

“Have the results of the scrying come back?” Rel’in demanded impassively when his assistant entered the room.

“Yes, Master,” the human said, sniveling and bowing.

“Enough of that,” Rel’in said coldly, waving off the customary formalities. His people may call him a traitor but he still held to the old ways, when convenient. “Make your report.”

“It seems that Veryl’s charms were greatly exaggerated,” the assistant said lamely. Cringing at the flash of irritation in his master’s eyes, he made his report hastily. “It was a woman who killed him. Cut him to shreds with her dagger. Not an assassin,” he said, seeing his master open his mouth to ask, “one of our kind. Or, rather, one of *your* kind.”

“And what would an elven woman be doing sneaking into our library? Has the inventory been completed? Do we know what she stole?”

“Yes, Master. She took the ‘Tome of the Cabal.’”

“I see,” Rel’in said stiffly. “Send word to the other covens with her description. Have them keep an eye out for this elven woman. Find out how she managed to infiltrate our upper floors and have the guards who let her through flogged. Veryl may have tolerated your lack of discipline and your laziness, but, by Sargerass, I won’t!”

“It will be as you command, Master. What orders shall I send out concerning the woman, should she be found?”

“That she is to be captured *alive* and sent to me. I will show her what we do to trespassing thieves myself. Now leave. You are dismissed.”

The human bowed his way out of his master’s presence, wiping sweat from his forehead once he was well out of the room.

“How did he take it, Ragnar?” a young orcish woman asked, cringing at the mere thought of their new master.

“Surprisingly well. Find out the names of the guards on duty on the upper levels that night, Gazrah. He wants them flogged for dereliction of duty.”

“He wants to flog demons?” the orc woman said, confused.

“No, but I’m not going to be the one to tell him that Veryl had us using demons as guards on the upper levels. Make up a name, pick someone at random, I don’t care. Just let’s find someone to for him to use to slake his temper. He makes my skin crawl!”

“We could kill him,” Gazrah suggested in a soft whisper.

“They’d just send another to replace him. Titans take me, where does the Legion keep finding these blasted elves? Speaking of which, let me tell you about the one who broke into our library.”

“He must have been a skilled thief,” Gazrah said simply. Ragnar sighed. No matter how long orcs studied the Art, they would never be known for their brilliant deductive reasoning.

“He is actually a *she*. And *she* is actually an *elf*. She’s about my height, blonde, straight hair that hangs to just about here,” he said, hovering a hand about halfway between his jaw and shoulder. “She’s got those glowing green eyes that scream ‘blood elf’ from across the continent. Her face looks like a she-fox’s, but then, all elvish faces look like that. Pass her description around to everyone,” he muttered, “I’ve got to send it off to the other covens. Oh, and, he wants her *alive*.”

“I see,” Gazrah grunted. Without another word, she turned on her heel to begin spreading the intruder’s description amongst the members of the coven in Desolace. If Rel’in wanted the thief alive, she and Ragnar needed to make sure he got her alive if they wished to remain alive themselves. Inwardly, the orcish woman shuddered. If Rel’in wanted the thief alive, it was only because he planned to make her beg for death.

“Ger’alin, let her sleep!” Callie muttered when she saw the elf start to sneak over to clap his hands in front of Alayne’s face and wake her. “It’s so much easier on us if she’s out cold when we have to fly.”

“If you wake her, you get to ride with her,” Zerith warned. “And see these?” he said, lifting one of his sister’s hands up so that Ger’alin could get a good look at it. “They may look like ordinary fingers and fingernails to you but, take my word for it, they are really the Legendary Claws of Doom.”

“Fine, fine. Have it your way,” Ger’alin said. “I was just hoping to make her laugh a little before we all head off for Desolace. I sent the others on with the mounts hours ago. If we take a flight now, we should just beat them to Shadowprey Village.”

“Did you get a look at the mounts they are giving us?” Zerith asked. “What are they like?”

“Oh, I didn’t pay much attention to them,” Ger’alin answered. “The handlers said that they were all battle-trained. Unfortunately, none of us has much practice with mounted combat. I have just enough to be able to tell you that it is nothing at all like fighting on the ground. Anyway, I will say this; the mounts match our group quite well. A rather diverse mix, just like us. You’ll get to see them when we get to Shadowprey.”

“Well, let’s get going, then,” the priest said as he lifted Alayne up and began to walk towards the wyvern roosts.

“Here, Zerith, I’ll take her,” Ger’alin offered. “I know you’d rather share a wyvern with Dar’ja,” he whispered, giving the priest a conspiratorial wink.

“Thank you, but no,” Zerith said, his face flushing. “Your offer is...most welcome but I would not inflict the risk of Alayne waking while in mid-air on my worst enemy, let alone you, my friend.”

“The sacrifices you make for your sister,” Ger’alin grinned. “I hope she appreciates them. Well then, as you said, let’s get going.”

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“Not back there. Anywhere but back there,” Alayne pleaded. “Don’t make me go back to where he...where I...just don’t make me go back there!” she screamed, tears running down her face.

What? A warlock who’s afraid?

“Oh, not you again,” she shouted. “Who are you and why won’t you leave me alone?”
You know who I am.

In the distance of the dreamscape ahead, Alayne could see a misty figure wavering and solidifying, transforming from nothing into substance. Moving closer, she watched the mist coalesce into a sin’dorei woman dressed in the kind of armor Alayne’s father had worn into his last battle. An ornate hilt rose over her left shoulder, attesting to the blade strapped to her back. Alayne moved closer, peering up into the dream-woman’s face. Her eyes widened in shock and she shrieked when her own face stared back at her, her own eyes meeting hers, dull, lifeless, and cold. She could still hear her other self’s laughter as she clawed her way to wakefulness.

“Hey, stop thrashing around so much or you’ll fall off!” she heard Zerith shout. The sound of rushing wind filled her ears and she thought she felt a harsh breeze stinging her eyes. Opening them, she looked up and saw Zerith looking down at her. “Oh no,” he moaned. “Why couldn’t you stay asleep for just another five minutes?”

Alayne blinked at him in confusion. Then, she clutched at him wildly when the ground beneath them gave way, dipping violently. Alayne buried her face in her brother’s chest, dug

her fingers into his shoulders, and tried very hard not to scream at the top of her lungs when she realized that the ground had not dipped; the wyvern she was riding on had. Zerith gritted his teeth and focused on ignoring the fact that her nails were digging into his back. “She’s scared to death of flying,” he reminded himself again and again.

After a few more minutes, the wyvern spiraled down and landed near the roost at Shadowprey Village. Zerith managed to dismount, dragging Alayne off with him, and waited for the others to land.

“You can open your eyes now. We’re on nice, solid ground,” he whispered desperately, pain bringing tears to his eyes. Once Alayne had ascertained that they were, indeed, no longer flying, she let Zerith set her on the ground.

“Sorry about that,” she muttered contritely.

“Apology accepted if you’ll promise to trim those claws of yours before we have to fly again. If you want to make up for it, you could tell me what’s bothering you, Alayne. I’m really worried about you. You haven’t been yourself for a while now.” He sighed when Alayne just looked more uncomfortable. “At least tell me what you were dreaming about that had you whimpering and thrashing about when we were in mid-air.”

Alayne glanced around with a sigh. Seeing that others were preparing to land, she took Zerith by the arm and led him away from the crowds. This was easily done as most of the adventurers who had come to Desolace were busy gawking at the herd of mounts that the Horde had provided. Once she was certain they were as far from the others as they could be, she took a deep breath and braced herself for the reaction to what she was about to confess. Shreds of her terrifying dream still clung to her, freezing her tongue. Several times she tried to begin, only to find herself looking helplessly into Zerith’s patient gaze. Something in his eyes began to melt the fear freezing her heart and she opened her mouth, determined to force the words out.

“There you are!” Dar’ja called out as she hurried up the path to them, cutting Alayne off before she could make another attempt. “Oh,” the elven woman said, blushing, “am I interrupting something?”

“No, no,” Alayne said cheerfully, her smile masking the relief and irritation mixing within her. “I was just going to tell Zerith that we should stay clear of the area called Mannoroc Coven. Jez’ral told me that a bunch of cultists have taken over the ruins there. They’re followers of the Burning Legion, meaning ‘insane.’ I’ll...let you two chat for a bit. I’m...going to go see what...the others are up to,” she babbled, turning back down the path and heading towards the crowds.

“What did I interrupt?” Dar’ja asked guiltily.

“Nothing,” Zerith sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Dar’ja said. “I can go back and get her and leave you two alone to talk, if you want.”

“I don’t think it would do any good, but I thank you for the offer,” Zerith smiled. “Now, what did you want us for? Are you feeling better? How’s your head?”

“I’m fine. That tea you gave me did the trick. You must come see the mounts. Ger’alin and Tau’re have started assigning them out and I thought you and Alayne might want to pick yours out before the best ones are all taken.”

“Then let’s get going,” he chuckled, letting her loop her arm through his as they hurried to the outskirts of the village. The mishmash of people who formed the Disorder of Azeroth were going through the motions of saddling whatever mount had been set aside for them. Tauren worked to loop girdles around wide-bellied kodos while orcs and trolls coaxed wolves and raptors to accept the bits of bridles. Elves and Forsaken climbed aboard the backs of hawkstriders, horses, or skeletal horses. Ger’alin stood, the reins of a warhorse in his hands, giving directions on how to form ranks that could barely be heard over the cacophony.

Glancing up, he saw Zerith and Dar'ja approaching. Waving to them, he shouted something over his shoulder. As the two drew closer, they could see Alayne tugging on the reins of a warhorse much like the one Ger'alín led. Standing near her was a hawkstrider. Ger'alín rolled his eyes and, with a muttered "Hold these, please," to Dar'ja as he thrust the reins of his horse in her direction, walked over to help the warlock out. Zerith and Dar'ja tried not to laugh as Alayne and Ger'alín engaged in what could only have been an argument about how to get the horse to move. Unable to hear what the pair were saying over the din, they could only imagine what words were accompanying the florid gestures the paladin and the warlock made. Finally, Ger'alín said something that made Alayne stop with a start. Then, with a laugh, she threw the reins at him and picked up those belonging to the hawkstrider.

"Okay, you win," Zerith heard Alayne say to Ger'alín as the pair came closer, leading the animals.

"Consider it your lesson for the day," the fighter smiled. Turning to Dar'ja, he took back the reins he'd given her earlier, passing her those of the horse that had been giving Alayne trouble. "When I saw this beauty, I just knew it was for you," he said smoothly. Dar'ja cocked an eyebrow at him, not sure quite how to take that. "He's strong, well-trained, dedicated..."

"...and stubborn," Alayne laughed. Ger'alín shot her a look that would have nailed any other person to the wall. "Callie told me what you said."

"Yes, thank you, Callie," Ger'alín muttered beneath his breath. "Anyway, he's good. My word of honor on it. A little head-strong but good nonetheless."

"Thank you, Ger'alín," Dar'ja said warmly. Ger'alín did a double-take but wisely kept his mouth shut.

"This one's for you," Alayne said, handing the reins of the hawkstrider to Zerith. "She's sweet."

"Thank you, I think," he muttered, eyeing the bird warily. "Mind telling me how I'm supposed to get up there?" he whispered to Alayne. He'd had to whisper loudly to be heard over the roar of the crowd around them.

"I'll show you how," Dar'ja offered. Alayne grinned at her and stepped aside. "First, you just put your hand here," the paladin said as she took Zerith's hand and lifted it to the hawkstrider's neck. "Just press a little to signal that you want her to let you mount. See?" she said, as the bird bent its knees, lowering its body closer to the ground. "Now, you just put one foot in the stirrup and swing your other leg over. I'll hold the reins while you do that."

Praying that he wouldn't fall off or get tangled in his robes while climbing up, Zerith managed to get aboard his mount without too many problems. Dar'ja flipped the reins over the hawkstrider's neck and mounted her warhorse, bringing it next to Zerith. "I think I'll call him 'Sunstrider,'" she said, patting her warhorse's neck. "What will you name her?" she asked, pointing to the hawkstrider.

"Um...El'a," he said. "What? That was the name of my family's pet cat!"

"It's a nice name," Dar'ja said soothingly. "What about you, Ger'alín? What name will you give your distinguished partner in battle?"

Shooting her a wicked grin, he leapt into the saddle of his warhorse. "His name is 'Lucky.'"

Alayne, Zerith, and Ger'alín roared with laughter at the outraged look on her face. Adopting a frosty air, Dar'ja turned to Alayne, "And what about you?" she asked the laughing warlock. Alayne stilled her laughter, caught her breath, and, with a whispered incantation, was aboard the back of a fiery felsteed. Staring off for a second while she tried to come up with a name to beat Ger'alín's, she grinned. "Lucky, El'a, Sunstrider: meet...Pepper," she giggled, pointing to her felsteed's fiery hooves.

“Okay, enough horsing around,” Ger’alin said once he’d finished laughing. “Let’s try to form ranks so that we can at least move around without trampling everyone.”

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Alayne collapsed into the pool, her legs feeling like jelly. “I wish there were a hot spring somewhere close by,” she muttered as she massaged her aching legs. The cold salty water of the ocean didn’t do much to relax her tired and stiff muscles. A full day of drilling following an entire evening of watching most people try to figure out how to control their mounts would make even the most dedicated equestrienne eager to fall out of the saddle.

Gritting her teeth as she washed away the sweat and dirt, she rose from the water, hurried back to the shore, and donned her nightgown. Cringing as she mince-stepped back to the camp she, Dar’ja, and Callie had set up, she crawled into her sleeping bag, idly wondering where Dar’ja was. Zerith had sent Callie off earlier that evening to go speak with the centaur clans, to test the waters for a possible alliance with some of them.

Rolling on her side, she stared into the flames dancing and licking at the wood. Shifting, she pulled herself and her roll closer to the heat, letting it seep into her and melt away some of the soreness. Forcing her eyes to stay open, afraid to sleep, Alayne lay there, letting idle thoughts roam through her tired mind.

“I wonder where Dar’ja is... Ger’alin’s been absolutely merciless; where did he figure out so much about mounted formations? Light, I hate riding a trot... cantering is so much smoother. I wonder what Zerith will plan for us here. He’s been pre-occupied with so many things since we came here. I’m sick of eating fish...”

