

Mistaken Potential

Scratching; that's all I could hear. It seemed to be moving - like someone dragging a knife along a stone wall. I laid in bed, my ears perked up, tracking the strange, unpleasant sound. What could it be? I heard urgent whispering outside my bedroom door. My parents must have heard it, too.

Slowly, I slipped out of bed, my tiny feet quickly crossing distance to the door. I slipped it open a crack. "Minn'da? Ann'da? What's that noise?" I asked groggily, rubbing my eyes and pushing my golden hair aside.

My statement must have startled my parents, because they both spun towards me with fear on their faces. My mother ran up to me while my father rushed over to the window. She knelt before me and stared directly at me with her brilliant green eyes – a glowing gaze that often brought me comfort but now made me very uneasy. Why was she so afraid?

"Get in your room, dalah'surfal," my mother commanded in a frantic, hushed voice. "Get under your bed and don't come out, no matter what. Do you understand?"

"But, Minn'da, what's..." I started.

"Do you understand, Kaelynara?" she interrupted in desperation. I just nodded, looking towards the floor. My mother bent forward and planted a soft kiss on my forehead. "No matter what happens, your father and I both love you very much," she assured me in a soft, loving voice. I looked back up at her and there were tears in the corner of her magnificent eyes. "Shore'aran, my daughter."

With that, she stood and closed the door between us. I could hear them scrambling around in the other room. Remembering what my mother had instructed me to do, I hustled over to the bed, grabbed my beloved stuffed animal, and crawled underneath. The scratching had stopped and an eerie silence befell the house.

Suddenly, I heard a booming crash. My mother screamed – a sound that shook me to my core. "Who are you? What do you want?" my father insisted. Is there someone out there?

"Where is it?" an unfamiliar voice demanded angrily. The voice sounded raspy, like the speaker had had nothing to drink in days; and there was a crazed quality to it. My ears picked up the voices clearly despite the door and space between us.

"How dare you wretched filth taint the doorstep of the noble Sunchaser family!" my father accused, wielding our family name like a weapon.

"Where is it?" the voice hissed again.

Ann'da will defend us! "Endala finel endal..." but his threat was cut short by a strange sound; a sound that I instantly wished I could unhear and made my stomach churn – it almost sounded like someone juicing a peach. But I knew what it was, and my mother's bone-chilling shriek only confirmed my terrified conclusions. Tears gathered in my eyes and began streaming freely down my face. I held my

little hands over my mouth to keep from making any noise. Ann'da... I hugged my teddy tightly, trying to squeeze out whatever comfort I could.

My mother continued to scream until another sickening sound heralded her enduring silence. I was all alone. I didn't dare move, obeying my mother's final command. Would they find me? I prayed the guards from Silvermoon would patrol this way soon.

I could hear clattering and crashing as they whoever was outside was overturning the kitchen. "Where is it?" the voice repeated again, this time more curiously than sinisterly. "I can feel the magic...I can taste it...I know they have something...something powerful in here."

Something powerful? My mind started racing, trying desperately to think of what they could possibly be looking for. Maybe if I gave it to them, they would let me escape. We had gold...plenty of it...but was that what they were looking for? That wasn't magical.

I heard my door slowly squeaked open as light began to creep into the room. "It feels stronger in here. It's close," the voice hissed. A pair of bare, emaciated feet stepped inside my bedroom. I desperately tried to stifle a whimper, releasing a small yip that was hopefully inaudible.

The creature inhaled sharply threw its nose, as if trying to sniff out whatever magic it was looking for. I knew for certain there wasn't anything magical in here. I watched in terror, heart pounding in my throat, as the feet shambled about my room, tossing things off of tables and tearing apart drawers. Every so often, the creature would sniff again. Suddenly, it stopped. My body started shaking violently as it turned towards the bed.

Slowly, it stepped towards me, stopping right at the side of my bed. I could almost hear its bones creaking as it bent down. "No!" I shrieked before I could stop myself as a set of bony fingers clutched the end of the bed. A moment later, I saw a pair of dead, black eyes staring at me. "Is it you?" it wondered aloud.

It plunged its arm under the bed and I did everything I could to shrink against the wall. "Go away!" I cried.

The creature merely cackled. "You smell of magic, little one. Me and my friends...we're ravenous. Won't you join us?" it muttered in its raspy tone. It managed to get its fingers coiled around my nightgown and reeled me in.

In a moment, the wretched creature yanked me from my shelter and held me firmly in front of it. Through my tear-filled eyes, I could see a something that remotely resembled an elf, but it was far too gaunt – much thinner than I thought possible to actually survive. Its skin appeared stretched across its bones. Its hair was long but thinned, as much of it had fallen out due to malnutrition; and what was left of it had been drained of any color. The once telltale glow of the eyes of my kind had long been extinguished from this creature's – a wretch, a mana fiend, a lowly creature who could not control its cravings for magic. And it was here...for me?

"Let me go!" I pleaded through my sobs as it carried me out of my room.

"I have found it!" it announced triumphantly.

Trembling, I turned my head and saw more of them moving about my house. They started to crowd around, smelling the air about me hungrily. Past their emaciated forms, I could see the lifeless remains of my mother and father – the once proud heads of the Sunchaser family.

In that moment, I felt something surging through my body. These fiends took everything from me! My rage coursed through me, along with...something else.

"I can feel it!" One of the wretches exclaimed excitedly. "This meal will be...delicious!"

Still in their grasps, I felt something strange trying to push its way out of me. I looked down at my miniscule hands. I am just a child, what can I do? They...the killed Minn'da...and Ann'da. Suddenly, an arc of what looked like purple lightning danced across my arms. As my terrified mind bounced between my certain doom and my parents' demise, the energy continued to surge.

It began to focus, building up in my chest. There was so much pressure...too much pressure. I couldn't contain it any more...

I had to let it out.

The next thing I knew, there was a blinding white light, shrieks of pain, and then nothing.

"Kaelynara!"

My eyes snapped open and I shot up in my bed. "Woah, Kaely, settle down," a familiar voice laughed. After a moment, I glanced over at the calm face of my friend and fellow student, Serena.

I looked away. "Sorry," I groaned, my mind replaying the horrific dream.

"What's there to be sorry about?" she shrugged. "But you better get up. Master Khadgar will be here soon and he'll be unhappy if we're not ready for today's lesson," Serena advised, before moving away to allow me to get up.

With a sigh, I swung my legs around and sat at the edge of my bed. There was a time when that nightmare meant a very unproductive day of moping, but I was too far along now in my studies to let that happen. *I can't let those memories get in my way anymore!* I glanced over at my little teddy, which always lay beside my pillow, watching over me. I picked him up and hugged him tenderly. *I miss them so much.*

It had been a little over ten years since that night. Shortly thereafter, the Kirin Tor came for me and brought me to the great purple city of Dalaran. I have been learning to harness the magic inside me ever since.

It took some time getting used to the arrangements and not a day went by that I didn't miss my poor mother and father, but I ultimately enjoyed a rather peaceful childhood in the city under the instruction of some of the most powerful people in all of Azeroth.

Finally, I mustered the energy to rise from my bed to go and bathe before my lesson. Once clean, I donned my apprentice's robes, grabbed my tomes from their resting place in my trunk, and left my little dormitory.

The sun shone brilliantly upon the sparkling city. No matter how many times I saw it, the sparkle from the sun reflecting off the hundreds of jewels that adorned the city never failed to steal the very breath from my breast. The sky was clear and a soft breeze offered a cooling respite from the heat of the sun. In a word, it was perfect. It had been several years since the fall of the Icecrown Citadel at the hands of a band of heroes; and even in such a short time, so much had changed in Northrend. While Dalaran was always a safe haven – hundreds of feet above the continent – even the woods below could be traversed without worry. And I did so much enjoy taking a stroll through the wondrous crystalline trees.

As I walked along the stone roads of the city, I could pick up on little tidbits of gossip from other citizens. Some were talking about major calls-to-arms taking place across the territories of both the Horde and the Alliance, as if they were preparing for another war. *That's impossible! The last war just ended. The Warchief Vol'jin and King Wrynn signed a treaty and everything!* I remembered that because it took place in the violet citadel. We were all invited to watch the history of violence come to an end.

But why would they be putting together an army? I couldn't answer the question and then tried to push it from my mind. I hated dwelling on the politics of the Horde and the Alliance. I was neither. I was a mage of the Kirin Tor – or soon to be, anyway. We transcend such factions!

My ears fell a little. *But in the end, when push comes to shove, I am Quel'dorei and that's all some people need to know to distrust me.* The mages that lived in Dalaran came in all shapes and sizes, hailing from cities of the Horde and Alliance, alike. We treated each other with respect. But the travelers who came through every so often were a different story. On more than one occasion, I had to endure vicious threats from large, muscle bound humans or more compact, but still muscle-bound dwarves who could probably have easily snapped me in half even if they weren't armed to the teeth.

Thankfully, those events were few and far between. Perhaps because of that, I adored living in the little bubble that was Dalaran. I couldn't imagine what it would be like trying to survive out in the rest of Azeroth like the travelers.

I reached the garden at the foot of the citadel. Most of the others were already waiting. There were a total of five of us, though I saw only three of my fellow pupils as I approached. Serena and Sol – both humans – were a few years more advanced in their studies than I was and were both quite talented in the ways of magic. Despite their obviously superior abilities, Serena always treated me like a little sister and supported me. Sol was nice, but kind of distant, but not in a bad way; she always had her nose in a book. She was sort of an odd one; very focused on studying the magical properties of plants.

Nayuuri, one of the few Draenei to be accepted into the Kirin Tor, was about my age. I met her the day Master Khadgar whisked me away from the orphanage in Silvermoon to live in Dalaran; and from that moment, we were the best of friends. We were nearly inseparable in our waking hours, though we were admittedly a strange duo to behold. She had nearly a foot and a half on me in height and her greyish-blue skin and dark hair was a stark contrast to my pale complexion and golden hair.

“Doral ana’dial, Nayuuri?” I greeted, taking a seat on the stone bench beside my friend.

She turned and smiled down at me. “Khronokai Khrystor, Kaelynara,” she responded cheerfully. I always way the way she said my name with her exotic Draenic accent. “Slept in a little bit today, did we?”

I blushed. “Not that much. Besides, I beat Zooti...” I started to protest.

“You beat Zooti the Great at what?” an obnoxiously high-pitched voice declared. I sighed and rolled my eyes. The fifth member of the class had arrived – Zooti Fizzlefury. He was by far the most advanced of our group, probably mere weeks from graduation. *And thank the Sun for that.* He was a little man – as most gnomes are - with a greasy, bright-green beard and a bald head. Despite his strange appearance, he was an unapologetic extrovert and womanizer, beyond the point of creepy. He always came on to Serena and me. Though, he never hit on Sol...maybe he was scared of her. “Oh, young, naïve Kaelynara; you know you’re no match for Zooti. Although, if you would like...I could give you a private lesson,” he continued, suggestively.

“Eww, no,” I groaned, my face contorting in disgust at the thought. I always wondered why he hit on me. The others were much...*fuller*...where it mattered for guys like him. Yeah, I was the most slender and lithe, but even I was jealous of the busts on Sol and Serena. And don’t even get me started on Nayuuri. Maybe it was my age that he was attracted to. The thought shot a shudder down the length of my spine.

“You’ll come around, baby. Zooti is more man than any woman could wish for,” he claimed, obviously not set back by my reaction. *You have to admire that confidence.*

“The women you’ve met must not wish for much,” Nayuuri taunted with a wicked grin.

“Some women want a staff, others want a wand,” Serena chimed in. “Though, there are admittedly more of the former,” she added with a giggle.

I cupped my face in my hands to hide my embarrassment from the conversation and the images it elicited. “Dor shar’adore da shando,” I exclaimed with a muffled voice. I was thankful none of them understood Thalassian.

“It isn’t nice to speak ill of your classmates,” a strong voice stated. It wasn’t a rebuke, but rather a more amused tone. I gazed up and was met with the weathered but friendly eyes of Archmage Khadgar, himself.

"I'm...I'm sorry, sir," I stammered out, face turning redder than it has ever been.

Khadgar smiled. "No need to apologize. And you're right. You all can be quite silly at times," he responded, taking some creative liberty in paraphrasing what I had said. Then, his demeanor changed. His smile faded, replaced by an uncharacteristic seriousness. He cleared his throat. "Now, I have an important announcement for all of you," he declared. We all sat up straight, eyes fixated on our instructor. "I am afraid there will be no lesson for today. As some of you may have heard, the armies of Azeroth have been preparing. What you may not have heard is that we are preparing for an assault on the Dark Portal, which has been re-routed to an alternate time."

"An...alternate time?" Serena repeated incredulously.

"Yes; the war criminal Garrosh Hellscream has escaped into an alternate time stream with the help of a rogue bronze dragon and is building an massive army to invade the Azeroth of our time," he explained. My stomach squirmed at the thought. *Another war?* "Over the last several weeks, I have been preparing to lead the armies of the Horde and the Alliance. Our sources say the invasion is ready, so we must act quickly."

"So, you're leaving us?" I concluded.

"I must depart within the hour. I wanted to make sure I bade you all farewell before I left. If our assault is successful, I will send for reinforcements from the Kirin Tor, so I may still see you again. The only thing that is certain is that you will all go far. I hand selected each and every one of you to study under me because I recognized your talent and passion for the magic arts. Starting tomorrow, you will continue studying underneath Archmage Elandra and I know each of you will exceed all of her expectations." After a few more words of encouragement, he dismissed the group. "Kaelynara, I would like to speak with you for a moment," he commented. "Please, walk with me."

