

Zerith sighed and rubbed his eyes, tired of staring down at the blank parchment in front of him. "I don't see how she did it," he muttered, glancing over at the journal Alayne had kept until her illness rendered her incapable of maintaining it. He'd read through it, trying to get a better understanding of what had been going on. "I wish I had thought do to this long ago," he whispered, tears springing to his eyes. "Maybe then I could have...but why couldn't she just tell us? Who is this 'Tal'ar's daughter' she speaks of? Alayne is Tal'ar's daughter but she spoke of her as if it were a separate person." Tucking his sister's journal gently away in the desk draw, he turned his focus back to his own. "I have to do this. I have to get it written while it's still fresh in my mind." Picking up the pen, dipping it in the ink jar, he held it poised over the blank page, ordering his thoughts, and then began.

From the personal journals of Zerith, a sin'dorei priest

"My sister returned to us three days gone. It was a reunion I had longed for but believed impossible. I wish I could say it was a happy reunion. Piecing together what I've learned from Lord Lor'themar and what little the other death knights have revealed between their tears and pleas for mercy and forgiveness, I have just enough information to form a theory about what happened to them. All of them had been plagued by sleepless nights and dreams. After months of this, they fell into delusions and madness. This made them open to suggestion, making them easy prey for the Lich King's lies. None of them were told exactly the same thing by Arthas. Some were told that they were carriers of contagion; that if they did not flee immediately, they would contaminate everyone they loved. Others were told they had been chosen to serve the master of immortality. Still others simply fell ill...those will not speak, other than to scream that they didn't know and they are sorry. I suspect Alayne falls into that group. She never made any move to flee, nor was she ever interested in gaining immortality. To whoever is reading this: that may seem incredible. A warlock not interested in gaining power? Alayne chose her path only because she cannot tap into the arcane energies after the destruction of the Sunwell. Had she been physically stronger and had her mother not been so overbearing and insistent on Alayne being a "proper elf maiden" as my sister recounts in her journal, Alayne might have chosen another path...

At any rate, Alayne returned to us. She wore the armor of a death knight, servant of the Lich King. She carried a blade which lies in pieces in her room. At first, she fought against us until Ger'alín disarmed her and removed her helm. I thought my heart would break and I would die, right then and there, when I saw her face over the blasphemous runes on her breastplate. She scrambled about for her sword and then her whole expression changed. When Ger'alín had disarmed her, she'd looked like a stranger; like someone I didn't know who just happened to look a lot like my adopted sister. When she took back up her blade...I don't know what happened but you could see it. She was coming back. The stranger would struggle to hold on but Alayne was coming back. The stranger would scream about betrayal and abandonment; what did she mean? What lies did the Lich King tell her?

Enough digression: at the end of the battle, to save us, Alayne slew her own father. Sylvanas thinks Arthas may have used Tal'ar to convince Alayne of whatever lies he wanted her to believe. Alayne practically worshipped her father and, from what those who knew them in days gone have said, her father loved her just as strongly. Mir'el, one of Alayne's teachers and our land-lord, mentioned that sometimes it seemed as if father and daughter had a kindly conspiracy going to 'drive Miris (Alayne's mother) insane.' He said it is a real tragedy that Tal'ar was forced into the ranks of the Scourge because, when Alayne was little, her father was the only person in the world who she could count on to understand her. I've always known that Alayne has very strong emotions but I never realized just how strong they were until now. Perhaps that is why she sleeps still? Is it that you cannot bear the choice you were

forced to make? Between your father and your friends? Do you feel torn in half, Alayne? I wish to the Light you would just open your eyes and tell me so I could help you! I am so sorry that you were ever put in that situation. I should never have gone with Callie and Ger'alın that night. If I had done that, we would still be apart, but you wouldn't be lying there, still, cold, and pale, drifting in a sleep from which I sometimes fear you'll never waken..."

Zerith angrily threw down the pen, not caring that ink splattered everywhere, and let his head sink into his hands. "She will wake up. She will," he repeated again and again.

"Zerith, are you well?" Ger'alın asked softly from the door. Zerith quickly wiped his eyes and nodded, keeping his back to the other man. "I have to go," Ger'alın continued. "I promised to resume my post as a sword instructor and my class begins soon. She's still asleep," he sighed, his voice tight. "She's not moved the whole time."

"I'll keep an ear open for her," Zerith whispered. "Go on to your class. Dar'ja will be back soon and I'll go speak with Ma'iv then." Waiting until he heard Ger'alın go down the stairs, Zerith picked up his pen and began again.

"...but you *will* wake up. I will not give into despair. I will be as patient as I tell Ger'alın to be until you open your eyes."

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"I think I found something you misplaced," Ber'lon grinned when he dragged Ger'alın home a few evenings later.

"Thank you," Callie sighed, taking the Blood Knight by the other arm and helping him to stagger into the house. "Luckily, Zerith and Dar'ja are both out right now. Could you help me get him up to his room so he can sleep it off?" Ber'lon nodded and helped the Forsaken carrying the drunken paladin up the stairs. He paused at the first door and gasped. "She's back? Oh, she's asleep," he muttered.