She bit down hard when she heard the mocking laughter that had flogged her spirit for days now. “Go away.”

Why do you fear me?

“Because you’re not me.”

But I am. I am Tal’ar’s daughter.

“You don’t know anything about my father or my mother. Shut up.”

I am you, little fool. I know everything about you.

“Not listening,” Alayne whispered as she tried to force the voice away.

I know how you want to fight; to bring honor and glory to your name. I know how you want to protect those around you. I know how you feel whenever you fail. If you continue down the path you’re on, you will fail, little Alayne. Stop fighting me and embrace me! I can save everyone!

“I will not fail. Not again,” she argued. The vision of Stromgarde; of Zerith falling, an arrow sticking out of his chest, floated before her eyes. “That’s low,” she muttered, dashing tears from her eyes. The vision continued. She saw the other woman, her other self, striding into the human city and melting it to the ground.

I saved you then. I brought Zerith’s attackers to justice. I can keep him safe if you’ll let me, little fool. Him and Callie and Ger’alin and Dar’ja and everyone else! Just let me do it!

Alayne stared sightlessly into the fire, unable to respond.

I can save them; I can save you. Or, have you forgotten this?

Alayne shuddered as the face of the man she’d murdered floated in front of her eyes. Clenching her teeth, she tried to ignore it; tried to ignore the mocking laughter that rang in her ears. She stared straight ahead, willing herself to neither see nor hear, her eyes burning and watering with the effort.

“Alayne?” Dar’ja asked as she limped up the path. “Asleep already? Ah well. Pleasant dreams, Alayne,” the paladin whispered as she crawled into her own roll and fell asleep. When she awoke the next morning, Alayne had not moved an inch.

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Callie climbed out of her saddle and tried to ease some of the stiffness. She could see many others moving as gingerly as she was, unaccustomed to being in the saddle for very long. They had been in Desolace two days now and Ger’alin had been drilling them in mounted combat mercilessly. He was one of the few striding through the crowd, back straight, legs unbowed. Even Alayne, who had grown up riding out with her neighbors in Menethil, moved stiffly.

“You’re enjoying this,” Callie accused Ger’alin as he passed by her.

“A few more days and you’ll be fine,” Ger’alin said confidently. “We’re almost ready to ride out and do some damage.”

“I know. Any clue where Zerith is? I just got back from the outpost with the information he wanted.”

“I was just going to speak with him myself. Come with me; I believe he’s taking his ease at the inn.”

The two walked down the road, Ger’alin pausing every so often to offer advice or criticism to one of their followers. Soon, they entered the rickety wooden and thatch inn and found Zerith sitting at a table poring over the notes and maps he had been given in Tarren Mill.

“Planning our operation, chief?” Callie asked glibly.

“Trying to, at any rate. At least if I’m focused on this, I don’t notice how much it hurts to move,” the priest muttered, glaring at Ger’alin.

“I have the information you requested. The Magram and the Gelkis centaur clans are amendable to peace. However, not only do they want the Kolkar and the Maurdine wiped out; each one wants the other eradicated as well.”

“About what I suspected,” Zerith sighed, stifling a groan as he shifted his weight. “I wonder if we could make a truce with both of them temporarily.”

“From what I saw, I don’t think that’s very likely,” Callie answered. “Raiding each other’s camps is what they do for entertainment. Singing songs about the glories of war and death to their enemies is what passes for culture. Ger’alin would fit right in,” she teased.

“What do you think of them, Callie?”

“Me personally?” the Forsaken asked.

“Yes,” Zerith responded. “You’ve spent time with both of the clans. Of the two, which one do you think would make the best ally?”

“I honestly don’t know. The Gelkis are close by so having them angry at us would not be a good idea. The Magram, though, are a power to be reckoned with as well. I say that we just try to avoid getting involved in their inter-clan dispute altogether.”

“Well, our mission kind of is to get involved,” he muttered, handing her the orders he’d received. “We’re to put an end to the centaur threat from Desolace for good. That means driving out any who won’t ally with us and allying with those who will. We’ll have to pick one of the two. For now, let’s focus on cleaning out the other two: the Kolkar and the Maurdine. At least we know they aren’t interested in any alliance.”

“I just got back from speaking with the scouts we sent to the mountain passes,” Ger’alin said, taking that as a signal from Zerith to begin his report. “They say that...” he trailed off as Alayne and Dar’ja limped into the main room.

“Callie!” Alayne said brightly. “I heard you’d come back.”

“Good afternoon, Alayne,” Callie returned.

“I want to ask a favor of you,” Alayne said. Zerith and Ger’alin glanced at each other in confusion. Alayne and Dar’ja ignored both of them and bent over, whispering in the Forsaken woman’s ears.

“Sure,” the Forsaken laughed. “Sounds like fun. Let’s go.”

The three women limped out of the inn, laughing and talking in an undertone where the two men couldn’t hear. Zerith waited until he figured they would be out of eye shot and then limped over to the doorway and glanced up and down the road, looking for signs of which way they went.

“Going to spy on the Sisterhood?” Ger’alin asked.

“Yes,” he answered.

“I’ll come with you. I’ve always wondered what they’re doing when they go off by themselves like that. Besides,” he continued, “I’ll give you my report on while we follow them.”

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“I think they went the other way,” Zerith muttered.

“No, see that? That’s definitely Alayne’s shoeprint.”

“How under the Light can you tell that?”

“Because she wears moccasins. And, she’s the only person wearing them who would be walking in phase with two people wearing boots,” he said, pointing to the tracks. “Did you never go out in the woods as a boy?”

“I was a little too busy with my studies,” Zerith said defensively. “We can’t all be wilderness survivors like you.”

“Sssh,” Ger’alin hissed, cutting Zerith off. Turning his head and cupping an hand to his ear, he listened. “They’re just around the bend. Be quiet.”

The two men tiptoed up the stone path, careful not to make a sound. Reaching the curve, they peered around cautiously, not wanting to be seen.

“My word,” Ger’alin breathed. Zerith said nothing, just gawking at the sight. Up ahead, Dar’ja was teaching Alayne some of the finer points of hand-to-hand combat. Callie stood on the sidelines, offering the occasional tip to the novice fighter. The two elven women would circle each other, looking for an opening, Dar’ja giving the odd lesson on what to look for or when to move and how while she flipped Alayne over her shoulder or tripped the warlock up.

“If we could just get them to do this in the middle of town and charge admission,” Ger’alin muttered, “we would be rich.”

“Ger’alin!” Zerith said hoarsely, scandalized.

“Oh don’t give me that look, Reverend Father,” the fighter said sarcastically. “You know you were thinking the exact same thing.”

“I was not!” Zerith protested, a blush rising to his face.

“Yes, you were. That’s why your face has gone scarlet.”

“It has not! Don’t project your sick and twisted...” he trailed off as he noticed motion in his peripheral vision. Turning his head, he saw the three women staring up at him, their faces perfect expressions of outrage. All three stood with hands on hips, one knee cocked, feet tapping. “I...we...um...” Zerith started, searching for an explanation that wouldn’t put him further in the dog house with the girls.

“Zerith,” Ger’alin said between clenched teeth, “shut up and run!” the fighter said as he suited words to action.

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Davril and Tau're shuffled up the dirt road towards the inn after another practice session with their mixed group of magi and fighters. Alayne and Zerith's innovations had inspired their creativity into forming a squad who excelled in mixing magic and steel in close-quarter combat. Thus far, while their efforts had been less than stellar, the Forsaken and Tauren were both cautiously optimistic that it could be done.

"What is that?" Davril asked, pointing to the dust cloud racing towards them. Seconds later, he and Tau're were picking themselves up off the ground.

"Why were Ger'alain and Zerith running so hard? Is there an attack coming?" Tau're asked just as the answer crested the hill in hot pursuit. He and Davril threw themselves out of the way as two elven women and a Forsaken ran down the street waving fists and shouting at the top of their lungs.

"Ah, to be young again," Davril said, a smile on his lips as he watched the chase.

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"Climb! Climb!" Ger'alain shouted as he jumped into a tree. "They can't reach us up here! They're too short!"

Zerith pulled himself up into the tree behind Ger'alain, clutching at the trunk for support while he found his footing and tried to catch his breath. The three women skidded to a halt beneath the tree, glaring up into the branches in frustration. Then, brightening, Callie and Dar'ja boosted Alayne up so she could grab at one of the lower branches.

"Oh, this is bad," Ger'alain said. "This is really bad."

As Alayne tried to pull herself up on the branch, the limb snapped, dropping her onto the two women below her and knocking all of them to the ground. Blinking, somewhat stunned by the fall, the girls tried to collect themselves for another effort. However, the humorous nature of the situation struck them and soon all three were rolling on the ground beneath the tree, laughing and pointing up to the two elven men still seeking sanctuary in its branches. Every time one of them would begin to wind down, they would just glance up and be gripped by laughter once again.

"We'd like to discuss a truce," Zerith shouted down once it seemed like the girls' laughter was drawing to a close. His request set off another round of mirth, leaving him looking down in consternation. He opened his mouth to say he was coming down but Ger'alain clapped a hand over it.

"Be quiet. I haven't seen her laugh in far too long," the fighter whispered. "If climbing a tree like a fool amuses her, then just hand me a banana and call me a monkey!"

Zerith gave the man a considering look and then nodded, sitting down carefully on the branch and letting his feet swing beneath him.

"You can come down, now," Dar'ja shouted up to the pair, a dangerous twinkle in her eyes. "We'll discuss the terms of surrender."

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"...and we'll just have to make certain that we keep an eye out so we're not flanked from the south," Ger'alain muttered as he and Zerith completed the last of the plans for their attack against the Kolkar.

"Alayne's going to kill me when she finds out she drew reserve," Zerith muttered as he examined the positions of the various forces arrayed on the map.

“Everyone hates reserve. Still, someone has to take care of it. Should we go gather everyone up and start telling them what the plan is?”

“No. Go and get just the people we picked out to lead each strike group and have them come here. The Maudine aren’t very far away and it’d be foolish to announce our plans to them. They can probably hear us all the way up in the mountains.”

“Any clue what kind of future forfeit they’ll ask for?” Ger’alin said as he turned to go.

“No idea. I did not like the look in their eyes when they announced that one. Still, it can’t be any worse than having to carry them into the village. I had enough trouble just carrying Dar’ja. I still can’t figure out how you managed Alayne and Callie at the same time.”

“Balance is the key. Besides, it helps that neither one of them wears chain mail. I suppose we shouldn’t worry about it. I still think it was worth it just to see her laugh like that.”

“Maybe you can climb another tree to tell her she drew reserve,” Zerith chuckled. “Anything to keep her from looking daggers at me again. I will never spy on them again so long as I live.”

“Yes, we will. We just won’t get caught again,” the fighter tossed over his shoulder as he hurried out of the inn to find and bring the others back. Zerith stared after him in amazement before shaking his head with a laugh. Yes, they probably would spy on the girls again. It was some of the best fun he’d had in a while. Even the part where he’d had to run and climb a tree had been fun.

“What are you smiling at, you nosy little priest?” Dar’ja asked so sweetly that Zerith quickly wiped the grin off his face.

“Nothing,” he answered. “Just thinking about...”

“We know what you’re thinking about,” Alayne said lightly as she dropped onto the bench next to him. Dar’ja walked over behind him and, putting a hand on his shoulder, leaned over him to examine the map. Zerith stared straight ahead, keeping his face impassive by an effort of sheer will.

“Have you assigned the reserves, yet?” Callie asked, pitying the poor man and giving him a way out. By his grimace, that had not been a good question to ask.

“Yes, have you?” Alayne asked, ceasing her teasing and sparing him the rest. “I’d like to request reserve duty,” she added, trying not to laugh at the startled look on his face.

“Then you have it,” he said, pointing to the unit he’d assigned her. “You’ll be positioned here along the road to keep an eye out for reinforcements.”

“Where am I?” Callie asked, sliding onto the bench.

“Let’s just wait until everyone else is here before we get started on assignments,” Zerith suggested.

“Or we could make you tell us,” Dar’ja whispered into his ear. “We can make you do anything,” she continued, grinning wickedly when she saw him clench his jaw so as to not react.

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“You actually asked for reserve duty?” Callie asked Alayne as the three of them made their way down to the area they’d picked out for their camp.

“Yes. I’d overheard them mentioning who was getting it anyway so I figured I’d spare Zerith the hassle and pretend like it’s what I wanted. I’ve caused him enough trouble lately,” she giggled. “I wonder if he noticed that he still had bark stains on his robes.”

“I don’t think he will until you tell him. Guys never notice that kind of stuff,” Callie snickered. “And what were you whispering to him, Dar’ja? He went white as a ghost there at the end.”

"Yeah, you did seem to be taking the joke a little too far," Alayne muttered. "The idea is to tease them a little, not make them miserable. Zerith looked like it was taking all of his strength not to react to whatever it was you were threatening him with. I'll warn you; he may not look strong like Ger'alın, but he probably can pick you up and toss you in the ocean if he gets irritated enough. Chain mail and all."

"Well, I was trying to get a reaction out of him," Dar'ja laughed. "Not that one, of course, but I'm quite happy with the one I got. I could see his pulse racing."

"What did you say to him?" Alayne asked. "Callie and I need to know what it was so we can help you with whatever you have planned."

"No offense, Alayne," Dar'ja smirked, "but I don't need your help."

"Oh," Alayne said, understanding dawning in a blush across her face. "I suppose you wouldn't at that."

"You're almost as bad as he is!" Dar'ja laughed. "Did your mother never teach you about men, Alayne?"

"Let's not talk about my mother," Alayne whispered. "She and I never did get along. And, if you want to talk about matronly advice, Dar'ja," she continued, her tone that of molten stone, "I have some for you. Be careful what you ask for; you might just get it."

"And what do you mean by that?" the paladin spat.

"Oh, you want it clearer? Well then, as the humans say: don't start what you can't finish. And that is all I'm going to say on the subject tonight." Leaning down, she gathered her bedroll up and stalked away, heading towards the sea shore.

