”

“Oh ho, so that’s how it is,” Ger’alin laughed.

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” Zerith muttered irritably. “Get your mind out of the gutter and get out of here. I’d like to get on to sleep now if you don’t mind. I have a busy day planned for tomorrow.”

Ger’alin slipped out of the inn, returning to his tent and bedroll by the river. Zerith hurriedly changed into his sleeping robes and climbed into the bed. *She’s not such a bad person*, he was thinking to himself as he drifted off. *You just have to get to know her.*

Outside, Ger’alin passed by Callie’s tent on his way to his own. He stood outside, listening for a sign that she was awake. She’d won the bet that night; Ger’alin had been certain that Dar’ja and Zerith wouldn’t have patched up their rocky start so quickly. Hearing nothing to indicate the Forsaken remained awake, Ger’alin tiptoed out of her small camp and made his way to his own. Pulling off his boots and jerkin, he wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down on the cool ground to sleep. *I’d really thought she’d be back by now. I hope she’s alright. I wonder what Zerith has planned*, he thought as sleep rolled over him.

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Alayne managed to hold down her nausea. Barely. She didn’t know whether it was worse if she had her eyes open or shut. All of her energy and dignity was wrapped up in not screaming at the top of her lungs whenever the wyvern gave any indication that they were anywhere other than on the nice, safe, firm ground. She was getting better at handling this flying business, she thought to herself. She’d actually been able to force herself on the zeppelin without fainting. Of course, the fact that Jez’ral had been with her and that she didn’t think he would tolerate her phobias for a second may have had something to do with that, she allowed.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the White Lady rising over the ocean. Normally, she’d have been asleep by now. However, her teachers wanted her to move quickly on with the next stage of her studies and she was in no position to argue. Especially not after they hinted that Prince Kael’Thas himself was impressed by her abilities and achievements.

“Light!” Alayne whimpered as the wyvern descended quickly towards the ground. The flight from Orgrimmar to Ratchet was short. Once the beast had landed, Alayne climbed off its back and handed the reins over to the goblin in charge of the wyvern stables for Ratchet. Jez’ral smiled at her and motioned for her to follow him as he strode quickly up the hill to the north of the town.

“You’re late,” a man said, his voice deep as the shadows surrounding the tower on top of the hill.

“We came as quickly as we could. Do not hold me, or my student, to fault for the foibles of goblin technology,” Jez’ral said impatiently.

“She doesn’t look like much,” the speaker said as he stepped into the light. “A little pale elf maiden. She should be tending her mother’s garden, not trying to impress me with a few simple conjurations.”

Alayne’s eyes widened in anger. It was bad enough that she’d been taken away from her friends on no notice at all. Worse still that she’d had to set foot on that Light-forsaken zeppelin. On top of that, she’d had to fly, on some winged beast’s back, to this town. Jez’ral had told her in Orgrimmar that she wouldn’t be sleeping tonight. Thinking of that added its own flare to her fiery temper.

“That’s better,” the man said, his pleasure audible. “I’d heard that your rage had potential. Now, listen well, elf maid. Beginning this night, you will face two trials. These will prepare you for what you will face in the future as you continue to study our Art. Only after you have completed both trials will you be allowed to advance further. Fail either of them and

you will most likely die. Should that happen, we will not mourn you. We never mourn the loss of a weakling.”

“What are these trials?” Alayne asked angrily, not allowing herself to feel afraid.

“The first trial involves gathering the items needed to force a felhunter out of the Nether. You will need to find the Tome of the Cabal and at least three Rods of Channeling used by the necromantic Dragonmaw orcs and return here with them. Only then will you be able to face down a felhunter and prove your mastery over that class of demon.”

“The other?”

“You will then need to bring us a cleansed summoning orb. The Burning Blade warlocks in Desolace carry an orb that can be cleansed. You will also need to wrest the soul from an infernal. Bring both here and you will be able to prove your mastery over the infernals who walk the Nether.”

“Very well,” Alayne said, accepting the task.

“One last thing,” the man said with a dark grin. “You must complete these trials unaided. My associate, Jez’ral, may accompany you only to witness your success – or failure. He will not aid you in any way. Only such aid as you can command from the Twisting Nether will be allowed.”

“I understand. I will see you again in the light of the morning sun, human,” Alayne tossed over her shoulder as she stalked down the hill. She could hear the man’s laughter echoing after her as she all but ran to her wyvern. Jez’ral followed behind her, an amused smile on his face. Without a word, the two mounted their wyverns and set out for Desolace.

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“I know you can’t help me,” Alayne told Jez’ral as the two made their way out of Shadowprey Village on the southwestern coast of Desolace, “but could you give me a hint of where to find this ‘Tome of the Cabal?’ I have a good idea of where the Dragonmaw orcs can be found. I grew up not far from there.”

“The Tome of the Cabal was stolen from Undercity by a foolish human woman who thought to make her name by swearing allegiance to the Burning Legion and becoming a warlock in the Burning Blade cult. We traced word of her to the Burning Blade stronghold here in Desolace. Strahad, the human you impressed so much back in Ratchet,” he clarified, “decided to set getting the Tome back as the trial of the next highly talented warlock to come across his path.”

“So, I’m wrong in thinking that this book contains extremely powerful rites and spells concerning felhunters?”

“Not entirely. It does contain some of that, among other things. However, you wouldn’t be able to read it. At least, not yet. There’s a warding laid on the Tome so that only the most advanced of our Order can decipher the text. That’s part of why the thief brought it to the Burning Blade. She couldn’t read it; she was, perhaps, hoping one of them could.”

“I see. Well, I will tell you my plan for how to get this book back. After that, I will put my plan into action and you will wait for me here,” she said, gesturing to a cleft in the mountain. You can hide there and not have to worry about anyone seeing you unless you advertise yourself. If I’m not back by noon tomorrow, consider me dead and let Zerith know that I went out fighting.”

“Very well,” Jez’ral smiled. The elf maiden had an air of command about her now. He’d seen hints of it when he’d first met her, in Menethil Harbor. Now, it seemed to settle about her like a well-worn cloak. Signs of the vulnerable elf-maid he recalled from their first meeting still clung about her, but less and less of them remained. “Tell me your plan.” As she

detailed her plan to retrieve the book, his smile deepened. This was a truly remarkable young woman.

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Alayne used the cloak of night to mask her movements through the area called Mannoroc Coven. Most of the members of the Burning Blade cult were in bed but a few guards patrolled the more well-lit passages, not looking too closely for intruders. They obviously trusted their reputation to keep people away. The elf woman rolled her eyes as a noisy patrol passed by her hiding spot. The Burning Legion must not require much intelligence to join its cause.

Just ahead and to her right lay the doorway she needed to take to enter the cult's library. She had overheard a pair of guards talking about it when she first entered the area. The Tome would most likely be there. The only other place it would be would require a change in plans on her end, were it there. She waited until the patrol disappeared behind the building and then made her move. On silent feet, she walked swiftly to the door of the library and opened it a crack. Looking around the room, she saw no one. Without letting herself rethink the idea, she opened the door all the way and entered, closing the door behind her.

"I must move quickly," she whispered to herself. "They may be stupid, but surely someone will check on the library." Steeling herself, she began scanning the shelves of books, reaching out to the Nether to test for the resonance that existed around all arcane tomes. Each book would have its own flavor; books on the arcane arts crackled with electricity. Those on the elemental arts had a primordial feel. Tomes reserved for the mastery of shadow magics felt slick, as if they were lightly coated with oil. Moving through the room, she located several likely candidates and, thumbing through them, soon had the Tome she sought. Tucking it into her belt pouch, she smiled to herself, relieved to have the task done. She turned back towards the door, intent on making her way out before she was discovered. Her eyes widened in shock and dismay when she saw a tall figure blocking her exit.

"You move well, for a woman," it rasped, reaching back to pull back its hood. An elven man smiled at her, an evil smile. "Too bad you never stopped to think that we would ward our tomes against outsiders."

Alayne stood silent, her back against the wall, searching desperately for a way out that would not bring the entire Coven down on her head. Bitterly, she realized that the only exit was the one blocked by the traitorous elf. Focusing her mind, she began the steps to summon the shadow-fire to burn the man where he stood. As if reading her thoughts, the man moved quickly across the room and, with a motion, rendered her mute. Alayne tried to scream but her voice would not work.

"A useful curse," the man said pleasantly. "Especially against those like you who are dependant on magic. You can't cast, you can't scream, you can't do anything except writhe in horror until I lift the curse. Of course," he said, after a moment's thought, "if you had been a fighter, I'd have to use this one as well," he said, muttering words Alayne recognized. She tried to shriek as she felt her body growing leaden, as if it were too heavy for her bones to hold. Slumping against the wall, she fought to remain standing. "Very amusing!" the man laughed. He continued to walk towards her until he was standing inches from her. He grabbed her arms, roughly, shaking her until her face was turned up towards his. "If you continue to amuse me, I might let you live and serve the Legion," he whispered, pressing his body against hers. Terrified panic shot through Alayne as she realized what his intentions were. Her mouth opened in silent screams as the man tore at her robes. With what little strength she still possessed, she struggled against him, hampering his efforts.

Adrenaline surged through her and, her fumbling hands finding her dagger, she managed to overcome the curse on her muscles long enough to plant her dagger in the elf's back. He jerked away from her in pain and anger, his eyes blazing like fire. "If you want to play rough..." he threatened, beginning to summon fire to burn her to ash. Rage surged through her, a rage remembered from Stromgarde, and she lurched forward, slashing at him with her dagger. Again and again she slashed and stabbed, losing herself in her own raging bloodlust.

Some time later, Alayne could not say how long, she managed to pull herself up on wobbly legs. Pulling her robes back into some semblance of neatness, she wiped her bloody dagger on the cloak of what had been an elven man, sheathed it, and began to make her way out of the Coven. Remembering, with cold detachment, that the cult members carried an orb she needed for one of her tasks, she returned to the body and searched through its pockets until she found the object she needed. Then, she turned, leaving only a hacked up corpse to attest that she had been there at all.

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Once outside of the Coven's hold, Alayne let herself slump against a rock. Her muscles felt like jelly and her bones had turned to water. Horrified at what had happened, what she had done, and the argument raging inside of her, she rocked herself back and forth, wishing that there were someone who could comfort her.

