

Spring melted into summer and summer faded to autumn. The first chill of winter danced on the late fall breeze, making Zerith glad to be returning home from his duties in the cathedral. He pulled his scarf tighter around his neck. Nodding to passerby respectfully as he continued home, he plucked at the stole he wore about his shoulders now, marking his rise in the ranks of the devotees of the Light left in Silvermoon. He wished he'd come into his powers earlier. Maybe then...

With a sigh, he pushed the thoughts out of his mind. His sister was with the rest of his family and her own, safe in the Light. Wishing her back was just mortal selfishness. In the months since that first threatened return of the Plague, he'd come to terms with her death. A few of the elves who had known Alayne when she first returned to Quel'Thalas had held a small service in honor of her memory. Zerith wished he'd known where Ger'alain and Callie went off to so they could have come and said good-bye.

Shaking his head, reminding himself that he and Dar'ja's first anniversary was coming up soon, he opened the door to his home, a smile on his lips. As he strode into the living room, his smile stretched into a broad grin. Ger'alain sat on the couch, sipping a mug of tea. Callie sat in the armchair across the room from him, idly flipping one of her daggers in her hand while the two paladins conversed in a surprisingly civil manner. Leaning against the corner of the wall, Zerith stood quietly, not wanting to disturb the scene. The house hadn't been this full since...

"Ah, Zerith. The lady said you'd be home shortly," Ger'alain said courteously, setting his mug on one of the small tables and standing, stretching out his hand in greeting. The priest cocked an eyebrow at the paladin, somewhat surprised at this rather formal greeting.

"He's picked up a lot of bad habits out in the world," Callie laughed, sheathing her dagger and standing up to throw her arms around the priest's neck. "Lucky and I try to keep him reasonably 'Ger'alain,' though."

"What brings you back to town, old friend?" Zerith asked, gripping the other man's forearm and clapping him on the shoulder. "Sit back down, please. I hope you're both planning to stay a while. This house could use some company."

"Actually, they've come back into town to see if we want to leave with them," Dar'ja said, an edge to her voice that Zerith knew meant she wanted to discuss this with him in private before he gave an answer. "They've heard the most fascinating rumors..."

"I assure you, good mistress," Ger'alain said in that maddening formality, "they are more than just mere rumors. Lord Lor'themar himself confirmed the last of my suspicions just this morning. The Warchief, Thrall, has approved my proposal. Therefore, not only do I have the blessing of the government of Silvermoon, I have the personal seal of approval of the leader of the Horde. You can hardly refuse my most reasonable request with that knowledge, can you?"

"Ger'alain, you sound like an ass," Callie laughed. "Quit dancing around the point and ask what you came here to ask him."

"Thank you, my dear," Ger'alain said rigidly as he turned to Zerith. "With the approval of the aforementioned leaders, I have been granted permission to gather the Disorder of Azeroth for an urgent mission into Northrend. I would like to ask you to accompany me. Dar'ja may come as well; we can always use skilled healers."

"Northrend? Are you mad? Is this some kind of a prank, Callie?" Zerith asked, glaring at the woman warily. "It's got all the makings of one of your practical jokes. Ger'alain acting like... someone that's not Ger'alain, asking me to come along to the most Light-forsaken place on this planet just as calmly as asking for a cup of flour."

"I swear, this is no prank," Callie said. "I told you, he's picked up bad habits out in the world. One of them is not explaining to people why he wants them to follow him to the Lich King's footstool," she glared at Ger'alain, kicking him lightly on the ankle. "Sit down, Zerith,"

she said gently, a sad smile warming her undead features. “This wasn’t easy for either of us to learn either, but you’ve got to know that...”

“That’s enough!” Dar’ja shouted, jumping to her feet and grabbing her husband’s hand. Without another word, she dragged him out of the living room and up the stairs to their bed room, slamming the door behind her and blocking it with her own body. “Just stay here,” she gasped, her eyes wide with fright. “Stay here while I throw them out. You’ll never have to see them again.”

“Wait, what is it?” he asked, confused. “Look, if it’s one of their jokes, well, I could use a good laugh.”

“It’s not one of their jokes, Zerith. It’s trash and lies; that’s what it is and they’re both mad to believe it. Just don’t listen to them. Let me go show them out before they can hurt you.”

“Dar’ja, what is it that you don’t want me to hear?”

“No, I won’t do that to you, my love,” she said gently. “I’ll just go see them out now. Stay here, please?”

Dar’ja had turned and opened the door. With a sigh, Zerith reached over her head and shoved it shut before she could get out. Putting his hands on her shoulders, he pulled her away from the door and gently sat her down on the bed. Sitting next to her, he looked her in the face and asked again, “What is it that you don’t want me to hear?”

“Please, Zerith, don’t make me hurt you. Don’t let them hurt you either.”

“Dar’ja, this is the kind of attempted diversion I expected from Alayne before she...” his breath caught in his throat at the guilty start that made his wife jump. “All right,” he sighed, “what does this have to do with Alayne?”

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Zerith stalked down the stairs and into the living room. The little that Dar’ja had told him had him angrier than he’d been in over a year. Someone was lying to him and he intended to get to the bottom of it tonight if he had to tear apart the two friends sitting downstairs with his bare hands.

“You have five minutes,” the priest said as he threw himself into the empty chair opposite Callie. “Make it good.”