I stood, legs wobbling. *He's leaving us...* I tried to walk beside him but my legs were not working properly. *Maybe if I walk slowly, he'll miss the attack and have to stay.* Khadgar noticed my pace and slowed his own to match it. "I have been very proud of you, Kaelynara," he stated as soon as we were out of earshot of the others. "I was not sure what kind of person you would become when I came to retrieve you from Silvermoon; I knew only that you would be powerful. Over the last decade, I have watched you develop into a compassionate and friendly young elf. If the situation had been different, I had hopes of taking you on as my personal apprentice when you had completed your studies." A small amount of pride mixed in with my despaired feelings of loss. "No matter what the future holds for you, please do not waste your talents," he requested.

"I'll try, sir," I responded quietly.

He stopped and turned to me. "I hope to see you again when we eliminate the threat in Draenor. I've never had a child of my own and I would very much like to be able to watch you continue to grow," he stated in a solemn, fatherly voice.

"Be careful and you can," I responded, throwing as much concern as I could into my voice.

He smiled. "Don't worry, I'll be well protected." With that, a figure slipped out of the shadows. It was a very tall woman, almost a foot taller than Khadgar. She wore a large, green cloak which obscured the majority of her body and dark armor that concealed the entirety of her skin. As she moved, I caught a glimpse of a myriad of blades hiding beneath that cloak, including one huge blade shaped like a hoop. She made me feel really uncomfortable. "Now, Cordana, we should probably be off," he announced to the other figure. He looked back to me. "Farewell, Kaelynara. Remember in your moments of doubt that I believe in you. After all, I am Archmage Khadgar, so you know I know what I'm talking about," he said with a wink. "Shorel'aran."

"Shorel'aran, Master Khadgar," I responded weakly.

Arcane energy surged from his hands and, in moments, he had opened up a rift out of thin air. Without another word, he and the bladed woman stepped through. It closed behind them and Archmage Khadgar was gone, probably for good. A profound emptiness befell me. *First my parents, now he's gone. I may never see him again.* How many important people in my life were going to disappear?

I felt alone. I felt weak. I thought about trying to find the rest of the group for support, but I didn't think my legs would carry me anymore. There was a bench nearby and I hobbled over and slumped onto it. My nose started to burn and I fought hard to fight off tears. *Anar'alah, I must look pathetic. What kind of fool cries when her teacher leaves?* I took several deep breaths to help myself calm down.

"Bah, silly girl, what are you so upset about?" a harsh voice chastised. Startled, my eyes shot towards the source of the jeer. An elven male stood before me, much older than myself, and dressed in magnificent robes to boast his obvious status as a full-fledge magus. *Who is he?* He looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I opened my mouth to respond, but he interrupted me. "You know what? I do not care. Do you think I got where I am today because I cried when things got hard? You've got a lot to learn, girl," he sneered. He shook his head and marched past.

I sat there, staring after him, more confused than I was upset all of a sudden. *What just happened?* "Well he's a delightful individual," I heard Nayuuri state sarcastically. She sat down beside me. "So Master Khadgar's gone, huh?"

I nodded. "I hope he'll be alright."

"I'm sure he will be. We just have to wait for him to send for us," she soothed calmly. "Come on, we have a valuable day off. Let's take a trip to the Crystalsong Forest and explore some more of the ruins. It'll be fun!" she offered hopefully.

I nodded and took a long, deep breath. I couldn't spend what little free time I got moping around. *Archmage Khadgar is one of the most powerful humans alive. He'll survive; I'm sure of it.* Nayuuri stood and held out a hand to help me up. I took it and joined my friend on an exploration quest around the ruins beneath Dalaran. After a few hours, my worries were gone.

This bed was cold and uncomfortable. The sheet barely kept the chill from the outside away. For a city that prided itself in its opulence, the state of the orphanage was something of an aberration. It was something I never thought possible in Quel'Dorei society...I couldn't imagine it was any better than one of those troll hovels across the river. Absolutely disgraceful. I'm a Sunchaser! Tears rolled down my eyes as I tried to sleep, clutching my teddy – the one soft and comforting thing I had left in the world.

After the guards found me, alone and covered in blood. They took me to the city. More distant members of my bloodline were contacted. Like vultures, they divvied my parents' wealth amongst them.

But when it came to me, no one stepped forward.

There are no laws in place forcing anyone to take me, so I was sent to the orphanage to live...and probably die. Every so often, I could hear another child cough and sputter. Someone could be sick and it would spread like the plague through the crowded bunkhouse.

Sleep did not come and morning arrived to find me more miserable than before. My mind had focused on how there was no one who wanted me. I was just some nuisance to be put up with so long as my parents were around, and discarded at the first possibility.

My ears perked up; there was quite the commotion outside. People were yelling – something about a human. Wait, a human? Here? Were we being infiltrated by the Alliance? The commotion grew louder and louder. It's coming this way!

There was a knock on the door, barely audible amidst the yelling and insults being thrown. The matron cautiously approached the door. She opened it just a crack. "Anaria shola," she insisted. Whoever was on the other side forced the door open, pushing the matron out of the way with ease. A figure stormed into the orphanage, cloaked and hooded. His stature was larger than one of my people but smaller than that of the orc I saw walking around with the other diplomats. This had to have been the human they were talking about. He was carrying a long staff with what looked like an owl on top of it.

Several city guards rushed in, weapons drawn and at the ready. The human did not seem to care. He turned to the matron. "Where is she?" he demanded.

"Where is who?" There was so much contempt in the matron's voice. "There is no one here for you. Leave this establishment immediately."

"This is your last warning, human; surrender or we will attack," one of the guards threatened.

The human sighed. "I already told you no," he muttered, shaking his head. He raised his hand from beneath his cloak and snapped his finger. A massive pulse of energy emanated from him. It was bizarre, to me and the other children around me it seemed like nothing more than a breeze. But the guard were thrown back against the wall, their weapons scattered. "Now that that's settled..." he trailed off, gazing around the room from underneath his hood. He stopped when he faced me.

Cautiously, I started to scoot away from him, but my back quickly reached the cold stone wall. What does everyone want with me? I clutched my teddy close.

The human slowed his advance as he got closer. When he got to my bed, he knelt down and pulled back his hood. He was an older man, with fairly deep wrinkles and short white hair. His eyes were warm and friendly. I was so confused. "Doral ana'dial, child," he said in a calm voice. "What is your name?"

I don't know why, but as I stared at this strange human's face, I grew to trust him. "It's...Kaelynara," I responded shyly.

"Well Kaelynara, my name is..."

"Villain, step away from the child!" a commanding voice interrupted. A new elf had appeared, wearing very complicated robes and shoulder-pads that glowed with an eerie light. Atop his hood floated a glowing purple eye. "You may have the power to subdue the guards, mage, but you have no chance against me, for I am..."

It was the old man's turn to interrupt. "Aethas Sunreaver, you daft fool," the man sighed, rising and turning to face the newcomer. Wait, the archmage of Silvermoon? My eyes widened. I didn't think I'd ever meet someone so famous in my lifetime.

The moment the old man turned, Archmage Sunreaver's expression changed dramatically to one of complete shock. "Anar'ala before...A-Archmage Khadgar!" he gasped. All of the commotion ended abruptly. I blinked a couple of times. Who? Everyone else seemed to think this old man was a big deal, but I'd never heard of him. "What...what are you doing here? You should have told me you were coming. We would have welcomed you much more ceremoniously."

"I am sure you would have, but ceremony takes time. How could you not sense the potential of this child? Instead, she was allowed to be thrown into this excuse for a home. No, when I heard, I departed immediately." The old man – apparently this Archmage Khadgar, or whatever – turned back to me. "I am here to take you away from here. We are going to a place where you will be comfortable and around others who are like you and want to look after you," he announced. He held out a gloved hand.

Tentatively, I reached out. After taking a deep breath, I took his hand and allowed him to gently pull me to my feet. His touch was warm and gentle. As soon as my hand touched his, I felt a surge of energy as the power that coursed through his body met with mine. I felt safe, for once. I held on to him with one hand, and grasped my teddy with the other, excited for the prospects of a better life after the one that I had had was shattered.

The man lifted his staff and tapped it on the ground. The air crackled and suddenly a large circle of light appeared before us, spinning slowly. I looked deeply into it; I could faintly make out forms – buildings maybe – and movement...people? What is this thing?

He turned his head to look at Archmage Sunreaver. "You and I will speak of this oversight in more detail later, Aethas. Until then, shore'aran." He turned his attention back to me again. "On the count of three, step through the portal with me, okay?" I nodded.

"One..." My heart started racing.

"Two..." I had no idea what to expect. Would people like me over there? He's a human, am I going to live with the Alliance?

"Three!" I took a deep breath and stepped into the light, closing my eyes in apprehension.

I felt a soft breeze and the sun. Grass now tickled my bare feet where wood had been just moments ago. I could hear the sounds of strange birds, unlike those native to the Eversong Woods. My curiosity overcame my trepidation and I slowly opened my eyes.

"Whoa," I gasped, staring up at massive stone buildings with beautiful, shining, purple crystals literally everywhere. There were lamps floating at the street corners. I even saw a broom sweeping the sidewalks all by itself. The extravagance of Silvermoon was nothing compared to this place, but at the same time, it was welcoming to more than just the elite.

"Welcome to Dalaran, the city of mages," Khadgar announced proudly. He squeezed my hand to get my attention. I gazed up at him. Cast against the towers of this city and the clear sky, the man looked a hundred times more spectacular. And, somehow, less...old. "If you please, little late, follow me. There's someone I want you to meet."

I nodded and walked with him a short distance to a nearby house. "Now it's still very early, so try to be quiet," he advised, holding a finger to his mouth. He pushed the door open slowly. The house was very inviting; the furniture all looked soft and there was some yummy-looking food already on the table. Khadgar led me to the door across the room and opened that as well, an excited smile building on his visage. Because of that, my own excitement grew.

"Good morning, Nayuuri," he said as he opened the door, abandoning his hushed voice. "I have a surprise for you." What's a Nayuuri? I raised a questioning eyebrow until I saw movement on one of the beds in the room. "I know you've been lonely since your parents sent you to us. But now I have brought you a friend."

A strange-looking creature peeked up from the bed. She had bluish skin and completely white eyes that glowed faintly in the dim lighting of the room. She had dark hair and small horns poking out from the top of her head. "What is she?" I whispered, hoping the creature couldn't hear me.

Khadgar knelt down. "Nayuuri is a Draenei, one of the many wondrous peoples we share the world with. Now why don't you go introduce yourself," he explained gently, obviously not surprised by my inquiry.

I nodded and walked up to the strange girl. "Hi, I'm Kaelynara."

She looked at me uncertainly for a moment before her mouth turned into a brilliant smile. It was to the picture of that smile that my vision began to cloud and the dream came to an end.

I awoke peacefully that morning, heart warmed by such a pleasant dream about the day my life changed. I arched my back and stretched my arms. As always, I went about my morning routine of bathing and dressing. I met up with Nayuuri outside my room and we walked together to attend Archmage Elandra's lesson. She was a good teacher, but she wasn't Master Khadgar.

It was hard to believe it had already been six months since he left with that strangely-armed Kal'dorei woman. There's been little news coming out of old Draenor, but we were certain the allied forces were still alive, which meant Khadgar must certainly be alive. In that time, Zooti, Sol, and Serena all had made it to the status of magister. Therefore, Nayuuri and I were combined with other students to help make things easier on the instructors.

Today was different. That Quel'dorei magus who had rebuked me the day Khadgar left approached Nayuuri and me before we could make it to the lesson. "Excuse me, you are Kaelynara Sunchaser, yes?" he inquired.

No one ever says my last name anymore. "Y-yes, that's me," I stammered uncertainly. What does this guy want?

"I am Astalor Bloodsworn, mage of the Kirin Tor. I'm sure you've heard of me," he stated in introduction. Indeed I had; he was a highly talented mage who often worked in seclusion. There weren't many he permitted himself to associate with. "I have been watching you in your studies for some time now and I have decided to take you on as my apprentice," he announced with a sideways smile.

I blinked a couple of times. *An apprenticeship? It usually doesn't happen like this!* I was expecting to have to go and beg half a dozen mages to find one that would take me on. "I...am honored, sir," I finally responded.

"Indeed you are. I see potential in you and with my help, you can unlock that potential. With my help, you can become a very powerful mage. We will be renowned across Azeroth," he declared, his voice boastful and unnervingly flamboyant. At that moment, he seemed to notice the seven-foot tall draenei to my left. "Who are you? Why are you here before me?" he wondered. "Begone; I have business to discuss with my apprentice," he commanded with a passing wave of his hand.

I was a little irked by his dismissiveness, but I was excited to have already become an apprentice. Nayuuri seemed to share my sentiments. "I'll meet with you later. Archanon Poros, Kaelynara," she stated with a smile. The smile fell for a moment when she looked back at Astalor but resumed when she walked away.

Astalor began to walk the opposite direction. It took me a moment to realize he intended for me to follow and I jogged to catch up with him. "If you are to be my apprentice, I have several important rules. First, you will address me as 'sir' or 'Master Astalor...'"

"Yes, sir," I responded automatically.

"Never interrupt me. You will not speak out of turn. That is the second rule," he scolded. "Had you kept your mouth shut, you would have known that. But because you are young and I am forgiving, I will let that one go this time. Now, third, you will arrive at my study at sunrise each morning. You will do what you are told without questioning my expertise." He waited. After a moment, his scowl deepened. "Is that understood?" he demanded impatiently.