"You don't need comforting. You did nothing wrong," part of her said. "He deserved what you gave him. More, even."

You don't understand. It's not that I killed him. I cut him to shreds!

"Quit being such a child. So, you killed a man. A man who, if you hadn't killed him, would probably be making you scream for mercy about now."

Stop it!

"No. You stop it. Every time you let loose a little righteous hell, you berate yourself for it. Don't you see? It's us or them. They've made it that way!"

SHUT UP!

"I will not shut up, *little Alayne*. Poor little Alayne; she wants to bring glory and honor to herself and her people but doesn't want to have to break the eggs that go into making that omelet. Now, stop your sniveling and go about the rest of your task. You need to finish your task. Certainly killing an infernal won't send you into a bout of existential angst. Consider it penance, if that makes you feel better, you little fool."

Wiping her face and forcing herself to stop shaking, Alayne rose and looked out across the desert of Desolace. In the distance, near the borders of the Coven she had just left, she could see the infernals patrolling the border. *The cult must be using them as scouts and guards*, she thought bitterly to herself. Only those who served demons would be foolish enough to use them in such a manner. They were, by nature, completely unreliable and unlikely to judge anything humanoid-sized as a threat. No wonder she'd been able to penetrate so deeply into the cult's home grounds so easily. She wouldn't be able to brag about it to Callie now, she thought, feeling some of the sense of accomplishment slip away.

Moving quickly, she came within casting range of one of the huge demons. Channeling the shadow energies, she cast a bolt of shade at the creature, striking it directly on its rocky back. The infernal turned and ran towards her with a horrific roar of rage, its green fire spurting out like an eruption of anger. Using all of the curses she knew, Alayne managed to drain the demon's energy until, finally, she could wrest its vile soul from its filthy, unnatural frame and trap it in a crystal dedicated to such purposes. With a sigh, she kicked the rubble that had been an infernal. Her internal war raged on as she went to find Jez'ral.

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“What happened to you?” Jez’ral asked in shock as Alayne walked up the path towards him. “You look like something a cat would drag home.”

“The infernal didn’t want to part with its soul for the asking,” she sneered. “So I had to convince it the hard way. Let’s get moving. The Wetlands is not exactly next door to this place. I intend to be back in Ratchet before sun-up.”

“You have the Tome?”

“No. The cultists of the Burning Blade gave me some interesting literature about serving the Legion instead. Of course I have the Tome!” she shouted angrily.

“Alayne, don’t speak to me like that,” Jez’ral said softly, his voice like cold steel. “Whatever happened to you out there is not my fault. I will not be used as your punching bag. No matter how far you have advanced, I have gone further up the path, my dear.”

The woman took a deep breath, exhaled loudly, and turned to face Jez’ral. “I apologize,” she said calmly. “I will not let it happen again.”

“See that you do not. Now, let me see the Tome.”

Alayne pulled the book from her belt pouch and handed it to Jez’ral. His anger melted as he flipped through the pages. The knowledge that many warlocks had feared lost was regained. Jez’ral smiled, his pride in his student replacing his irritation with her. It was almost a shame that he would have to see her hand it over to Strahad. Closing the Tome, he slipped it into his satchel and began walking back towards Shadowprey Village. Alayne followed after him, keeping a firm leash on her temper.

Once back in the village, they quickly mounted their wyverns and began the flight back north, to Orgrimmar. Alayne struggled to keep her emotions in check throughout the long flight, fatigue battling with fear fighting with anger which in turn sided against horror and a desperate hysteria that left her wanting to scream and weep until the very night closed in around her. By the time the wyverns landed at the roost in Orgrimmar, Alayne felt shaky and drained from the wearing battle raging within her. Jez’ral glanced over at her as she concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other. “We can stop and let you rest for a while, Alayne,” he suggested. “Nothing says that the trials must be completed by sunrise. You just have to complete them if you want to advance further in the Art.”

Gratitude towards her teacher surged through Alayne but she refused to give in to her exhaustion. “Thank you,” she said politely, but distantly, “but I will be fine. Come on, we have a zeppelin to catch.”

Shaking his head, Jez’ral followed after Alayne. When she came to a sudden halt at the base of the zeppelin tower, he repeated his offer and was, once again, politely refused. With a determined sigh, Alayne led the way up the tower and on to the waiting zeppelin. Once aboard, she descended into the belly of the flying contraption and, in a small concession to her weariness, sat down and leaned her head against the wall. Jez’ral sat across from her, pulling the Tome of the Cabal out of his satchel and skimming through some of the sections that interested him most. He didn’t notice Alayne’s clenched-jaw, white-knuckled terror during the flight across the sea to Lordaeron. He closed the Tome with a sigh of regret when the zeppelin shuddered to a halt and the goblins announced their arrival near Undercity. Looking up, he was startled to see Alayne gone already. Hastening down the tower, he found her leaning against the doorframe of the decrepit house, gasping for breath. She drew herself up when she saw him approaching her and, forcing her breathing back to normal, even breaths, she walked so quickly on to Undercity that Jez’ral nearly had to jog to keep up with her. Descending into the city of the Forsaken, they explained their business to the keeper of the giant bats and were loaned a pair of the flying beasts to speed them on their way. As they

were mounting, Alayne muttered something undecipherable under her breath. When her teacher asked her to repeat it, she merely sighed, pursed her lips, and shook her head. The pair flew off, landing on the road running through the Wetlands just as the sky was darkening into the deepness preceding the dawn.

“Are you sure you don’t need any rest?” Jez’ral asked once more as they made their way through the swampy marshes towards the mountains where the Dragonmaw had established a foothold. Alayne shot him an irritated look but held her tongue. With the tone of one who is about to lose her patience completely, Alayne said, “Stay here. I’ll be back soon,” and then stalked off into the hills.

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Ahead of her, standing guard on a rock, was an orc. Decked out in the regalia of a Dragonmaw warrior, he stood sentinel over the entrance into the Dragonmaw lair. He had seen the elven woman coming for several minutes now. Leisurely, he drew his bow, intending to make short work of the trespasser. The sight of him, arrow knocked, stoked Alayne’s fury and, with a scream of rage, she let loose a bolt of flame that engulfed the orc, lighting him up like a torch.

She let loose a primal scream of rage and anguish as tears streaked down her face. Her wild shouts drew the attention of nearby orcs who rushed towards her, only to join their incinerated comrade as Alayne let loose the rage that had been building inside of her for a long while now. The mountain pass was soon filled with the guttural cries and moans of dying orcs. Their brethren, opting for the better part of valor, retreated into the deepness of the mountains, wondering if the elven woman’s rampage was the opening move of a campaign to drive them out of their stronghold.

The sky was pearling with the beginnings of a bright dawn when Alayne finally came back to herself. Looking around her at the burnt grass and smoldering rocks of the mountain pass, she sighed tiredly. Lowering her head in defeat, she began rummaging through the smoking remains of the orcs she had slaughtered, looking for the rods Strahad had ordered her to bring to him.

“What is happening to me?” she whispered softly as she wiped her soot-covered hands on her dusty robes.

Jez’ral wisely said nothing when she returned to him carrying the rods in a dirty hand. He wondered if Strahad would recognize the elf maid who had thrown her defiance at him just hours ago. In silence, the two mounted and prepared to return to Ratchet. As they flew, Jez’ral would peer over his shoulder from time to time, wondering just what it was that seemed to be consuming his student from within.

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“She’s amazing,” Strahad said, his voice low but filled with awe.

“She is,” Jez’ral agreed readily. “During my trial, I never thought of cutting off the creature’s tentacles.”

“Nor did I,” Strahad chuckled as he recalled the sight of the young elf woman fighting off the felhound. “Once it plants those barbed spikes in you, all you can think of is the pain. Ah, Menara, my dear, how is she?”

“She’ll be down shortly,” the human woman said briskly as she descended the twisting stairs leading up the tower. “I hope the goblins have plenty of wintersbite and grave moss. I’ve used up the last of our stock blending a poultice for her. She is something else, isn’t she? Raw talent, a natural at weaving, and full of spunk besides.”

Above them, Alayne stood in a room, alone. The bruises marring her back, shoulders, and arms from her trials were darkening into an ugly purple-black. She could feel the fresh cuts along her ribs whenever she breathed. The mix that Menara had made blocked the worst of the pain but Alayne still winced whenever she moved. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to ignore the pain and the fatigue that wanted to drag her down into unconsciousness and dressed herself in the robes Menara had made for her, marking her advance in the ranks of the Horde's warlocks. Letting the skirts settle around her legs, Alayne limped down the stairs, forcing herself to try to walk normally; to mask her true condition.

"You look much better," Strahad said warmly as her foot left the last stair. "If you continue to progress so quickly and so well, your future will be set."

"Thank you," Alayne said, straining to inflect some tone of gratitude and emotion into her leaden voice. "I will try hard," she finished. Bowing politely, and biting her lower lip to keep from crying out, she managed to mask her soreness with a stately, if slow, glide. So tired was she that not even the humans' amused chuckles could raise her ire.

Jez'ral caught up with her after making his farewells to his comrades and beamed down at her. "You have really impressed Strahad, Alayne. That is all to the good for you. He is a very powerful man. Keep in touch with him; he can open doors to knowledge and power you've never dreamed of."

"I will," she replied, her voice drained but aware that some acknowledgement was expected.

"You should sleep," her teacher continued. "As soon as we return to Silvermoon, I'll order a room and bath prepared for you. I'll also have some of our own look at your injuries. Menara is good; but she's still human."

"I'm not going back to Silvermoon," Alayne said haltingly, bracing for the torrent. After a moment of awkward silence, she glanced over at Jez'ral. He was staring at her, a blank look on his face. His silence asked the question to which she answered, "at least, not right away."

"Going on to Tarren Mill, then? Back to your friends, I suppose?"

"No, but would you deliver a message to them for me?"

"That depends, Alayne, entirely on what message I am to give them and whether or not you can convince me that it's worth my while to be your errand-boy."

"Just tell them that I passed my tests and that I decided to give Zerith a bit more of a vacation from my mothering. I'm going to the area they call Azshara. I've been wanting to see some of the historical landmarks our people built ages ago. Who knows but what secrets lurk in them, waiting to be uncovered again?"