Ger’alin opened his mouth to launch into the tale but Callie, seeing the look on Zerith’s face, raised her hand, forestalling him. “Gerry,” she said lightly, forcing a smile on her face, “go and check our rooms at the inn, would you? And make sure the stable boys are taking good care of Lucky.” Ger’alin scowled at the undead but she met his look blandly. With a muttered oath, he rose and stormed from the house. Callie sighed in relief, the false cheer she’d adopted draining from her. “I didn’t want to come here,” she told Zerith baldly. “But it’s been all I could do just to stop him from setting sail to Northrend on his own ever since we ran across an old friend of yours, and Alayne’s, Ber’lon.”

“That’s insane. Ber’lon died the night of the Scourge invasion, just like all of the others infected with the Plague.”

“Oh, I know. But Ger’alin’s...well, he’s Ger’alin. What more can I say? He’s gotten this crazy idea that Alayne is actually still alive, being held captive by the Scourge up in Northrend. I’ve been trying to talk sense into him for over a month now, trying to distract him with all manner of quests, battles, even pretty maids until...well, let’s not get into that. I’ve been shouted at enough recently. A little over a month ago, someone calling himself ‘Ber’lon’ crossed our path in Un’Goro. Ger’alin is convinced that...”

“You don’t need to say anymore,” Zerith sighed. “I see where this is going. Several people have appeared in Silvermoon recently, claiming to be those who died the night of the

Scourge invasion. Lord Lor'themar has ordered them locked up in the dungeons, afraid that it's another manifestation of the Plague. I've spent some time with them myself. They're convincing, but they're traitors, Callie. No doubt Arthas has found passable look-alikes amongst those who have given in to despair and joined the Scourge. It's just another one of his feints to try to shake our resolve."

"Well, maybe you can convince Ger'alín of that. I've been trying for weeks now to set him off this mad plan of his, but he won't listen. The others aren't any help; he's rounded up everyone who flocked to your cause last year and has them all hyped up and eager, raring to go to Northrend. Zerith, don't glare at me like that. I know she's been dead these past ten months and more. And, even if she had been taken captive, she would have either died a prisoner or been killed. Alayne would never join the Scourge, no matter how crazy she was. But, Ger'alín is convinced she's up there, pining away, waiting for him to ride in like some knight out of a children's tale and rescue her. He's been absolutely frenetic these last weeks, riding from one capitol to another, arranging meetings, gathering information, planning campaigns. I brought him here hoping that either you could talk him out of it or, at the least, to give you a chance to see him one last time. I think he means to get himself killed this time; not that he hasn't been trying before now. Well, there," she said, standing up from her seat, "I've told you how it is. I'll go back and tell him that you're not coming and we'll be out of here in a few days."

Zerith watched the woman over steepled fingers. Finally, he sighed. "We'll come with you," the priest said softly.

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Ger'alín listened intently, not daring to move until he was certain that the whole house was asleep. His heart had not stopped pounding with joy since Callie told him to come back to Zerith's house and stay the night in his old room. He hadn't even really heard her say that the priest had agreed to come north with them. He hadn't been able to hear anything over the blood pounding in his ears.

Hearing snoring from the other room, he decided that it was worth the risk. Zerith had loved her in his own way as well; surely he would understand if he came across Ger'alín. Tossing back the quilt, Ger'alín rose and tiptoed down the hallway, careful not to let his armor clank or to make the slightest sound. Pushing open the door to what had been her room, he crept in, letting it shut behind him. He glanced around in irritation. They had moved her things.

"Well, of course," he said ruefully to himself, "they thought she was dead. Now that they know better, I'm sure they'll put it all back." Kneeling down before the bed she had once slept in, he lay his head on the quilts and closed his eyes, imagining that he could still catch a scent of her after all this time. With a blissful smile, he fell into a peaceful slumber, the first he had had in almost a year, and dreamed dreams of their reunion.

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The woman gripped the windowsill tightly, feeling an old flutter in the pit of her stomach at the thought of being so high above the ground. Forcing it away, she watched the land pass beneath them in silence. Below her lay the snowy reaches of Northrend, her true homeland. She reached up and removed her helm, leaning out the window to inhale the sharp, icy air. Turning back to face the room, she smiled, a cold smile that did not warm her eyes.

Off to one side stood the man who had once been a sergeant in the Silvermoon guard force. His reputation had only grown since his death and resurrection into the ranks of the

Scourge. It had been him who had finally convinced her of the truth her master revealed to her. Letting the smile slip from her face; she was no longer accustomed to such displays, she stared out the window once again, remembering her first nights in the ziggurat and the clarity they had brought.

She'd been ill. She could recall that easily. An illness brought on her by those she thought loved her, by those she had called 'brother' and 'friend.' It had sapped her, weakening her mind, turning her into a brainless, witless child. But then, she had been a brainless, witless child crying for her father in the night. Her mouth twisted in distaste as she remembered her confusion, her frantic attempts to control that which needed no control. Her father had shown her the way. No longer did the woman waste her time wrenching demons to serve her; instead, she wielded death with her own hands. She could feel the fever within her chilling, freezing her blood as she unslung the runeblade from her back and let it flash, reflecting the light of the moon while she thought back to that first night...

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The room was dark, cool, and restful to her fevered eyes. Letting herself relax on the cold stone slab covered lightly with straw, the woman exulted in being able to actually think again. The madness that had gripped her these past months was lifting. The dark robed priests had cured her. With a tired smile, she raised a hand and, letting the sweet ecstasy of magic course through her, whispered the beginnings of a spell. She could feel the Nether twist in response to her summons and had to restrain herself from laughing in delight when a dark flame appeared, dancing merrily before her face.