"What is her problem?" Dar'ja muttered as she sat on her blankets. "I thought she was fine with me and..."

"She is," Callie answered. "But he's her brother and she's going to look after him first. Besides, she's right, you know," Callie stated. "Mess with a man the way you keep teasing Zerith and dropping hints and you're going to get burned."

"I'm not messing with him any more than she messes with Ger'alın. Asking him to teach her to use a sword. I mean, *come on*," Dar'ja muttered.

"And she asked you to teach her how to fight barehanded," Callie rushed to her friend's defense. "She really does want to learn how to fight in close. I don't know why she wants to learn, but she was sincere about that."

"Coulda had me fooled," Dar'ja muttered, her face flushing in embarrassment.

"I'm going to go find Alayne," Callie said with a sigh. "Why don't you stay here and rethink your current course of action? I'll just be thankful that certain urges died when I did. I wouldn't want to be you for all of the gold in Azeroth."

Dar'ja stared angrily off into the night. After a while, she sighed and began to consider Callie's last words. Making her decision, she dug through her bag, pulled out a rope, and headed back into town.

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Zerith sighed and rubbed his jaw. It ached from him gritting his teeth during most of the meeting. His father had warned him that some women were pursuers while others had to be pursued but he'd never much considered those conversations until Dar'ja had entered his life. There had not been many girls his age around and then he'd been pre-occupied with taking care of his family as they slowly succumbed to their arcane addiction. He half-wished Ger'alın had taken a room in the inn so he would have someone to talk to.

"What the?" he muttered, hearing something tapping against his window. He crept over to it cautiously, wondering what could be tapping so far above the ground. Peering out,

he saw a familiar figure pausing in throwing pebbles up at his window. Leaning on the sill, he smiled down at her, “I thought it was the man who was supposed to serenade the lady.”

“Here, catch,” she replied, tossing up a length of rope.

“Why not use the stairs like a normal person?” he muttered, planting his feet and wrapping the rope around his wrist while she climbed up to his window. Once she was inside, he pulled the window shut and leaned against the wall, folding his arms across his chest and waiting for her to speak. When she said nothing, just looked around uncomfortably, he sighed. “Did you come up here to make good on some of those threats?”

Dar’ja blanched, “Maybe this wasn’t a good idea,” she muttered. Clearing her throat, she started again, “Actually, I came to apologize for any embarrassment I may have caused you this evening. A couple of friends pointed out that I may have taken the joke a little too far.”

“I will say that *moderation* doesn’t seem to be one of your primary traits,” Zerith muttered good-humoredly. “I guess we should discuss that.” He smiled gently, feeling protective of her as he watched her shift in awkward embarrassment. It also didn’t hurt to get a little back after the way she’d acted earlier. “I’ll go easy on you if you’ll go easy on me. This is my first real relationship.” Pleasant warmth surged through him at the delighted smile of relief that lit up Dar’ja’s face. Settling down next to her, the two began to talk.

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“You’re looking rather cheerful this morning,” Alayne yawned to Zerith as they began climbing aboard their mounts. “Either you’re looking forward to the battle, or something happened between you and Dar’ja last night.”

Zerith shot her a look of surprise. “How did you...”

“Because we fell asleep waiting for her to come back, silly. What, did you think I took up mind-reading or something?” she said, her jaws creaking in another yawn. She met her brother’s look of amused annoyance with a watery glare of her own. “So, tell me about it or I’ll,” she yawned sleepily again, “yawn at you a lot,” she muttered.

“We just talked, Alayne. No need to give me the evil eye.”

“That’s not my evil eye. That’s my ‘I didn’t get much sleep’ eye. I’m actually glad to be in the reserve right now. I may just lie down and take a nap while you all take care of the Kolkar,” she sighed.

“Why did you stay up so long waiting on Dar’ja to get back? Worried about my good name?” he teased.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she muttered. “Callie’s snoring kept me up.”

“I don’t snore,” Callie said, wheeling her horse next to Alayne. “I know so because I don’t sleep as much as you. I was busy counting stars last night. You, on the other hand, not only snore, you argue in your sleep.”

Alayne muttered something under her breath that Callie ignored. “You were arguing and pleading with someone all night. I almost woke you a couple of times figuring that you’d get more rest awake than you were getting asleep. Dar’ja wound up moving further off just so she could get to sleep at all.” Turning to Zerith, Callie said frankly, “I know little to nothing of elven development. Is it normal for your women to be afflicted with such sleepless nights and nightmares so frequently?”

Zerith cocked an eyebrow at the undead, answering in a similar tone, “No, it is most definitely not common. It’s usually a sign that someone is trying to hide something instead of talking about it with the people who care about her and letting them help her.”

Alayne glared at them, muttering in an undertone. Callie rolled her eyes and sighed, “Is this what you really, really, really didn’t want to talk about that night you and Ger’alin

tried to poison yourselves with alcohol? Do I need to drag you into a tavern and get you intoxicated again so you'll tell us what's keeping you from sleeping unless you're passed out?" Alayne shot her a look that would have nailed anyone else to the side of the mountain. "This is ridiculous," Callie muttered. "We're about to go into battle. Some of us could die, Alayne, and you won't even tell your two best friends what has you on edge lately. If you won't tell me, at least, I'm going to go make sure my group is in formation," she sighed, wheeling her horse and heading towards the front of the line.

Alayne rode next to Zerith in glum silence for several minutes more before she sighed and started to say, "Zerith, I'm sorry but I just..."

"If the next words out of your mouth are 'don't want to talk about it,'" he said angrily, "then you needn't continue. Just go back to your group and don't come to me until you do want to talk about it. I'm sick of feeling so useless around you. I have a battle to look after this morning. I'd rather not be distracted by worrying about you."

She stared at him in shock for a moment before wheeling her horse and galloping towards the back of the line. Zerith fought not to follow her and apologize. Every nerve in his body wanted to just go back to her, hug her and beg for her to tell him what was wrong so he could make it right. In her own way, Alayne was just as confusing as Dar'ja could be. Taking a deep breath, the priest muttered a prayer to the Light for his sister and then forced his worries out of his mind. He had been honest with her: he did have a battle to look after.

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"Master, master!" Ragnar gasped as he ran into Rel'in's chambers. The elf glared at the human in annoyance.

"This had better be good," Rel'in muttered as he closed the tome he'd been studying. "I dislike being disturbed from my studies."

"The intruder; they found her. The elf bitch who killed Veryl," he said as he gulped for air. "She just rode past. She's with some kind of army. They took the road towards the Magram village."

"Very good, Ragnar," Rel'in said, a slight smile on his lips. "I assume that she's being followed *carefully*, as we discussed should she show her face back in Desolace?"

"Yes, Master," the human said. "If I may..." he began, faltering at the glance his master gave him.

"Yes?"

"I think they're planning to attack the Kolkar. Some of our lookouts overheard them discussing a battle. They were moving through the area fairly leisurely," he explained, desperate to be believed. "They're obviously not much of an army."

"Oh?" Rel'in laughed. "What are their numbers? Did your lookouts think to count them? Or to observe who the leaders are, that we might take them out easily? How many fighters do they have; what about their magi? Surely they have some of those. You amuse me, Ragnar, when you pretend to knowledge you do not possess. Now, go. Prepare my mount. Since none of you can be trusted, I will observe this 'army' myself."

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Callie whooped as she rode down another centaur, ducking its attack as she plunged her daggers into its chest. Around her rang the song of combat; steel clashing against steel, bows twanging as arrows were launched, and the whoosh of spells flying to their targets. Up ahead she could see Zerith holding his group aloof, directing the healers towards where they were most needed. In the fore of the fight she could hear Ger'alín and Dar'ja shouting out

elvish battle cries as they charged the centaur. The Forsaken woman smiled as she let loose the anger she'd been holding in at her friend for days and used it to help guide her strokes against the Kolkar.

"This is how I like to start a morning!" she heard one of her fellows shout. Grinning over at him, she circled behind his enemy and, with a quick motion, hamstringed the centaur. "That one counts as mine!" she laughed as the orc she'd assisted cleaved the centaur's head from its body.

"The problem with such a large group is that the fights are never long enough!" another Forsaken laughed merrily as he glanced around. "We should put more in reserve, just to give them a fighting chance."

"Don't let Zerith or Alayne hear you say that," Callie grinned. "Both of them favor overwhelming the enemy. Go on ahead; it looks like Ger'alyn could use some more fighters. If you hurry, there might be some fight left in those horses." Callie chuckled to herself as some of the more hotheaded galloped towards the rear of the camp. Others stayed back with her, forming a second reserve group. The battle had lasted just over an hour with light casualties on their side. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see Alayne and the others assigned to reserve standing atop an outcropping of rock, watching the battle in case they might be needed. Turning back to the combat, Callie decided that the reserves would be completely fresh. The main force had the remaining centaurs pinned between them and the mountain and, from the looks of things, no reinforcements were coming to help the half-men, half-horse creatures. "They've got this one wrapped up," she muttered to one of her fighters. "I'm going to go tell the others to head back and prepare for tonight's celebration. I'm sure our reserves will be glad to be of *some* use," she joked.

"They seem to have decided that already," the fighter laughed, pointing at the hill. "I just saw them turn and run down that hill."

"Well, let's just go get them, shall we?" Callie said lightly, fear worming its way into her gut.

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"There they are," Rel'in said, pointing to a group of fighters and magi milling about beneath the road. The elf woman stood, watching something on the other side of the road, with others on top of a rise. "We can pin them against that outcropping," he muttered.

"But Master," Ragnar said in surprise, "they're double our number."

"It amazes me, Ragnar, how you manage to get out of bed in the morning. We can double our numbers easily," the elf said coldly. "Summon the infernals and felguards," he ordered the warlocks accompanying him. "We'll give them something to keep them occupied. Take the elf woman alive."

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Alayne had stood, watching the battle, irritated with herself and praying that Zerith, Callie, and the others would be well. She had decided to tell them about what had happened during her trials. Even if the thought of reliving that night gripped her with dread, she would tell them. Anything to make Zerith not angry with her. She would even confess to what happened at Stromgarde and the terrifying dreams and visions she'd been having.

"They've got that one wrapped up," Davril muttered bitterly. "We didn't get to lift a finger this round."

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll get our chance next time,” Alayne said absently. “Maybe we should go on over there and see if they need us for anything now that it seems to be just about over.”

“Or maybe we should go see what those demons want!” Davril said in alarm. Alayne turned back to see a group of warlocks and demons rushing towards their position.

“To arms!” she shouted, moving into casting range of the attackers. “We fight the Legion!” Relief flooded through her as she began to hurl bolts of shadow at the demons. At least she could rid herself of some of her tension before having to confess to Zerith. Behind her, she could feel her other self waiting in the wings, eager for the chance to take over. Taking a firm hold on her temper, Alayne searched for a target in the melee.

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“Oh no!” Callie shouted as she spurred her horse into a gallop. The reserve groups were being overwhelmed by demons and warlocks wearing the mantle of the Burning Blade. Davril and Alayne were trying desperately to rally their forces to fight on but lacked sufficient numbers of fighters to hold off the demons while they cast their spells. Several magi lay sprawled on the ground, moaning in pain. “Ride back and bring the others, now!” she shouted as she dove into the fray.

Her appearance gave fresh heart to the Disorder of Azeroth and they rallied, managing to hold the demons off. Then, just as Alayne was about to give out a cry of triumph, one of the warlocks swooped down on her, grabbing her and pulling her onto his mount. With a shout, the warlocks turned and left the field.

“Help me!” Alayne screamed as she struggled against her captor. Ignoring the demons, Callie galloped after her friend.

“Alayne!” the undead screamed. “They’ve taken Alayne!” Lashing her horse with the reins for speed, she drew closer to the warlock who held Alayne tightly with both arms, guiding his demonic horse with his knees.

“Oh no you don’t,” he snarled as Callie drew close enough to make a grab for her friend. The man struck out with a small staff, knocking Callie from her horse. The undead hit the ground with a sickening crack, nearly blacking out as she felt the bones of her shoulder crunch beneath her. Gritting her teeth, holding her now-useless arm with the other, she turned and began to run back to the battle to get help for her friend.

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“What in the name of the Light happened here?” Ger’alin breathed as he surveyed the remnants of their reserve force. He’d never expected to have to fight a second battle, and this one against demons like the one Alayne had called upon in Alterac, right after battling horses.

“They caught us from behind,” Davril answered. “A group of warlocks and their demons. They just attacked. We were overwhelmed almost immediately.”

“I see,” Ger’alin muttered as he glanced around at the carnage. He could see Zerith and Dar’ja moving through the crowds, laying hands on the injured. “You did well,” the fighter said with a smile. “It’s good to know that even our reserve group can stand by itself in battle.”

“Where is Callie? And Alayne?” Zerith asked as he finished healing the last of the wounded. “They’re not with this group. Where are they?” he demanded, panic rising within him when Davril didn’t answer.

“What is that?” Ger’alin asked, pointing down the road. Giving Zerith a hand up behind him, the fighter kicked his horse to a canter, slowing as he drew near a familiar sight.

Callie's horse limped, winded and rider less, back up the road. "Light no," he heard Zerith whisper.

"Mount and rally!" Ger'alın shouted over his shoulder. "We've got to find them!"

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"Oh, thank the Light," Callie sobbed as she saw Zerith and Ger'alın dismount and run to her. "They've taken her!"

"Hush for a moment," Zerith muttered as he examined her shoulder. "Ger'alın, brace her. This is going to hurt," he warned as he wrenched her broken and dislocated shoulder back into a more normal shape. The Forsaken woman yelped in pain, remaining conscious only by effort of will while the priest worked his healing magic on her injuries. "Now, tell me what happened."

"They took her! Alayne, they just grabbed her and ran off!" Callie wept. "He knocked me from my horse and took her away!"

"Who? Who took Alayne?" Ger'alın demanded, desperation in his eyes.

"The Burning Blade," Callie sobbed. "They attacked the reserve group and grabbed her! After they got her, they ran off, heading back south. We've got to rescue her!"

"We do," Ger'alın agreed as he turned to shout orders. Zerith gripped the fighter's arm in a vise-like grip, his fingers digging painfully into Ger'alın's flesh.