Alayne smiled inwardly as she saw her teacher visibly relax. "Need a bit of a vacation from constantly battling for the glory of the sin'dorei, do we?" he joked.

"Something like that," she laughed weakly. "Don't worry about me, Jez'ral. I'm planning to take a nap as soon as I find a likely campsite late this afternoon."

"Very well. I will take your message to your friends in Tarren Mill. When should I tell them you will be returning?"

"In a few days. I just need a few days..." she trailed off, fearful that she wouldn't be able to continue her deception if she spoke more.

Jez'ral appeared to attribute her faltering as fatigue. "Keep those wounds clean," he advised, sounding almost paternal, "and get some rest. You've more than earned it." With a smile, he turned and left, heading towards the roost to fetch his wyvern back to Orgrimmar. Alayne stood where she was, watching him go. When he was just a speck in the sky, she turned, called forth the felsteed she had enslaved after passing her trials, and, chewing the inside of her mouth raw to keep from crying out, headed north into the forests of Ashenvale.

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“Feeling better, I take it,” Ger’alin grouched when he saw Zerith strolling out of the inn, a large leather sack slung over his shoulder.

“Yes, I am,” the priest said, his lips quirking in a smile.

“She should be back by now,” the fighter muttered angrily. “Four days when we all thought she’d be gone just a few hours.”

“What was it you told me, once, Ger’alin?” Zerith said lightly, “Stop worrying about one of the most capable women you’ve ever seen. Jez’ral explained it the afternoon he delivered her message; she is taking some time to visit the ruins of Azshara. She’s been wanting to see them since she was a little girl. Light, Ger’alin, I thought I was supposed to be the overprotective one.”

“I guess you’re right,” Ger’alin said irritably. “I probably shouldn’t worry about her. Hell, I’ve seen what she’s capable of doing when you get her temper flaring. She can handle anything Kalimdor throws at her,” he said in the tone of one trying to convince himself of something.

Zerith stared at him for a moment and then, looking around to make sure no one was close by, he asked in an undertone, “What, pray tell, is she capable of?”

“She didn’t tell you?” Ger’alin said flatly.

“No. Neither would Callie. Every time I’ve asked someone about what happened after I was shot, I get a dose of the fish-eye and a quick change of topic.”

“Well, I suppose you’ve a right to know,” Ger’alin sighed heavily. “But not here. Come on down to my camp by the river.”

Glancing around, Zerith asked, “Will this take long? I’m supposed to meet Dar’ja near the turn to Durnholde. She’d really like to learn more about herb-lore, so I figured I’d take her to the Hinterlands and show her where I really started learning.”

“Yeah, sure, flowers,” Ger’alin muttered as he led Zerith back to his campsite. “Are you sure she’s not planning to learn how to poison you or something?”

“Oh, grow up, Ger’alin,” Zerith said in exasperation. “She’s not a bad person. Sure, we had a rocky start but we’ve patched it up and we’re becoming friends. It’s not like there’s a surplus of sin’dorei after the last war. We do need to stick together.”

Ger’alin muttered something beneath his breath that Zerith decided it would be best to pretend he hadn’t heard. The two men reached the fighter’s camp site and Ger’alin glanced around, double checking that there was no one within hearing range.

“So, tell me the big secret,” Zerith teased. “What did she do? Blow up a house?”

“No,” Ger’alin said, his tone cold and completely serious, “what she *did* do was damn near start a genocide when she thought you’d been killed. For a few minutes there, Alayne had a really good ‘exterminate the humans’ effort going on there. It took being knocked to the ground, pinned so she couldn’t cast, and then slapped harder than I’ve ever hit *anyone* bare-handed to snap her out of her blood-rage.” Zerith paled, his eyes widening in shock. “Let me tell you something else. Personally, I think, if you had been killed, there wouldn’t be a single human left alive on this *entire continent*. She’d probably be planning a tour of Kalimdor as an encore.”

“You’re lying,” Zerith said once he could finally speak.

“No, I’m not and you know it and that’s what’s made you damn near pass out,” Ger’alin said flatly. “Well, if you’re going to faint, sit down at least. It’s a shorter distance to fall. And this,” he continued, gesturing to Zerith, “is probably why she didn’t tell you herself and no one else would. By the light of the sun, I don’t know what it is with some of you. Alayne was just as horrified as you are now once she came back to her senses. I can understand some of that. I felt the same way myself the first time I fought in a real battle and

realized that the thing on the ground in front of me had been a living, breathing person just moments before I'd gutted him. But war is hell, Zerith. Alayne's only problem was completely losing control; not the destruction she caused."

"How can you say that? She could have..."

"She could have wiped that whole town off the map without breaking a sweat. She's good at that whole throwing-fire-and-shadow thing. She did nothing wrong except lose control of her emotions." Sighing, he shook his head at the expression of horrified confusion on his friend's face. "Let me try a different approach. What Alayne did was pretty much act as a rear-guard to ensure that our injured – you – could be evacuated safely. That is a perfectly honorable role to play. If she had not done it, I probably would have myself by ordering my group to return fire. Would that bother you?"

"No," Zerith said slowly, "but..."

"But nothing. What bothers you is that Alayne lost control and couldn't stop herself without someone forcing her to a halt. That bothers me, too. No one who has a rage like that should ever get in the forefront of a fight. They become deadly to all around them, friend and foe."

"I see," the priest said blankly after a moment's silent thought. "Well, thank you for telling me the truth, Ger'alín. In a way, not knowing was worse." He turned to go but Ger'alín put a hand on his arm, stopping him.

"She is a good person," he explained. "She's tormented herself enough over that lapse. Don't go acting or feeling any different towards her for what she did when she thought that someone she loves dearly had been murdered in front of her eyes."

Zerith said nothing, unable to speak around the lump in his throat. Firming his face, he nodded impatiently and made his way down to the road leading towards Durnholde. Once he was out of sight of Tarren Mill and Ger'alín, he stopped and leaned against a fence post. "Light," he prayed fervently, "don't ever let her feel that kind of pain again. She is a good person. Too good for that kind of pain and fear to be inflicted on her gentle soul. Send out your radiance to look after my sister and ease her suffering and calm her fears." Then, drawing a deep breath, he forced himself to let go of his worry and look forward to spending the day with a new friend.

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"You owe me five gold," Ger'alín informed Callie when she came down to their shared fishing spot. "He did not flip out and go, how was it you put it, 'bat-shit insane.' For someone inexperienced in combat, he listens well to those of us who are."

"I never should have made that bet," the Forsaken muttered as she baited her hook and cast her line into the river. "I'll pay it off by buying you a round of drinks at the tavern of your choice in Undercity."

"I accept your payment in lieu of cold, hard currency."

The two sat fishing in companionable silence for a while.

"They aren't biting today, are they?" Callie muttered finally.

"Indeed, they are not. I think we've just about fished this spot out."

"Want to head on to Undercity? I do have a debt to pay off."

"My lady, you have read my mind."

"It's pretty easy to read. Eating, drinking, and fighting seem to cover most of your interests."

"Ach!" Ger'alín cried out in mock offense, "you wound me, my good undead. I also have been accused of occasionally thinking about women."

"Oh ho, is *that* why Dar'ja hates you?" Callie laughed.

“Most likely,” he chuckled.

“Are you finally going to tell me that story? I’ve been trying to figure out why she can’t stand to be around you for days now. If I hadn’t already died, I’d say that the suspense was killing me.”

“There’s really not much to tell. I had just arrived in Silvermoon and presented myself for training. Dar’ja was nearby, hovering around the Lady Liadrin like some mindless sycophant. I made what I felt were proper respects to a knight and told her my background and why I was there. Dar’ja kept rolling her eyes at me so I offered to give a demonstration of my hard-earned combat skills by dueling her. To be honest, she almost had me beaten there using her divine skills. But still, praying isn’t much use when a fellow my size decides to clamp his hand over a woman her size’s mouth and put her in a sleeper hold until she passes out. Dar’ja’s considered me a muscle-brained oaf with all the sophistication of pond scum ever since.”

Callie stared at him for a long moment. Then, her lips began to twitch. After a few seconds, the dam burst and she clutched her sides, her full-throated laughter ringing down the mountain. Hiccoughing and wiping tears from her eyes, she sputtered down after several more minutes, but would still break into fits of giggles whenever she called to mind the image of Ger’alin wrestling with the haughty Dar’ja. “So, she’s not very good at hand-to-hand combat?” the Forsaken gasped out.

“Light of heaven, no,” Ger’alin replied. “I think Zerith could probably out-do her there.”

Callie stared at him incredulously for several seconds and then was, once again, rolling on the ground, her whooping cackles echoing and re-echoing across the area. Ger’alin stared at her in confusion for a moment before he understood. Throwing back his head, he joined her in laughing until tears streaked down his face.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” he managed to croak out several minutes later.

“But it’s such an amusing gutter!”

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“You really know a lot about plants,” Dar’ja muttered blankly as Zerith finished explaining the difference between two flowers that, to her, looked identical. “I’ve always figured healing was mostly just the will of Light.”

“It is, in the end,” the priest said happily. “After all, if the Light has decided to call you on to the next stage of existence, then all of the prayers and all of the potions on this world will avail you nothing. Sometimes, though, calling on the Light for healing is like amputating an arm to get a splinter out of your finger. There are just easier, less costly ways to go about it. Now, if you take this one,” he said, picking up a yellow flower with six petals. “Am I boring you?” he asked, noting the lack of enthusiasm on Dar’ja’s part.

“It’s not you,” she said gently. “I’m just not as interested in this as I thought. Come on, let’s head back to Tarren Mill. Your sister will have my hide for a rug if I let you wear yourself out.”

Zerith nodded, stuffed his collection into his gathering sack, and, dusting off his knees, took his place next to Dar’ja as they set out back to Tarren Mill.

“I’m sorry if I wasted your whole afternoon,” he said.

“It’s not your fault, Zerith,” she laughed. “I never dreamed there was so much variety in the grasses of the Hinterlands. It’s just not my cup of tea.”

“Well, what is your cup of tea?” he asked. “I’d like to make up for dragging you along.”