The door to her room creaked open. A dark robed, pasty-faced human glided over to her bed side and, neither gently nor roughly, forced a foul-tasting concoction down her throat. Her joy was not dulled at all by the treatment; indeed, happiness soared within her. "Bless you," she murmured to her caretaker. "How can I ever repay you?"

"Serve the Master," was the human's mirthful reply.

"And who is your master?" the woman asked, pushing herself up to sit on the slab.

"I am, little one," replied a familiar voice. A breeze blew through the room and, her jaw dropping in shock, the woman saw the phantasm of a man she'd vowed to fight with all her strength. "Calm yourself, little one," the apparition laughed. "Or would you seek to harm the one who cured you of the madness your own people inflicted upon you?"

"You're lying!" the woman screamed in terror.

"Am I?" the ghostly figure asked, still chuckling. "Then tell me where the lie is, my child. You returned to your homeland, hoping to be part of the rebuilding. Almost immediately, you began to be plagued by dreams of me. Yes, young one, it was I. I was trying to reach you; to warn you against the path your leaders were forcing you down. Then, as you continued to draw upon the fel powers to feed your addiction to the arcane, the dreams became worse. Disjointed, fragmented, and so painful you began to stay awake the night long. Then, instead of leaving you alone, the dreams began to chase you during the daylight hours."

"Stop it," the woman moaned, covering her ears with shaking hands. "I won't listen to you."

"You saw yourself bringing ruin to those around you. You saw yourself going mad and killing them all. Eventually, you did turn in your madness. You turned and attacked them, believing them to be your enemies. And they were, young one. They were your enemies!"

"Please!" she shrieked.

"Very well, darling child," the figure sighed. "If you cannot see that I have spared you all that; that I have taken you from what you fear and given you back your health, then you

must strike me down. However...those who follow me will try to stop you. Do you think you could cut down your own father to strike at me?"

"My father?" the woman gasped, looking up at the man's face in rage. "*You* killed my father!"

"Did I? Then pray explain this, my child."

The ghostly figure wavered, vanishing into mist. The door to her room creaked open once again. Emerging from the darkened corridor was an elven man, tall and hooded, a quiver hanging at his hip and his bow slung across his back. A short sword hung opposite the quiver, housed in a sheath that the woman knew from her earliest days of childhood. She shrank back against the wall, a wordless keen issuing from her throat. The elf walked slowly across the room, stopping when he was in the midst of it. Lifting his hands to the hood hiding his face, he pushed it back and smiled down at the woman. Moving again, he sat down next to her and pulled her onto his lap, holding her as he had when she was just a little girl.

"Papa?" she asked in horrified awe, lifting her head to stare at the ghastly familiar face.

"My little Alayne," the elf who had once been Tal'ar whispered as he smiled at his daughter. "You look so like your mother."

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"They came for me once before, traitor Prince," Alayne said coldly when next the apparition appeared before her. "My friends *will* come for me again."

"No, my child, they won't," the apparition said, sounding genuinely amused. "Your 'friends' are the ones who infected you; they are the ones who brought you to the brink of insanity."

"You're lying."

"Then show me the lie. Were you not, as a child, a very talented mage? After the destruction of the Sunwell, did you not become a talented warlock? Advancing more quickly through the ranks than your teachers believed possible? As you advanced, did you not notice that your energy was being sapped? That as your friends grew stronger and more powerful, you grew sicker and weaker?"

"You...you're..."

"They were feeding off you, little one. Your government marked out the strongest, the brightest, the most talented and drew your own life-forces away to feed the others. Do you really believe that Kael found a new, completely safe, reliable font of magic? He found nothing more than the ability to leech off of others to sate his own hungers. Those of you strong enough to tap the very essence of the Legion were taught to do so while others tapped your souls. You were the conduit through which they fed; the filter that absorbed the corruption – driving you mad in the process – while giving them access to pure arcane energy."

"They would never..."

"They would because their lust for the arcane is strong, insatiable. So many of your people were drained; so many fell into madness and despair because of it."

"You...but...it can't be true!"

"The truth is always hard to bear. You were being sacrificed so that others could gain the power that you house in your soul. I have freed you from that. I have saved you from the madness that their vampirism was causing you. In return, all I ask is that you serve me faithfully, as does your father."

"I will never serve the Scourge! I hate them!"

“Does that include me, Alayne?” her father asked gently. Looking through the floating apparition, Alayne could see the dark ranger who was her father. His face was drawn with sorrow and grief. “Well, my daughter?”

“I...no...Papa, forgive me!” she cried as she threw herself at her father, flinging her arms around him and sobbing into his chest in confusion, frustration, and fear.

“Talk to her, Tal’ar,” the apparition said gently as it began to fade away. “See if you can explain the truth to her.”

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“They’re not coming, are they?” Alayne asked dully. She had lost count of the weeks since their arrival in Northrend. Only a few among the once captives remained in the deep caverns. The others had accepted the truth and gone above to train and to serve.

“They are not,” Tal’ar said, his voice harsh and gentle at the same time. “Surely you didn’t expect them to? They took what they wanted from you and then they threw you away.”

“But...Zerith...he wouldn’t...he couldn’t. And not Ger’alin and Callie...,” she protested weakly.

“They are not your family, my daughter. They do not love you.”

“But we...”

“If they loved you, Alayne, would they have left you in madness? Wouldn’t they have stopped drawing your precious life away and let you recover your strength? Instead, they used you, as brutally as anyone has ever been used. And when you could serve them no more; when you were utterly spent, they abandoned you! That is the truth. You must see it, now!”

*It is the truth. Papa would not lie to me...*

“But they...”