I thought I wasn't supposed to speak out of turn. Was it my turn? "Y-yes, s-sir," I stammered. My excitement was starting to wane the more he talked. *Why is he being so mean to me?*

"Good. And my most important rule is that you understand that you have accomplished nothing. I, on the other hand, have accomplished much. You are not here on your own merits, but due to my good graces. You may one day become great, but only if you submit to my lessons and whim. As such, while you are under my tutelage, your successes will be credited to my skill as your master." He paused again.

"I...I understand," I responded, taking the silence to mean it was my turn again. I must have been right, because he didn't yell at me.

"Failure to abide by these and any future rules will result in dismissal. Now tell me what you know about blood magic."

"Um..." I trailed off, trying to recall my studies. "It's an old and powerful form of magic. We don't really learn much about it, since there aren't many who can actually use it," I responded. If I remember correctly, it wasn't much more than a footnote in one of our tomes.

"There are many who believe it to be *the* most powerful form of magic. Living creatures have blood, blood which can be used to power spells. In order to prove to me you are ready to become an independent magus you will master this magic," he declared.

I stopped walking for a moment before shaking my head and falling in beside Master Astalor again. "But...but sir, may I say something?" I started.

He sighed. "If you must...speak."

"Master Khadgar taught us that an affinity for blood magic *must* be inborn," I argued. *You know, like in the members of the Bloodsworn family...* "No one can learn blood magic if they're not born with the ability to use it."

"First of all, Archmage Khadgar is no longer your master, I am...you will never refer to him as such in my presence again," he sneered. My stomach twisted. *I've been his apprentice ten minutes and*

I'm already pretty sure he hates me. "And second, Archmage Khadgar is overrated. Sure he knows a lot of magical theory, but ultimately he is only known for being the one who killed Medivh..." I'm not sure I agree with that, but now isn't the time to challenge it. Just smile and nod. "A truly powerful mage can master any type of magic he or she chooses, like myself."

But...but you're a Bloodsworn...you already could use the magic. I released the faintest of sighs. There was nothing to do but give it a shot.

"Of course, I expect it to take you quite some time. You may have talent, but you are nothing compared to where I was at your age. And the Order requires that I make sure you are caught up to speed in your other disciplines, but the bulk of your attention will be focused on blood magic."

"Yes, sir," I responded. Will I actually be able to learn it? What happens if I can't? My stomach twisted at the thought of failure. Everyone kept saying I had talent, that I was powerful, but I never had done much to show it. How do they know? What if they're wrong and I am just...normal? I'd never doubted myself like this before.

"Good...now let us begin..."

"Look out, everyone! Someone let a succubus loose in the city!" a human boy yelled out, laughing as he did. A small group of children, all a couple years older than us, had gathered around Nayuuri. It wasn't the first time she was ridiculed for looking so different.

"Shut up, Andrew," Nayuuri retaliated, starting to tear up. She had always tried to ignore the taunts from the other children, but I knew how being compared to a demon hurt her. It was no surprise she would snap.

I ran over to her side to support her. "Ignore him, Nayuuri. He's not worth your time," I whispered, but she continued to cry.

"Look guys, I weakened it! Stand back while I banish it back to the nether!" he laughed, looking like he was starting to cast a spell. I knew this child; he wasn't a particularly talented student. At his age, he wouldn't be able to conjure more than a burst of air. "Get out of the way, elf, so I can banish the demon."

I stood there, staring straight at Andrew and waited.

"Suit yourself," he laughed before unleashing his "attack." It was weaker than I expected. I barely even faltered and Nayuuri was not effected at all behind me.

I showed a wicked smile as I started to focus arcane energy to my hand. "My turn," I declared mischievously.

He didn't look scared. "What do you think you're going to do? You don't know how to use magic. You're as harmless as a little bunny."

My arm started to crackle with purple light. Andrew's superior smile fell when he saw it. The entire group took a step away from him. I knew exactly what I wanted to do to teach him a lesson. I started to whisper the incantation I remembered seeing Master Khadgar teach to his older students. I held out my palm and willed the energy to release. A small bolt of energy flew from my finger-tips and hit Andrew square in the chest.

"What did you..." but he stopped. He looked down at his body as he started to shrink. "Wha-?" His body continued to get smaller and smaller and his arms and legs quickly disappeared into the increasingly-ill-fitting clothes. As his head disappeared into his shirt, I could catch a glimpse of his ears growing and his face sprouting short, white fur.

After a moment, there was nothing but a pile of clothes on the ground where Andrew had been standing with a small lump in the center. The group stood in stunned silence. Suddenly the lump began to move. After some struggling, a small white rabbit was able to free itself from the clothing.

"Who's the harmless little bunny, now?" I taunted. Nayuuri began giggling behind me. The rabbit that was Andrew started to tremble, staring up at us. He started to squeak, as if begging me to change him back.

"We're telling!" one of the kids threatened, scooping their friend up from the ground and they all ran off.

"We're going to get in so much trouble," Nayuuri pointed out, but still laughing. "Kaelynara, I didn't know you could do that! How did you learn?"

"I like to sneak in on some of Master Khadgar's lessons and watch," I shrugged. I didn't really care if I got in trouble for it; I needed to teach that jerk a lesson. He wouldn't be picking on Nayuuri anymore.

A couple minutes later, a very cross-looking Magister Liara approached us. "You two, come with me."

Trying to suppress our giggles, we followed her to her study. She began chewing us out. Apparently, using polymorph spells on other students was something that was frowned upon. The most frustrating thing was that she didn't even seem to care to ask about why I did it. I mean, who just decides to turn someone into a bunny on a whim? Obviously, I had a reason.

Soon, though, there was a knock on the door. "Enter," she called, unable to hide the annoyance from her voice.

Master Khadgar walked in. "Good afternoon, Liara," he said jovially as he wandered in. Uh-oh. I hadn't expected that Master Khadgar would get involved. He was way too busy a man to deal with my mischief.

"Archmage! I'm glad you are here. We have had a little incident today with these two young ladies," Magister Liara declared, punctuating her anger with each word.

"I heard all about it," he mentioned. Why doesn't he look angry?

"Is there something you would like to say to them about it?" She seemed to be getting impatient with Khadgar's attitude towards the situation.

His face took on a serious expression. "Thank god she didn't turn him into a sheep," he commented solemnly.

"What?" Nayuuri, Magister Liara, and I all questioned in unison.

Khadgar broke his serious face and laughed. "I mean a sheep is just so cliché. Now a rabbit isn't really original, but it could have been much, much worse," he chuckled obviously amused with himself.

"I don't think this is a laughing matter, Archmage."

"Was the boy changed back to normal?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then there's no problem." Khadgar turned to me. "Why did you turn him into a rabbit?" he asked curiously.

I looked at Nayuuri and then my feet. "He called Nayuuri a demon and then tried to push me around, too."

"Well, if you ask me, someone should be talking with Andrew about the consequences of picking someone who knows magic," Khadgar laughed. "Why isn't that part of our standard curriculum?"

"Archmage, I really think that some punishment is..."

"Completely unnecessary," he interrupted. "Unless, of course, you are referring to the boy. Then you would have my full support. Bullying should not be tolerated and retaliation is to be expected. Now, I think we are done here. Girls, please," he announced, motioning us to leave with him.

We scurried out of the room with Master Khadgar following closely behind us. Once we got outside, he pulled us off to the side and knelt down. "Now, Kaelynara, in all earnestness, please try not to use your talents on the other kids. You may hurt someone."

"I'm sorry, sir."

Khadgar chuckled a bit. "You haven't started learning how to use magic yet. How did you know how to do that?" he wondered curiously.

I blushed. There was no use lying to him. "I was watching...I was watching you," I admitted. Would he be disappointed I've been sneaking into his lessons?

"Oh, so I taught you to do that, huh? Looks like I'll have to work on building my students' creativity if you learned turning him into a bunny from me! I can do better than that." I wasn't sure how to respond. "So you've been sneaking around my classes, have you?" I nodded uncertainly. "How would you like to not have to sneak in anymore?"

I looked up at him. "What do you mean?" I asked, cocking my head to the side in confusion.

"How would you like to become one of my students? You're a little young, but it's obvious you could handle it."

My face lit up briefly before I remembered my friend. I couldn't leave her alone in our boring classes. "Can Nayuuri come, too?" I requested.

He laughed. "Of course, like I'd be able to stop her." He stood up. "Well, young ladies, you'd better run off now; you have plenty to prepare for. Tomorrow, the fun really starts."

It was another two months before we heard anything from Khadgar. Each morning, I forced myself to rise early and hurry off to Master Astalor's study by sunrise. Every day, I threw my heart and soul into my lessons and did everything I could to learn what he was teaching me. The standard magic was very doable and I built up my repertoire of spells quickly. But that didn't seem to matter to my instructor. He either ignored my progress or commented about how it was a reflection of his teaching ability. I was making literally zero progress when it came to learning his prized blood magic. It didn't help that his version of teaching was showing me what the final product was supposed to look like and leaving it to me to learn the steps leading up to it. Regardless, no matter what I did, I couldn't do it, much to Master Astalor's chagrin. He frequently expressed his displeasure with my lack of results. Every night, I spent several frustrating hours in the library, pouring over tomes to help me find the answers I desperately needed to unlock blood magic. Sadly, everything I read seemed to agree with Khadgar: without being born with the gift, learning blood magic was impossible.

Nayuuri often spent her evenings with me in the library, doing what she could to calm and encourage me. It was very trying, to be honest, and I do not know if I would have made it without my friend around to coax me into trying "just one more day."

Then, one day, we were all summoned to the gates of the violet citadel. Lady Proudmore stepped out onto the front steps and cleared her throat. "Attention, mages of the Kirin Tor," she started, magically projecting her voice. "We have received word from Archmage Khadgar," Lady Proudmore announced. The crowd started to mutter to each other.

I couldn't suppress my smile as my excitement rose.

"The assault was ultimately a success and the Iron Horde threat to Azeroth has been suppressed. However, there is still much work to be done on Draenor. Khadgar has established base and is requesting reinforcements from amongst our ranks. While I am certain many of you would like to help, I will be personally selecting the supporting forces based on the information the archmage has given me about the area. Expect to hear from me by this afternoon regarding my decision." With that, she returned to the citadel, leaving us all chattering excitedly.

Master Astalor demanded that we depart and continue the lesson, obviously none-to-interested the gossip of the other mages. My ears fell a bit as I followed him back to his study for another couple hours of frustrating futility.

In the mid-afternoon, Master Astalor received a message from Lady Proudmore that he was to be summoned to join the efforts in Draenor. A wide grin spread across my face. *Maybe this is the end of it! If he goes off to Draenor, he can't torment me anymore with his stupid blood magic! I'll be able to find a normal apprenticeship!* I could barely contain myself.

That didn't last long, as it quickly became clear Master Astalor intended to take me with him. However, that meant I would be able to see Khadgar again. Maybe he could help me. Master Astalor gave me one hour to pack my belongings before we would depart.

I ran back to my room and began throwing sets of robes into my trunk alongside several tomes. I placed a couple, choice books within my personal satchel, along with my Teddy of course. I couldn't leave him behind.

Frantically trying to get everything accomplished on time, I went in search of Nayuuri. I found her hanging around the garden near the violet citadel. I explained what was happening. She expressed her excitement for me, but indicated she had not heard she would be called to join the campaign in Draenor. "It makes sense," she shrugged. "I'm still a student, not even an apprentice," she explained. "We'll see each other again" she assured me. The tears in her eyes betrayed her calm demeanor.

I stood there for a moment, tears of my own building. Suddenly, I threw my arms around my friend. "I'm afraid, Nayuuri. I'm afraid of what I'll find there. It's going to be dangerous," I vented as quickly as I could with a quivering voice.

"The Light will be with you, Kaelynara," she soothed through a snuffle. "Don't take too many risks and you will be fine." I had to try to believe that. "We *will* see each other again," she repeated, this time more certainly. "Archanon Poros, my friend. May the Light bless your path."

"Shorel'aran," I finally responded, separating from my best friend. I tried to dry my eyes. After one final moment, I turned and left her standing in the garden. I retrieved my belongings and met with Master Astalor at the Violet Citadel. He had several servants standing behind him carrying large trunks. He seemed amused by how lightly I had packed.

After a short speech from Lady Proudmore about how brave each of the mages were – *I'm sure she was excluding me from that statement* – for facing the unknown, she assisted several other mages in opening a portal. One-by-one, we marched through. When my turn came, I stopped and took one last look at the streets of Dalaran – my home – before taking a deep breath and walking into the blinding light.

The white light disappeared instantly and I found myself in a strange place. It was dark, but I couldn't be certain if it was night or not. Gigantic mushrooms towered over us, obscuring my vision of the sky. It also appeared that we were in a deep mountain valley, with sheer cliff walls on both sides of us. The stone ground was covered in moist moss. We were on the side of what looked like a large hill. At the crest, I could see what looked like a mage's tower. I looked down the side of the hill and caught sight of some very strange creatures shambling around in the marshes below. They looked like giants covered in plants...or maybe *made of plants. What kind of place is this?*

I followed the procession of mages up the hill to the tower. There was an encampment established outside the tower. The magisters lined up in front of the tower, awaiting instruction. I fell in behind Master Astalor. Finally, I glanced around at the other mages; there were about two dozen full-fledge mages, along with a couple who were in my situation. My eyes widened as I saw my old classmates amongst the recruited mages. *Everyone's here...except Nayuuri.* I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *Stay strong.*

Every so often, I noticed Serena and Zooti eying me curiously. Sol didn't seem too interested; she was more focused on the tower. *Maybe she doesn't remember what I look like? She barely ever looked at me before.*

After another minute, Archmage Khadgar emerged from the tower, looking tired, but otherwise the same as I remembered. He was followed closely by two people. The first was the Kal'dorei woman I had seen him leave with.