“Oh no,” she smiled. “We don’t know each other that well, yet. Ger’alin would never let me forget it if he found out just what it is I do for fun.”

“Then I won’t tell him,” Zerith said. “I’ll take any vow you require.”

Dar’ja stared at him in amused shock. Rolling her eyes, she laughed. “I guess that will do. Remember; you’ve dragged it out of me.” Stepping close to him, she stood on her toes and whispered in his ear.

“No!” he exclaimed, astonished.

“Yes. My mother and grandmother were quite good at it.”

“I didn’t think any women did that anymore.”

“Oh, not many do. I’m one of the few who can. Not only can I do that, but I you should see some of my quilts.”

“Needlepoint?” he said, still in shock. “I could never get the hang of that.”

“It’s quite relaxing,” she said defensively. “Trust me, after a hard day of training, nothing feels better than to curl up next to a nice fire and stitch a few flowers onto the hem of a robe.”

“I suppose,” he drawled. “I’d have to try it, though.”

“That could be arranged.”

Zerith stared at her for a second before laughing. “I could just see that now.”

“Ger’alin would never let you forget it.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Zerith agreed pleasantly. “And I do believe that’s the first time I’ve heard you say his name without practically spitting. What is your history with him?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather not get into that right now,” Dar’ja said, her cheeks flushing. “He and I did not get off to a good start at all and I don’t think we ever will patch things up as you and I have. He’s an irritating man who lacks any sort of intellect beyond that required to eat and sleep. Even the Lady Liadrin sees that.”

“He’s not all bad,” Zerith defended his friend.

“I didn’t say he was,” Dar’ja explained, “I just don’t care for him myself.”

“Why? What did he do so wrong that you dislike him so much?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes, Dar’ja, I really want to know.”

“The first day he was in Silvermoon, he was ordered to report to the Lady Liadrin to begin his training in the ways of the Blood Knights. We number mostly former priests, paladins, and warriors. Ger’alin showed up, full of himself since he’d been a guard in Theramore among *humans*. As if that counts for anything,” Dar’ja spat. “He kept going on and on about his combat experience; some of the skirmishes he’d fought in. It was so boring to have to stand there and listen to him recite his whole history as proud as a child who can recite his letters. When Lady Liadrin asked him if he had any experience with magic or wielding the powers of the Light, he, of course, said he didn’t. She asked him just what it was he wanted from studying with the Blood Knights. I couldn’t help but giggle when he couldn’t answer. That made him angry so he challenged me right then and there. I was putting him in his place; his muscles availed him nothing against the power of the Light. Then, the next thing I know, he’s standing over me. I’m on the ground, blinking, with him grinning down at me. He did not fight fair.”

Zerith said nothing, careful to keep his face blank. His new standing with Dar’ja was delicate. The slightest wrong move and she’d freeze up again. He thought carefully over his next words. “It sounds like,” he began finally, “you can’t forgive him for embarrassing you.”

Dar’ja whirled on him, her eyes flashing with anger. Zerith ignored it. “Be honest with yourself,” he said softly. “That’s one of the gifts of the Light: the ability to learn and grow

from bad experiences instead of being embittered by them. Ger'alín's never mentioned this to me. He's always just said you and he got off to a bad start and that you don't get along. If he were really the oaf you think he is, he'd have been bragging about how he beat you without having to use the Light."

The elf woman glared at him, but her expression was softening. Finally, after several minutes of silent introspection, she sighed, gave the ghost of a shrug, and smiled up at Zerith. "I see now why so many people follow you," she said gently.

Now it was Zerith's turn to blush. "Don't start on that. I don't know why they follow me. I'm not wise or extremely brave or anything like that. I'm just me."

"Of course you are," she laughed delightedly, stepping up and throwing her arms around him. Zerith stood awkwardly for a moment before he returned the embrace, his heart fluttering as a not-unfamiliar yet new emotion ran through him in waves. After several moments, the two disentangled themselves and, hand-in-hand, continued back to Tarren Mill.

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"I'm not doing anyone any good out here," Alayne muttered to herself irritably as she stood, idly tossing stones into the Great Sea. Just a few steps north would put her in Darkshore, the ancient forests her distant ancestors had inhabited. To her south, she could see the outlines of the great temples and buildings that were cast down by the Sundering. She'd spent hours climbing through those ruins, searching for some secret wisdom to guide her on the path she should take; some lingering spirit to comfort her and help her stop the war she felt raging within her heart whenever she did not force herself to some occupation. "And don't you dare start," she said warningly to herself. "I'm in no mood for it now."

Walking along the shoreline, she breathed in the salty tang of the sea. Her mind drifted back to her days in Menethil when she would swim in the warm salt water near the harbor while her mother watched from the shore. As a child, she had longed to swim out into the heart of the vast ocean, into the Maelstrom itself, and, holding her breath, make her way down to where the ruins of the ancient elven civilization must lay. In her childish dreams, those ruins had been peopled with her ancestors, wise, strong, powerful. She'd dreamed of adventuring under the sea with them.

"But, all dreams must end when we wake," she muttered. "And, we must put away childhood as we grow. I should return to the others. I'm not doing anyone any good out here."

Steeling herself, she began the incantation to call forth her mount. As had happened every time in the past four days when she'd had this conversation, her incantation fizzled as the face of the man she'd murdered floated before her eyes. Closing her eyes, trying to shut him out of her mind, she began again. This time, the scene of the carnage she'd wrought in Stromgarde hung before her. Squeezing her eyes so tightly shut that she could feel the muscles at the base of her skull bunching with the strain, she tried yet again. Visions of Zerith, of Callie, of Ger'alín, of so many she knew and had come to care for falling before her blind wrath assaulted her, staggering her. She collapsed to the ground, her hands slamming the gritty sand and keeping her from pitching onto her face.

What good is a warlock who can't cast a simple spell?

"You shut up," she snarled between clenched teeth, her eyes still tightly shut. Mocking laughter, the same laughter that had plagued her since just after her trials, flayed her, ringing in her ears like the roar of the ocean. She could feel the hot, bitter tears of anguish and defeat trickle down her nose; the same tears she had shed each time she tried to leave her self-imposed exile. "I did this to myself and now I'm undoing it!" she screamed.

Poor little Alayne. She cannot wield the arcane. By the shores of the sea, she cries bitterly and the waves just laugh at her pain.

“I hate you,” she growled. “I hate you and I want to be free of you.”

You could sooner cut out your own heart.

“LET! ME! LEAVE!” she roared. Suddenly, the words of the summoning spell spilled from her tongue, rolling off fluently. Jerking her head up and letting her eyes open, she smiled happily when she saw her felsteed pawing the ground just a few feet away. Climbing aboard its back, she clucked to it, signaling a gallop, and set off for Orgrimmar and the zeppelin back to Lordaeron.

“I should learn to use a sword,” she muttered as she passed wide of Astranaar. “Maybe Ger’alin would teach me how. Useful for if I can’t cast a spell.”

He wouldn’t mind teaching you that. He probably wouldn’t mind teaching you other things while he’s at it.

The murdered man’s mocking face hung in her vision. “You shut up,” she whispered harshly. “I’ll find a way to make you shut up. I will.”

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Ger’alin and Callie headed up the road towards Undercity, regaling each other with tales that forced them to stop, wheezing from laughter, quite often. Hearing the horn sounding to alert those nearby that a zeppelin had arrived, Callie turned, grabbing Ger’alin by the shoulder, and pointed towards the tower.

“Did I tell you about the time we had to go to Orgrimmar?” she asked, her voice hoarse from laughing.

“You didn’t. Zerith did. I shouldn’t laugh,” he snickered, “we all have our fears. But I would have given anything to have actually seen you guys dragging her onto that machine!”

“Maybe we should make a trip ourselves. In memory of that day.”

“Madame, my evening is yours,” Ger’alin said courteously, making a bow that would fit in at the Court of the Sun.

“Why, sir, you are too kind,” Callie said in a falsetto voice, returning his gesture with one of her own. The two friends laughed at themselves and hurried up to the zeppelin tower. Upon reaching the top, they stopped when they overheard goblin voices arguing with a recalcitrant passenger. From within the ship, a familiar figure emerged, shaking like a leaf in high winds.

“Alayne!” Callie cheered, running up to the elven woman and embracing her.

“For the love of all that is holy get me off this blasted contraption and down this misbegotten tower!” Alayne forced between gritted teeth.

“Good to see you too!” Callie laughed, taking her friend’s hand. “Close your eyes. I’ll lead you down. Ger’alin will make sure you don’t fall.”

“I don’t care just *getmedownfromhere!*”

The three made their way slowly down the tower. Callie guided Alayne’s steps. Ger’alin walked behind her, his hands out by her sides to catch her should she miss a step. Once they were finally down on the ground, Alayne opened her eyes and sighed. Then, smiling at them, she said, “I am glad to see you both.”

“You have been missed,” Ger’alin laughed.

“How’s Zerith?”

“Oh, he’s fine,” Ger’alin replied.

“Dar’ja’s been taking really good care of him,” Callie added.

“Dar’ja?”

“You’ve missed out on some things. Come, join us and we’ll get you up to speed,” Callie explained.

“Obviously,” Alayne laughed. “So, what are you two doing so far from Tarren Mill?”

Callie and Ger'alín looked at each other guiltily. "Um," Ger'alín began, not sure of what to say or how Alayne would take the news.

"I lost a bet with him about something that you don't need to know about because it's embarrassing enough," Callie said glibly, thinking quickly. "And, to honor my wager, I'm buying him drinks at the tavern of his choice in Undercity."

"Add buying Alayne here some wine to that list," Ger'alín suggested.

"Wine?" Alayne laughed. "I could use something a little stronger than fermented grape juice after that flight. Make it a mead and I'll take you up on it."

"Then a mead it will be," Callie cackled.

"Now, tell me about Zerith and this Dar'ja? Is she nice?"

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"So, tell us about Azshara," Callie asked after she'd finished getting Alayne up to speed on what she'd missed in the past week. "Did the naga bother you much?"