*They betrayed us. They betrayed me! After all I did for them; after all I wrought...they betrayed me and left me for dead!*

“They wouldn’t...”

*Then where are they, Alayne? Why have they left us here? Everyone has lied to us! Lor’themar, Sylvanas, Thrall, Zerith, Ger’alin, Jez’ral...all of them! Only Papa and Arthas have told us the truth! We must serve! I will serve! Arthas has given me my father back! MY FATHER!*

“I swore...,” she said, rubbing her palm, feeling the scar from the day she’d taken Zerith as her brother.

*You sniveling wretch! Zerith? You still think of him? If he had loved you, if he had been your brother in truth, would he have drained you? Wouldn’t he have healed you instead of killing you by inches? He is not our family! Papa is!*

Tal’ar watched, his bloodless lips quirking into a smile. His daughter, who looked so like her mother, stood before him, her head bowed and her eyes vacant as she made the last, futile struggle to hold on to those who had abandoned her. He had watched her these past weeks and knew that the battle would soon be over and, as the Lich King had promised, she would be by his side, forever.

When she lifted her head and stared into his eyes, Tal’ar sighed. “Alayne,” he began.

“Call me that no longer, my sergeant,” the woman said formally, distantly. “For I am Alayne no longer...” Deep within her, buried beneath the chains of despair that had clung to her for long weeks, Alayne screamed in disbelief as Tal’ar’s daughter took control.

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“You are distracted, my daughter,” Tal’ar laughed.

“I’m not,” she protested, picking herself up off the ground. “I’m inexperienced.”

“Inexperienced? A child could have seen that attack coming.”

“Try it again,” she muttered, picking her sword up off the ground.

“No,” he said. “Not until the distraction is gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“You hear her voice still. The voice of the one who called herself Alayne.”

“I do,” the woman muttered. “Titans save me, I do.”

“You have locked her under chain, under weight, in a dark corner of your mind. You ignore her. You refuse to listen to her. But still, you hear her. I can tell.”

“Well, how do I get her to shut up? She cries, gibbering and whining, that her ‘friends’ would never hurt her. That everyone here is lying. She refuses to accept the simple truth! She tries to force her way into my thoughts whenever I’m working the forms with you or one of the others. At night, I find myself dreaming her dreams. Dreams of love, adventure, magic...”

“You can never silence her. You must learn to live with her but without her distractions.”

“How do I do that?”

“You must accept the side of you which you fight. Two natures war within you. One from me; one from your mother. Embrace them both, reconcile them both, and you will finally master yourself. Then you will be more powerful than you have ever dreamed.”

“What do you mean by that? Accept her? With her crying and moaning? I’d sooner wish to be back with Mother being berated for not being ladylike enough to suit her.”

“You know the answer, my daughter. It is within you. Now, clear your mind and begin again.”

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Tal’ar’s daughter picked up the blade that would become her own. It felt icy, as chill as a decades-old grave, even though it had only just been quenched from the forging. The blade was icy blue, glittering silver in the cold light of the northern sun. Hefting it, letting it flow through the forms she knew so well, she smiled. It was perfect, if incomplete.

*I will not do this.*

“You will. You have no choice.”

Clearing her mind, Tal’ar’s daughter picked up the graver and began to carve the runes into the blade. Letting her soul flow from her heart, to her hands, and into the blade, she drew the runes that would enhance her dexterity, lend her the strength of steel, and bring the cold, darkness of northern nights upon her enemies. For hours she worked, carving, forcing the part of her that had been a warlock into the blade. Finally, she finished, hefting the blade. Smiling, she danced through the forms, stopping mid-way to frown as the blade seemed to take on a life of its own, twisting in her grip.

“I will master you yet,” she promised. Closing her eyes, she listened intently, waiting for the response. All that met her mind was silence. Blessed, peaceful silence.

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The rest had been merely expanding upon what she already knew. The necromancers taught her avenues to power. She had disdained much of their teaching, turning her back on magic altogether in favor of cold, hard steel. She looked forward to seeing her old ‘friends’ and ‘teachers’ again. Gripping the hilt of her blade firmly, ignoring the way it twisted in her hand, she let the cold rage wash over her as she recalled how she had been tricked and

betrayed, her own addiction used against her by those she had once sworn to protect. Her ‘friends’ had helped in that goal, letting her vitality be sapped away and leaving her to drift into madness.

*They would never...they loved me...they would never hurt me!* the other woman protested weakly, faintly, secure in her prison house.

“Be quiet, you,” Tal’ar’s daughter muttered. “If they’d loved you, why didn’t they come for you? Answer that!” The other woman sighed, unable to respond. “They betrayed me. They were killing me. I hate them!” the death knight muttered, reaching down and squelching the rising tide heating her blood as she saw the blood-red and gleaming white spires of Silvermoon draw near.

“Land in sight,” one of the necromancers said as he gazed through a telescope. “We should be over Tirisfal within the hour.”

The woman lifted and resettled the helm over her face. The first mission was to return the rebellious sheep to the Lich King’s flock. She looked forward to helping to bring Sylvanas back where she belonged. Slamming a mental fist on the table in her mind, she told herself she was not hoping to see Callie or the others at all.

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Zerith awoke, his heart pounding in his ears. Dar’ja had also bolted upright, glancing around for the cause of the noise. The alarm bells of Silvermoon thundered through the night air. Without a word, the two dressed quickly and hurried out into the hall. Ger’alin stood ahead of them, striding out of Alayne’s old room, his sword in his hand.

“Are we under attack?” he called out down the stairs.

“Not as far as I can tell,” Callie shouted back from the front door. “I’ll run on ahead to see what’s going on.”