The other appeared even stranger than I thought the night-elf appeared. The way she stood, I would have thought she was a dreanei. But there was something strange about her posture and build. Additionally, instead of hooves exposed below her armor, this individual had what looked like fur-covered wolf paws. She was heavily armored, wearing ornate armor that was crafted and potentially enchanted to appear to look as if it were there were lava cascading down it. The shoulders bore the visage of a magma giant like I've seen in books. The helmet covered the whole face with two glowing-yellow slots for vision. She carried a massive shield decorated with spikes and what looked like a skull and rib-cage on the front. The axe she had at her side looked like the profile of a lich's face and magical energy visibly swirled around it. I've never seen anyone like her.

Khadgar surveyed our group; I wasn't sure if he saw me or not. After a quick welcome and thank you for joining the efforts, he began assigning mages to strategic locations. Zooti got assigned to help out in near the tower. "Magister Serena," he announced. Serena straightened where she stood. "This hero is in need of a skilled mage to attune the ley lines at their arcanist's tower at the Alliance outpost in

Talador." I watched Serena survey the mysterious stranger uncertainly before stepping forward. Together, the two of them walked away to work out the details of the task.

"Magister Sol," Khadgar continued. "Given your affinity for magical plant-life, I will be assigning you to Gorgrond to the north. There is an area the locals call the Everbloom Wilds with some highly, highly...unique...fauna. Your task is to study the strange beings known as the botani and see if you can figure out how to counteract the strange effects of their magic. I have sent several mages on ahead to establish the outpost. You will meet up with them to lead the research."

Sol nodded. "Understood, Archmage," she responded.

"Magister Bloodsworn."

"About time," Master Astalor muttered under his breath.

"Your talents are needed in the south central region of Talador, near Auchindoun. Our forces have combined with the Auchenai defenders to repel attacks from the legion under the leadership of Teron'gor." I shuddered at the mention of that name. I had learned a lot about the Shadow Council while growing up in Dalaran. Their actions were almost part of legend for us.

"Understood," Master Astalor sneered. He snapped his fingers and waved his hand to send his servants away. "You heard the man. Set up camp just north of Auchindoun," he commanded.

Khadgar's eyes met mine for a moment and he seemed...confused. He finished the assignments and immediately approached me as the crowd dispersed. "I will be honest, I did not plan to see you with the first wave of support," he commented to me.

"I'm the apprentice of Master Astalor," I responded, unsure if my master could hear me.

Khadgar, on the other hand, did not seem concerned with whether or not the magister could hear us. "Astalor Bloodsworn is your master..." he trailed off. He rubbed the back of his head. "He certainly has a...strong personality," he stated, obviously taking great care to moderate his speech. "And I have never known him to take an apprentice before. He must see what I see in you." He smiled warmly at me. "I am happy to hear you are still moving forward, though. Stay safe out there. When you're near Auchindoun, you will be surrounded by hundreds of skilled warriors to help defend you, so I have full confidence you will be fine," he stated resolutely..

"Excuse me, Archmage, but I really must be on my way. Come along, Kaelynara. We have much to discuss about your training on the way," Master Astalor interjected suddenly. I almost groaned, but was able to suppress it. I gave Khadgar a weak smile and turned to follow my master.

There were horses waiting for us as we exited the valley. I was able to load my small trunk onto mine with ease. It looked like Master Astalor was not carrying any luggage of his own. *It must be nice to have servants*, I mused. It certainly explained his lax approach to teaching.

We took off down the path at a trot.

“As you know, I have made no secret of my disappointment in your progress. I had hoped that you would have mastered at least the basics of blood magic, by now. I expect better from you while we are here in Draenor and away from all of your...distractions,” he reprimanded, his voice rife with annoyance.

“But I feel my other magic is coming along well,” I protested before I could remind myself of his second rule.

He let out an annoyed sigh. “I suppose your mastery of basic magic is adequate for your age. But if a mage only needed to know the basics, the Order would be in a sad, sad state. I expect better from you.”

“Yes, sir...sorry, sir,” I sighed. *I don't know how much longer I can put up with this.* I was already missing Nayuuri. Who knows when the next time she would be able to give me a pep-talk? *I might just go insane before then.*

I spent the next few miserable hours getting lectured by Master Astalor and listening to his grand plans to turn me into a *real* mage, as he liked to put it. Eventually, the magnificent structure that was Auchindoun appeared on the horizon. I had looked over the maps of Draenor before coming, but had no idea of the beauty of it. I would have never thought that any place that could rival the violet city, but here it was.

My gaze wandered from the gigantic structure off to the east and my face fell. It was as if the world was on fire. Evil, green flames rose, sending torrents of thick, black smoke billowing into the sky and obscuring the light. If I tried, I could barely make out what looked like a battle near the fires. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of figures locked in combat. Amongst them, I could make out the lumbering stone forms of infernals and the great wingspans of the doomguard. *By the Light! We're going there?! My lip quivered slightly. I had absolutely no confidence in Khadgar's assurance of safety.*

“How are we going to be able to help against *that*?” I blurted out.

Master Astalor actually laughed. “It looks like it is time for a demonstration of some of the more modern applications of my magic,” he declared. “Come; the servants should have set up camp by now. If not, there will be hell to pay.” *But we're only like...maybe twenty minutes behind them...*

Within an hour, we had located the camp, which was still in various stages of being set up. Only Master Astalor's tent had been erected. While he went about screaming at his servants, I went to work helping raise the other tents.

Mine was comparatively tiny compared to Master Astalor's, with nothing but a small cushion to separate me from the cold ground. But that was fine by me. I didn't need anything too special. *Besides, we're almost too far away to hear the fighting. I can practically ignore it!* I knew at some point that I would have to find a more peaceful place to spend any free time I might manage to accrue.

By the time camp was established, I was nearly ready to pass out. It had been a long, incredibly surprising day and I was thrown off. Master Astalor also seemed somewhat distracted as we ate our evening meal. He told me that the next phase of training would start in the morning and went off to bed. I didn't like the sound of that, so I decided I should probably get as much rest as possible and retired to my tent.

Lying on the cushion, I reached into my satchel and retrieved my teddy. I clutched him close to me and tried my hardest not to think about how close we were to certain death. *I will survive the night...I will survive the night...* I repeated that chant in my head until I finally drifted off to sleep.

Nayuuri and I wandered amongst the old white-stoned ruins beneath the violet city. All around us, there were massive, crystalline trees reaching up toward the sky. They sparkled brilliantly in the sun, causing small fractals of light to dance around all around us and creating tiny rainbows everywhere. There wasn't a sound to be heard, save for Nayuuri's hooves against the stone.

It was the day Khadgar left for Draenor. I was a little distracted, but the effect of the scenery was not completely lost upon me. I kept sighing.

"You're thinking about Master Khadgar, aren't you?" Nayuuri wondered.

"That obvious?" I sighed again. What am I going to do?

She swung around in front of me to stop me. "You have a thing for him, don't you?" I swear she was grinning from ear-to-pointy-ear.

"What? No!" I denied, facing turning red as a beat. I backed away. "No, I do not have a crush on Master Khadgar. He's like...super old. How could you even think that?"

"Because you're always talking about him and look at how upset you are now that he's gone! It makes sense!" she retaliated. "So tell me what's really going on between you two. Why did he ask you, and only you, for a private word before he disappeared?"

I took a seat on a piece of broken pillar and stared down at the ground. "It's nothing like that." I paused. I'd never told Nayuuri what happened to me; I always let her believe I was like her. "Please don't hate me."

"Why would I hate you?" she inquired curiously. She let out a short laugh. "Kaelynara, what's going on?"

I curled up into a little ball on the seat. "My parents never sent me to study here," I admitted. "A week before you and I met, they were killed in our home. They died trying to save me," I sniffled into my knees. "And...well, Master Khadgar saved me from a life as an orphan in Silvermoon City. He's looked after me so closely since that day," I explained and then fell silent.

Nayuuri walked up beside me and placed a hand on top of my head. "So you see him like a father," she concluded. "Kaely, you should have told me."

"I didn't want you to pity me," I responded.

"Well, what's done is done," she shrugged, pulling my head up with her hand. She stared directly at me. "You can tell me anything, okay?"

I nodded, which was hard, given that she still had a grip on my head.

"And I'll stop teasing you about Master Khadgar," she promised, letting go of me. With a sigh, she sat beside me on the ruined stone. "It's a shame you don't have a thing for older guys...Zooti would probably date you in a second," she remarked.

I laughed. "Yeah, and he'd need a ladder just to kiss me," I commented, giggling.

"And a stool to..."

"Nayuuri, stop!" I interrupted, face growing even redder. She started wildly laughing. After a couple minutes, she settled down, catching her breath.

We were quiet for quite some time, staring at the shimmering reflections from the trees. "So...is there anyone you have a thing for?" Nayuuri finally asked.

"Not really," I replied. It was a bit of a lie.

"We've been here for most of our lives so far. What is it those humans say? There's love in the air? Well, there is literally love in the air. Don't tell me you've never thought about it," she probed further. "Come on, who was your first kiss?"

I laughed again. "All the boys are probably still terrified I'd turn them into a bunny rabbit," I joked.

"That was, like, seven years ago."

"My reputation lingers. Who was yours?"

"Andrew," she responded nonchalantly.

"Andrew? As in the one who tormented you daily?" I asked, incredulously.

"Yep, the very same. It was a couple of years ago. Nothing really came of it."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I was afraid you'd turn him into a bunny rabbit...again," she giggled and then sighed. "But yeah, that's pretty much been the extent of my love life." Nayuuri paused. "Wait, does that mean you haven't had your first kiss yet?" she realized, her mind obviously hopping back to earlier in the conversation.

I looked away. "Well...yeah," I admitted shyly.

"Kaely, that's unacceptable! You're, what, seventeen? You have to have your first kiss!" she declared. Was this some kind of rule I had missed somewhere.

"Well, like I told you, there isn't anyone I'd want to do it with," I denied obstinately. "I probably wouldn't even be good at it anyway," I added to the side.

"I've got it!"

"You've got what?" I don't know if I liked the sound of this.

"What if I was your first kiss?" she proposed.

"What? No! Wouldn't that be weird?" The heat from my cheeks could probably have boiled water.

She rolled off the stone and faced me again. "It's not that weird. Girls practice kissing on each other all the time...I've heard," she explained, mumbling the last part under her breath. "Come on, this way, you can say you've had your first kiss and you won't have to worry about anyone telling people how bad it was!"

"But you and I aren't..." I protested.

"I'm not with my first, so what does that matter?" It took her another couple of minutes to convince me to give it a go. She told me to sit still and then closed her eyes. Slowly, she brought her face towards mine. My heart started pounding the closer she got. By the Light, she's actually going through with it. Why am I so excited? I had to remind myself to breathe.

I could feel her breath tickle my lips as she was a mere inch away. This is it...

In one fluid motion, Nayuuri moved forward and...

My eyes snapped open quickly, cheeks burning. *Why would I have that dream? Why now?* I shook my head, trying to dispel the memory. When they wouldn't disappear, I groaned and sat up. The dream ignited the profound loneliness I felt being so separated from her. There's no question there was love there – she was like a sister to me. Or, at least, she was what I believed it would have been like to have a sister. And now she was gone. Would I ever see her again? I had to survive this strange place first.

As I collected my thoughts, my ears began to pick up the sounds of combat again. *It's never-ending.* I packed my Teddy away in my satchel and crawled out of the tent. I felt dirty, but I didn't know of a safe place off-hand in which to bathe. I would need to scout it out.

Master Astalor was already up and about, commanding his servants to carry supplies towards Auchindoun. When he noticed me, he beckoned me to follow him. We walked towards the huge, sacred

dome and headed south-east. My anxiety rose faster and faster the closer we came to the battle. Soon, we came to an encampment beside the battle surrounded by floating purple crystals. These crystals frequently fired beams of energy into the legions of demons that were attacking. It was a small comfort, but I was still uneasy. There were several large, metal constructs standing nearby. In front of them was a large bowl of blood. I never wanted to ask where he got ahold of that much.

“This is the reason the archmage decided it was prudent to send me to the front,” he claimed. He held out his hands towards the bowl. “Observe and take notes; this *will* be important.” The blood in the bowl began to churn. Slowly, it began to lift, hovering in the air in an amorphous ball. Then, Master Astalor began to channel his own magic into the orb of blood and the two began to swirl and mix. Finally, the orb floated towards one of the constructs, which had a large, empty chamber in its chassis. A bolt flew from the blood orb and hit the construct’s chamber, only to start accumulating as its own, smaller orb within the confines of the chamber.

The construct came to life almost instantly. As if commanded, it immediately lumbered off in the direction of the battle. I followed its path and noticed a couple could be seen already fending off the demons.

“My blood constructs are amongst the most powerful weapons we can bring to bear against the demon menace. And it even cuts down on the loss of mortal life,” he explained, still controlling the orb. He began to activate another construct.

“My servants will leave a construct waiting at the camp. You have two weeks to activate it. If you do not, you have failed me as my apprentice,” he declared.

“But, sir, that’s...” I started to protest.

“That is the arrangement. You either do it, or you fail,” he interrupted sternly. “I find that a little desperation is usually all that is needed to give a person the push they needed. Now, I must focus my efforts on preparing my golems for war. I will not be supervising you directly, but I trust you will work hard, regardless. Now leave me.”