"Ish ma fault," Ger'alın gibbered. "I never shoulda taught her sha shward."

"It's not your fault, Gerry," Callie sighed. "It's not anyone's fault but Arthas's."

"If I hadn'ta taught her, she wouldn'ta killed her father and she'd be 'wake."

"Ger'alın," Callie said as they let him drop onto his bed.

"Yesh?"

"Shut up," she muttered as she slammed the door shut. She winced and bit her tongue when she heard him start sobbing and berating himself drunkenly. In all the months they'd been together, she'd never yet figured how to deal with him when he got in one of these black moods. She'd have to make doubly certain she kept her eye on him. It wouldn't do at all to have a repeat of what happened the one time she gave up and stormed out to hunt raptors in Stranglethorn... "I'm sorry you had to witness that," she said politely to the death knight.

"I just wish I'd known he was drunk before I bought him a round and asked after his expedition," Ber'lon sighed. "He can put away an amazing amount of liquor. I think I see why, at least," he muttered, walking into Alayne's room. "So, she finally came back."

"Yes, she did. She came back with the others. Took an arrow right through the chest and killed her father. Long story. Look, I..."

"Her father?"

"A Scourge ranger."

"That was her *father*? I wondered why she was always with him in Northrend. It's not like we really talked, though. None of us really spoke to any of the others but she wouldn't even answer to her old name the night I decided to leave for good. I tried to speak with her, but she didn't seem to recognize me. How long has she been asleep?"

“Five days,” Callie sighed. Ber’lon glanced around, his eyes falling on the broken blade. “What?” she asked, seeing the expression on his face change. He ignored her and bent down, gathering the shards up and holding them gingerly, as if it pained him to do so.

“This sword,” he muttered. “She freed herself from it.”

“What are you rambling about?”

“We bound ourselves to our blades, Forsaken. Part of our souls is forever locked into the steel and ice. However, Alayne’s has gone. Whether that is good or bad, I cannot say.” Standing up, he placed a hand on the woman’s forehead, nodding to himself. “She makes up for the sleepless nights and the long drought,” he whispered. “Keep an eye on her. When she awakens, she will need help to hold on. It is something we all go through when the fire we smothered returns to the blood. She will need to remember and be reminded.”

“What are you talking about?” Callie asked. “Did you just do something? Will she wake up now?”

“I have done nothing,” Ber’lon replied. “Merely seen what is there. Tell Zerith what I said. When he sees, he will understand.”

“When he sees what?” Callie said, tiring of the cryptic tone. Ber’lon said nothing but turned and walked away, seeing himself out of the house. “Well, that certainly was weird,” she muttered to the sleeping sin’dorei. “Not that you care, Ysera-in-training. Looks like I’m going to have quite an evening. I get to keep an eye on you, not that that’s any trouble, while making certain Ger’alin doesn’t manage to get into any trouble, which he shouldn’t if he just goes ahead and passes out. The only thing wrong with him is you. I wish I knew what your problem was, though,” she sighed, putting a hand on Alayne’s forehead. She jerked it away when the heat pouring out of the sleeping woman registered. Hurrying back down the hallway, she threw open the door to Ger’alin’s room and spoke quickly in short, choppy sentences. “Sober up. Going to find Zerith or Ma’iv. She’s got a fever. Hot. Watch her!” Without giving the man a chance to ask questions, Callie dashed out of the house.

Ger’alin rubbed a hand over his face, sober as a bishop giving a sermon, and hurried down to Alayne’s room. Pausing only to wet a cloth and drape it over her reddening forehead, he sat, watching her with haunted, hooded eyes.

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“I’m so tired,” the woman sighed, sitting down by the spring. “Why am I so tired?”

“Because you have foresworn your oaths,” a man’s deep voice said sadly. “Because you have killed your father. Because your spirit was broken in the end.”

“Who are...? Arthas?”

“No,” the voice said. “I am not the traitor prince. He sits atop Icecrown, brooding over the loss of his gamble. Still, he reaches out, finding those driven to despair who will serve without the need for insanity. And those of you who were infected, who fell prey to him...one by one, you are breaking free. But there is a price to breaking your bond to him. He is never one to let go of a hold he has gained.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My child, you have suffered long from an illness that was killing you by inches even as it broke your mind. Did you think that you would be free of it just by willing it so? That is only the first step. Now you must follow the road or die trying.”

“Who are you?”

“One who has an interest in redemption. Sleep now. Dream of a better world than the one to which you will awaken. Gather your strength, child, for you will need it in the days to come.”

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Zerith and Dar'ja hurried up the stairs when they heard Ma'iv's voice coming from Alayne's room. The healer was muttering to himself in irritation as the potion he'd been trying to feed the woman dribbled out of the corner of her mouth. Turning her head to let the rest fall out so she wouldn't drown herself, Ma'iv renewed the cold cloth on her forehead and told Ger'alín to bring more water and cloths.