The three elves followed the Forsaken into the streets. “Oh no,” Ger’alin groaned when he looked up to see the ziggurat passing over the city. “To the walls!” he shouted, running towards one of the gates that would allow him to gain access to the upper levels of the walls. Archers were already in position, bows drawn, should the floating citadel come within range. Zerith stood in the streets, watching the sky in frustration, waiting for the attack to begin.

The minutes crawled by as the citadel drifted high over the city and, without stopping, turned southwest, leaving Silvermoon unmolested. The watchers and fighters stood, frozen, watching and waiting for the next attack. The hours ticked by and no further sign. Finally, just as dawn was beginning to lighten the night sky, runners burst out from Sunfury Spire, hurrying down the streets, stopping to whisper hushed orders to soldiers, guards, and Blood Knights. Zerith and Dar’ja watched as Ger’alin hurried back down the stairs from the upper reaches of the walls and, whispering something to Callie, went sprinting off towards Sunfury Spire.

“What’s going on?” Zerith asked Callie before she could run off.

“Undercity’s under attack,” the woman said calmly. “Ger’alin wants us to go there now and help reinforce the defenses.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Zerith said as he hiked his robes and began to run for the Spire. “Let’s get going!”

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Ger’alin clapped Tau’re on the shoulder as the pair raced up the ruins of the courtyard in Undercity. The ziggurat hung over the city, ropes dangling from it where some of the

Deathguards had managed to hoist themselves up in hopes of gaining control of the citadel. Grabbing one of them, Ger'alín hoisted himself up, pulling himself hand-over-hand along the rope, climbing towards the citadel. He swung his weight, making the rope sway, to dodge the arrows that the archers above him were firing down. As he neared the port leading into the floating monstrosity, he felt the rope vibrating as if someone ahead were trying to loose it from the structure. Gathering himself for a leap, he dove into the citadel as the rope gave way, dropping into the courtyard below. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Tau're pulling himself up over the wall, knocking away Scourge rangers with his meaty fists as he hauled himself over.

In the courtyard below, Zerith, Callie, and Dar'ja watched helplessly as the remaining ropes were cut away and flung down by the ziggurat's defenders. None of them wanted to leave Ger'alín to face the Scourge alone, but none of them could make their way up there now. Turning, they ran below, leaving the Blood Knight to his own devices for the moment. The Undercity guards seemed to be rallying and repulsing the attackers. Callie ran off towards the Apothecarium where the last of the fighting seemed to be contained. Skeletal minions, zombies, necromancers, and armored warriors held off the Forsaken and sin'dorei fighters while they wrecked the Apothecarium, breaking beakers, smashing open crates of reagents, and making a mess of the Royal Apothecaries' Society's work. The attack seemed targeted on that with little other force given to the other areas of the city. Callie and Dar'ja shoved forward, daggers and sword flashing as they joined in the battle against the Scourge. Zerith kept his distance, his eyes scanning the crowd while he offered up prayers for healing and the occasional blast of the Light against the foul minions of the Lich King.

After an eternity, the last of the undead fell to the combined forces of Undercity and Silvermoon's volunteers. Backing away from the wreck that had been the Apothecarium, Zerith and the others spotted Davril in the distance.

"Come on," the Forsaken mage shouted to them. "The rest of them are already up!" Once the three were close enough, the mage lifted his voice in an incantation and the wings of magic sped them on their way.

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The man who had once been Tal'ar grunted. The attack was failing. The Banshee Queen must have suspected something. Sylvanas had ever been one to read her enemy's mind and know what he planned before he himself realized it. That was why she had to be retaken; that was why she was such a danger, left alone.

"They are coming," the woman who had been his daughter said, her voice as lifeless as winter's chill. She and the others were angry, upset at being held back from the attack on the city. Now that she had the chance to prove herself, she sound almost...disappointed. Tal'ar stared at her, wondering if she would be able to do this and fearing to see her destroyed. The Lich King had not been certain at all about letting these experimental death knights join the attack but one raided their enemies with the troops one had. Pointing, she drew his attention away from her and to a handful of sin'dorei, tauren, and Forsaken who had managed to either climb to the citadel or escape their captors. With a nod, Tal'ar fell back, hiding himself in the shadows, waiting. At least they would not be returning completely empty-handed. Perhaps he could avenge his daughter's torment without angering his master.

Ger'alín ran through the citadel, his sword ready and his shield in front of him, looking for an enemy to fight. Thus far, he'd found only a few Scourge archers, a banshee, and a gibbering ghoul. The ziggurat seemed to be empty and abandoned, giving the impression that the Scourge's main force had jumped to Undercity. "Arthas is no fool,"

Ger'alın muttered to himself as he passed through another empty room. Finding himself against a blank wall, he cursed and turned around. He headed back out the way he'd come. Glancing out of a window, he could see others gathering in the courtyard below. Zerith spotted him through the window and pointed up, saying something that directed the others to begin heading in Ger'alın's direction. The sin'dorei fighter decided to stay where he was, for now, and let the others catch up to him. After a few moments, he heard his friends' steps echoing through the twisting stairwells as they ran to join him. Placing himself next to the door, his back to the passage they would enter from, he scanned the rest of the room. He thought he heard movement further in the citadel. Schooling himself to patience, he waited, not moving until he saw Zerith, Dar'ja, and Callie leading the crowds up the stairs and into the room. Just as the first dozen or so entered the room, the door slammed shut. Ger'alın turned back to see skeletal mages, dark rangers, and even a few of these so-called 'death knights' entering from deeper within the keep. "I should have known this was a trap," he muttered as he raised his sword and ran to meet them.