My legs started shaking as I wandered back to our encampment. *Two weeks...* I couldn’t even move the blood after months of work. How was I supposed to do this in just two weeks? By the time I got there, there was an inactive blood golem standing in the center of the camp. The servants paid me no mind while I stood there staring at the construct. They were too busy scurrying about the camp, trying desperately not to fail to meet the master’s expectations. *We were a lot alike, that way.*

I spent the rest of the day foolishly standing in front of a bowl of blood that was starting to stink something awful in the sun. I kept trying to focus all of the power in me and channel it into the bowl, but nothing worked. All I did was waste a substantial amount of energy.

I skipped the evening meal in order to keep practicing. I could see Master Astalor sitting at the table, watching me with an entertained smirk. I worked late into the night and only retired to my tent

once the physical and mental exhaustion overwhelmed me and I could barely stand. As I collapsed onto my little makeshift bed, I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, I awoke well before dawn. It couldn't have been more than a couple of hours since I fell asleep. I was still horribly exhausted, but my brain would not let me sleep longer. *I need to get back at it.* I couldn't waste any time on silly things like sleeping. My body was still covered in sweat, but I couldn't spend any time bathing. I went back to work trying to activate the construct. Again, I skipped meals and worked well into the night. However, there was still no use. I could feel I was reaching my limit. It felt almost like my energy was nearly completely tapped out. *How much longer can I survive this?*

As I lay in my tent, I imagined Nayuuri's encouragement. *"Just one more day..."*

Days passed and still I made no progress. I was subsisting on only a minimal amount of sleep and whatever food a concerned servant would bring to me in moments when I would collapse. After a hunk of bread or piece of fruit, I forced myself to rise and continue. With each day, each attempt, I was able to muster less and less magic to use.

By the tenth day, I could barely muster the strength to walk, let alone practice magic. I felt absolutely disgusting. Sweat covered my whole body and mixed with dirt and ash that drifted on the winds from the battle and caked on my skin. I couldn't go on like this.

I hobbled towards the golem and the rancid bowl of blood. One of the servants ran up to me. "My lady, please don't. You'll kill yourself," he implored. "Lord Astalor is gone for the day fueling golems to the south. Please, take this day to rest and recover."

"I can't..."

"You must! We have packed you a lunch and readied your horse. Please, my lady, do this one thing for yourself." His pleading stare was too much for me to handle.

"But what if Master Astalor should return?"

"We will tell him you went out in search of fresh supplies for your training," he responded. "Please."

I nodded weakly and followed him over to the horse. It took way too much effort to mount the beast and I began panting heavily simply sitting there. After thanking the servant, I gave the horse a weak kick and it started moving, slowly.

I tried to remember the maps I had studied of this area. There was a road due east from the camp, past a crystal mine. The map led to a small lake, well away from any battle zone. That could be a good place to wash up, or at least relax.

After traversing some rocks and tall, spiraling trees, I found the stone-paved road from my memory. It headed north-east. *This has to be it.* My horse seemed pleased to have found the road as well, as it wouldn't have to deal with any more of the dreadfully uneven terrain. After a short while, I came to a bridge over a tiny pond, filled with frogs. I had to admit, I was in awe of draenic architecture. The perfect arch-ways, ornately-carved stone designs and great purple and blue crystals were a beauty to behold. Just after crossing the bridge, I came to a set of stairs surrounded by a wall, which led to a small courtyard and some type of shrine. Just beyond that was the lake.

I slipped off the horse, legs almost buckling as they touched the ground. I stood at the edge of the water and closed my eyes. The warm sun shined down upon me, while a gentle breeze brushed lightly across my skin. I could hear the gentle sounds of the water's undulations. I could hear birds and frogs and other creatures. It was, in a word, serene. I opened my eyes and stared down into the crystal-clear waters. I watched the fish swimming around in schools, their long tails whipping behind their small bodies to propel them effortlessly through the water. I looked across the waters; there was a small island not too far out with what looked like a draenei gazebo. Everything about this place was perfectly peaceful. It was such a great change from near Auchindoun and all of the fire and destruction. Away from the wars, Draenor was a beautiful place.

I quickly gazed around. There wasn't a soul in sight. I bit my lip while I was considering what to do next. *There's no one here...now...If I'm quick no one will see.* After a long breath, I stripped down, carefully folding my robe and undergarments near my satchel next to a boulder. I stepped into the water. *It's freezing!* I stood there for a moment, trying to build up the courage. The water was so cold; I didn't want to submerge myself. Finally, waded out until the water was waist-deep, took a deep breath and plunged into the water.

The frigid water gripped my skin, but the shock lasted only a moment. Then, it became amazing. As my body became acclimated with the temperature of the water, my exhausted muscles started to relax. Holding my breath, I swam around underneath the water for some time, watching the fish scurry away from me. Finally, I resurfaced, letting myself float face-up in the water. While I floated, I started to rub my hands across my skin to try to dislodge the grime that had built up over the last several days, especially on my face. It wasn't a legitimate bath, but it was better than nothing. The water was so refreshing and revitalizing, I lost track of time.

"Look, Daddy, someone's in the water!" I heard a young voice shout suddenly.

I thrashed around instantly towards the source of the noise. To my horror, a draenei child and her father stood at the edge of the water. *Oh no!* My face turned red and I tried to cover myself up. I hoped the water concealed something, but the water was so clear that it probably didn't help at all.

The young draenei was giggling while her father was intentionally trying to look away. "Do you need assistance?" he called, continuing to avoid eye contact.

“N-no!” I yelled back. “S-sorry.” I sped off towards the shore towards my clothes, which – to my humiliation – was in the same general direction of the two. As I slipped my robe on, I hid behind the boulder. *Hopefully they’ll go away.* I tried to catch my breath and calm myself down.

“Hi there!” the young draenei greeted, peeking out from around the rock.

I visibly jumped. “O-oh...hi,” I stammered.

“You look weird; what are you?” she asked innocently.

“Melani, hush now,” the older draenei scolded from the other side of the boulder. Slowly, I stood up to face them, face glowing. “Greetings, stranger. I apologize for our intrusion. We were not expecting to see anyone else out here.”

“N-neither was I,” responded, forcing a laugh. *I’m so stupid. I should have just been in and out and done. This never would have happened!* “I apologize for my...um...display,” I responded.

The little girl returned to her father’s side. She tugged at his pants. “Daddy, what is she? Is she a pale orc?”

“We have heard there are outsiders from a strange world her, but we have not had the pleasure of meeting any. Tell me stranger, what do you call yourself?” the man asked politely.

“My name is Kaelynara Sunchaser of the Quel’dorei,” I responded quietly.

“I am Barum, a crystal-shaper from Aruuna, just over the hill, there. This is my daughter, Melani,” he introduced. “We have come to fish for our meal. Would you care to join us?”

“Um...I-I guess, thank you,” I sputtered, still reeling from what had just happened. I collected my satchel and went to guide the horse over to where the two had set up to do their fishing. I sat at the edge of the water, dipping my bare feet into the lake.

They asked me several questions about myself and where I came from. I politely responded to their inquiries and asked a few of my own. They were a very gentle and kind family. Before long, they had caught several fish to cook.

“Melani, did you remember to bring the supplies to start a campfire?” Barum asked.

The little girl looked down at the dirt and tapped her hoof a couple times. “No,” she finally responded.

Barum sighed. “Then we will have to return to town if we would like to eat,” he declared. “I’m afraid this is where we part.”

“Hold on, I can help,” I offered quickly.

“You have flint on you?”

“Not exactly,” I responded. I closed my eyes for a moment. *I can feel my energy returning.* I snapped my fingers and a small flame erupted around my hand.

“Wow!” Melani exclaimed.

“A fortuitous meeting, indeed,” Barum commented with a smile. He collected some small sticks and I transferred the fire onto the pile. “Since you have enabled our meal, please have a fish,” he offered.

I shook my head quickly. “That’s okay,” I declared. “I have some food of my own.” I pulled the lunch the servants had packed for me out of my satchel. I waited for them to cook their fish before eating my own food. “You know, my best friend is a draenei. I met her when I was about your age,” I mentioned to Melani. She brought back memories of the early years with Nayuuri.

“You have our kind where you are from?” Barum interjected. *Oh boy, how do I explain this? Should I even try?* I nodded, trying to think of what to say. “How is that possible?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just know that there are Draenei on my world, too,” I lied. *Feigning ignorance is probably the way to go.* I began talking about Nayuuri and telling stories about the trouble we used to get in growing up. Melani seemed pretty entertained by my stories.

As the afternoon grew late, I realized that I needed to return to the camp before Master Astalor completed his own work for the day. After a brief goodbye, I hopped onto my horse and set off back down the road towards Auchindoun.

I couldn’t believe I had allowed myself to relax for so long today. Sure it was completely wasted as far as solving the puzzle of the blood magic, but I felt a million times better than I had this morning. I had energy enough to move again. Such a brief breath of fresh air was enough to renew my resolve to complete my training. I still didn’t know how I would do it, but I would sure as hell do my best.

As I drew near the camp, I heard the sounds of screams. *What’s going on?* I kicked the horse to get it to gallop. I sprinted into camp to find it in complete disarray. “What’s going on?” I questioned frantically to one of the servants who were running around.

The servant pointed towards Master Astalor’s tent. I dismounted the horse and cautiously approached the tent. I could hear something on the other side of the flap. Warily, I stuck my head in. *Oh no...* Standing over the still body of two of Master Astalor’s servants was a massive humanoid creature. From the back, I could see pale-blue skin with huge muscles that appeared to be chiseled from stone. It wore gold and red armor with humungous spikes that threatened to tear the delicate fabric of the tent above it. The creature carried an axe that was almost twice my size.

It turned and noticed me. *Run!* I backed away quickly before turning to put as much distance between me and the tent as possible. I heard a thunderous roar behind me and I stopped, almost paralyzed in fear. I looked around; the remaining servants cowered nearby, hoping to hide from this demon. There was no one to defend them.

Except me.

I spun around and saw the demon standing in front of the tent, staring directly at me. "Get behind me," I commanded loudly to the servants. I could hear them scrambling to obey my order.

I started to mutter an incantation under my breath, holding my arms out to the side. Immediately, my hands ignited. As I continued to chant, the fire grew larger.

The demon began to lurch forward, crossing an astounding amount of distance with its large legs. But it wasn't going to move fast enough.

I combined the fire above my head. *I have enough! It's time.* "Felo'melorn!" I cried, slamming the fire into the ground. A moment later, the earth beneath the creature erupted with a fiery explosion. Thinking quickly, I created a protective shell of arcane energy to protect the servants behind me as the explosion expanded, sending out a pulse of pure fire.

There was nothing left but a smoldering crater where the demon stood. I stood, breathing heavily as my adrenaline started to dissipate. *Uh oh.* My eyes widened as I saw the state of the camp. The construct Master Astalor had left for me was in pieces. My master's tent was ablaze.

"What is the meaning of this!" *Speak of the devil...* Master Astalor ran up to the camp. "What happened here?" he demanded angrily.

"A demon attacked us," one of the servants exclaimed.

"Lady Kaelynara was able to defend us," another chimed in.

Master Astalor turned on me. "*You* did this?" he questioned, a deep scowl on his face.

"Yes sir. It tried to kill us," I tried to explain. *Why is he so mad at me?*

"If you had been a more capable mage and learned real magic like you were told, it wouldn't have had a chance to get close to the camp. And then my belongings wouldn't be *on fire!*" he scolded. There was nothing but pure rage in his eyes. "Instead, you cut corners in your studies and have destroyed the camp."

That's not...that's not fair! "B-but, sir," I stammered, trying to defend myself.

"Silence. I must meditate on this and figure out what course of action is appropriate," he grumbled angrily. "Get out of my sight."

I hung my head in shame and walked away from the camp. As I walked past the servants, they stared at me with their mouths stuck open. They must have been as surprised by his reaction as I was.

"What are you all standing around for? Get these fires out and see what you can salvage what you can. I want camp back up and running in an hour," I heard Master Astalor yell as I kept moving. I didn't look back.

I didn't know where to go; I just walked north towards the mountains. At the foot of the cliff, I found a big rock that offered some decent protection so that it would be hard to see me from a distance. Sitting on the ground and leaning against the rock, I replayed the incident in my head over and over. *What else was I supposed to do? Just let the demon kill me and all of the servants?* If only Master Astalor didn't have this delusional expectation that I could master something that I could never have done since the moment I was born. Tears started to gather in my eyes as I began to speculate on the consequences. *Maybe he'll cool down. Maybe he'll realize that I did the right thing.* I knew that wasn't true, but I had to keep telling myself that to keep from crying.

I decided to stay out the rest of the night. I would return to camp in the morning and see if Master Astalor had settled down enough to talk to. I grabbed my teddy from my satchel and held it close as I always did when I was upset. I was left with nothing but my thoughts for the rest of the evening.

Because of the profound amount of sleep deprivation I had imposed on myself over the last several days, sleep was not difficult, even sitting against a rock without any cushioning. I awoke late the next morning. As I stood and stretched out, my entire body protested. My neck was killing me. I winced in pain as I rolled my head around, trying to loosen up my muscles.

I could feel in my gut that it wasn't going to be a good day. My heart started to beat faster as I thought about returning to camp and facing my instructor once again. I tried to take several deep breaths to calm myself down, but it didn't work. *Let's get this over with.* I started to make my way back to camp.

When I arrived, I was surprised to see it appeared to be back to its original state, for the most part. Even Master Astalor's tent looked good as new. I couldn't help but notice something was missing, though: my tent.