"If we just run down there without a plan," the priest said, his eyes haunted, "we're going to get her killed and ourselves too. We make for Sun Rock Retreat to plan the rescue, Ger'alın. I'm not risking getting my sister killed just to be doing something!" he shouted, seeing the reckless fire in the other man's eyes.

Ger'alın turned away, staring down the road for a moment. "Fine," he muttered. "Let's go plan her rescue while we leave her in captivity," he spat. "To Sun Rock Retreat!" he shouted as he mounted his charger and galloped off north. The rest of the Disorder of Azeroth galloped after Ger'alın, leaving Zerith, Callie, and Dar'ja alone for a moment.

"You can't just leave her," Callie said desperately. "We can't afford to go sit in Stonetalon while you plan her rescue! Let's just ride down there and get her!"

"Callie, stop," Zerith said, choking back tears. "Do you know why they would have taken her?" The undead woman shook her head. "Do you know where they would be holding her?" Again, Callie answered in the negative. "I don't want to leave her in their clutches a moment longer than I have to," he said, trying not to shake, "but if we just run down there, none of us will last the rest of the day. Now, go on. Follow Ger'alın and see if you can keep him out of trouble for a while. I'll be along shortly."

"Zerith?" Dar'ja whispered, climbing down from her horse as Callie rode off. "Zerith, I have El'a here."

"Oh, just go away!" Zerith muttered, turning his back on her and trying to control his emotions.

"No," she said softly, walking up behind him and wrapping her arms around his waist. "I'm not leaving you here to suffer alone. I won't let you face this pain by yourself any more than you would let Alayne..." she stopped, feeling him shudder. "She'll be all right, Zerith." Her heart lurched when Zerith tore away from her, turning and facing her with a wild and pain-filled expression. Softening her own features, she held out her arms, "She *will* be all right," the paladin whispered again. Her eyes widened in breathless shock a second later when Zerith gripped her tightly, weeping incoherently against her shoulder as the dam burst. "There, there," she whispered over and over again, gently stroking his hair while he accused himself of all manner of malice and failure. "You'll rescue her and she will be all right."

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“So you finally decided to join us, General,” Ger’alin sneered as Dar’ja and Zerith rode into Sun Rock Retreat. Zerith glared at him and opened his mouth to answer in kind but Dar’ja reached out and placed a hand on his wrist, halting him. Ger’alin growled and turned back, heading away from them.

“You, you, you, and you,” Zerith said calmly, pointing to the four closest people. “Head to the wyvern roost. I want you,” he said, pointing to the first of them, an orc dressed in wolf pelts, “to go back to Desolace and speak with the leader of the Gelkis clan. See if they’ll assist us in rescuing one of our comrades from the Burning Blade. You,” he said to the tauren standing next to the orc, “do the same for the Magram clan. You there,” he pointed to a Forsaken warrior, “are to go to Shadowprey and find out what they know about the Burning Blade’s hide outs in Desolace. I want the three of you to return as soon as you can with news.”

“And what about me?” the fourth asked, turning around. “Shall I go rescue Alayne while you’re wasting time?” she spat angrily.

“No, Callie. You are to go to Silvermoon. Drag back that bastard Jez’ral. I want to know why in the Nether the Burning Blade would kidnap Alayne and I suspect that that son of a bitch has the answer. Do whatever you have to in order to convince him that coming here is in his best interests,” Zerith said icily. “I’ll be at the inn, trying to piece together a plan until you return.”

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“The Gelkis are amendable,” the orc reported late that night. “It seems that the Burning Blade has been encroaching on their territory and they’d like the chance to kill some of them.”

“That’s good,” Zerith said, “And the Magram?”

“They’re not interested in doing anything other than taking over the Kolkar’s lands and killing the Gelkis. If we’re willing to help them there, they’ll help us,” the tauren responded.

“Then we’ll ally with the Gelkis. Go get some rest. I’ll have orders for you to carry to them tomorrow morning.”

Zerith leaned over the papers scattered about the table, focusing on what he’d learned from his scouts. The Burning Blade had two bases of operations in Desolace: Thunder Axe Fortress to the north and Mannoroc Coven to the south. All indications pointed to Alayne being held in the ruins to the south. Zerith sighed and rubbed his burning eyes as the maps blurred together. The Forsaken he’d sent to find out about the areas had reported rumors that the ruins actually disguised some kind of underground lair. Only rumors, though. The Burning Blade probably made short work of anyone who could confirm the existence of their lair.

“Here, I brought you something to eat.” Zerith looked up to see Ger’alin standing over him holding a plate of food and a mug of tea.

“Thank you, Ger’alin,” Zerith said politely, “but I’m not hungry.”

“No problem,” the fighter answered, setting the food down at the end of the table. “I couldn’t eat either,” he said glumly. “Have you got anything planned?”

“Not really,” Zerith sighed. “I need to know more about where they’re holding her.”

“I might be able to supply that deficiency,” came an answer from the door way. “Or rather, he will,” Callie growled as she shoved Jez’ral into the inn and slammed the door behind her.

“Good evening to you,” the warlock began smoothly. “I came as soon as I heard what happened. Others are on their way as well. We can’t let one of our own be held prisoner by the Burning Blade, after all,” he smiled.

“Sit down and shut up unless you’re going to tell me just why the Burning Blade would be interested in Alayne,” Zerith said, his voice like cold steel. Jez’ral raised an eyebrow at his impertinence. “I don’t give a damn what you are used to or how you want to be addressed. Ever since Alayne went off with you, she’s been a completely different person. Either you tell me why, or I’ll let Ger’alin here cut you into little pieces as a warning to the next warlock who’d mess with my sister!”

“I look forward to the exercise,” Ger’alin said, baring his teeth in what might have been a smile. Loosening his sword in its scabbard, his tone became almost jolly, “I haven’t killed anyone in hours.”

“I am getting a little hungry,” Callie rasped from her spot by the door. “And he looks delicious,” she smacked her lips. Jez’ral blanched, wondering if they were serious or not.

“I suggest you tell me everything you know about this cult, why they would want Alayne, and where they might be holding her. We have all night to discuss the matter,” Zerith said coldly.

“I see,” Jez’ral muttered, his face taking on a green tint. “I don’t know where, exactly, they’ll be holding her. Hand me some parchment and a quill and I’ll draw you a map of their underground lair. That’s usually where they take prisoners and spies to torture them before they execute them.” Zerith’s face went white and sweat began to bead on his forehead.

“Why would they want Alayne?” Ger’alin asked faintly, his face a twin to Zerith’s.

“Because she stole a book back from them,” Jez’ral muttered as he sketched the layout of the lair. “Keep in mind this information may be out of date. The new leader killed all of the spies we had infiltrated into their cult. We still haven’t found out exactly what happened to Veryl, their last leader,” he said as he passed the map over to the priest.

“You mean to tell me that she’s been captured and may be tortured and killed over a *Nether-spawned book*?” Ger’alin shouted hoarsely as he leapt from his seat and drew his sword.

“Well, not just any book,” Jez’ral said smoothly. “A very special book. She went to a lot of trouble to steal it from them as part of her trials. At least, she came back looking like she’d been run through the wringer,” he continued pleasantly. “She’s really something else, though. Completed her trials in a single night and faced down a felhunter and an infernal on top of it all. We’re very proud of all she’s accomplished. That’s why we’ll be coming along with you to rescue her.”

“No, you will not,” Zerith said calmly, the pieces of the puzzle falling into place. What must she have endured at the hands of those cultists to get this blasted book that Jez’ral was nattering on about? “You are going back to Silvermoon right now before I forget that Alayne respects you and kill you myself. Get out of here!” the priest shouted. “You make my skin crawl!”

“I don’t answer to you, boy,” Jez’ral sneered as he stood up. “And neither do those who are following me. Just stay out of our way when we go to rescue our student. If you do that, I might let you live.”

“Let him go, Ger’alin,” Zerith muttered as the fighter moved to block the warlock’s exit. Once the man was gone, Zerith collapsed back down into his seat. “Everyone, get a few hours’ sleep. We’ll be returning to Shadowprey tomorrow morning to work out terms with the Gelkis and to rescue my sister.”

Zerith sat, fidgeting impatiently and trying not to cough from the pipe smoke. The leaders of the Gelkis clan sat around the fire, puffing contentedly and discussing strikes and raids they'd been in and making plans for future raids against the Magram clan.

"We are honored to be brothers with warriors such as you," Ger'alın said as he exhaled smoke. Zerith had suggested that the fighter do most of the talking when it came to bragging about their raids. "But now, let us discuss the battle with the Burning Blade."

"In time, brother," the eldest, a wise old centaur named Uthek said. "First we will feast and cement our bonds of brotherhood. Then, we will battle and trample our enemies under hoof."

Zerith knew his face must look as strained as Ger'alın's. That was the same answer they'd gotten every time they tried to steer the talk towards planning Alayne's rescue. Zerith could hear Ger'alın gritting his teeth in frustration. To the Gelkis, this was just another raid.

"Honored elders," Zerith began, taking the pipe from his mouth and then nearly dropping it when the bowl burned his fingers. "We look forward to feasting with you, but first, we must rescue my sister. She is being held prisoner. The Burning Blade took her in a raid."

"Your trouble stirs our hearts," Uthek said as he puffed on his pipe. "But, to raid with new allies without a feast of brotherhood is unlucky. Until you've been introduced to our clan's totem spirits, fighting with you is unlucky. Besides, no one would harm a woman taken in a raid. She'd be taken to her captor's tent as a servant," he said reasonably.

Zerith and Ger'alın gaped at each other. Did the centaurs have any idea just what the Burning Blade would do to prisoners? From the impassive faces of the centaurs around them, the answer was obvious. They were not used to fighting enemies who were vile and given to torture, or worse. Their common opponents were other centaurs; creatures of primitive honor like themselves. Zerith sighed in frustration, wondering how he could communicate the danger that Alayne was in without offending his new allies. Fortunately, Ger'alın took the issue out of his hands.

"She's my woman and I want her back in *my* tent," he said flatly. He ignored the outraged look on Zerith's face. If it would prod the centaurs into action, he'd say whatever he needed to say. "I'll be going after her this evening with our without you. She'll not spend another night away from her clan."

From the shocked looks on the centaurs' faces, not to mention the way Zerith looked as if he were about to choke to death, Ger'alın thought he may have gone too far. After a moment, Uthek sighed and nodded.

"You won't go alone," Uthek said. Waving his arm towards a young centaur warrior, he ordered, "Take the pipes away. We have a raid to plan. Don't worry, young brother. We will get your woman back to your tent before she has a chance to miss you."

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Alayne shuddered, pushing herself up on arms that shook. Her back burned like a wildfire and her legs trembled. For the first hour, she'd worried that she would betray her friends and tell the cult everything. After the second, endless hour of torture, she had indeed babbled out everything she knew. Anything to make the pain stop. Bitter tears of shame trickled past her nose as she recalled just how eager she'd been to tell them about the defenses of Silvermoon, about all of the studies the Magisters had undertaken, about the rumors concerning Prince Kael'Thas's imminent return she'd heard. She'd told them the numbers of the Disorder of Azeroth; the style of fighting that Zerith and Ger'alın preferred. She would have told them anything they demanded just to make it stop. Rumors, dreams, thoughts... She'd even told them what little she knew about the Blood Knights and the energy being

rumored to live beneath their stronghold. The words had gushed out of her like a river that she'd hoped would wash away the whips and the brands they'd held. Forcing herself to her knees, she lifted her hands to her face and tried to claw her eyes out. The physical pain she could bear and recover from. The pain of betraying her friends; of discovering just how weak she was...she would never recover from that. She wished that she'd let the murdered man kill her so she would never have had to face this torment. Desperately, she tried to scratch away the memory of what she had done; of what had been done to her.

There now, don't do worse than they have already.

"I want to die. I wish they would kill me."

Maybe they will. Maybe we're both going to die here.

"It's what we deserve. Light, please don't let Zerith risk himself in a rescue attempt."

Alayne sank back down onto the cold, stone floor. She even closed her eyes and let her breathing become deep and even. She forced herself to keep her eyes closed even though she could see the looks of disgust and hatred her friends would give her when they found out she had betrayed them. Alayne turned, her back facing her fellow captives, so that they wouldn't see her weep.

"They'll hate me."

They already do.

"I know. They'll hate me even more. No one will ever forgive me for what I've done."

"There are those who would understand. You must find them. Seek them out. They will care for you. They will understand the path you walk."

Who are they? Alayne whispered desperately to the strange, new voice that had offered comfort. She sighed bitterly, tears of anguish falling from her closed eyes, when silence was the only response.

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"Hey, it got them to plan the raid, didn't it?" Ger'alain said defensively.

"She is going to hit the roof when she finds out what you told them," Zerith muttered. "And I'm not going to stop her from killing you this time."

"I only said what I had to say to get them to actually do something other than sit around and feast and drink to brotherhood," the fighter growled. "Or would you rather she remain in the welcoming hands of the cultists another night just to protect her good name?"

"I understand why you did what you did, Ger'alain. I'm just warning you that Alayne might not see it the same way. She can be very peculiar when it comes to that kind of talk. I have a feeling that she's something of a traditionalist. You should get Dar'ja to tell you what Alayne said to her about what she was saying to me."

"Overuse pronouns, much?" Callie asked, drawing her horse up along Zerith's other side. "And what did Ger'alain do that is going to have some traditionalist up in arms?"

"Oh no, he's not telling you," Ger'alain said. "You'll run off and tell her first thing."

"Never mind, Callie," Zerith said politely. "Are the others in position?"

"Yes. That's what I came to tell you. Uthek says that he'll signal the attack as soon as it's full dark. That would be in about an hour, I guess," she said, looking at the sky.

"Will the archers be able to see in the dark?"

"Yes, Ger'alain, they will be able to," she muttered. "I'm just as anxious as you are to get Alayne out of the cultist's clutches but we should stick to the plan you guys developed. It is a good one. Rather different than how we normally do things, though."