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Tal'ar's daughter smiled behind her helm. She could hear her master's orders moving gently through her mind, his touch as soft and mild as that of a lover's caress. In the room before her stood those who had abandoned her to madness and helplessness. She raised her sword and advanced on them, her will utterly surrendered to her savior's voice as he whispered, "Bring them to me." She felt the rising joy of combat long-abated warm her blood as she nodded in acceptance of the order. She would prove herself yet; she would avenge herself against those who had betrayed and abandoned her.

Deep within, the woman who was still and always would be Alayne screamed in horror as she struggled against the chains she herself had forged.

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Zerith hung back, letting Dar'ja and Callie run after Ger'alın as he engaged the Scourge minions before they could cross the room. Not giving the skeletal magi a chance to cast their deadly spells, the three, followed quickly by others, smashed into them, swords, daggers, staves, and maces shattering the Scourge. The rangers retreated into the corridor, moving into the next room, letting the death knights act as their buffer while they put distance between themselves and the living. Just as the fighters finished off the last of the undead minions and wheeled to advance on the dread fighters, two of them lifted their hands, muttering the words of necromancy. Zerith prepared his own spells as he saw the battered remnants of the Scourge shift and reassemble themselves to take the fighting force from behind.

*You will not do this, the woman who was Alayne shouted inside her skull. That's Ger'alın! And Callie and Dar'ja! For the love of all that is holy, Zerith's there too! Stop! We swore to protect them, once, remember?*

The other woman, the one directing her limbs ignored her, her will that of the Lich King's. She had grown adept at ignoring the woman who still thought of herself as the sin'dorei warlock, Alayne. Tightening her grip, she forced her unwilling blade to dance in the moonlight as she moved forward, laughing whenever Alayne screamed as she cut through those who had left her in madness.

Callie hissed in frustration as she turned her back on the black-plated knights and launched an attack against the reassembled zombies. Ignoring their bites and scratches, she swung in with her fists and daggers, desperately trying to put them out of the fight. Tau're joined her, picking up skeleton in his mighty hands and cracking them over his knee. Using his horns as she used her daggers, he bore in and gored the Scourge, keeping them at bay and away from the other fighters.

Something in the way one of the knights moved caught Ger'alín's attention. Letting his shield catch the blows from the knight he was fighting, he stared at the lone female knight. Those motions, that fluid grace, even the way she held her sword struck him as eerily familiar. Shoving his way through the fighting towards her, he began to push her out of the fray, smiling as his blade met hers in a flurry of attack.

*No!* Alayne shrieked as the woman engaged Ger'alín, meeting him stroke for stroke.  
*No! Listen to me!*

"They betrayed me! Leave me be, you foolish woman. I will take from them what they tried to steal from me once before!"

*We'll see about that,* Alayne muttered as she watched for an opening, twisting and refusing to cooperate as best she could.

Dar'ja tried to keep an eye on her husband while dodging the blade of one of the death knights. Her sword was already dripping blood from one of his fellows. She was also trying to pay attention to the archers who had backed themselves into the hallway. Tears of frustration threatened to blur her vision as she tried to force an opening in her enemy's guard that would let her blade slash through. This was madness. She was never going to forgive Ger'alín for getting her and Zerith into this insanity.

Ger'alín laughed, deaf to the cries of friend and foe alike. The searing joy of pure combat burned through him, bringing life to his eyes and face as he continued to spar against the woman. She met him, blade to blade, sparks flashing as she pushed him back across the room. He could hear his laughter echoing through the halls as he gave ground. Seeing an opening in her defense, he bore in, knocking her off her feet and pinning her to the ground before she could grab her fallen sword. Holding her arms behind her back with one hand and a knee, he grasped the bottom of her helm, wrenching it off and throwing it across the room. He was stunned when long, delicate elven ears showed through her honey-colored hair, cut in a style that, though ragged, seemed painfully familiar. "No," he muttered. "No."

Letting go of her hands and grabbing her shoulders, he spun her around to peer into her face. He could feel the blood draining from his own face, his jaw dropping open, and his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest when a stranger glared at him from behind Alayne's eyes.

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Ger'alín released Alayne, jerking his hands away as if his fingers had been burnt. The woman glared at him, rage burning in her eyes as she cast about for her sword. The sword kept slipping from her nerveless grasp, as if it was refusing to let her wield it any longer. She grunted, scrambling after it. Those gathered around looked on in shock and surprise, confused to see one who had been of their number fighting against them. Zerith felt light-headed, as if he might faint; his mind sought to cast away the pain that the sight of Alayne, alive, and a death knight, wrought on his heart. "She *hates* the Scourge...why...what is going on here?"

he asked breathlessly as the woman crawled across the floor, trying desperately to pick up her sword. Smiling triumphantly when she grabbed it with both hands, her face went slack, her eyes widening in shock and horror as she lifted it and stared at it.

*No more*, the sin'dorei warlock's voice said, ringing through her skull.

"They betrayed me!" Tal'ar's daughter screamed. "How can you still care for them, fool woman!"

*I see now...I never should have fought you, Tal'ar's daughter. I am you; you are me, whether I want to accept it or not. Whether I like it or not. I will fight you no longer; I will give you power over me no longer. Papa gave me the key...and now I will free myself from the prison I have built.*

"They betrayed you and left you for dead! Mad, mindless, and dying! I saved us! I saved them! I killed, I hated, I *hurt* for them and they *betrayed* me! Their lives are mine to take as they tried to steal my own from me!"