"Ma'iv, what's going on here?" Zerith asked when Ger'alín rushed past him.

"Mostly getting him out of the room before he does himself an injury," the healer sighed. "It's nothing serious. She's running a fever. That's not surprising. It's a good sign."

"How is a fever a good sign? Light, she's as red as a strawberry!"

"It's a good sign," Ma'iv repeated. "The ones that the others dragged back all went through something like this. They spoke of a gentle voice helping them, guiding them, while Arthas made one last attempt to hold on to them or, failing that, to kill them. Don't you recall treating them?"

"I still haven't quite grasped the concept that they were telling the truth," Zerith admitted. "I thought they were insane."

"I know. I only listened to you say that a few thousand times," Ma'iv grinned. "You know what to expect now. Keep an eye on her as best you can. Try to get her to drink something but don't be surprised if she doesn't. Either she'll wake up after she's recovered from the fever or..."

"I know," Zerith sighed. "We'll pray. That's all we can do now."

"Light send your prayers are granted, my son," Ma'iv said as he patted Zerith on the shoulder in farewell. "Send word to me if you have need of me later. Oh, and try to calm that other young man down. Between the alcohol and her fever, he's a tad...distracted."

"I'll worry about him, Zerith," Callie said, startling the pair. They had forgotten her since she sat so quietly at the foot of the bed. "I don't know whether to let him hope or keep him in the dark," she sighed to herself as she watched Ger'alín tear apart Dar'ja's linen closet.

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"What is going on here?" Alayne demanded as a rush of visions assaulted her.

"You swore to serve me. You will serve either dead or alive."

"I will not! I am free of you!"

"Locked within you forever is my power. You are mine!"

"I am not!"

"Then see what fate awaits you as you struggle against the ties that hold you to me!"

Alayne staggered, clutching her head, as she saw her people tearing themselves apart, brothers turning on sisters, wives against husbands, fighting in the streets of Silvermoon while something dark and foreboding loomed high over the city from the Sunwell Plateau. She saw the verdant green forests of Eversong burning, even the Scourge fleeing the horror arising in the city. Lying dead, their bodies broken as if they had been stomped on by some titanic being, she saw her friends, their blank eyes accusing her, demanding to know why she had abandoned them to this fate when it had been within her power to save them. Through it all, the Lich King hammered at her, demanding that she return to him, insisting that only by serving him could she avert this fate.

"Arthas, I will not!" she screamed. "I cannot save them by serving you! *I will not do that any longer!*"

“No, child, you will not,” silvery chimes rang out. “Your fate is your own to decide.” Alayne sighed in relief as the assault ended and, closing her eyes, felt the last ties holding her to the Lich King fall away as she drifted back off into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

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Zerith sighed and placed another cloth on Alayne’s forehead. It lost its coolness almost immediately. Leaving it for the moment, he took another and lathered her face, neck, arms, and hands, listening to her broken mutterings as she raved. The only things he understood were “Arthas” and “will not.” Tears sprang to his eyes when she began whispering for her father. “I wish I could do more to help you,” he sighed as he refreshed the cloth on her forehead and sat down on the stool next to her bed.

By the time Ger’alin poked his head into the room to check on them both around dawn, Zerith was sound asleep and Alayne lay quietly, soaked in sweat, her face calm, pale, and cool.

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Ger’alin sighed and tapped his foot against the floor impatiently while he listened to Callie talk to Alayne. Today was the tenth day since she’d returned and the second since her fever broke. Still, she showed no sign of awakening. It was driving him mad to sit there, day after day, watching her sleep. At least the fever had brought a flush of life to her face. Now, she just lay there, wan, pale... “I can’t do this again,” he growled. “Callie, I’m going on to my class. I’ll be back tonight,” he said in a louder tone.

“Don’t be too late,” the Forsaken replied. “I’m not dragging you out of a bar again tonight. Three drinks maximum, Gerry, or I’m going to tell Zerith everything!”

“Fine, fine. Three drinks maximum. I’ll be back in time for supper.”

“That reminds me; bring something back with you. Zerith got called out this morning before dawn to attend a birth and Dar’ja’s going to be worn out from escorting that shipment back to Undercity. Of course, maybe Alayne will wake up this afternoon and she’ll whip up one of her gourmet specialties.”

“Don’t remind me of that! Do you know how much I’ve prayed that...”

“I’m sorry, Gerry,” Callie said sincerely, opening the door. “Just don’t give up hope. She’s here, she’s alive...she’ll wake up. It just might take time.”

“I’ll be back for supper,” he said tightly. Callie raised her hands in surrender and watched him go. Once he was out of the house, she glanced back over at the sleeping woman, holding her breath. Had Alayne’s eyes just fluttered? Sighing when nothing happened after staring long enough that her own eyes burned, Callie walked back down the stairs and settled onto the couch, picking up one of Dar’ja’s books, and losing herself in the pages while she waited for something, anything, to happen.

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“It is time, child. You’ve rested enough. You’ve overcome him completely, at long last. Wake now, and begin the next chapter of your journey.”