"We have to assume they'll know everything about us and what we've done already. We can't know what she's told them or what she's held back...or even if she's still alive," he

sighed sadly. Next to him, Ger'alın began growling, his eyes blazing with anger. "You should probably get back into position," Zerith muttered. "Wait for Uthek's signal."

"Oh," she said as she turned to leave, "before I forget. Jez'ral and that Strahad said something about them taking care of the library and the leader's chambers. I guess we should let them do that?"

"They can burn in the Nether for all I care, damned wizards and their Light-be-damned books," Ger'alın growled angrily.

"Yes, Callie. Let them do whatever they want. We're here for Alayne," Zerith said, his tone implying the "thank you for putting up with Ger'alın" that the Forsaken seemed to need right then. With a sigh, he schooled himself to patience, speaking only to calm Ger'alın while waiting for Uthek's signal.

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Alayne groaned, then whimpered when she heard her joints pop and crackle as she moved, trying to find a position that didn't hurt as much. Pain washed over her in waves. In her failing vision, she could see her other self floating before her eyes. Reaching out, she tried to draw on her strange self's strength. Bitter tears leaked from the corners of her eyes when she realized that the woman had no more strength than she.

"I will surrender to you if you'll help me," she whispered to her own wavering face. "Just give me the strength to fight back once; to fight back enough to force them to kill me."

"You will not die here, Alayne."

"Who are you?" she gasped. She could see her other self nodding as if responding to an order Alayne had not heard. Then, her other self vanished as Alayne felt a welcoming surge of rage begin to well in her heart.

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"Let's go!" Ger'alın shouted as soon as he saw the signal they'd been watching for. Elves, orcs, trolls, tauren, and centaur poured from the hills above the coven, crashing down upon the warlocks like a flood. Off to a corner, he could see Jez'ral and the human with him making their way to the area they said was the library. "Wizards and their books," he muttered as his sword flashed through the air, cutting open the orc warlock in front of him. Onwards, he fought, cutting a path through the violence with his blade. He could hear Zerith behind him, calling on the Light to smite the cultists and heal his friends.

"We found it!" he heard Callie call from across the ruined building. "This way," she gestured. Ger'alın followed her to a ramp leading down to what looked like a pile of rubble. "Look at it closely," she said. "It could fool a dwarf." Ger'alın examined the pile carefully. After a moment, he realized it was a very cleverly painted door. Lifting his foot, he summoned all the rage he possessed and kicked it off its frame.

"Good job!" Zerith shouted as he ducked into the hallway. Callie and Ger'alın followed on his heels, punching, shoving, and slashing their way down the twisting paths. Up ahead, they heard a man's agonized shouts. Callie and Zerith rushed towards the source of the sounds while Ger'alın pressed deeper into the lair. He laughed with malicious delight whenever one of the cultists fell to his blade. They would pay for keeping Alayne from him.

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Alayne shivered, her teeth chattering as her body shook. The temperature in the room had begun to plummet in the past few minutes. Letting the rage burn through her, she shoved

herself up on her hands and knees and tried to summon the strength to stand. Wobbling unsteadily on her feet, she lurched towards the door, determined to tear it down and fight through the Burning Blade until she was free...or dead. She made it as far as the door before she collapsed, unconsciousness smothering her. She thought she heard a man groan in frustration and failure as the light faded from her eyes.

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Ger'alín fought onward. He'd long since lost sight and sound of his comrades. He had lost himself in the twisting passages of the underground labyrinth. Only the groans of the few warlocks who had tried to remain hidden during the fight could be heard this far beneath the ground. He rounded a corner, his footfalls echoing ahead of him. Two warlocks emerged from one of the rooms just as he stepped in front of the doorway. They had only a second to blink in surprised confusion before he had both of them on the floor, the orc's blood pumping out as quickly as her heart beat. The undead he tore apart, knowing from his time in Undercity that only burning the corpse would keep it from reanimating after a few hours. He then ducked into the room they'd headed out of, surprised to find it a dead end. Turning on his heel to leave, he heard a woman's shout from beneath the room.

"Ah ha!" he exclaimed, seeing the trapdoor hidden beneath the table. Shoving the table aside, he opened the door and leapt down, sword at the ready. A cell door stood in front of him, its thick wood and bars declaring its purpose. A smile on his face, confident that he had found her at last, Ger'alín opened the door. He frowned when something blocked it, preventing it from opening all the way. Pushing more firmly, he heard a whimper followed by a sigh. Filled with dread, he squeezed himself through the narrow opening and into the cell.

"Light no!" he screamed, dropping his sword and shield on the ground and fell to kneel beside the fallen woman. Rolling Alayne on her back, he pressed his fingers against her neck, shuddering with relief to find her life-pulse beating faintly. She burned to the touch with some fever and the whole cell stank of infection and rot. He tried to clear his mind and reach out as his instructors had taught, tried to wrest the healing powers that came from the Light into his hands. For long moments, he tried desperately to purge the poison coursing through the Alayne's veins. With a strangled grunt of anger, he set her back on the ground gently, and rose to his feet. Choking back the tears of self-hatred he felt rising at his failure and ineptitude, he turned and ran from the cell.

"Zerith!" he called out as he raced back up through the keep. "Dar'ja? Somebody come quick!"

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"Ah, Rel'in," Jez'ral was saying as he saw the man that the Disorder of Azeroth had taken captive. "I thought you might be part of this insanity."

"Jez'ral," the elf said calmly. "I'm not surprised to see you as part of this rabble."

"Where's Alayne?" Zerith demanded.

"Oh, is that the wench's name?" Rel'in asked, affecting surprise. "I can't be bothered to learn the names of all the fools we execute."

"You'd better be lying," Callie warned, hefting her daggers.

"Oh, he is," Jez'ral said pleasantly. "He'd never kill a captive until they were too weak to survive the torment he extracts from them. That's his weakness. Though I'm surprised he would run as sloppy an operation as he does. Rel'in, old man," Jez'ral said amiably, as if talking with an old friend instead of a traitor to his people, "I'm surprised you let my student get through to steal back the Tome."

“That was Veryl, not me,” the elf spat.

“Ah. So that explains why she returned to me with her robes ripped open. Veryl never could stand to let a woman pass by without interference.”

“I’ll kill him!” Zerith swore, looking around for the subject of discussion.

“She beat you to that,” Rel’in said calmly. “She cut him to ribbons in the library. Veryl never did stop to think that someday, a wench might actually back up her ‘no’ with a little action.”

“That’s my *sister* you’re talking about, you filth!” Zerith shouted, advancing on the captive man, enraged beyond reasoning. Jez’ral grabbed the priest before he could tear Rel’in apart with his bare hands.

“Stop it, Rel’in,” Jez’ral sighed. “You won’t get an easy death at this young man’s hands. Zerith,” he said to the priest, “leave. Go see if you can find the prison cells. That’s more likely than not where Alayne will be.” For a moment, it seemed as if the priest would ignore the warlock. Then Ger’alin stumbled into the room.

“Zerith,” he gasped, “quick. Found her,” he said as he sucked air into his starving lungs. “Hurt bad. Needs your help.”

Without another look at the traitor elf, Zerith followed Ger’alin further into the lair at a run.

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Zerith gasped in horror as he examined the woman’s injuries. Ger’alin hovered over him, pacing and cursing at himself. Reaching out to the Light, Zerith made a futile attempt to heal Alayne. He sighed when the effort was not enough. His sister’s injuries were beyond his ability to repair alone. Trying again would be like trying to reach for the moon by standing on his toes. Every gasp or moan she let escape from her throat when he moved her cut through him like a knife. He wished he could risk waking Alayne, risk letting her know she was safe, that her tormenters were dead.

“She’d just pass right back out from the pain,” he whispered to himself. Alayne was a mass of cuts, bruises, and burns. He could feel the heat of infection just by hovering his hand over some of the worst of them. If the prison cell hadn’t stunk of illness and putrefaction before now, the stench of the woman’s untreated wounds would have made the air loathsome on its own.

“Zerith?” he heard Dar’ja call out from the door way. “They said you needed assistance. I came as quickly as I could.”

He nodded and pointed for her to sit on the other side of Alayne. Closing his eyes, he felt Dar’ja reaching for the source of her divine powers while he opened himself to the Light. At a signal that he couldn’t explain but knew instinctively, he melded their energies together and directed them into the woman’s body.

Alayne gasped and then settled back to the floor, her breathing deep and easy. Only faint bruises and scars remained, marking her fair skin, as signs of her torture. Examining her again, he smiled sadly at Alayne. The wounds to her body were gone, soon only scars remained. The wounds to her spirit would take much longer to heal.

With a sigh, Zerith let Dar’ja help him up. He opened the door and was almost knocked over by Ger’alin. “She’s still asleep,” Zerith said in response to the question in the fighter’s eyes. “She’ll need to rest.”

“I know, I know,” Ger’alin muttered, unable to keep delight out of his voice. “But she doesn’t have to stay here, does she?”

“No, I suppose not,” Zerith said tiredly. “You can take her to your tent.”

Ger'alın flushed in embarrassment but said nothing as he carried Alayne out of the dank cell.

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Ger'alın smiled, at least, it was an attempt at a smile, as yet another person clapped him on the shoulder and offered congratulations. Zerith must have related the entire incident to Callie for it to have spread all over the gathering so quickly.

"I am going to strangle her," he muttered to himself, or words to that effect.

"Strangle who?" the intended target asked. Ger'alın gave a start; he had not heard anyone creep up behind him.

"You," he snarled. "Are you trying to get me killed?"

"What are you so upset about?" Callie blinked. "Whatever it was, I didn't do it. I've been too busy," she said, fighting a smile, "too busy looking after your woman!" she cackled.

"How is Alayne doing?" Ger'alın asked pointedly, trying to ignore the teasing.

"She's still asleep," Callie said, her demeanor changing instantly. "Zerith thinks she may sleep another day or so. If we hadn't killed most of them, I'd be all for going and massacring those blasted cultists until...until...until they were dead!" she finished lamely, her anger preventing her from making her normal smart-aleck rejoinder.

"I can agree with you there," Ger'alın muttered, unconsciously gripping the hilt of his sword. "You should be glad you didn't see what she looked like before Zerith and Dar'ja got there."

"I am. It's bad enough just watching her sleep now. You can call me a liar, but two days ago, I'd have prayed for her to sleep peacefully. Now I wish she'd twitch or move or mumble just once. It's un-natural," Callie shuddered. "If I couldn't see her chest rising and falling, I'd think she was dead, she's so still. Zerith says it's just exhaustion but..."

"I understand," Ger'alın whispered. "The Magram are sitting quiet," he said, changing the subject.

"So that's where you went. Dar'ja said she figured you were scouting out one of the other clans. She said you probably needed to get away from all the well-wishers for a few hours."

Ger'alın winced. "I'm glad she's still asleep. I've been meaning to talk to you about those 'well-wishers' ever since the first of them offered their congratulations. Oh no, don't try that wide-eyed innocent look with me, Callie. That trick won't work this time."

"I had nothing to do with this one, Ger'alın. I swear."

"I have a hard time believing you considering that you've managed to tell every last person what someone else remarked about them when it amused you. But this time, it's gone a little too far. I've not had a moment's peace since we got back from Mannoroc Coven!"

"I swear I said nothing to no one. The only person I've mentioned it to was you."

"Sure."

"She's telling the truth," Zerith said. Both sin'dorei and Forsaken started. So intent they had been on their arguing that they had not heard the priest approach.

"Is she awake yet?"

"How is she?"

"She's still asleep. And she'll be fine," Zerith sighed. "It's just exhaustion."

"Are you sure?" Callie asked. "I can hardly stand to go in there."

"It is just exhaustion," the priest repeated. "After seeing what they did to her, I'm not surprised at all by how long it's taking her to wake up. Light, I probably wouldn't want to wake up either after being treated like that," he shuddered.

“Don’t let yourself dwell on it, Zerith,” Ger’alin advised. “We’ve already brought her tormentors to justice.”

“I know,” he sighed. “But, at any rate, Callie’s not the one who spread news of your marital status all over the camp. You can thank the centaurs for that. And no, Ger’alin, you can’t go and bash our new allies over the head so don’t even ask. I’m sure that if you’ll just wait and explain it to her rationally, she’ll understand and be flattered.”

“Yes, she’ll understand,” Callie nodded. “If I’d been in your place, I’d have done the same thing.”

“And it gives you something else to harass me over,” Ger’alin laughed without mirth. “I’m going to go find something to eat and try to avoid ever speaking to anyone ever again. Me and my big mouth.”

“Why is he letting it bother him so much?” Zerith wondered aloud after Ger’alin had stalked off. “I mean, yeah, sure, Alayne’s old fashioned. She doesn’t even like me being in her room when I’m looking after her and she calls me her brother. Still, she didn’t flip out that night he passed out on the floor of her room so... What?” he asked, seeing the disgusted look on Callie’s face.

“I refuse to believe that you are as dimwitted as you’re pretending to be,” the Forsaken muttered, turning on her heel and following Ger’alin.

“Is everyone trying to drive me crazy?” Zerith called out after her. “Because, if so, you’re succeeding admirably! I wish someone would let me in on this joke,” he muttered.

“What joke?” Dar’ja asked as she walked up to him.

“I don’t know,” he sighed, hating the whine in his voice. Stumping over to her, he leaned his head down against her shoulder in tired defeat. He smiled when he felt her arms circle his waist and heard her murmur something vaguely comforting. “Forget about them,” he muttered into her hair. “Let’s get something to eat before I have to go check in on Alayne again.”

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“They’ll never forgive me,” Alayne whispered to the stranger. She sat in a cold, dark room, much like the cell that housed her. “I betrayed them because I was weak and scared and they’ll never forgive me.” In the strange manner of dreams, she felt comfortable confessing to the strange man standing, swathed in shadows, in front of her.

“I forgive you,” he rasped.

“I know you do,” she said, surprised that she did know. “But, do you understand...”

“Understand about the battle you face to control your temper? Understand the shame you felt when you pleaded with your captors to let you tell them all about the disposition of the forces in the Ghostlands?” the stranger asked, amused. “Of course I understand, Alayne. I’ve betrayed and been betrayed in turn.”