One of the servants saw me and came up to me before I entered the camp. "My lady, Lord Astalor has already departed for the front lines and will not be back until this evening. He instructed us to deliver this message to you," he explained solemnly. I could see a conflicted look in his eyes as he avoided looking directly at me.

"Th-thank you," I replied uncertainly, staring down at the letter. The back of the envelope bore Master Astalor's seal. The servant bowed and then walked away. Hands shaking, I broke the seal and opened the envelope and retrieved the message. *This is it...* With a deep breath, I unfolded the parchment and read:

"Kaelynara,

It is with some regret that I must inform you that I am relieving you of your duties as my apprentice. I blame myself for being mistaken of your potential; I hope you can understand that even the most talented of mages sometimes makes mistakes. At least now you can put your ineptitude

behind you and pursue a reasonable goal. Perhaps basket weaving may prove more suitable for your...talents.

Unfortunately I do not associate myself with any basket weavers specifically and am too busy to write you a recommendation. Please return to Azeroth at your soonest convenience.

-Astalor”

Tears began to form in my eyes almost immediately upon starting to read. My hands shook even more violently as I tried to contain myself. *He honestly believes I'm useless...* A tear dropped onto the page, distorting the ink slightly. *Maybe I am.*

Whether or not I was actually worth anything was irrelevant. This was the end of it. There are not second chances for apprentices that are dismissed. No self-respecting mage would take on a proven failure. My future as I had envisioned it was over.

Another tear dropped. And now here I was in this strange world, all alone. I had to go back to Azeroth, but how? I would have to admit to Khadgar what had happened. *He's going to be so disappointed in me.* A third tear stained the page. Even if he gave me a portal back to Azeroth, where would I go? I couldn't go back to Dalaran in my shame. *I'm such a disgrace!*

Maybe I could go back to Silvermoon, get a job as a handmaiden or something. I could make enough silver to survive. *But...I was going to be an archmage one day, just like Khadgar.*

So much was going on in Draenor – so much conflict. And apparently there as nothing I could do to help anyone. People were going to die and there was nothing I could do to help. *I really am useless.* What did I miss? What was the secret that I didn't read that would have helped me actually prove myself? Why didn't I have the power I needed? Several more tears sank into the parchment.

I began to wander towards the north-east, vaguely in the direction of the archmage's tower. I read and re-read the letter, unable to contain my emotions. I sobbed audibly as I stumbled across the hills. *There has to be something I can do to prove myself...anything...*

My mind started racing, trying to think of something I could do to change Master Astalor's mind. There had to be something useful I could do. Was there some way to end the burning legion's attack?

“Release us...”

I shuddered and came to a halt. I quickly glanced around. *I'm sure I just heard something.* But there was no one around me. Just nearby, in the face of the mountain, I could see a large crystal mine.

“Release us...and we will repay the debt.” I heard the voice again. It was nothing more than a whisper, but I heard it. It felt like it was coming from the mines.

I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate in case the voice came again. I could feel a strong magical energy emanating from the mine.

"Release us...and we will crush your enemies." I had a vision of the legion demons dissolving into dust. *Was this creature talking to me? Did it know what I wanted?*

I found myself walking towards the mine. The closer I got, the more strongly I could feel magic freely pulsating through the air. As I stood at the mouth of the cave, I folded the dismissal from my master and put it back in the envelope. I slipped the envelope into my satchel, staring down into the large cave, mystified.

Whatever was down there, it was powerful. And something was calling to me. I stepped into the cave and made my way down the shaft. It was dark except for the few dim lanterns strung on the ceiling every twenty feet or so.

Finally, the shaft opened up into a large cavern. Brightly-glowing crystals jutted out from the dark stone. There were a couple dozen draenei miners working to free the crystals from their resting places.

"Release us..." The voice was clearer, but I still couldn't figure out where it was coming from.

In the center of the cavern, there was one massive crystal sticking up from the ground, significantly larger than any of the others I could see. I could an overwhelming amount of magic leaking from it.

That's it...that's how I can prove myself... The crystal had enough magic contained in it to wipe out the demons once and for all. It was like my body was possessed by another entity; I just walked automatically down towards the crystal.

"Young woman, what is your business here?" one of the miners inquired as I stood a mere foot from the crystal. I didn't respond. Instead, I held up a hand to the crystal. I closed my eyes, feeling the raw energy wash over me.

I will show everyone just how powerful I am. I will prove to everyone that I am worthy. I pressed my palm to the crystal and began to siphon the magic. My body convulsed somewhat as a surge of pure energy jolted through me. My hand fell away, but the connection had been made. *So much power...* I began to levitate, sucking up more and more power.

I could hear the shouts of the miners, trying to figure out what was going on, but they sounded so far away. I was trapped in my own mind, focused entirely on my goal. My body was soon floating directly over the crystal, several feet above the floor of the chamber. A pillar of magic swirled around me, creating a protective barrier around me. *There is so much power here. And now it is mine!*

"The bindings have weakened. We..are...free..."

I looked around and saw strange beings rising up from the very floor. They were elementals made of pure arcane energy, much more wild than the ones I've seen Master Khadgar conjure. They began to attack the terrified miners.

“What are you doing? Stop this madness!” I protested. *I helped free them...why are they doing this?*

“Fooling, naïve mortal. We will not be contained.”

They tricked me! But I still had this crystal. With enough power, I could save the miners and then wipe out the legion. Then, maybe I would even have enough to win the war against the Iron Horde. With the help of the crystal, everything will be alright. I’ll win the war and everyone can go home. I can go back and keep my promise to return to my dear friend.

“Kaelynara! Stop this madness!” A familiar voice commanded. It was Archmage Elandra. *What is she doing here? Was she coming here to use the power of the crystal as well?* I didn’t respond and focused all of my efforts on siphoning from the crystal. *She may be upset with me now, but when I’m done, she’ll see...she’ll see why I’m doing this. I’ll save everyone.*

I had to do it quickly or I wouldn’t be able to protect the miners from the elementals that were still multiplying throughout the cavern. I didn’t have time to explain myself to Archmage Elandra.

Some time later, I heard a booming shout that shattered my concentration. I looked around and caught sight of the same hero from Khadgar’s tower charging straight at the elementals. *What is she doing here?* Had news of my actions reached that far? My stomach twisted painfully. *I think I might have screwed up again.* I fought back the burning in my nose. I couldn’t cry again, I had to have faith that I could make this right.

Before long, the hero had rescued the miners. She made it look so easy. *I’ll have to thank her when all of this is over.* I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if these innocent draenei died because of my incompetence. That would only prove Master Astalor right.

I continued to channel into the crystal. I felt so powerful; soon, there would be nothing the legion could bring to bear to stop me, I was sure of it.

The archmage and the hero stood near the entrance to the mine, straight across from me. Her hands were glowing. “Kaelynara, I warned you,” I could hear her say.

The next thing I knew, she was transporting the three of us out of the mine. “No!” I screamed as I found myself in a green field. I was on my knees. The hero stood in front of me while Archmage Elandra started channeling a spell. Before I knew it, there was an arcane shell surrounding us all, preventing me from escaping.

I rose to my feet, breathing heavily. I could feel the immense power slowly starting to leave me. *I have to do something quickly or it will have been for nothing.* “I just need to get you out of my way and I’ll...I’ll...” I didn’t know what I’d end up doing. *Please, just leave me be!*

I had nothing against this hero, but she was standing between me and my future. *I don’t need to kill her...I just need to get her out of commission so I can escape.* My hands ignited as I started preparing

fireballs. "Get out of my way," I screamed, still fighting back the urge to cry. *I can't be weak...I have to hold it together.*

I began throwing fire at the stranger. She raised her huge shield to absorb my blasts. *Who is this woman?* She tilted forward, as if preparing to charge. I charged up a stronger spell and launched it her way. Upon contacting her shield, there was a blinding flash of light and the fireball was soaring back towards me. I barely had enough time to dive to the side to avoid being singed by my own spell.

I quickly pushed myself up from the ground and spun to face my attacker. "What?" I gasped in astonished surprise. The strange hero was right on top of me. I raised my arms to try to defend myself, channeling magic through my arms to try to create a shield. Immediately, my attacker slammed me with all her force with her shield. I could feel one of the spikes puncture the side of my belly. I was flung away by the impact like I was nothing more than a doll. *I'm...I'm so pathetic. I really was worthless.*

I lay on the ground in a crumpled heap. The grass felt warm and wet at my side. Something tasted like iron. I started to shudder as the warrior woman approached me. She stopped at my side and simply stared down, watching me bleed. *Just finish it.* Tears started rolling down my eyes. *Khadgar...Nayuuri...I'm sorry...I tried...I really did.*

"Kaelynara...You had such potential...what a waste," the archmage spat before teleporting away without another word.

My satchel lay on the ground a couple feet from me. Slowly, I reached out with a shaking arm, carefully unclasping the bag. As I reached inside, the warrior brandished her weapon, threateningly. *Did she think I was going to attack again?* I sniffled loudly and coughed. I was getting thirsty...my throat was so dry.

I retrieved my beloved teddy from my bag to hold for comfort one last time. I held him close to my breast and closed my eyes, which did nothing to prevent the constant stream of tears rolling down my cheeks.

There was an unsuspected silence. I opened my eyes. When I retrieved my dear toy, the letter from Astalor must have fallen out. The warrior stood over me reading it. After a moment, she gazed down at me. I stared at the lifeless eye-plates with my tear-filled, pain-stricken eyes. *Did she understand why I did it?*

I opened my mouth to speak but only coughed. I felt something bubble out of my throat, which resulted something warm spattering onto my lips. *I don't want to die...*

I closed my eyes again. *Ann'da...Minn'da...I'm sorry...I'm coming. We'll be together again soon.*

My breathing became jagged and weak. I could feel myself slipping from consciousness. My last thoughts drifted to Nayuuri...Would she ever know what happened to me? What would she think when she heard. *I'm so, so sorry.*

I tried.

With that, I faded from consciousness. I was certain I would be fading from life shortly. I was just happy I wouldn't be awake for that final moment.

I don't want to die...

It was another late night in the library as I poured through obscure tome after obscure tome, trying desperately to find the key to harnessing blood magic. The candles were burning low and I was certain I would have to replace them soon. I wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

Nothing I was looking at was any help. Maybe the reason there's nothing about the key to blood magic is that there simply isn't a key to blood magic. I was confident in that conclusion. I believed what Khadgar had taught me. But Master Astalor was so insistent, so sure.

And I had absolutely no hope of completing my apprenticeship to his satisfaction without doing what everyone else believed to be impossible. Tears welled in my eyes and I slammed my forehead onto the page. I'm so doomed!

I heard the familiar sound of hooves on wood approaching me. "I thought I might find you here. What's wrong, Kaely?" Nayuuri wondered in a sweet voice. She sat down at the table across from me.

I lifted my head and stared at her with desperate eyes. "I can't do it," I responded miserably. "Master Astalor...he wants me to do something that is impossible...I...I can't do it." I let my head fall back onto the book and groaned loudly. "Maybe I should just give up. Dalaran needs fruit vendors, right?"

I felt Nayuuri's hand gently squeeze mine. "I hear that you are stressed. I know he's pushing you harder than you ever thought possible. It's unbelievable what he's asking you to do, but..." she trailed off, so I looked up into her eyes to see why she'd stopped. "If there's anyone who can make the impossible possible, it's you." She smiled warmly.

"But...I don't know how much longer I can keep going. I'm so tired. I just want it to be over!" I whined.

She her delicate fingers squeezed my hand again. "Don't give up."

Am I dead? I feel weak...everything hurts...is this what death feels like? Everything was dark.

"I think she's coming around," I heard a voice comment. It was a deep, smooth woman's voice.

I'm...I'm alive? I opened my eyes slowly. A figure stood over me, but my eyes were unfocused; I couldn't see many features. I recognized those horns – sticking out back and to the side and curving

down slightly. My eyes began adjusting to the light. I know those caring, white eyes. "Nay...Nayuuri?" I muttered weakly.

The figure moved away a step. My vision continued to improve rapidly and I quickly realized I was wrong. Standing near me was a draenei woman, but her hair was completely white, not Nayuuri's black hair. This draenei also looked a little bit older than us. *But her face, her skin...she looks just like her.* I took a moment to survey her further. She was wearing a full suit of gleaming, steel armor with gold trim and several purple gemstones affixed to the shoulders and chest-plate. She did not have a helmet.

"She's awake," the draenei stated, turning her head. She had Nayuuri's accent. She wasn't the one who I heard earlier. I tried to sit up, but my body was too weak. All I did was shudder while my muscles refused to lift me. I let out a light gasp in pain. The draenei returned her attention to me. "Don't try to move," she ordered, placing a firm, armored hand on my shoulder.

I rolled my head to the side and caught sight of another person in the room. She was a tall Kal'dorei wearing a long, blue-and-gold robe that showed off her toned midriff. In one hand, she held the shaft of a golden staff with a stone in the head that glowed like the sun, itself. She had short, blue hair and what looked like tattoos of leaves around her shining eyes. She must have been the one whose voice I heard first.

"Where...where am I?" I inquired, my voice barely audible. It was hard to talk; I could feel my heart rate picking up simply from the exertion of speaking. I tried to glance around the room; it looked like little more than a standard room at an inn. There was a wooden end table beside the draenei, a desk across the room, and a window on the wall next to me. I could see the sky.

"Try not to talk too much," the draenei warned, as if she could feel my pain. She looked back to the other woman. "Luna, go get Naomi. Let her know our guest is finally awake." The Kal'dorei woman nodded and gracefully glided out of the room.