"Oh, that," Alayne muttered as she stared into her empty mug. Blinking, she tried to remember just when it had gotten empty. Setting it firmly to the side, she tried to come up with a plausible tale. Deciding on something approaching the truth, she said, "I didn't make it to Azshara. Too many...oh, thank you," she smiled to the attendant who brought her a fresh mug. "Too many night elves and all guarding the road. I wound up on the other coast of Ashenvale. Spent some time in the ruins there. Got bored. Came back. Are you going to finish that?" she asked Ger'alín, pointing to his mug of ale.

"Yes," he said, taking a sip and staring at Alayne quizzically. She'd managed to polish off five mugs of mead, a feat he hadn't believed possible for someone her size to accomplish without getting drunk. Very drunk. "Tell us about your tests," he suggested as he finished the last of his ale. Winking at Callie, he smiled, "That was good. I'll have another."

"I'm going to have to beg in the streets if you two luses keep this up much longer," the Forsaken groused. "Can all sin'dorei drink like this? Or are you two just alcoholics in training?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Alayne said, staring off into space blankly. "You can't make me. Not unless I get much, much, much drunker than I am right now," she amended. "Thank you!" she said brightly as the same undead gave her a fresh mug.

"I can't afford all this," Callie muttered to him. He waved her off, whispering, "For you three, it's all on the house. For what you did in Silverpine." Callie brightened considerably at this news and ordered a round of Deadhead, the local specialty, for her and Ger'alín.

"I think you've had enough," Ger'alín started to say, reaching over to take Alayne's mug away from her. She pulled away, irritation twisting her face, and cradled the mug against her chest.

"I haven't had nearly enough," she said carefully, in the tone of one who is making an effort not to slur her words. "You're just afraid I'll out-drink you."

"Is that a challenge?" he laughed, assured he could win this one easily.

"Yes," she said, nodding her head. "I've had...how many have I had, Callie?"

"Six," the Forsaken woman replied.

"I've had six mugs," Alayne said proudly. "You've barely finished off..."

"Three," Callie supplied the number again.

"Three, like she said," Alayne grinned. "You finish off three more and then we'll go one-on-one. Last elf still conscious wins."

"What will I win?" Ger'alín smiled.

“Oh,” Alayne said in mock exasperation, “you think you’re so clever. *I’ll* win,” she stared off into space again, lost in thought before finally turning to Callie, “what should I win?”

“Beats me,” the undead laughed.

“How about this?” Ger’alin suggested. “We’ll play for future forfeits. The loser will, at some point in the future, have to perform whatever task the winner decides. Within reason,” he amended, seeing the look on Alayne’s face. “Callie will decide what’s ‘within reason.’”

“I accept.”

“Ah, here, drink this one,” Callie said as the attendant returned with two mugs of Deadhead. “One mug of this has about as much alcohol content as three mugs of ale. It should give you a nice buzz.”

Ger’alin picked up the mug and quaffed it down like a seasoned veteran. Slamming the mug back on the table, he grinned at Callie, feeling the effects of the drink already. “Let’s get started!” he said, his voice loud to his own ears. Alayne grinned at him as she raised her seventh mug to her lips. He could feel the same kind of drunken grin stretching across his own face as he lifted his mug in salute to her and then turned the bottom up.

Callie rolled her eyes. She had a feeling that it was going to be a long, long night.

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“Sho,” Ger’alin slurred, trying to remember what he’d done with his mug, “you’re sherious? An infurn-hul?”

“Yesh,” Alayne slurred, shoving his mug at him and groping for her own. “It’sh big an’ green an’ whoosh!” she flung her hands into the air, “hash flames ev’r’where. Very not nice.”

“An’ a horshe, too?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “How many’sh that, Callie?”

“Way more than either of you needs.”

Alayne and Ger’alin roared with drunken laughter. “You’re such a shilly pershon!” Ger’alin said, his eyes glassy but filled with amusement.

“I really think we should head back to Tarren Mill. Zerith has got to be wondering if we fell down a hole or something.”

“Bah,” Ger’alin muttered dismissively. “Sherith’s probabably shuckin’ the skin offa ol’ Dar’sha’s face.”

“I’ve gotta shee thish Dar’sha,” Alayne said as she tried to stand up. Ger’alin laughed as he caught her just before she tripped over her long robes.

“C’mere, you,” he said, plunking Alayne on the bench right beside him. “I haf a mug wit your name on it.”

The bartender brought another round of mugs for the two sin’dorei. He then leaned over and whispered to Callie that closing time was fast approaching and that this was the last round.

“Okay you two,” the Forsaken said patiently. “Finish those drinks and then let’s get going. The bar staff wants to close up. You’ve both proven whatever point it was you were trying to make.”

The two elves grinned up at her, their eyes glassy and faces flushed from hard drinking. Callie didn’t think she’d ever seen anyone get quite so drunk as these two had tonight. “At least they’re happy drunks,” she said to herself, counting her blessings. They polished off their drinks obediently, then rose on unsteady feet. Sighing, Callie pushed herself between them and, letting them lean on her for support, she led their faltering steps up out of the tavern.

“That’s it,” she coaxed. “Just one foot in front of the other.”

“Shomeone keepsh tilting the floor,” Alayne muttered. Then, stopping so quickly that Callie almost lost her balance and fell, Alayne stared off into space angrily, saying, “No, ish not MY fault. Shut up!”

“Alayne, no one’s blaming you for anything,” Callie said soothingly. “Just come along. It’s going to be a long trip back to Tarren Mill.”

“She’s always shaying stuff,” Alayne said, waving her free arm wildly. “Won’t shut up.”

“I have no clue what you’re talking about but okay,” Callie temporized. Looking up, she saw a wagon on the road to Silverpine. “Excuse me!” she called out to the driver. Ignoring Alayne’s darkening mutterings and Ger’alin’s attempts to start telling some wild story, Callie managed to convince the driver to drop them off at the fork in the road to Tarren Mill. Getting both of them into the wagon was a nearly insurmountable task made more difficult by Alayne’s sudden decision to become extremely argumentative. Once the two elves were secured, Callie sighed deeply and climbed up onto the board next to the driver. “Thank you,” she said sincerely.

“Had a bit too much to drink?” he laughed as he cracked the whip over the horses’ heads.

“Alayne, I wanna tell you a shtory,” Callie overheard Ger’alin muttering. Straining her ears, she tried to make out what he was saying but couldn’t over Alayne’s giggling. With a sigh, she thought that at least whatever it was seemed to have gotten Alayne back into a better mood.

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“What under the Light?” Zerith muttered, hearing loud voices outside. “It’s not even morning yet,” he said angrily as he tossed aside the covers and hurried to the window, wondering what was coming down on them. “I hope Ger’alin and Callie are awake too.” Listening intently, he thought he heard singing. Off-key and in Thalassian at that. He could make out a man’s deep baritone and a woman’s chiming alto singing the ancient battle chant of Quel’Thalas. The singing grew louder and Zerith grew more annoyed. To be awakened by a couple of drunks at this hour! He started to slam the window shut and return to his sleep when he saw the figures stumbling into view. “Oh no,” he breathed, not liking what he saw at all. “Not both of them!” Grabbing a dressing robe, he slipped on his shoes and hurried out into the darkened street. Angry mutters came from all of the other rooms in the inn, as well as from the windows of occupied houses.

“Guessh who’sh back!” Ger’alin exclaimed happily when he saw Zerith hurrying up to them. “Alayne!”

Zerith’s eyes nearly fell out of his head in shock when he saw his sister staggering drunkenly to find her footing. “Hiya Sherith!” she said happily, and loudly enough to be heard in Stranglethorn Vale.

“Think you could help me get these two in bed?” Callie whispered desperately. “I don’t think I can handle both of them together much longer.”

“You take Alayne; I’ll get Ger’alin,” Zerith muttered darkly. “He can take the floor of my room. Ger’alin, stop that racket!” he whispered harshly.

“Don’t you start now,” Callie warned Alayne as the woman opened her mouth to pick up the song she’d been singing. “Come on, up the stairs. Lift your feet.”

With much muttering and difficulty, Zerith and Callie managed to wrestle Alayne and Ger’alin up the stairs of the inn. After another attempted serenade, Callie kept her hand clamped firmly over Alayne’s mouth. The sin’dorei woman seemed to think the whole thing

was one enormous joke. Ger'alın wasn't much better, his single-person dialogue making sense only to Alayne, who was just as intoxicated as he. Zerith propped Ger'alın against the wall just inside Callie's room and moved to help the Forsaken get Alayne settled in. After a few minutes of patient arguing, Alayne finally slept, curling up on her side in a ball.

"One down, one to go," Zerith muttered as he turned back to grab Ger'alın. Before he could reach the man, the fighter tumbled down the floor, snoring drunkenly. Callie bit the inside of her mouth to keep from bursting into laughter at the look of sheer frustrated outrage that flashed across the priest's face as he glared down at the unconscious fighter. "Bah!" Zerith finally spat in exasperation. "He can sleep here on the floor. He's too drunk to do anything else and I'm not about to try to lift him! I don't know where you're going to sleep," Zerith muttered, trying to sound apologetic but still too frustrated.

"Don't worry about me," Callie said, exerting all of her willpower not to laugh at the whole situation. "Just go back to bed. I think the Quel'Thalas choir has retired for the night and, besides, I'll just steal his tent. Like you said; they're both too drunk to do anything other than snore," she giggled as Alayne began doing just that. Zerith stared at the Forsaken woman in horror. Callie returned his look blandly. Then, her lips began to quiver. Zerith turned, shaking his head and shoulders in silent laughter.

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Ger'alın rolled over on his back, turning his head slightly for the faint thud that had made him stir. He had almost fallen back asleep when another sound roused him further. Slowly opening an eye, he glanced around, trying to figure out where he was and what the sound could be. The foot of a bed stood in the grey shadows of the pre-dawn light before him. With a muffled groan, he forced his other eye open and turned his head. He was laying on the rough wooden floorboards of the inn. How, exactly, he had gotten there was still a mystery to him. He was puzzling over it and wondering what had woken him when he heard the sound again. It sounded like faint, muffled weeping. With a grimace of effort, Ger'alın forced himself to sit up, looking around the room for the source of the tears.