“I don’t think I can bear it,” Alayne continued as if she had not heard. “I don’t think I’ll be able to bear the looks of disgust and scorn that they’ll give me when I must tell them about what I did. They’ll hate me, then. Instead of caring for me, Zerith will push me away again, like he did once already. I’ll be all alone again. Just like after Mother died.”

“You’ll never be alone. Come to me and I can reunite you with your friends and family,” the stranger offered. “Already, I have calmed the battle within you. There is much I can do to help you grow strong, little one.” He could sense the woman hesitating, wavering in her decision. All that held her from him was her devotion to her brother. The stranger had not yet uncovered a way to cut that tie though he had several likely plans in motion. He disliked being forced to move so quickly and openly. With a sigh that sounded like the icy wind of death itself, the stranger changed his tactic. “You should rest,” he cooed soothingly, careful to

keep distaste out of his tone. “Rest and dream of one who will always love you, no matter what choices you make.”

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Alayne sat, facing the corner of her room, shivering and sobbing. Her mother had shoved her into her room ages ago, ordering her to sit in the corner and think about what she'd done. It wasn't fair, the little girl thought to herself. It wasn't as if she'd meant to break that jar. She'd just wanted to look at the pretty sparkles it was making. She hadn't meant to disobey her mother. She was just so curious about the pretty things in the store that she couldn't stop her hands from reaching out to try to grab them.

Outside, she could hear her mother and father talking. Then she heard the stairs creak and the door to her room open. Turning, she began sobbing anew when she saw her father's stern face.

“Alayne, come here,” he said firmly, sitting on her bed. Alayne wiped the tears from her eyes and hiccupped as she dragged her feet, walking slowly across the room until she stood in front of her father. She heard him sigh and then say, “Alayne, look up at me.” She lifted her face and stared up at him, unable to stop her crying. “Your mother told me what happened at the arcanist's shop today, Alayne. You know better than to touch anything unless your mother or I say you may.”

“Yes, Papa,” she sobbed.

“Until you can learn to obey your mother and me, you won't be allowed to go out shopping with us. You'll have to stay with your grandmother when we have to run errands until you can show us that you are an obedient little girl. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa,” she sobbed again. She flinched when he reached out for her and saw his expression change from one of sternness to one of concern. She felt her heart flutter when he lifted her up and set her in his lap, rocking her while she cried.

“There, there,” he said softly. “Stop crying. It's okay now.”

“I c-can't!” she wailed, burying her face in her father's chest and shuddering.

“What's the matter, Alayne? I just told you what your punishment was. There's no need to keep carrying on like this.”

“I was 'fraid,” she managed to croak out. “I thought you and Mama would hate me for being so bad.”

“Oh now,” he said, holding her up to his face and smiling, “there's nothing in this world that you could do so bad that would make Mama and I hate you. I love you, Alayne, and I always will.”

Alayne stared at her father's smiling face, seeing the love shining from his bright blue eyes. The warmth of his care melted away the rest of her fear and she smiled, wrapping her arms around his neck and tangling them in his long, reddish brown hair while he rocked her until she fell asleep, safe and secure in her father's loving arms.

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Alayne woke up and blinked. She was laying atop a pile of furs, a quilt thrown over her. Her tattered and filthy robes had been replaced with a clean linen nightgown and, as she tested her legs, she noticed she had been healed. Lifting her hands to her face, she could no longer feel the swelling or the soreness that had she had grown accustomed to in the last days. Her fingers encountered the wetness of tears as they traced her cheeks and she smiled, letting the bittersweet warmth of nostalgia drift over her as she remembered the dream.

Her joy was short-lived, though, as she pulled herself out of the bed and began to examine her surroundings. A pile of her clothes lay heaped in one corner and, with a shiver, she lifted the remains of what she had been wearing when she was captured. "I don't think there's a seamstress in the universe that could repair this," she muttered. "I wish there was one who could repair my memories," she said as she threw the rags down and wiped her hands on her nightgown. "Where in the nine hells am I?" she asked aloud.

"Ah, you're awake!" came a booming feminine voice from the opening of the tent. "Just stay there, lass. Your mate was worried about you. I'll go fetch him now."

"Thank you!" Alayne called out to her mysterious benefactress. "Wait, my *what*?"

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Ger'alín tore another bit of meat off the haunch he held, telling himself it was deer, and swallowed without tasting it. The sun was setting and a chill was spreading across the desert, making him grateful to sit close to the fire, telling himself that it was the heat of the flame that was bringing color to his face and not the remarks of the centaurs he'd chosen to sup with. Thinking that they would leave him in peace had been his first mistake, he mused as he tore another bite off and chewed angrily. Maybe, if he could figure out a way without offending his new "brothers," he could introduce them to a concept called "the quiet game" that his mother had loved for him to play when he was a child.

He tried to smile and nod happily as the centaurs continued to offer their rather frank, and, considering the differences in physiology, *impossible* -- not to mention inappropriate -- advice on how best to celebrate his "mate's" return. Waving them off, he said something about needing some more wine and stalked off. Seeing Dar'ja, Zerith, and Callie sitting by themselves, he headed in their direction. The good-natured ribbing of his friends was preferable to the more ribald lessons their allies had been giving him.

He was halfway to his friends when he heard hooves galloping in his direction. Turning, he saw one of the centaur women who'd been helping to tend to Alayne. The horse-woman wore a broad grin as she halted in front of the elven man.

"Your woman's awake," the female centaur laughed. "Climb aboard; she's eager to see you."

"Me and my big mouth!" Ger'alín groaned.

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Alayne paced the width of the tent, her heart pounding in fear. Had the centaurs rescued her from the Burning Blade and then given her to one of their own as some kind of sick prize? She'd heard stories of women taken in raids from the humans as she was growing up and the notion had always disgusted her. She froze when she heard hooves approaching her tent. Looking around for a weapon, she steeled herself to fight off whatever barbaric horse-man thought he would ravish her. Her hand gripped a spear stuck in the ground in the corner of the tent and, with a strength borne of desperation, she managed to free it from the dirt.

Her heart lurched in her throat when she saw Ger'alín duck into the tent and she dropped the spear in relief.

"You will not believe what they told me," she said, her voice shaky with the release of tension.

"It's good to see you up and about," Ger'alín said, looking everywhere except at Alayne. "But maybe you should go back to sleep for a while?" he suggested lamely.

“Oh no,” she laughed. “I’m starving. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. Where are Zerith and Callie? Are they still mad at me?”

“You’re hungry? That’s fantastic!” Ger’alin exclaimed. “I’ll just go get you something to eat. I’m sure Zerith and the others will want to see you as well. I’ll just go get them too while I’m at it,” he said, lifting the tent flap as he prepared to go out.

“Wait a minute,” Alayne said. “Where are we? What happened? The last thing I remember is trying to get to the door,” she explained, “and thinking that I was going to die in there...” she trailed off, shuddering in distaste at the memory, “The next thing I remember is waking up here and some centaur lady saying – and this will make you laugh – that she was going to fetch my mate!” Alayne gasped, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. “I thought I was about to meet a four-legged suitor when you ducked in here!”

Ger’alin gave a guilty start. “We’re in the Gelkis village, just west of Mannoroc Coven,” he said, trying to divert her away from any dangerous topic. “You’ve been here for about two days now, asleep. We allied with the Gelkis to rescue you. You were pretty bad off,” he said, his eyes darkening as he recalled the sight. “Between us and the Gelkis, we killed or captured every last one of those Light-be-damned cultists. Did any of them...” Ger’alin trailed off, anger choking him.

Alayne stared at the man as if she had never seen him before. “Did any of them hurt you, Alayne?” Ger’alin managed to croak out, sounding strangled. The woman stared at him dumbly. “If that any one of those scumbags so much as touched you, I swear by the Pantheon, I’ll...!”

“Oh, Light no,” Alayne gasped, understanding dawning. “Some of them wanted to, I suppose, but their leader wouldn’t so much as let them touch me without him being there. He preferred to torture me himself. He seemed to enjoy it,” she shuddered, “Are you okay, Ger’alin? Do you want me to get you some water or something?” she asked, recoiling at the look of implacable hatred on her friend’s face.

“I’m fine,” the fighter said, a slow smile washing away the strange look he’d bore. “I couldn’t be better,” he laughed.

“That’s a relief,” Alayne said, sitting back down on the furs that constituted her bed. “How are the others? Zerith and Callie? And Dar’ja, too,” she added. “Why didn’t they come with you?”

“They’re fine. Zerith and Callie have been hovering over you the whole time. I think they only left to go find something to eat. Speaking of that, you said you were hungry,” he said, turning to leave again. He opened the tent flap to find a pair of centaur matrons standing in front of him carrying plates of food. “Oh no,” he whispered.

“Hungry, lass?” one of the centaur ladies laughed. “Well, you can hardly celebrate with your mate on an empty stomach!”

Ger’alin grabbed the plate from the horse-lady and let the tent flap drop. He turned around, to see Alayne staring at him, her hands on her hips, one knee bent, foot tapping and eyes glittering dangerously. “That’s really a funny story,” he said, forcing a laugh. “You see I told them that we were married so that they would go... Alayne, what are you doing? Put down that spear!”

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“Was that Ger’alin that just rode off on the back of a centaur?” Callie asked, staring off behind Zerith.

“Do I look like I have eyes in the back of my head?” the priest asked, smiling at his friend. “If you’re finished eating, we should probably go check on Alayne. See if you can find some stew or something in case she’s woken up.”

Callie hurried off, while Zerith swallowed the last of his meal. The Forsaken woman returned a few minutes later with a large bowl of steaming stew and a loaf of bread. The pair stood up and began walking towards the tent where the elven woman lay sleeping. Dar'ja spotted them and hurried over, giving Zerith a kiss on the cheek in welcome and whispering that she wanted to check on Alayne as well.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Zerith laughed when he saw a crowd of centaur women gathering around Alayne's tent. He could see the tent flap moving and tell that the horse-women were speaking to someone inside. Then, the horse-women backed away in surprise as Ger'alın sprinted out of the tent, running for his life with Alayne following after him, her night gown hiked to her knees with one hand while she waved a spear in the other.

"Ger'alın!" she screamed as she chased the man, "I'm going to kill you for that!"

"Is this a normal mating custom of your people?" one of the centaurs asked the three gawkers. Three pairs of eyes turned on the questioner. Zerith, Callie, and Dar'ja stared at the centaur for a moment before all three burst into laughter. Zerith managed to convince the horse-women that this was, indeed, some time-honored tradition of his people while Dar'ja and Callie gasped for air, laughing about the newly-invented ancient sin'dorei mating ritual called 'the tree-run.'

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"So, she didn't kill you after all," Zerith said, stifling a laugh. Ger'alın was walking back into the camp, carrying a sleeping Alayne in his arms.

"No, she didn't," the fighter said tightly. "The spear is still up the tree somewhere; I couldn't find it in the dark. Then the little minx fell asleep waiting for me to climb down so she could kill me. I suppose it's all over the camp by now," he muttered.

"It is. There may be a few people in Winterspring who didn't hear her screaming at you, if that's any relief."

"Oddly enough, it is."

"Want me to carry her back to her tent?" Zerith offered.

"Thank you, but no. We came to an...agreement of sorts," he muttered sullenly. "I think she's been spending way too much time with Dar'ja."

"I'll be around shortly to sit with her so you can get some rest."

"Again, thank you, but no," Ger'alın said firmly. "I told you we came to an agreement. Part of it is that I'm to stand guard for her until everyone forgets about this whole incident," he muttered. "It was either that or wear one of her dresses in the middle of the camp and sing some sappy love song," he said in response to the shocked expression on Zerith's face. "Go on. Get some sleep. I'll take care of your sister as if she were my own."

Watching the priest walk off, glancing occasionally over his shoulder and shaking his head, Ger'alın waited until he was out of sight before continuing on with his task. Alayne had extracted several promises from him before she finally let him climb down and sit with her until she fell asleep. She'd found the entire situation hilarious, after she'd calmed down. After she'd finished laughing, they had talked about Zerith and Dar'ja and made speculations about the pair of them until Alayne nodded off. Kicking aside the tent flap and ducking in, Ger'alın set her down and tucked her in, thankful that she was asleep and couldn't see the tenderness in his eyes. "You know," he whispered to her sleeping face, "I would have agreed to watch over you, regardless."

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"I can't believe you're letting him sleep in your tent," Dar'ja said as she and Alayne worked the blades together. They were the only two non-centaurs left at the village; all of the others had ridden off just after dawn to raid the Magram.

"I rather like having him as a guard dog," Alayne laughed. She almost wished she could let Dar'ja and Callie in on what she and Ger'alín were planning. He had told her about the teasing he'd taken for what he'd done to rescue her and she was more than happy to help him get a little back. "Anyway, when are you and Zerith just going to get on with it?" she asked pointedly.

"We're quite happy with the way things are, Alayne."

"So, should I call the caterer, then?"

"What's gotten in to you?" Dar'ja muttered. "A week ago you were on my case saying I was going too far, too fast."

"Nothing in particular," the other woman sighed. "Your sword work could use some work, too," Alayne said as she managed to put the other woman in a wrist lock and disarm her.

"You've improved tremendously," Dar'ja sighed, rubbing her wrist. "I suppose Ger'alín's been teaching you all kinds of holds."

"And what do you mean by that?" Alayne cried angrily.

"Nothing, Alayne. Sheesh, no need to get so touchy."

Alayne waved her off, sitting down and wiping the sweat from her face. Dar'ja settled down next to the other woman, still rubbing her wrist and stretching to cool down from the work out.

"You should take Zerith back to Silvermoon and marry him," Alayne said suddenly. Dar'ja nearly choked on the gulp of water she had in her mouth.

"What brought this on?"

"Just do it. As soon as he gets back from this raid, tell him you want to go home and get married or something. Just get him out of here and keep him safe and take care of him."

"Alayne, I've barely known him two months. And, yes, I guess you could say that we'll probably marry one day, it won't be any day soon. You were right that I was moving too fast before."

"Don't wait," Alayne muttered irritably. "You never know when one of you might not come back. Just do it! I don't want him out here anymore! Everyone should just go home!"

"I see," Dar'ja said, not understanding completely. "Does this have anything to do with being held captive by the Burning Blade?" She saw Alayne flinch and knew she had struck a nerve.