"Who is she talking to?" Callie asked. The battle was winding down; the necromancers slain, the Scourge minions had no one to raise them back up when they fell. Only the death knights in the room and the archers in the corridor remained. The death knights, save for Alayne, stood stock-still, shaking their heads, some casting away their helms to reveal faces familiar to others in the room. Horrified gasps erupted from the fighters as several of the death knights threw down their weapons and began shrieking, their screams echoing through the keep like the wail of a soul damned beyond hope of salvation. In the midst of it all, Alayne knelt, staring at the sword in her hands as if arguing with it.

*I would have given them my life willingly if they had need of it. I still will. It is time to rest, Tal'ar's daughter. Let us be the woman we were born to be.*

"No!" she shrieked, dropping her sword and raising her hands to her face. "You will not hand me over to them! I will not betray the master who returned my....," she trailed off, feeling the sin'dorei warlock reaching out and gently, but firmly, regaining control.

"Fool...you love those who **abandoned** you?"

*Whatever their reasons, whether they return my love or not, I love them and I will protect them. Come now, rest until you are needed, my brave, head-strong, overbearing, fierce self. This battle is no longer yours to fight alone. It is ours. It is mine. I will fight to hide you no more; I will fight **myself** no longer.*

Tal'ar's daughter shivered, shaking as she felt the self-righteousness fade from her, the conviction that what she was doing was right and just. "But Papa," she whispered, closing her eyes. She felt the warlock gently brush against her soul, her touch gentle and reassuring. *Papa will join me...or I will face the consequences. But I will harm the others no longer.*

Alayne shook her head, clearing it and letting the haze evaporate from her eyes as she regained control of herself, feeling the part of her soul she'd suppressed, the part of her that her mother had hated and had taught her to hate, flow and merge with the part of her she'd always thought of as her true self, the self acceptable to her demanding mother; the part that didn't frighten others with its strong emotions. She grunted as she pushed herself to her feet, feeling a sliver of her soul remaining locked within the runeblade. Walking slowly, as if unaccustomed to controlling her limbs again, she limped towards Zerith, tears filling her eyes. He stared at her, first in horror and dread then, seeing that she would not attack, with forgiveness and love. She stopped a foot from him, a noise from the corridor making her ear twitch. Turning her head, she saw the archers drawing back their bows. Without another thought, she ran down the hallway, her sword slashing as she cut through the ranks of those who had been her allies. She ignored the arrows striking her, using her body to block the hallway, to force the dark rangers to shoot her while denying them the opening to launch their bolts at the others.

“Alayne!” she heard Zerith and Ger’alin shout she heard their feet pounding down the corridor as they rushed after her. Snarling, she fought on, hacking and boring in relentlessly until only one archer remained. The man who had been Tal’ar held an arrow knocked and drawn, pointed at his daughter.

“Don’t do this,” she pleaded with him, gripping the doorway he’d backed through with her hands and blocking it with her feet. “Don’t make me do this. You can turn your back on him as I have. You could join the Dark Lady. You could be free!”

Tal’ar sighed. She had turned on him. Choosing those who would kill her over her own father. Part of him felt warmed by it, seeing the determination in her eyes. The same determination that he had felt, holding the wall against the invaders, praying that there would be something for his wife and daughter to come back to. Part of him began to shift, his eyes opening and his spirit flowing within him. Alayne held her breath, praying, seeing his eyes light with life, with independence. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the light was ruthlessly crushed out. Tal’ar’s eyes went dark. Alayne hung her head in defeat and sorrow. Behind her, Zerith and Ger’alin struggled, trying to push their way into the room. Without taking her eyes from the bolt, Alayne kicked, sending the pair stumbling back as she ran into the room, her sword at the ready, prepared to block or stop whatever her father tried. “Don’t make me...” she pleaded. Tal’ar smiled, a cold smile, when she looked surprised as he sprinted away, getting a clear view of the doorway she’d tried to block. One of the men, a priest, managed to enter the room. Tal’ar turned his bow on the man and prepared to loose...

“Zerith no!” she screamed, seeing Tal’ar turn his aim. Sprinting, shoving off the floor with her feet, Alayne sailed through the air, throwing her sword at her father just as his arrow left the bow, its point flying towards the space where Zerith had been but Alayne now was. Her sword wheeled, spinning hilt over blade, burying itself in Tal’ar’s chest just as his arrow drove through her armor, flesh, and bone to stick out of her back.

“Alayne!” Ger’alin shouted, running to catch her before she hit the ground. Zerith picked himself up and turned, looking horrified at the sight of his sister smiling, her eyes shining, the fletching of the arrow still quivering above her chest.

“Free,” she sighed, feeling the love she had almost forgotten warm her even as her heart broke at what she had done, “I’m free.”

Across the room, the runeblade she’d forged in rage, despair, and abandonment, shattered.

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It was a silent and morose group that teleported out of the floating Scourge citadel. They carried with them their wounded, their dead, and their prisoners. The Apothecaries and healers scuttled about, offering healing to those who needed it or going with the Deathguards to escort the death knight prisoners to where they could be investigated and interrogated. None of the former servants of Arthas gave any trouble; most still wept openly, shaking their heads as if to clear them and muttering self-castigations. One death knight had to be led by the hand; he had clawed his eyes out of his face.

Lord Lor’themar wove through the crowd, stopping to speak a few words of congratulations or commiseration with the members of the Disorder of Azeroth. Up ahead, he could see Ger’alin and Zerith kneeling beside one of their wounded fellows. Striding over to them, he gasped when he saw the face of the comrade they were tending. Turning, he tried to get away before he was noticed.