The sheets of the bed had been pulled off and dragged to the far side. Rolling onto his hands and knees, not certain he would be able to stand, Ger'alın crawled over to the side of the bed and discovered the cause of the thud he'd heard earlier. His room mate had obviously tumbled out of the bed after tangling himself in the sheets pretty thoroughly. *But why the weeping?* Ger'alın wondered to himself. *And it doesn't sound like Zerith at all.*

Moving over to the quivering lump of sheets and weeping, Ger'alın grabbed for what he hoped was a shoulder and gave it a gentle shake. Anxiety began to gnaw at him when the sobbing increased in frequency and volume to the point where he was forced to admit that not only was this not Zerith, it was definitely a woman and he wasn't too clear on how, exactly, he'd wound up in her room.

"Come on now," he whispered to the bundle, "calm down. Please quit crying. It can't be as bad as you fear," he tried to make light of the strange situation. The woman's weeping increased, becoming sobs and hiccoughs that made the blankets wrapped around her tremble like a tightly drawn bowstring. Sighing, Ger'alın decided to take the tauren by the horns. "Please stop," he whispered. "I promise, whatever happened last night, I still respect and honor you and will marry you as soon as you wish. I have a friend who could hear our vows whenever you'd like," he trailed off. This was certainly not a situation he'd ever thought he'd find himself in and certainly not how he'd hoped to meet his future wife. He reached for the sheets, determined to at least see the face of the woman he would be tied to for the rest of his life. As he tugged at the sheets, a hand reached out from them and shoved him. His jaw dropped in horrified shock recognition set in.

“Alayne?” he asked finally, feeling extremely nervous and uncomfortable. “Are you all right?”

The blankets around her head shook violently as her weeping took on an edge of hysteria. Gingerly, he scooted closer to her, leaning his back against the side of the bed and reaching to pat her gently, albeit awkwardly. “Calm down, Alayne,” he said softly. “Tell me what’s the matter?”

It seemed impossible, but her shuddering increased. Taking a page from the matron of his orphanage, Ger’alin pulled Alayne into his lap and rocked her the way he had been when his parents declared lost. At first, she struggled against him weakly. After a few minutes, her sobs subsided and she slept, an occasional hiccup or shuddering sigh the only breaks in her peaceful slumber. Considering the matter tiredly, Ger’alin decided he was no less dead if he left her where she was as he nodded off himself.

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“Good morning!” Callie said cheerily as she plunked herself down next to Alayne. The sin’dorei woman was sitting at one of the long wooden tables in the dining area of the inn, her head laying upon her arms on the table. Her drinking partner from the previous night sat in a similar position across from her. Next to each of them sat empty mugs that gave off a faint, unpleasant odor. “Hangover?” the Forsaken continued in her merry tone.

“If you offered to cut my head off,” Ger’alin muttered, “I would thank you for your kindness and compassion.”

“Sweet merciful Light, what happened last night?” Alayne muttered at the same time. “And why did it seem like such a good idea at the time?”

“That, I don’t know,” Callie said in response to Alayne’s second question. “But, last night, you and Ger’alin set a new record at the Skeleton’s Closet for ‘Most Alcohol Consumed In One Evening By Those With Working Metabolisms.’ Neither of you won your bet, by the way.”

“There was a bet?” Ger’alin asked, his voice muffled by his arms. “I don’t remember that.”

“I don’t remember anything after getting on that blasted zeppelin back in Durotar,” Alayne snapped, her voice similarly muffled. “I vaguely recall a tavern. I’m not even going to ask why I woke up with you shaking me,” she said, lifting one arm to point at Ger’alin. “That’s a road neither one of us needs to go down. My father would come back from the dead to kill *both* of us if we...”

“Oh, that?” Callie laughed. “You didn’t. I doubt either one of you could have found the coordination necessary.” The sin’dorei lifted their heads from their arms and glared at the undead, twin glassy expressions of irritation and disgust on their faces. “Don’t look at me like that,” she muttered. “Neither one of you could walk unassisted, let alone...”

“Thank you that’s quite enough information for now,” Alayne said hastily as a blush painted her face and neck red. Ger’alin just let his head drop back on the table with a thud.

“So, what do you have planned for today?” Callie asked, changing the subject. Ger’alin muttered something that sounded like “Not a funeral, thank the Light,” but Callie ignored him, focusing her attention on Alayne.

“I need to pay back the Apothecaries for all of the care they’ve lavished on Zerith,” the sin’dorei woman said slowly. “One of them mentioned that the ogres in Alterac have been getting more organized. It seems their leader, Mug’thol, has some kind of device that helps him keep them in line. Such a device could be very useful,” she explained, “so, we’re going to check out the situation once my head quits pounding and try to get this object from him.”

“We being?”

“Well, me, Ger’alin, and you, I suppose.”

“We should bring along Zerith and Dar’ja.”

“We’ll bring them along for the fighting, if we need them,” Alayne replied. “All we’ll be doing today is scouting out the situation. No fighting unless we have to.”

“So, should I start getting ready to rally the troops?” Callie asked, a broad grin of anticipation on her lips. Ger’alin raised his head again, a smile shining through his hangover. Alayne looked at both of them and sighed. She’d had her fill of fighting lately.

“I suppose,” she whispered, closing her eyes and firming her control. “Maybe you should take care of that while Ger’alin and I scout the area?”

By the time Alayne opened her eyes a few seconds later, Callie was already gone and Ger’alin was grinning in eagerness. “By the way,” Alayne asked quietly, “do you think you could teach me how to use a sword?”

It took all of her self-control not to laugh at the bewildered expression on Ger’alin’s face.

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“Where is everybody?” Zerith asked the innkeeper when he returned to the inn for a late breakfast. He’d been surprised to find Alayne and Ger’alin up and gone already and no sign of Callie anywhere.

“They were down here earlier,” the innkeeper muttered, his voice harsh and gravelly, sounding forever as if he disapproved of something. “The two elves said something about going to watch the ogres in Alterac. The girl with them bolted out of here like a bat out of the abyss. I think she said something about rallying some group or something.”

“I see,” Zerith said. After asking for and receiving a biscuit for his breakfast, he stepped out of the inn, wondering if he would be able to catch up to Alayne and Ger’alin if he hurried. Over in the clearing near the road, he saw Dar’ja practicing her sword-work.

“Good morning, Zerith!” she said brightly, sheathing her sword and wiping sweat off her forehead. “You’re up rather late this morning. Do you have any plans for today? Callie said something to me about attacking the ogres in Alterac. I didn’t catch all of it; she was running to the wyvern roost like she was being chased.”

“I didn’t sleep too well last night,” he replied warmly. “A couple of drunks woke me up. I have no idea what Callie was talking about but I’m on my way to find out,” he said, pointing to the road. “Care to come with me?”

“I heard some kind of racket last night. Who was it? I’ll bet Ger’alin was one of them. I thought I heard someone singing the Lament.”

“He was. Alayne was the other.”

“Oh,” she said, stopping short. “She didn’t strike me as the kind to...”

“Get falling down drunk? My sister is just full of surprises,” he laughed. “I had hoped to catch both of them still asleep this morning. I’d been planning this wonderful scene of outraged indignation since Ger’alin passed out last night at the foot of the bed we had Alayne in.”

Dar’ja laughed. “I thought Callie was the prankster of the group.”

“When they wake me up like that, I think I’m entitled to a bit of fun at their expense,” Zerith smiled, taking Dar’ja’s hand in his own. “Come on. The innkeeper said they were headed to Alterac. Maybe we can catch up to them on the road.”

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“They really aren’t that imaginative, are they?” Alayne muttered as she and Ger’alin worked their way back down the mountain.

“Well, it’s a design that has served them well in war in the past. No reason to change what works. Besides, it does make it easier for us to plan how to take the keep since it will probably use the same interior as the one in Menethil and in Theramore,” he replied reasonably, reaching out to steady Alayne before she slipped and fell on a patch of ice.

“It does help that the place has been pretty thoroughly sacked,” the sin’dorei woman continued. “With only three buildings still intact, we have a pretty good idea of just where Mug’thol would be hiding.”

“Yes,” Ger’alin said happily. “We’ll tell Zerith about it first thing. Then he can...”

“Then I can what?” Zerith asked. Ger’alin turned with a start to see the priest and Dar’ja standing just beyond the entrance of the yeti cave.

“Good morning, Zerith, Dar’ja,” Ger’alin said. “Alayne, this is Dar’ja,” he made the introductions.

“You’ll tell me what so that I can what?” Zerith asked again after greetings had been exchanged. Alayne and Dar’ja had hung back from the two men a bit and were chatting with each other quietly, testing the grounds for a future friendship.

“We were just coming to tell you about the layout of the ogre compound. After that, we can make our plan of attack. Their leader, Mug’thol, has something that the Forsaken want. So, we’re going to go in and get it from him.”

The four continued back to Tarren Mill, Ger’alin detailing the location of the buildings and the possible layout of their interiors to Zerith. Alayne and Dar’ja appeared to be getting along quite well. Once back at the inn, the two women went upstairs, still chatting warmly, leaving the men to their own devices.

“Do they plan that?” Zerith muttered as he watched them go up the stairs.

“I wouldn’t know,” Ger’alin replied evenly. “I’m hardly invited to the Sisterhood meetings. Come on, we have a battle to plan while the girls do whatever it is girls do when they closet themselves up together.”

The two men seated themselves at a table off in a corner and, going through many sheets of parchment, soon had a plan they both agreed would work. Just as they were finishing it up, they heard the women come back down the stairs.

“Finished with your planning?” Alayne asked, her voice larded with sugar.

“Yes...” the two men answered cautiously.

“Good,” she said. “I’d like to begin my lessons now,” she said to Ger’alin.

“Lessons?” Zerith asked.

“Wait, you were serious?” Ger’alin replied.

“Of course she was,” Dar’ja laughed. “Go on and get changed, Alayne. You’ll just trip yourself up in those skirts. You can use my sword if you want,” she said, unbuckling the belt from her waist and handing it to Alayne. “Listen well to what he says,” she continued, nodding towards Ger’alin. “He does know how to swing a blade.”

Alayne nodded in gratitude and hurried back up the stairs to change.

“What lessons?” Zerith repeated.

“She asked me to teach her to use a sword. I said I would. I thought she was kidding.”