The draenei woman shot me a very strange glance of curiosity before placing moving her hand down onto my side. My belly flinched automatically as she touched the spot where the warrior's shield spike punctured me. I whimpered in pain. "Stay still," she advised softly. *Easier said than done.* Then, something changed. I couldn't explain it; it was as if the pain was being sucked from the area into her hand. There was a soothing warmth beneath her touch and, soon, my wound had gone numb. I took several deep breaths before my breathing returned to normal.

"When you awoke, you called me something..." the draenei started, staring intently into my eyes. "What was it?"

I looked away. "You...you reminded me...of a friend," I responded slowly. It was certainly less painful to talk now, but still difficult and uncomfortable. "I'm sorry."

"You called me Nayuuri," she commented, narrowing her eyes, as if studying every aspect of my face.

I stared back into her face. *This woman...those eyes...her lips, nose, horns...everything...she looks so much like her. But the hair...it's all wrong.* I nodded slightly.

She looked like she was about to speak when the door behind her opened. In walked the strange warrior woman who had attacked me back in the mines, fully clad in her armor, and being followed by the Kal'dorei from before. My heart started pounding. *Is she here to finish me off? I have to get out of here!* I desperately tried to shrink away from her, but I could still barely move. The woman approached the bed and towered over me. *I don't want to die.* Tears returned; I clenched my eyes shut and turned my head away, expecting the worst.

And then...nothing happened. Cautiously, I opened my eyes and turned my fearful gaze back to the others in the room. The woman held her helmet in her hands. Her face resembled that of a wolf – dark fur covering a long snout. She had long, pointed, fur-covered ears. *What in hell is she? Is she going to eat me?*

“Don't be afraid, I'm not going to hurt you,” she assured me. Her voice sounded rough, as if speaking was unnatural for her. The warrior smiled, flashing a set of large, sharp teeth that were none-too-comforting. “Oh, sorry,” she apologized suddenly.

Suddenly, she started to change. Her snout became shorter with each passing second and the fur started to disappear. She cocked her head to the side, and the muscles in her neck appeared to be straining to keep her head still. Her body began shrink, as well. After a brief moment, she looked completely human. Her armor looked amusingly big for her body now and her gauntlets seemed to be threatening to fall straight off her hands. That, in addition to her kind face, just made her look sort of goofy now. “Is this a bit less intimidating?” she inquired, her voice soft and smooth, just like a normal human. She had an odd accent, completely unlike anything I'd heard from the humans who hailed from other parts of the Eastern Kingdoms. “I imagine you aren't well acquainted with Gilneans,” she commented with a laugh, staring at my astonished face.

A Gilnean? I had heard about the people who lived south of the Greymane Wall. I had heard about the curse that had befallen many of them. But I didn't think any of it was true. I just thought they were bedtime stories. I couldn't believe the worgen were actually real. I shook my head, dumbly, unable to think of something to say.

“Though, you may have come across more of us than you think,” she shrugged. “Many of us don't like to show our fur and teeth in public.” She laughed a little to herself, possibly remembering something. She placed her helmet on the floor and took off her gauntlets, placing them beside the helmet. “That's better. I'd hate to have these things fall off and make a racket while we talk.” This time, when she smiled, I was much less afraid. She pulled a chair over to the side of the bed and sat. The draenei and kal'dorei stood against the wall near the door.

“Who...who are you?” I asked shyly. My voice was still very quiet.

“Yes, I suppose introductions are in order aren’t they? We didn’t exactly exchange names at our last meeting.” I averted my eyes in shame. “My name is Naomi. Naomi Malmin, an adventurer of sorts.”

“You’re...the Malminator?” I asked incredulously. I had heard the name many times before. There were stories of a hero that traveled around the world sorting out major conflicts. She fought in countless battles, including the final assault on the Icecrown citadel. She fought Deathwing and Ragnaros. I’d heard she and her companions were also responsible for the capture of Garrosh Hellscream. But none of the stories mentioned she was a worgen, short of maybe a passing mention that she fought with the fury of the wolf.

She laughed. “Yes, I hear that’s the silly nickname they’ve given me. Naomi is fine,” she responded. “And I assume you are Kaelynara?”

“How did you...” Before I could finish the question, she produced the letter from Master Astalor – though I guess he wasn’t my master any more – the page still stained with my tears. I just nodded, my mind replaying the whole incident in my head. I couldn’t look this woman in the face. *How can she speak so casually with me after what I did?* “Why...why didn’t you kill me?”

Naomi’s face went serious. “I’ve been around my fair share. I’ve killed a lot of people over the years...some evil; others – well – just misguided. By this point, I think I’m able to tell the difference. When we fought...” *It wasn’t much of a fight, really.* “...I looked into your eyes; I saw the fear and desperation of someone who was lost. And then...I saw this,” she stated, waving the letter around. “So, I used what first aid I knew to try to keep you going long enough for my friends, Luna and Coralia to tend to you. It was pretty touch and go for a while. They weren’t sure you would make it.”

“Contrary to popular belief, it is actually quite difficult to heal someone who is that close to death,” The kal’dorei – Luna, I assumed – chimed in. You’d lost a lot of blood by the time she got you to us. We could seal your wounds, but we had to let your body’s blood supply naturally replenish,” she explained. *So that’s why I feel so weak.*

“There is a lot I would like to speak with you about regarding this letter,” Naomi told me. “But not until you’ve regained some of your strength.”

I nodded. Then, another question bubbled into my brain. “How long...how long was I out?”

“It’s been nearly a week,” Naomi responded. “The fact that you woke up at all is a good sign.”

At that moment, someone burst into the room. “Ma’am, a fight’s broken out downstairs,” he exclaimed frantically.

“Who is it?” Coralia asked, stepping away from the wall.

“Lantressor and Delvar,” the man responded.

Naomi sighed, standing up. “Those two stubborn assholes are going to kill each other one of these days. I’ll be down in a moment,” she responded. She smiled back at me. “Well, that’s enough gabbing for now. I will be seeing you soon.”

She clenched her eyes shut and her body began to twitch. She started to grow in size and fur sprouted all along her body. I watched her bare hands turn into large, fur-covered claws. Her nose extended until it was replaced by the furry snout she had shown earlier. After the transformation was complete, she retrieved and donned her discarded pieces of armor and went to leave the room.

Naomi stopped at the door. “Coralia, please stay with our guest and send for me if she needs anything,” she requested. It was weird, she obviously seemed like the one in charge, but she didn’t seem to give orders. After Coralia nodded, Naomi stormed out of the room.

“Oh dear, I had better go make sure no one gets hurt,” Luna stated, rushing out of the room after her.

Coralia marched across the room and took a seat where Naomi had been a few moments earlier. “You are a mage...of the Kirin Tor...yes?” she asked curiously.

I nodded. “I...I am...or...I was,” I responded sullenly. *What am I, now? Am I still part of the Kirin Tor?*

The armored draenei looked pensive. “The name you called me...it is the same name as my younger sister,” she mentioned. “When she was still just a child, our parents sent her to study magic under your mage order. I was already training with the Hand of Argus when they sent her away. Tell me, you know Nayuuri?” She stared at me in hopeful expectation.

Nayuuri has a sister? It explained why the two looked so much alike. “I do,” I affirmed. “She’s...she’s my dearest friend.” Thinking about her only brought more feelings of embarrassment and shame. *How could I face her again after what I did?*

“She’s not...here...is she?” Coralia asked, pointedly.

I shook my head. “She’s safe...in Dalaran,” I responded. My eyes started to droop; I was incredibly tired. *Why is just talking so exhausting?* This was all just more evidence of how pathetic I was.

Coralia visibly relaxed. “Good.” She surveyed my face. “You appear extraordinarily tired. Please, rest now. You and I will talk more later.” She looked so excited to have heard that I knew Nayuuri. *I wish I had the energy to talk to her now.* A part of me longed to reminisce about my friend. Unfortunately, I slipped into sleep moments later.

I was bed-ridden for another day, barely unable to move. I was left alone, for the most part, with the exception of someone occasionally checking in on me. Most of the time, it was Luna; other times, it was someone I did not recognize. I quickly discovered my teddy lying beside me on the bed. I

must have missed him the day before with so many people to meet. Luna explained that he had had to be cleaned after they brought me in, as he had been virtually soaked in my blood. That was an uncomfortable thought and one I wished had not been shared with me.

By the third day, I was able to sit up with a little help. Seated on the bed, I was able to look down at myself for the first time since I awoke. My robes were gone, but my torso was wrapped in bandages.

I sat there, staring out the window for quite a while, cradling my teddy in my lap. From this angle, I could see more of the area surrounding my room. It looked almost like a small city with high walls beyond the buildings outside. There were trees with dark bark and leaves. I could see a large fountain in the center of a large village square of sorts where vendors had set up wagon stalls.

Perhaps the strangest thing I could see from the window was the diversity of races I would see wandering about. Naomi was a firm member of the Alliance – even appointed commander of their forces in Draenor. So of course there were draenei, humans, kal'dorei, dwarves, and gnomes about. They were everywhere. But there were others as well. I saw at least one orc walking around. There were creatures that resembled humanoid birds wandering around. Then there was this big fellow. He had to be twenty-feet tall and broader than the small house I could see near the garden at the other end of the town. This creature looked like some kind of gigantic ogre. He lumbered around most of the day and no one paid him any mind. Everyone seemed to coexist in relative harmony. Or, at least, they avoided each other if they couldn't.

Luna entered the room and explained she had come to check on my convalescence and change the bandages. She began carefully unwrapping the bandages from my body. I was quiet for a while, continuing to stare out the window.

"Where is Miss Naomi?" I finally wondered aloud. She had not returned to visit since the day I awoke and I couldn't see her moving around below.

"She has traveled to Nagrand to see where she may be needed in the war efforts," Luna responded.

"Will she be alright?" I asked quickly. *The life of an adventurer must be dangerous.* What would happen to me if something were to happen to Naomi? Would I simply be forgotten? Maybe I would get sent back to the Kirin Tor to be tried for my crimes.

"She has yet to find a foe that could best her in battle. Besides, she brought Coralia and Mini Millie with her for support," was the response. *So that's why Coralia hasn't checked up on me either. And who is Mini Millie?* It was such a silly name. Luna finished removing the bandages. "As you saw firsthand, she is a very capable warrior," she commented. I gazed down and saw a large scar to the left of my belly-button. "This is healing quite nicely," Luna observed. She cupped her hand over it and began chanting under her breath. Her hand started to glow with a golden light and I could feel the same

soothing warmth as I had when Coralia touched it. When she pulled her hand away, the scar had diminished considerably. "By the time we are finished, you will be good as new."

"But it won't change what I did," I muttered, memories of my failure flooding back into the forefront of my mind. My nose started to burn. *How could I have been so stupid? Master Khadgar had had so much misplaced faith in my goodness, and I went and nearly got a bunch of innocent people killed.*

"What is past is past. Your repentant tears are proof you are not lost, child," Luna encouraged. "While I can do nothing to alleviate the pain of your memories, I would not even if I could. Use this pain in your heart...grow."

"But how do I live with myself?"

"That, I believe, is a question for Naomi to answer," she hinted. *What does that mean? "Do not worry; she travels often, but she always returns here for sanctuary from the conflict. She will return shortly. I know she is eager to speak with you."*

I fell silent and went back to staring out the window.

"I do not think you need new bandages. I will have some clothing brought up for you to cover yourself. How are you feeling? Is your strength returning?" Luna commented, continuing to look me over.

I nodded. "A little bit, I think." It didn't hurt to talk as much. And I could move my limbs. I just couldn't put much pressure on them yet.

"You are less pale, as well," she pointed out. "I will send word that you are well enough for a visit. I expect she shall be back by morning." Luna excused herself and left me alone in the room. A few minutes later, a woman whom I came to recognize as the inn-keeper brought me a robe to wear. It was simple in design but the cloth was incredibly soft. I tried to imagine a warrior as renowned for her combat prowess as Naomi Malmin was wearing something like it.

Once clothed, I continued to stare out the window and watch the happenings of this strange town. It was nearly enough to keep me from dwelling on the extent of my foolishness...nearly. I began to grow apprehensive about meeting with Miss Naomi. *How will she react when she hears the whole story?* I began to quiver where I sat. *Would she kill me?* Suddenly, that became the only eventuality in my mind. If it were not for my weakened state, I would never have managed to fall asleep.

I was awoken the next morning by the sound of knocking on the door. Slowly, and with shaking arms, I pushed myself up to a sitting position. "Come...come in," I called, my voice straining a bit. *Is it her?* I grabbed my teddy out of habit.

The door swung open. It took me a moment to realize that the woman who entered was Naomi. She was in her human form and wearing common clothing. It wasn't even anything special; just a white shirt and baggy cloth pants. Everything looked to be a few sizes too big for her, most likely to account for if she transformed.

She must have noticed my look of confusion, because she laughed. "You didn't think I wore that heavy armor all day, did you?" she inquired. I blushed and stared down at my lap in embarrassment. *I guess I did.* "Did I wake you?" I didn't look back at her, but I nodded. "I'm sorry. I thought you and I could chat over some breakfast. Our cooks make the finest bacon and eggs this side of Auchindoun," she offered. The mere mention of Auchindoun sent a pang of guilt through my chest.

I accepted the invitation and carefully swung my legs over the edge of the bed. I stared down at my feet for a moment. *Am I strong enough to stand?* There was only one way to find out. I scooted all the way to the edge of the bed so I could set my bare feet on the wooden floor. Wrapping my arm around the headboard of the bed, I pushed up with all of my might to try to stand, simultaneously denying the offer of help from Miss Naomi. Immediately, my legs began to shudder violently. *I can't let this stop me.* Slowly, I let go of the bed; my balance was extremely off, but I didn't fall.