"Alayne, Zerith will be fine. He will always come back and he will never let anything happen to you again. You've heard him discussing that ever since you came back. He and Ger'alín have completely restructured the force so that the reserve will never be caught off-guard and short-handed like you were again."

Alayne glared at Dar'ja, then turned and looked up the road. In the distance, they could hear hoof-beats pounding on the stone road. The warriors were returning from the raid and, by the shouts they could hear, the Magram had been beaten. Dar'ja sighed when she saw Alayne slam her sword into her scabbard and stalk back to her tent, ignoring the victors' return. Plastering a smile on her face to mask her irritation, Dar'ja stood, watching the raiders return, looking for Zerith. Spotting him, she hurried to his side. He leapt down from his mount and hugged her, planting a kiss on her cheek as he let one of the reserves take El'a's reins.

"Did it go well?" she asked, returning his kiss with one of her own.

"Once we sweep the Maudine out of the hills to the north, the Gelkis will be the undisputed rulers of Desolace. And, they've sworn never to invade or even encroach on

tauren lands, so our task will be accomplished. Ger'alín and I will plan the final raid tomorrow, after the celebration."

"That sounds wonderful," Dar'ja smiled, wrapping an arm around Zerith's waist and leading him towards the edge of the village. Once she was certain they were alone, she smiled and kissed him on the lips.

After several moments, she pulled away with a sigh and looked up at him through lowered lashes. She wasn't sure how to mention this, especially considering how he was looking at her at the moment, but it had to be said. Taking a deep breath, she blurted out, "Alayne's lost her mind. She wants us to go back to Silvermoon and get married." Zerith blinked at her, letting that run through his mind until it made sense.

"She actually said that?" he asked finally, his expression unreadable.

"Yes. She's been hinting at it since she woke up but today, she just said it right out. 'As soon as he gets back from this raid, tell him you want to go home and get married or something. Just get him out of here and keep him safe and take care of him. I don't want him out here anymore!' were her exact words, I believe."

"Hmph."

"Zerith, I'm really getting worried about her. I know you are too. You've got to go talk to her and see if she'll talk back. You two were the best of friends. Now, whenever she looks at you, she looks like she's been punched in the gut and you look like you're about to pass out."

"Dar'ja..."

"No," she said firmly. "No stalling. You're going to talk to her right now." Suiting words to action, Dar'ja pulled Zerith behind her and towards Alayne's tent. Reaching it, she shoved him inside.

Zerith straightened his robes and took a step into the tent's interior. The world turned upside down as he felt someone grab his arm and flip him over their shoulder. Luckily, he landed on his back on the bed. Staring up in consternation, he saw Alayne looking back at him in surprise. "Is this how you greet Ger'alín?" he asked dryly.

"I'm sorry, Zerith," Alayne muttered, moving to help him sit up. "Ger'alín's been harping on me about my tosses and I figured I'd show him how much my technique has improved."

"Yeah, sure," Zerith muttered. "Dar'ja wants me to talk to you. Apparently you've decided she and I should get married right away." Alayne jerked back as if burnt. "And, apparently you want us both to head for Silvermoon and stay there. She didn't mention anything about you returning with us, so I'm assuming you'd stay out here."

"I just want you to be happy," Alayne said blankly.

"I am happy, Alayne."

"Then I'm glad for you," she said in a rush, "and you can quit wasting time with me and go be with her," she said, hustling him towards the tent flap.

"And what if I'd rather stay in here and talk to you?" he asked, planting his feet and refusing to be budged.

"Oh, you wouldn't want that," Alayne laughed dispiritedly, trying vainly to move him.

"Um, unless you're planning some kind of private celebration with Ger'alín in here, that is exactly what I want."

Alayne gave up with an elaborate shrug and flopped down on the floor. "Why would you want that?" she asked dully.

"Why wouldn't I want to spend some time with my sister?" he asked, settling next to her and putting an arm around her shoulders. He felt her tense up but refused to let that dissuade him. Maybe Dar'ja was right and he had left this too long. Alayne whispered something incoherent, her face turned away. "Come again?" he asked, leaning closer to her.

“You hate me,” she muttered through clenched teeth, “and you are right to.”

“I don’t hate you, Alayne. Where ever did you get that crazy idea?” he gasped in horror.

“I know you do,” she said in the same tone, her back still facing him. “I hate me too. That’s why you should leave now.”

“Alayne, you’re crazy. I don’t hate you. Come here,” he muttered irritably, “I want you to look at me and talk to me.” Grabbing her shoulders, he forced her to turn around and face him. The sight took his breath away. Her face was red, her eyes bloodshot and filled with tears, and her jaw clenched. It was evident that she was exerting all of the energy she possessed not to cry. “If you won’t talk,” he said, letting his own eyes fill, “I will.” Ignoring the shock on her face, he let the words rush out of him, telling her how guilty he felt for putting her in the reserve, for being short with her the morning she’d been taken, for not rushing off immediately with Ger’alin to rescue her. He let them flow, and let the tears of guilt, shame, and fear flow as well. By the time he finished, Alayne was staring at him, very still and quiet. “If anyone should hate anyone,” he said around the lump in his throat, “*you should hate me.*”

A second later, Zerith was gasping for air. Alayne had tackled him in a hug that knocked him flat on his back. He patted her gently on her back while she wept incoherently against his shoulder, sobbing brokenly that she could never hate him. Zerith wisely said nothing, knowing he had no idea what to say and that the wrong thing could send her back into her self-imposed isolation. Instead, he just lay there, letting his sister strangle him while he patted her on the back, wishing she would open up and tell him what was eating at her. “She’ll come around, in time,” he told himself as he just let her cry herself out.

After a while, she pushed herself up and pulled him up on his seat. The two sat, hiccupping companionably. “So, best friends again?” Zerith said lamely.

“Yes,” Alayne replied. Lifting her head, she strained to listen to who was approaching. Sharing a mischievous smile with her brother, she motioned for him to hide on the other side of the tent opening while she planted herself where she had been when Zerith entered. A moment later, Ger’alin strode in, saying something about dinner. He didn’t get very far when Alayne grabbed his arm and, twisting so her leg twined around his in mid-step, she lifted him off the ground and flipped him over her back, using his own momentum against him.

“Now that,” the fighter said when he managed to get his wind back, “was a perfectly executed body slam.”

Zerith shook his head as he headed out of the tent. His sister could be strange sometimes.

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“Would you like me to bring you something back, Alayne?” Ger’alin asked as he finished polishing his sword and shield. Alayne was laying down, a compress over her eyes, complaining of a headache from crying herself out on Zerith’s shoulder. She’d confided the entire conversation to her “adopted guard-dog,” as she liked to term him, and Ger’alin had listened intently, letting her relive the moments, passing no judgment and offering nothing but silent commiseration.

“No, thanks. I’ll probably be asleep by the time you get back anyway.”

“Fair enough. Zerith and I will be planning the last raid tomorrow. Do you want to take part in it or would you rather stay back here again? I’ve noticed that you’ve been having trouble concentrating enough to cast your spells when we drill. Actually, I’ve noticed that you’re having trouble concentrating, period.”

“And I’ve noticed that you seem to be spending all of your free time sitting under a tree and staring at the ground,” Alayne muttered defensively.

Ger’alin jumped and turned to stare at her in amazement. He hadn’t realized that anyone had noticed his attempts to teach himself what his instructors amongst the Blood Knights had failed to drum into him. “Oh no,” he said flatly, “let’s not divert the issue. Do you need more time to recover or do you feel stifled sitting on the side-lines? Don’t worry about convincing Zerith either way; I’ll take care of that for you.”

“I just want us all to go home,” she sighed.

“I know that, Alayne. You’ve told me that at least a hundred times already. I know that you are scared half to death right now.” He tossed the rag he’d been using on the ground and sat down on the bed at her feet. “I remember how long it took my partner back in Theramore to get back on his feet after he’d been held captive by the ogres – and they just put him in a cage for a day. They didn’t beat him black and blue like you were. But, you can’t hide away forever, Alayne. The world is a big place; sometimes a dangerous place. Zerith is no safer in Silvermoon than he is out here. Less, probably, if some of the goings-on I saw are tolerated as much as I suspect.”

“Don’t talk treason, Ger’alin.”

“Don’t try to mother me, Alayne,” he said lightly, tweaking her toes. “So, will you go or will you stay?”

“I’ll go,” she muttered. Ger’alin stood up and headed out. “Oh, and Ger’alin?” she called out, halting him. He turned to see her lifting the compress from her forehead and propping herself up on one elbow. “That rag goes over in the pile of things to be washed; not in the middle of the floor. I don’t care what you told the centaurs; I’m not picking up behind you all the time. I’m your friend; *not* your wife,” she teased.

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“She’ll be coming along in the next one,” he whispered into Zerith’s ear. “And don’t stick her off in the reserves.”

“She’s ready go get back into the thick of things already?” Zerith said, his brow furrowing in surprise. “I’d have thought she’d want to stay out of it a while longer, considering how she’s been telling Dar’ja to take me back to Silvermoon and marry me.”

“She’s actually said that?” Ger’alin asked in shock. “*Belore*, she really needs a change of scene then.”

“What do you mean by that?” the priest asked.

“She’s not well out here with all the pressure,” the fighter sighed. “She won’t talk to anyone about what’s bothering her and I’ve discussed it with her often enough lately to realize that she’s got to work out what’s wrong on her own. I know you and Callie had been pressing her to try to open up but that seems to be the wrong tactic with Alayne. Something in her is not letting her confide in us. She needs to be left alone, I think, to work it out.”

“Considering you rarely leave her side lately, I guess you would know best.”

“Don’t snap my nose off,” Ger’alin muttered. “She’s afraid to talk to you for some reason. I managed to get that much out of her. I thought about telling her that you know what she did at Stromgarde but I’m afraid of making any wrong move with her right now. She has, at least, stopped talking to herself like she did right after she came back from her trials.”

“That’s a relief. I suppose she’s sleeping better, too?”

“She sleeps. She talks in her dreams, sometimes. Nothing that makes any sense, though.”

“So you two have something in common. Don’t look at me like that; Dar’ja says your nocturnal mutterings were the talk of the class, back in Silvermoon. She has been dying to ask you about the one where you were talking about candy in Durotar and the orc fairy.”

“Lovely girl, Dar’ja. Remind me to drop a house on her sister.”

“Hey now!”

“Sorry,” Ger’alin muttered. “I keep forgetting that she acts half-way decent around you.”

Zerith sighed and stretched out, tucking his hands behind his head and staring up at the cloudless blue sky. “Maybe Alayne’s right.”

“What?”

“Maybe she’s right. Maybe we shouldn’t be out here. Maybe, we never should have left Silvermoon.”

“You’re joking. If we’d stayed cooped up in Silvermoon, safe and sound, who would have killed Dar’khan? Or driven Arugal out? Or brought the Arathi Highlands to the Horde? Or any of the other things you two have led us to do? What honor, what glory would there have been staying in Silvermoon?”

“Alayne never would have lost control of herself in Stromgarde if we hadn’t been there,” Zerith pointed out. “I never would have been shot; she wouldn’t have been taken captive by the Burning Blade. I imagine we’d all be much happier if we’d stayed where we belonged.”

“And the Horde would still be looking at every single sin’dorei cross-eyed if you two hadn’t proven our worth to Thrall.”

“I think you forget that Alayne and I were never warriors like you, Ger’alin. Alayne, at least, shouldn’t be out here anymore.”

“So you’ll pack her off to Silvermoon? You think that’s the answer?”

“I don’t know what the answer is anymore.”

Ger’alin sighed and dug a pebble out of the ground. Flinging it into the distance, he sat, lost in thought for a while. Zerith closed his eyes against the glare of the sun and half-dozed, still tired from the day’s fighting.

“What if we went back just for a visit?” Zerith opened one eye and looked up at his friend. “Maybe that’s just what we all need right now; to finish this task and then take a break. I know I should return to the Blood Knights; there’s many things I need to learn. That’s one lesson I’ve got by heart after all this journeying,” Ger’alin muttered. “And, it would probably calm Alayne down a bit to have us all somewhere safe for a while. It’d give her a chance to come to grips with whatever’s bothering her and,” he laughed, “it’d give you a chance to court Dar’ja in a more relaxed setting.”

“Maybe that is what we need,” Zerith sighed. “We’ll make this battle a good one and then take a vacation until we’re *all* more settled.”

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Alayne stood nervously waiting for the signal to strike. She’d been going over her spells in her mind, murmuring them beneath her breath to make certain she had the incantations correct. Ger’alin had been right that she’d had trouble casting her spells lately. The closer she let herself get to opening up, the more the other her, the one in the back of her head flogged her, telling her she couldn’t place all her troubles on her friends shoulders. Alayne had been fighting a non-stop internal war with herself for weeks and she was just about spent. She would try to confide in one of her friends, only to have the other her clamp her mouth shut, screaming at her for being weak, for failing to protect the others. The other one was driving her mad with her constant nagging, dredging up of her nightmares, and her

contradictions. Alayne never knew, from one moment to the next, if the voice she heard would be cruel or kind.

“I’ve got to stop thinking about that and focus on the moment,” she muttered. A faint “yes, you do,” whispered in her ear. Muting it, she concentrated.

Below her, she could see the Gelkis and Ger’alin’s group galloping up the slope, whooping and hollering, drawing the main body of the Maudine down upon them. That was her signal. Lifting a hand, she jerked her arm forward, signaling for her group to jump from their hiding places on high and hurry into range.

“I am with you, young one,” she heard a man whisper in her ear. ***“Fight well.”***

Her nervousness left her, lifting away like a mist, and she felt the thrill of magic tingle through her blood as she began casting her spells. The voice that had lurked in the back of her head was held off, leaving her free to be as she was meant to be. She laughed as she skipped down the hill, leaping lightly off of rocks, skidding to a stop near the surging mass of Maudine fighting to free themselves from the enemies encircling them. She lifted her hands and streaks of dark flame shot from them, engulfing the centaur, distracting them with its searing pain while the fighters, led by Ger’alin, chopped them down. On the other side of the fray, she could see Callie leaping from a Gelkis’s back to straddle a Maudine centaur while she reached around before the creature could turn its half-human body and slit its throat. Alayne could see the heated joy of combat in her friend’s eyes and knew it was reflected in her own.