“Why would she want to learn to use a sword?” Zerith wondered aloud. Ger’alin concentrated, trying to remember if Alayne had said anything in the past night’s drunken haze that would answer that question. Finding nothing, he shrugged helplessly. Meanwhile, Dar’ja was biting the insides of her cheeks to keep from laughing. Alayne was right; teasing these two was fun.

After a few minutes, Alayne returned to the common room, Dar’ja’s leather breeches and a jerkin replacing Alayne’s customary robe. The paladin’s sword was belted at her waist

and hung awkwardly, the sheath nearly tripping her when it twisted behind her legs. Ger'alın watched her walk across the room, wondering desperately how he was going to get himself out of this mess. Dar'ja smirked at him and, shoving him on the shoulder, said, "Go on. You did promise. She's not the worst I've ever seen. At least she got the sword on the right side." Turning to Zerith, she smiled, "You can come along with me," she said sweetly.

Zerith and Ger'alın glanced at each other and then shrugged. The whole situation made no sense whatsoever. *Better to just go along with it*, their glances said.

"Follow me," Ger'alın said, standing up and striding to the door. "There's a clearing just up the hill a bit where you can get started."

"And I'll just follow you," Zerith told Dar'ja as he stood up from the table and put away the parchment and ink.

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Ger'alın sighed. This day was just going from bad to worse. The highlight had been planning the next battle. The whole afternoon had been downhill from there. He watched his student move awkwardly through the beginning forms and tried to not wince. Except for having no balance, no sense of planning, weak knees and wrists, she was good.

"That's enough for today," he called out, holding up a towel for her to wipe her face with. "I think you've gotten the concept of swinging the sword around."

Alayne ignored him, forcing herself to go through the stances he'd shown her again. She knew she wasn't doing it right. Still, she forced herself to keep trying. "What is it I'm doing wrong?" she asked, gasping for air.

Ger'alın pushed himself to his feet and strode over to her, studying her awkward, jerky movements as she continued her efforts. With a sigh, he walked behind her and stood close to her, reaching around her waist to try to cup her hands in his own while using his legs and feet to move her legs into the correct stance. He felt her stiffen and begin to pull away but held her firmly until she was in the proper attack stance. Satisfied, he stepped back a little, still keeping his hands on hers as he guided her through the fluid motions that composed the basic parry-riposte-return to guard form.

"The idea is to make only one motion. Never move more than you must. Moving takes energy; you want to conserve as much as you can. Sometimes, the only way to overcome an opponent is to outlast him. So, don't waste motion," he explained as he continued to guide her through the basic forms. After several more minutes, he felt her arms relax and begin to flow into the stance without his guidance. He stepped back more, walking around to watch her from the side, offering an occasional criticism or reminder to watch her wrists and keep her feet planted.

"You did much better there at the end," he praised her efforts. "You do need to learn to relax more. Working the sword isn't something you do with just your muscles; the mind and spirit is part of it, too. You need to clear your mind, calm your spirit, and relax your body before you even think of unsheathing."

"Yes, Blademaster," she said with a tired smile. With quivering arms, she managed to slide the blade into the sheath and turned to head back to Tarren Mill. She blinked when she realized the sun was setting. "What time is it?" she muttered.

"Time for food," Ger'alın answered. "Food is a very important part of a swordsman's – or woman's – training."

"You're just hungry," Alayne laughed. "I'm too tired to eat. I don't think I could lift a fork right now."

“Then I’ll lift it for you,” he said quietly. “You’ve not eaten since last night.” Alayne glanced at him, something in his voice making her wary. “I’d also like to know what’s bothering you.”

“Nothing’s bothering me,” she said gaily.

Ger’alin looked at her evenly for a long moment before deciding to let the matter drop, for now.

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“Everyone’s here!” Callie called out. She’d been gone a day and a half and was tired, but eager to get on with the battle.

“How many?” Alayne asked, working her shoulders to try to ease some of the stiffness out of them.

“You wouldn’t believe me. Go see for yourself.”

Alayne hurried out the front of the inn and was struck dumb at the sight of the crowd milling about the town. Easily double the size of the last gathering, the mass of them created a cacophony with their conversation. Some of the veteran members of the aptly named Disorder of Azeroth recognized the elf woman who emerged from the inn and pointed her out to the newer members. Gaping, she ran back into the inn and stared at Callie. The Forsaken laughed at the shocked expression on her friend’s face. Just then, Zerith and Ger’alin entered, and, seeing Callie, glared at her.

“Either there’s some kind of festival happening tonight that we weren’t informed of,” the priest said calmly, “or we’re more popular than I knew.”

“Well, you are kind of cute,” Callie teased. “Yes, I know. A lot of people came. Probably more than we need. It’s not like I can control them, though. Once people hear that you’re planning something, they want to join in. Face it, Zerith. You and Alayne have started something that appeals to the hearts of warriors everywhere. People want to join in; to help out.”

“I can see that,” Zerith muttered. “And I’ll concede your point and quit worrying that the Silvermoon government is going to suspect me of raising my own private army. Still, there are way too many people out there for our next operation.”

“So have some of them stay back here. I’m sure we’ll find a use for them afterwards,” Ger’alin suggested.

“I suppose we’ll have to,” Zerith replied. “Now, how are we supposed to explain the plan to that horde out there? And how do we decide who to take and who to leave behind?”

The four sat in silent thought for several moments, searching for answers to the priest’s questions.

“You could always just go upstairs and open one of the windows. That way, everyone can see you and you can be heard,” Alayne said. “So, there’s the first problem solved.”

“I think that Callie and I could weed out the best fighters and have the rest remain here. Alayne, I thought I saw Davril out in that crowd. You and he can cull through the magic users and select the best of those. Zerith, you and Dar’ja,” Ger’alin stopped, smiling for a moment, “you and Dar’ja can decide on the best healers and have the rest remain here and prepare in case we bring back injured.”

“Well then,” Zerith sighed, fighting to hide a smile, “I suppose I have some announcements to make.”

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“Did you get enough rest, Callie?” Alayne asked as the chosen fighters made their way north towards the ruins of Alterac.

“Yes, mother,” Callie joked. “It’s not like I need as much as you. Sleep is for the living. Ah, we’re here,” she said as she signaled for the groups behind her and Alayne to halt. They moved off to the side of the road to allow the other three groups to pass them and make their way deeper into the town. Once Zerith’s reserve had turned the bend, Alayne and Callie moved forward, leading their group into the abandoned town hall.

“They’re all asleep,” Alayne whispered. “If the ones in the fortress are as lazy, this will be easy.”

“I don’t see him in here,” Callie whispered as she crept around the main room, examining each sleeping ogre in turn. The group turned to sneak out and meet up with Zerith’s group in the middle of the town when an alarm rang out, waking the ogres around them. Alayne and the magic users moved back, letting the fighters surge forward to slaughter the ogres before they could get to their feet. Rushing out into the streets, the two groups could see Zerith leading his force into the fortress. Callie rushed past him and Alayne led her group to keep pace with his as they entered the fortress and stepped into chaos.

“Keep back!” Alayne shouted, directing her group to hold the entrance and prevent reinforcements from entering the keep. There were precious few of those arriving; most had been lost in the massacre in the town hall. Poking her head around the corner, she shouted orders to her followers, directing them where their abilities would be of best use. Zerith did the same for his group, moving closer to the melee to call on the Light to shield the fighters. Keeping an eye on her brother, Alayne moved further into the fortress, tossing bolts of shadow at ogres, careful to keep them small to prevent the backlash from harming any of the Disorder of Azeroth. As quickly as it had started, the fighting was dying down. The ogres were overcome by sheer numbers and skill.

Ignoring her brother’s attempts to stop her, Alayne pushed and shoved her way forward, following the chimes of swords meeting spears and the battle shouts of ogres and Horde. Her eyes scanned the corpses around her, looking for the one who carried the item the Apothecaries wanted. Not finding it, she pressed on, taking the stairs up the keep, stopping only to help the occasional fighter who was being overwhelmed by an ogre’s brute strength. She could hear Zerith following behind her, stopping more frequently than she to lend his healing talents to the fighters she’d helped.

“Found him?” Callie asked breathlessly as she dodged an ogre’s meaty fists, ducking under his guard to hamstring him. Alayne muttered the curse that had been used against her and the ogre’s attack slowed, giving Callie the opening she needed to plunge her daggers into its chest. The two women continued on, the sound of fighting guiding them to the ogre’s last stand.

Alayne’s eyes opened wide as she took in the scene before her. Several of their fighters lay sprawled on the floor where they had fallen on their faces, evidence that the ogres had taken them from behind. A cursory glance showed that most were just knocked out. A few would need more intense healing. “Zerith, get up here!” she called out as she moved towards the last of the fighting. Dar’ja and Ger’alin were trading blows with an ogre so large that ‘massive’ would not have done him justice. Dar’ja wore a look of grim determination as she dodged the ogre’s blows, looking for an opening in his guard that would let her attack through. Ger’alin was laughing defiantly as he took the ogre’s blows on his shield and forced the brute back, his sword dancing and flashing like an extension of his arm. The two paladins seemed to have the fight well in hand so Alayne and Callie tore across the room to help quell the other pockets of fighting. Minutes that seemed like hours passed as Alayne and Callie used daggers and dread to bring down the last few ogres still standing.

“Dar’ja!” Zerith’s agonized scream cut through the dying clash of combat. Alayne whirled around to see the paladin flying across the room and slamming into the wall with a crash, having failed to avoid the pain-maddened ogre’s backhand. Ger’alin was snarling, trying to force an opening in the beast’s attack. Callie sprinted over, scooting wide of the ogre in an attempt to get behind him. Without a break in his attack against Ger’alin, the massive brute swiped at Callie, knocking her flat.

Alayne closed her eyes, focusing on her casting. She had just enough energy for one last spell. Luckily, it was a good one.

Are you sure you’ll be able to cast it, little Alayne?

“Leave me alone,” she muttered, feeling the spell start to falter.

You can’t do it.

“Yes, I can,” she growled through gritted teeth. Forcing herself to ignore the mocking laughter, to empty her mind and calm her spirit as Ger’alin had taught her, she reached into the Nether.

“INCOMING!” she shouted, running to pull Ger’alin out of the line of fire. She grunted as the ogre’s fist slammed into her back, knocking her and Ger’alin flat.