“You knew about this?” Zerith asked calmly. He’d seen the man approaching.

“No, I didn’t,” Lor’themar replied smoothly. “I thought she was dead.”

“I find that...hard to believe,” Ger’alin growled, his back to his Regent-Lord. “You knew, you bastard, and you let us...you let *me* think she was dead!”

“I had no idea, Ger’alin,” the ruler of Silvermoon repeated. “However, now that she’s back, if she lives, we’ll need to take her into custody. She is a traitor to her people, after all.”

“She’s no traitor,” Ger’alin said hoarsely, gathering Alayne into his arms. “She sacrificed herself to save us from that archer! She turned on them...she fought against them! You’ll take her from me, from us, when I lie cold and dead as that ranger!” he cried, pointing to the corpse laying next to her, a bloodless, gaping hole in its chest. Lor’themar blanched when he recognized the face and turned, desperate to get away. He nearly bowled over the Dark Lady as he scurried away. Sylvanas stared after the man in irritation as she walked over to the leaders of the Disorder of Azeroth. Like the elf before her, she gasped in horror when she recognized the two lying there.

“Do you know about this, Lady?” Zerith asked, struggling to keep his voice calm.

“She should have been told,” the Banshee Queen said coldly. “Perhaps if she had known...but that is past and cannot be undone. Arthas, you bastard, is there nothing you won’t twist to your own ends? Is even a father’s love but a tool to be used against your enemies?”

“What are you talking about?” Zerith demanded.

“Take a good look at the pair of them, children,” the Dark Lady hissed. “That,” she pointed to the corpse of the Scourge ranger, “was her father.”

“You mean she...she killed her own...” Zerith said, aghast, “to save us?”

“She must have loved you very strongly to make that choice,” Sylvanas muttered. “I wondered why she never returned when the others who had fallen ill began trickling back to us. Oh, yes; we knew. We knew or strongly suspected they lived. What good would it have done to tell you? Some suspected it was a plot. A plot to lure us into Northrend in hopes of ‘saving’ them. Seeing them together...I see what held her there. Tal’ar used to talk of his daughter; she was the center of his universe from the day the midwife put her in his arms. He would have done anything to keep her with him and, if half of what I’ve heard of the young woman is correct, her own nature would have demanded the same. He never could bear to be parted long from those he loved: Miris and Alayne. He also would have done anything to protect either of them. Alayne inherited that trait from him as well, it seems. She may be the spitting image of her mother but she’s her father’s daughter.” Standing up, Sylvanas wiped her hands on her skirts. “Burn the body,” she said coldly, striding away.

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“How long do you think she’ll sleep for?” Ger’alin asked as he lay Alayne down on the bed. Without waiting for an answer, he began to remove the sleeping woman’s armor, knowing from experience that a person could not rest comfortably in full plate.

“I have no idea,” Zerith replied as he stared at her face. “Honestly, I expected her to be awake already. Stop that, Ger’alin, and put your hand on her forehead. Tell me what you sense.”

Scowling, the paladin dropped the woman’s breastplate, grimacing at the hole punched through it. He lifted her up and pulled the back-plate away as well, letting her settle back down without the heavy armor pressing down on her exhausted frame. Lifting his hand, he laid it on the woman’s forehead and closed his eyes.

“Exhaustion,” the paladin muttered. “It’s just exhaustion.”

“That excuse worked last time because you didn’t know...”

“It’s exhaustion!” the man shouted, standing up from the bed and stalking out of the room. Staring after him, Zerith shook his head. Exhausted people didn’t feel as if their soul no

longer inhabited their body. They didn't feel chill to the touch. With a sigh, Zerith walked over to the bed and, after examining the straps on Alayne's ghastly runed leg-plates, called for Dar'ja's assistance.

"Out, out," his wife muttered, shooing him from the room while she stripped the rest of the armor off his sister's sleeping body and covered her with a blanket. Dar'ja ducked her head into the hallway, asking Zerith to carry her a basin of water so she could at least wash the blood and sweat away.

"We could all use a bath," his wife muttered pointedly when he returned with the water. After she'd finished cleaning the woman off and had pulled one of her old linen nightgowns over her head, Dar'ja felt a shiver run over her. Looking around, she thought she heard voices murmuring softly. Giving her head a shake, she stalked out into the hallway, determined to go wash off as well.

The spirit of the elven man smiled at the other woman as she stormed out of the room. She was a good example for his daughter to follow. Looking down at her sleeping face, Tal'ar sighed. He could feel Miris calling out to him, impatient for them to finally to be on their way. But, he couldn't leave their daughter without saying something to try to make up for the pain he'd caused her. He had never been able to return to her in life and he'd been unable to help her resist following him in death. She could no more have left him than he could have been willingly parted from her or Miris. So much like him...no wonder she'd driven her mother up the wall. Staring down at her, he could see the etched lines of suffering that marred her face; the marks that showed how she struggled with the temperament and spirit she'd inherited from him and the lessons Miris had tried so hard to instill in her. With a fond, but sad, smile, he wished he were still alive to help her, to teach her how to focus her spirit and use it, instead of being torn in half by it. To teach her what things she should learn from her mother and what things she should ignore. So many things he could not say, could not do...but this, he could.

"Sleep, Alayne," his spirit whispered, reaching out a phantasmagorical hand to lightly touch her face. "Soon you will have to wake; soon you will have to face all that has happened, all that you have done. But for now, my daughter, sleep."

As he ascended to the realm where all must travel when their time comes, below him, his daughter stirred slightly, warmth and color returning to her face.