Back and back their surrounding cluster pushed the Maudine, opening only to allow other centaurs to fall into the encircling trap. Once the entire group enclosed within the deadly surround was down, the fighters split apart, wheeling and flanking, to surround the next group. Further up the pass, other groups penned and held the rest of the Maudine, some forming their own deadly enclosures where the terrain and numbers favored them. Zerith stood in the midst of the fighting, watching each group battle on and directing the healers with him where their energies were needed the most. He paused to give Alayne a tight-lipped but happy smile, overjoyed to see her more herself than she had been in weeks.

The battle stretched on, the Gelkis and their Horde allies pushing the Maudine back. In vain, a pair of young centaur warriors tried to make for the enormous war-horn set at the top of a treacherous climb. Both were brought down quickly, frozen in place by the mages under Davril’s command and finished off by the fighters with Tau’re. By the time the sun set, the only remnants of the Maudine clan were those who had hidden themselves deep within the mountain cave that gave them their name: Maraudon.

“Should we go flush them out?” Ger’alin asked after the fighting had ended. He was kneeling on the ground, trying to catch his breath, holding himself up with his sword. His shield has battered from the centaurs’ desperate blows and his shield arm still rang from them. Alayne sat next to him, just as winded, wiping blood from a gash on his forehead. He had waved off offers of healing, saying he just needed to catch his breath but more than content to let Alayne worry over him.

“Leave them,” Uthek said, snorting. “Let them hide in their dank caves. We will take their land and ensure that they never forget their cowardice in running from an honorable fight.”

“Then we are done here,” Zerith said, letting his legs fold beneath him. There had been few serious injuries, but he’d still had his hands full. “Tomorrow, we will go back to Silvermoon to rest awhile,” he announced.

Alayne laughed in delight. “Shall I start decorating the cathedral for your wedding?” Zerith picked up a handful of loose pebbles and tossed them at her.

“Oh, you are to be mated?” one of the Gelkis centaurs asked. “We must celebrate that tonight along with our victory over the Maudine!”

“What? NO!” Zerith shouted, but it was too late. He glared at Alayne and Ger’alin who were both roaring with laughter. The centaurs were wasting no time in spreading the word and the other members of the Disorder of Azeroth were shaking off their fatigue to offer congratulations and best wishes.

“Now you get to see what it’s like!” Ger’alin barked as he wiped tears from his eyes.

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“Since neither she nor I agreed to it, it doesn’t count,” Zerith muttered for the hundredth time when Callie asked him, yet again, how he was enjoying married life. “I’m going to kill her when we get off this zeppelin.”

“Oh, come on, it was all in good fun,” Callie laughed. “Besides, if you want revenge, just go down and talk to her about food. You’ll get to watch her go green around the gills and she’ll probably break all of the bones in Ger’alin’s hand again. Go on, you’ll feel better if you do.”

“Is she still throwing up? At least we’re over the ocean now. I pity anyone who had the misfortune to be beneath our flight path when we were over land.”

“Yes, she is. Dar’ja’s down there tormenting her. I think Ger’alin might get mad at your wife in a few minutes and chuck her off the back of the zeppelin if you don’t go down there and put an end to it.”

“Gah!” Zerith choked. “I’d forgotten completely about that!” he said as he ran down the stairs, nearly tripping himself on the hem of his robes. “Dar’ja said she’d...”

“Hello, Zerith,” Ger’alin said carefully when he heard the clamber and turned to see the priest descending. “Think you could get your missus to *back off a little* before your sister spits up her shoes?”

“I’m not nearly done with her,” Dar’ja muttered angrily. “It will be a sunny spring day in Northrend before I’m done with her.”

“It’s not her blasted fault, Dar’ja! How was either of us to know that the Gelkis would just up and marry you two like that? Does either of us look like we’re experts in centaur customs?”

“I’m sorry,” Alayne gagged as she tried to stand up straight. She and Ger’alin were standing on the outer balcony of the zeppelin where she had been hunched over the railing. She turned to face Dar’ja and to apologize for the thousandth time.

“Oh, it’s quite all right, Alayne,” Dar’ja cooed, her voice larded with honey. “We’ll just go out to the Well of the Sun and have a nice big feast to celebrate the occasion. I guess we should have tender, juicy, rare roast just oozing with sauce since it was such a primitive...” she trailed off as the other woman paled again and bent over the rail. Ger’alin struggled between holding Alayne steady and going over to strangle Dar’ja.

“Dar’ja, stop it,” Zerith said calmly.

“Oh, that’s right, take your sister’s part!”

“Ger’alin, is she finished?” the priest asked, ignoring Dar’ja. The fighter looked over the rail and, paling himself, nodded, swallowing hard as if he might be sick in a minute himself. “Good. Carry her up and tell Callie to keep her trap shut for five minutes, would you?” Not waiting to see if Alayne could steady herself, Ger’alin reached down, lifted her gently to his shoulder, and hurried out before she could be sick again. A yelp followed by a string of curses attested to his failure to accomplish that. Smiling to himself, Zerith shook his head and turned to face Dar’ja.

The woman sat with her back against the bulkhead, her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms hanging over them with her head down. Her face was flushed, either with anger

or embarrassment. Letting her stew for a moment, Zerith adopted the most stern pose he could, recalling all the times he'd gotten in trouble with his father for teasing his little sisters.

"Are you calm, now?" he asked, careful to keep his voice perfectly neutral.

"No," Dar'ja muttered sullenly. "I don't think I'll ever be 'calm' again."

"You'd better learn to be," he continued in the same tone. "You can't go all of your life blaming someone else for your problems." He took a deep breath to steady himself when she glared up at him, hurt and anger in her eyes. "First, you blamed Ger'alín for the bad start you made with him. Then you tried to blame me for the way you acted towards me. Now, you're trying to blame Alayne for something you know you could have put a stop to with a single word. Yes, I know, she started it by making that joke about us getting married. Still, at least they asked you if you wanted to accept me as your mate. You could have said "no" right then and put a stop to the whole business." Dar'ja muttered something beneath her breath. Allowing a little of the anger he was feeling into his voice, he continued, "Why didn't you?" She muttered again. "Speak up, woman!" he growled.

"Because I didn't want to say 'no!'" she shouted. Zerith blinked, taken aback and warmed by her statement. He wished she'd look up at him right then instead of staring at her knees.

"Well, then," he said lightly and dryly, "you can't go blaming it all on Alayne and making her sick with guilt over the matter. She meant it as a joke, Dar'ja. Not as something intended to get us married by the Gelkis. You can't blame it *all* on her."

Dar'ja did look up at him then and smiled tremulously, seeing the warmth and affection replacing the sternness in his face. "No, I suppose I can't," she whispered. Leaning her head back against the bulkhead, she sighed, "I suppose I should go up now and apologize to her. I had her puking for at least a good half hour."

"You could do that," Zerith agreed happily, "or, you could stay down here with me and help me figure out how to get back at her for this whole mess."

"Ooh! I just love a man who likes a good prank!" she laughed.

"And I love you, too," he said, more seriously. Kissing her lightly on the forehead, he changed the subject, "So, do you have any ideas on what to do, or do I need to get Callie and her devious mind down here for that?"

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"Where'd Ger'alín and Alayne go?" Zerith asked as he and Dar'ja stepped off the zeppelin. Callie stood waiting for them on the landing, her face guardedly blank and not making any jokes.

"Oh, Ger'alín decided to just carry her on down the tower instead of letting her go at her normal snail's pace. He muttered something about finding a lake as he passed. Whether it was for him to wash off in or to drown her in, I don't know. He told me to take Lucky on to the stables. I'm just waiting for them to unload the mounts now. Are you feeling better?" she asked cautiously.

"We're fine," Dar'ja said with a grin, wrapping an arm around Zerith. "We'd better go find those two before one of them kills the other."

"That sounds like a good idea," the Forsaken agreed quickly. "You two go on. I'll take care of the animals."

"Where's the nearest lake?"

"Just head south until you hear Thalassian cursing. That will, more likely than not, be Ger'alín."

Zerith shrugged and laughed, putting an arm around Dar'ja's shoulders as they walked down the tower and skirted the ruins of Undercity's upper levels. Near the border with

Silverpine Forest, they found Ger'alın wading in the lake in his armor, scrubbing the backs of his calves and dumping water out of his boots. Once he was satisfied that he was fairly clean, he waded out of the water and sat next to a very pale, very tired-looking Alayne. Zerith motioned for Dar'ja to be quiet while the pair of them sneaked up close enough to hear what the paladin and the warlock were saying.

"...the Light, try to hold it in next time," Ger'alın was growling

"Then don't toss me over your shoulder on my stomach, Ger'alın," Alayne said in response. "It's kind of hard *not* to throw up in that position."

"I wouldn't know," the fighter muttered, leaning back on his elbows and casting a glance at his friend. "I've not been picked up and tossed over someone's shoulder since I was about yea high," he said, lifting a hand about three feet off the ground.

"I can see where it would be difficult to pick you up," Alayne muttered. "If I ever feel like breaking my back, I'll let you know so I can give it a try."

Dar'ja stifled a laugh at the mental image that brought up and glanced over to see Zerith doing the same.

"So, do you want to go back and find the others or would you rather lie out here all night being miserable?" Ger'alın was asking.

"I'll take the second option," Alayne sighed. "Dar'ja hates me. I suppose that means that Zerith will have to hate me now."

"Where do you come up with this stuff, woman? Okay, I'll grant you that Dar'ja does probably hate you right now. She will probably make your life a living hell for a while. She does that to *everyone*, except Zerith, for some reason."

"She loves Zerith, moron."

"I gathered as much when she said she'd take him as her mate," Ger'alın muttered dryly. "Give me some credit, would you? Now, just because she's mad at you, it does not stand to reason that he would be."

"Yes it does."

"No, it does not."

"Yes it does."

"No it does not, Alayne."

"Yes it does."

"Cripes, we *are* going to be out here all night. No. It. Does. Not."

"Can we just go back to Silvermoon? I figure I can sneak into Murder Row and hide out there until things blow over."

"No, we can't just do that. Come on," Ger'alın said, standing up and pulling Alayne to her feet. "At the very least, you need to eat something to replace everything you threw up courtesy of the lovely Dar'ja."

"I'm comfortable here," she whined as she let herself be pulled to her feet. "It's just you and me out here. I don't have to worry about..."

"About what?" Ger'alın asked.

"About a lot of things," she said, putting a hand to her forehead.

"Look, I've learned not to press you, but what things?"

"About what Zerith will think..." she started, suddenly closing her mouth so quickly that Ger'alın could hear her teeth click together as her jaws slammed shut.

"Think about...?" he prodded.

"I..I'm sorry," she muttered, "I just can't talk about it. He's got to hate me, now."

Ger'alın sighed but let it drop. "Why is it that you can talk to me just enough to make me really start to worry about you, but you can't even tell Zerith or Callie why you can't talk to them?"

"You're different," she said dismissively. "Zerith is...well, he's so...*nice* and *sweet*."

“And I’m not?” Ger’alin asked in mock offense.

“You’re asking me this? The woman you got into a drinking contest with? Maybe we should go have another of those,” she suggested, trying to change the subject.

“Oh no,” he begged off, “waking up on the floor of your room and thinking I’d dishonored you once was enough for me, my dear.” Laughing, he put an arm around her shoulders to steer her towards the road and strode off, keeping his pace to hers.

Dar’ja and Zerith waited until the other two were well out of range before coming out of their hiding places. Both wore stricken expressions, staring off the way the other two had gone.

“Oh, I went way too far, didn’t I?” Dar’ja asked rhetorically.

“I suppose you didn’t help matters, but she’s had this crazy idea that I’m going to hate her for a while now. I don’t know where she got it from, but I’m going to find out. One way or another.”

“Let’s go catch up to them. Maybe if I apologize, she’ll feel better and won’t think you’re mad at her for my sake.”

“Maybe. But why would she think that to begin with?”

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“There you four are,” Callie said as she ducked into the Blue Moon tavern. The four sin’dorei were seated around a large, circular table, cups of wine sitting untouched in front of them.

“What took you so long?” Zerith asked. “We’ve been waiting for you so I could make a toast,” he said, shoving a cup of wine at the Forsaken.

“I had to stable the animals over in Brill. There wasn’t enough room here. Before I forget, here are the claim tickets for them so you can pick them up whenever you want.”

“Thank you,” Dar’ja murmured as she pocketed her and Zerith’s tickets. “Now, Zerith, your toast?”

“Oh, yes, thanks for reminding me,” he laughed. Standing up on his chair, he tapped a spoon against his wine cup until the entire tavern was looking at him. Alayne, Ger’alin, and Callie glanced at each other, wondering what was about to come. Dar’ja just sat smirking, holding her cup in her hand. “Um, thank you for your attention,” the priest started lamely. Everyone in the tavern muttered, wondering what the mad elf was doing. “I’d just like to take a moment to raise a toast to my dearest friends. Ger’alin, Callie: thank you for all of your muttered comments appraising the state of my relationship with Dar’ja. I know you thought we couldn’t hear them, but we could. Alayne, my dearest little sister, thank you for opening your big mouth and getting us married over in Desolace.” The three mentioned buried their faces in their hands in humiliation. Alayne’s face went pale as if she were about to be sick again and Ger’alin shifted to make certain he was out of the line of fire. “I’m not finished!” Zerith called out over the rising din of the tavern. “I’d also like to toast my dear wife, Dar’ja. It may not have happened the way either of us thought it would, but we may as well enjoy what we have. Alayne, Ger’alin, thank you both so much. Dar’ja, shall we drink to our long and happy marriage?” he suggested as he emptied his cup and sat back down. “Um, guys. I was being serious, you know,” he said to his table mates. “Really, thanks.”

Ger’alin lifted his head and stared at the pair, seeing the sincerity in their eyes. With a laugh, he clapped Alayne on the back while Callie cheered. “That was so sweet,” he confided, “that I think Alayne’s going to throw up!”