“What in the name of...?” Ger’alin started to shout angrily.

“INCOMING!” she screamed again, motioning for Callie to get out of the way. The Forsaken managed to jump clear just in time. Where she had been standing, a massive ball of green flame and grey stone appeared. Pulling herself up, Alayne focused on the demon inside, commanding it to transform into an infernal. Reluctantly, the demon obeyed her commands. Callie, Ger’alin, and Zerith stared at the monstrosity in open-mouthed awe tinged with horror. The ogre turned around to see what stood behind him and blanched. Alayne smiled, a dark smile.

“Attack,” she ordered, forcing her will onto the demon. The infernal let out a scream of rage and, raring back with one of its mighty stone fists, began pounding the ogre into a pulp. Once she was certain that the ogre was dead, Alayne called the demon to a halt and began the struggle to dismiss it while she still had the willpower to dominate the un-natural being.

“Stay back!” she warned when she saw Callie and Ger’alin begin to close in around the demon, uncertain whether to treat it as an enemy or an ally.

It’s going to turn on you now. You can’t control it. You’ve killed all your friends, little Alayne.

“We’ll see about that,” she muttered.

“Alayne, who are you talking to?” Ger’alin asked.

She ignored him, feeling her willpower begin to wane as the lack of sleep and fatigue of battle casting set in.

You’re a fool.

“Shut. Up!” she forced past her clenched jaws, breathing heavily through her nose. Sweat began pouring down her face as she struggled to dismiss the demon before it escaped her control. Just as she felt herself begin to slide into unconsciousness as she battled for control, the infernal let out a roar of disappointment and vanished, returning to the Nether from whence it came. Alayne’s legs went out from under her and she landed heavily on the floor on her hands and knees. Gasping for breath, she asked, “Dar’ja? Callie?”

“I’m fine,” Callie said. “Nothing broken, nothing missing.”

“Dar’ja will be all right after some sleep,” Zerith answered. “She’ll probably have a headache. I’ll make sure it’s not a concussion.” With a sigh of reluctance, he stood up from Dar’ja’s side and walked out the hallway, shouting for healers to come and aid the wounded.

“Ger’alin?” she asked, turning her head to look at him.

“Oh, I’m just fine, thanks for asking. I’d be more worried about you. Let me check to make sure you don’t have any broken ribs from where that savage punched you.” Slings his shield on his back and sheathing his sword, Ger’alin moved closer to Alayne, kneeling down beside her and lifting his hands to press gently on her sides, feeling for broken ribs. Alayne clenched her jaw, forcing herself not to bolt at his touch. The face of the man she’d murdered in Desolace still floated in her gaze whenever Ger’alin, or any man, came too near.

“No broken ribs but you’ll probably have a spectacular bruise on your back,” he said after he finished his examination. “Alayne, you’re trembling,” he muttered. “What’s the matter? Where does it hurt?” he asked, fearful that she might have internal injuries. “Zerith!” he shouted.

She could hear footsteps running towards her as the nausea overwhelmed her. Unable to hold back any longer, Alayne’s arms shook as her body locked up rigidly while she vomited up every meal she had eaten in the past week, then collapsed as the darkness closed in around her.

“Hell of a way to end a battle,” Ger’alin muttered as he gently lifted Alayne off the ground.

“Maybe it was something she ate?” Zerith suggested as he did the same for Dar’ja. The other fighters were getting up and runners went out for assistance for those who would need litters to carry them back to Tarren Mill.

“Something tells me there’s more to this than just bad meat,” Ger’alin sighed. “At least we got what we came for. Callie, would you mind digging it out of that mess?” he asked, kicking his foot towards the remains of the ogre that Alayne’s infernal had pulverized.

“Ew!” the Forsaken spat. “You owe me,” she muttered as she pawed through the carnage until she had the object the Apothecaries had named as their price. “Let’s get everyone back to the village. I need a bath after wading through that mess.”

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“Feeling better?” Zerith asked when Alayne came downstairs around midday.

“How’s Dar’ja?” she asked, ignoring his question.

“She’s fine. I’ve ordered her to stay put for the rest of the day. Since her head is pounding, she’s not likely to disobey me. How are you feeling?”

“You should go check on her.”

“Alayne, she’s sleeping. I was just up there ten minutes ago anyway giving her something for her headache. Are you feeling better?”

“I should go check on Callie.”

“Callie is fine,” Ger’alin answered from his place at the door. He’d entered the inn just moments before and had been listening to the exchange between the two with mounting irritation. “I could hear her snoring from the other side of the river. I believe Zerith asked you a question, Alayne.”

“I’m feeling fine,” the woman answered, trying to calm the panic she could feel threatening to overwhelm her.

Zerith and Ger’alin would never hurt you, you fool.

“I know that,” she whispered.

Then why are you about to bolt like a horse that’s scented a snake?

“I don’t know.”

Maybe THIS is why? the voice mocked as a vision of the murdered man, wearing Ger’alin’s face floated in front of her. Behind him, she could see Zerith with an arrow sticking out of his chest.

“Leave me alone,” she growled, forgetting where she was. “I told you to leave me alone!”

“This is a definition of ‘fine’ I have never come across before,” Zerith muttered as he stood up from the table and walked over to Alayne. “People who are ‘fine’ don’t talk to themselves! What is bothering you, Alayne? Tell me so I can help you, for the love of all that is holy! Right now, you’re scaring the life out of me!”

Alayne inched back, stepping away from Zerith as he moved closer to her. Ger’alin snorted and strode across the inn to help the priest shake some sense into the woman. Alayne continued to move backwards until her back was pressed against the wall. The irritation melted from Ger’alin’s eyes when he saw how panic-stricken Alayne was.

“Alayne, what’s the matter?” he asked.

“If you don’t tell us what’s bothering you, we can’t help you,” Zerith pleaded. “Alayne?”

The woman stood there, her gaze unfocused, trembling. The skin of her face was a sickly pale white, drained completely of blood. Her lips moved in a wordless howl but no sound emerged from her throat.

“Alayne, you are really frightening me,” Zerith said as he moved to try to embrace his sister. Seconds later, he and Ger’alin were staring at each other from the floor, wondering just how she had shoved them away and whether or not they would be able to find her, let alone catch up to her, where ever she had run off to.

“Maybe we should just go to Silvermoon and get Jez’ral to tell us what happened while they were gone. Perhaps he knows,” Ger’alin growled as he helped Zerith to his feet. “I don’t think we’re going to get any answers out of her. I wonder what had her so spooked, though.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Zerith muttered as he dusted himself off. “She’s been acting strange ever since I woke up after the incident at Stromgarde. Think that could be it? Just nerves or stress?”

“It could be. She did seem to be doing better, though, before Jez’ral came for her. I think something happened during those trials she doesn’t want to talk about. We should find a warlock to tell us just what it is they do during those tests. I doubt it’s just ‘recite a spell’ and answer some questions.”

“I think I saw a few warlocks out there in the crowd. Let’s go get one of them,” Zerith suggested, heading for the door. His exit was blocked by a hulking orc carrying a sheaf of papers.

“I’m looking for Zerith or Alayne,” the orc said brusquely. “I have orders from the Warchief.”

“I’m Zerith. Alayne’s not here right now,” Zerith responded. “What orders does the Warchief have for us?”

“You and your ‘Disorder of Azeroth’ are ordered to report to Desolace immediately. The centaurs clans are making a nuisance of themselves again and the Tauren have requested action. Here is a map of the region, along with notes concerning the various centaur clans. We’ve worked out a peace with two of them. You’ll find further orders once you arrive in Shadowprey Village,” he said gruffly as he thrust the sheaf of parchments at Zerith. “I would suggest you leave right away. The Warchief, and the other leaders, have set aside mounts to speed you on your way. You’ll pick them up outside of Orgrimmar.”

Not knowing exactly was expected of him, Zerith raised a fist to his chest in salute. The orc returned his gesture and then stumped out of the inn.

“I’ll go out and rally the troops,” Ger’alin said. “Get them moving towards Durotar. That old greenskin said we should leave immediately and I think he means to count the seconds.”

“I’ll follow and meet you there this evening. Dar’ja will probably sleep for a few more hours and I have no clue where Alayne would have run off to. If anyone asks, just tell them I remained behind with the wounded to see that they were taken care of and I’ll be along shortly,” Zerith sighed as he stuffed the papers into a pocket. “I guess I’d better go track down Alayne and see if I can help her at all. Maybe she’ll have calmed down enough to tell me what’s bothering her.”

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Alayne lay shivering on the ground where she’d fallen. She wasn’t sure where she was. All she really remembered was the need to run, to get away from where ever she had been. Pushing herself up, she moaned. Her head was aching abominably. Her teeth were chattering, making her head throb worse. Rubbing her arms through her sleeves, she tried to stop her shivering and figure out where, exactly, she was.

“There you are,” Zerith said, relief clear in his voice. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“I’m here,” she croaked. “I’m not sure where ‘here’ is, though.”

“Near Durnholde. You ran pretty far. Why?”

“I don’t remember,” she said, confused. “You and Ger’alin were crowding me; I had to get away. I couldn’t think. I could only run.”

“I see. Why would you feel like you had to run from me and Ger’alin? Either one of us would die before we ever harmed a hair on your head, Alayne.”

“I don’t remember,” she said fretfully. She hated the taste of bile that rose in her throat at the lie.

“Well then,” he sighed, reaching out a hand to help her to her feet, “you can tell me when you do remember. Just don’t forget that I will never let anything happen to you.”

“I know,” she whispered, letting her head fall against his chest as she wrapped her arms around her brother. Gritting her teeth, she forced down the panic and let herself be held while she wept against her best friend’s chest.

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“Found her, I see,” Callie said as a wan and disheveled Alayne followed Zerith into Tarren Mill. “Dar’ja was starting to get worried. I’ve sent the others on ahead. We can take the bats as far as Undercity to catch the zeppelin.”

“Zeppelin?” Alayne said, some of her old spirit returning.

“Yes,” Zerith groaned, “*thank you*, Callie. Alayne, we’ve been ordered to Desolace... I hate it when she does that,” he moaned, bending down to pick her up. “Flying is not *that* bad!”