I took a single step forward and my knees buckled, sending me crashing to the floor in a heap. "Damn it," I cried in frustration.

"Let me help you." Naomi ran to my side and helped me up. She swung my arm around behind her head and grabbed my waist, hoisting me to my feet and supporting most of my weight.

I couldn't stop apologizing as we hobbled out of the room and down the stairs of the inn. She just kept telling me to quiet down. As we reached the bottom of the stairs, the whole inn went silent. All eyes were on us; well, more likely on her. All she had to do was nod and they all went about their business. I let out a long sigh once the spotlight was off of me. She led us over to small, empty table and set me down in the seat. *Honestly, she could have just let go of me and let me do it myself...falling seems to be the one thing I can do nowadays.*

"Hey Madison, two plates over here!" Naomi called towards the kitchen. "So how are you feeling?" she inquired, turning her attention back to me.

"I'm still alive," I responded honestly. *For now.* "I'm still fairly weak."

"It's to be expected. With all the blood you lost...all the bones I broke," she commented. "I do apologize about that. Sometimes I get a little...overzealous...in combat," Naomi added sincerely.

I shook my head a bit too quickly; it made my neck ache. "I deserved it...and more," I muttered, staring at my knees again.

"I'll withhold judgement until I've heard the whole story," Naomi stated. For a moment, I shot her a terrified glance before turning my stare back downward. "You're still afraid I'm going to kill you, aren't you?"

I gave her the slightest of nods. “Uh-huh,” I muttered. I realized I was shaking in the seat.

“I’m not in the business of murdering children,” Naomi mentioned, as if that was a natural thing to say. For a moment, a small jolt of indignation surged through me at being called a child. “Especially not ones that aren’t posing a threat to anyone.”

I stayed silent, thinking about it. My mind was a little more at ease, but I was still dreading what her response would be when I finally gave my side of the story.

A moment later, a woman wearing a chef’s hat and apron approached the table carrying two large plates. She set one down in front of each of us, bowed to Naomi, and walked away after being thanked. The introduction of the food stalled the conversation. I couldn’t help but notice Naomi had a rather substantial pile of bacon compared to mine.

She inhaled strongly through her nose, her eyes closed. “You know, the best – and occasionally the worst – part about being a worgen is the sense of smell...even when I’m like this,” she sighed satisfactorily. “I never get tired of the smell of bacon. It gets my mouth watering.”

She began to dig in. I sat there for a moment staring at my plate. I was ravenous – having only eaten a small amount over the last couple of days – but my stomach was unsettled. Slowly I picked up a piece of bacon and began to nibble on it. It honestly was very good, but I didn’t want to eat too quickly.

After a few minutes, Naomi sat back and let out a relieved sigh. She watched me slowly chipping away at my own meal. I wondered if she understood why I was being so tentative, because she just sat and waited.

Finally, I think she must have grown impatient. She pulled out the letter and, after re-reading it, tossed it unceremoniously onto the center of the table. I stared at it, my heart-rate rising. I began to quiver again.

“So I have a lot of assumptions from what I’m reading,” Naomi started. “But I want to hear from you directly. So, what’s the story? Who is this Astalor creep?” she asked. She didn’t sound angry, but rather mostly curious.

Speech slow and wavering, I began recounting the whole story. I felt like I had to start with when I was a student under Khadgar. Then, after he laughed, Astalor took me on as his apprentice. Then, the conversation became more emotional as I poured all of my frustrations onto the table. It was easy to get worked up when talking about my training – or lack thereof.

From there, I explained the circumstances that brought me to Draenor and the conditions that were quickly set thereafter by Astalor. Then, I failed, destroyed the camp, was dismissed and... Naomi slowed me down and made me go back to describe what had happened in more detail starting with the demon attack.

As I got to the point where I was given the letter of dismissal, I burst into tears and had to take a moment to collect myself before continuing. I explained everything – my fears and anxieties, the devastation I felt after feeling my entire life was falling apart. I described how I came across the mines – the whispers. “I just thought...I thought that if I borrowed enough...if I was just a little bit stronger...I could show someone...anyone...that I was actually worth something,” I sobbed, trying to keep my voice down to avoid drawing attention from the rest of the patrons at the inn. Then, I fell silent and went back to staring at my knees. I waited.

“Well that is quite a tale, isn’t it?” Naomi commented as if she didn’t have better stories to tell. She paused, which prompted me to actually glance up at her. Her eyes were closed and her body tensed up. Every so often, her fingers would twitch and spasm. I caught glimpses of wolfish features starting to appear before being suppressed. “I knew from the letter I wouldn’t like this man...but I didn’t think it would be that bad,” she admitted through clenched teeth. “It makes my blood boil just hearing about it.” She took several deep breaths before opening her eyes. “Sorry about that. It takes a decent bit of concentration to keep this form. It’s harder when I’m angry.”

“A-angry?” I repeated cautiously.

“I understand why you did what you did, believe me,” Naomi stated seriously. “After hearing everything, I don’t believe it was really your fault,” she concluded.

“What? But I...I was the one who put all those miners in danger!”

“And you did that because you were driven to the point of pure desperation by someone who was supposed to be helping and supporting you,” she pointed out. I could see why she would blame Astalor, but...*how is this not still my fault?* “Look...we all make mistakes in moments of crisis. Heavens knows I’ve made my fair share. I just had the good luck of having companions around to bail me out when my back was against the wall.” *Mistakes?* “I can only imagine what it was like to feel like that and have no one around to help you.” The thought of being all alone struck me particularly hard. “So what are you going to do?” she questioned.

“Do?” *I thought I’d be dead by now.*

“I mean, you have to do *something*. Are you going to go back home?”

“I...I don’t know...” I responded sorrowfully, thinking about how Archmage Elandra had looked at me after the mine. “If I went back...I...I don’t know what they would do to me.”

“I doubt they’d be *that* hard on you,” Naomi encouraged. “Take some time to think about it. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need,” she offered, starting to rise from her seat. “Come on, let’s get you back up to your room.”

Just like before, she helped me to my feet and all but carried me up the stairs. Before long, I was back in the bed, sitting against the headboard. A question from earlier popped into my mind. “Miss

Naomi...You said you've made mistakes...how do...how do you get past them? How do you live with yourself?" I asked.

She looked pensive for a moment. "You know, I don't think there's a big secret to it. I just live life a day at a time. Sure, it gets rough sometimes. But that's the stuff I learn from," she shrugged. "It may not seem like it now, but I expect – in the end – you'll walk away from this a stronger person than before." *I wish I shared her confidence. People have been wrong about my potential before.* "Just mull it over a bit. I'm sure you'll come up with something."

"Miss Naomi?"

"Please, Naomi is fine."

I blushed. "Th-thank you...thank you for taking care of me."

"You don't have to thank me. I'm just glad I didn't have to count you as another one of my mistakes. Some are harder to live with than others," was her reply as she ran her hands through her dark hair. "You're one of the good ones; I can see that clearly. Don't let anyone tell you different."

I stared out the window to give myself a plausible reason to be unable to make eye-contact. *I certainly don't feel like one of the good ones.* I was completely at a loss for what to say.

"I'm going to go ahead and leave you be for a while," Naomi announced. "I have some matters that need my attention. I do hope we can chat again, soon." I nodded. Naomi made her way to the door. She stopped when she reached it. "You know... *if* you were thinking about getting even with your old master...I wouldn't think any less of you. Food for thought." With that, she left me to my thoughts.

I sighed. *What does she mean 'one of the good ones'? I don't feel like I'm good.* I shook my head. I needed to stop thinking like that. *Maybe I'm thinking about this wrong...* Luna had claimed that because I felt so bad about it, it was proof that I wasn't a bad person. Maybe that was the best comfort I could find: not a good mage, but not a bad soul. Maybe that's what Naomi saw in me.

"You seem deep in thought," someone said behind me. I jumped and swung my head around. Coralia stood in the doorway. She, too, was not dressed in the armor I had seen her in previously. It was strange seeing them in more casual clothing. "My apologies. I did not mean to scare you."

"Oh, no...it's fine," I sighed.

"It was bad fortune that Naomi called me away when she did. I had hoped to be able to come and visit with you. I knew she had business with you, but in seeing her leave, I took to assuming that you were finished," she explained, walking into the room and pulling up the chair by the bed.

She speaks strangely... so officially. "We're done...I think," I promised.

“Are you feeling well enough to speak with me?” Her gaze appeared hopeful. I smiled slightly and nodded. “You know my sister, yes?” Again, I nodded. She then started asking me about Nayuuri. Apparently, she had not seen or heard from her little sister since she was taken away by the Kirin Tor.

It was a refreshing distraction to be able to talk about Nayuuri rather than myself. Of course, Coralia would occasionally ask me more about myself after I told her a story about her sister and me. As I recounted my memories, my heart began to ache. *I wonder what Nayuuri is doing right now. What has she heard about me?* After some time, Coralia started opening up about herself. It almost felt like I was talking with Nayuuri. It felt like I was making a friend.

Coralia kept me company for several hours. She even had a modest lunch brought up for the both of us. It was most definitely a welcome distraction. After eating, I felt some of my strength returning and tried to stand once again. Coralia stood by and watched, just in case I should risk hurting myself. It took a considerable amount of effort, but I was able to stand independently and with some stability. It was still difficult to walk; with each step, it was all I could do to keep my knees from giving out. Honestly, it was exhausting work having to relearn how to walk.

I was starving by the time dinner rolled around. I was also starting to feel a little restless being cooped up in the room all day. Luckily, Naomi returned to invite me to dine with her. She was amused to see Coralia in the room when she arrived. I wondered if the draenei had mentioned anything about me knowing her sister when they were out...adventuring, or whatever it was they were doing.

“You know, it really does get to be a bother staying like this all the time,” Naomi mentioned suddenly, forcing a brief pang of guilt. “Do you mind if I change?” I shook my head quickly. “Lovely.” She began to thrash as the transformation took effect. I could see her better this time and I watched as her legs changed shape and her feet morphed in large paws.

In a moment, a worgen stood before me, jerking her head from side to side and rolling her shoulders to crack her joints. She now fit into her once baggy clothing. *She almost looks stranger as a worgen wearing normal clothes than she did as a human wearing clothes that were way too big.* “Much better,” she sighed in a rough voice.

She walked up beside the bed and offered me a furry hand. I didn’t trust my body to make it out of the room without collapsing, so I allowed her to help me up. As she propped me up against her side, I couldn’t help but notice how much taller she was than me now compared to this morning.

“Coralia, care to join us?” Naomi invited. *Her voice...it’s so much harsher...*It would take some time getting used to it.

“I assumed I would be,” Coralia responded.

“Well then...it is a wonderful evening. Why don’t we eat out on the balcony?” Naomi proposed. I had no say in the matter; for the time being, I was at the mercy of wherever they were going to take me. *Though, outside sounds good.*

So, instead of going down the stairs, she led us down the hall to a balcony overlooking the town on the other side of the inn. Naomi set me down in a chair around a circular table and Coralia sat to my left. Naomi announced she was going to go downstairs to request the food be brought up to us. *It's so strange...isn't she the one in charge? Why does she do everything herself?* I was so used to Astalor commanding all of his servants around...ordering *me* around.

I turned my attention outward. The night was clear and peaceful; it reminded me of the serene little slice of paradise I had found out in Talador. A light breeze danced through my golden hair. Limbs wobbling, I pulled myself out of the chair and hobbled over to the railing of the balcony.

I heard chair legs screeching across the wood floor. A moment later, I felt a firm hand on my shoulder. "Be careful. You're still weak, you may fall," Coralia warned compassionately.

"I'm fine," I assured her, putting more weight on the banister. Was able to rest pretty much all of my weight on my elbows as I leaned against the railing. Coralia let go but stood nearby.

I gazed out beyond the balcony to the town below. The streets I could see were far less busy than what I had seen from my window. The lanterns were lit but the stalls were starting to close. I could hear music in the distance and tried to imagine what festivities they were enjoying. I imagined families getting together and reveling in each other's company. I let out a longing sigh. *What would my life be like if I still had a family?* I tried to push the thoughts out of my mind.

The high walls around the town caught my eyes. This place was so heavily fortified; it was no wonder the people were able to do things like celebrate without worrying. But there was a war going on out there. I wondered how Barum and Melani were doing, living beyond these walls. Were they safe? What about the village they were from? Was it as untouched by the war as this place? They were such good people; my heart hurt at the thought of something happening to them.

My mind shifted to the demon attack on Astalor's camp. Prior, the camp had been so quiet secure. I had been able to work myself to the point of exhaustion without concerning myself too much with my safety. But then things changed so quickly and without warning. *That must be how it is out here...one minute you're safe; the next, your world is burning.* Just thinking about it drove me closer and closer to a panic state. But those walls were here to prevent that...I felt safer here, especially surrounded by such strong travelers. But there were so many who couldn't feel like me.

This war needed to end. Some of the same feelings that had led me into the minds were reignited in me. But there was something different; I knew I couldn't do anything on my own. But, there had to be a way I could *help*. I had to do what I could to help the innocent people of this world feel the security I enjoyed now. Naomi and her companions were doing just that; Khadgar was doing just that. Even if I could return to Dalaran, I felt I needed to stay here while I could still do something...even if it was some mundane chore.

“Deep in thought, are we?” Naomi observed, walking up beside me and leaning against the railing like I was. “I’m glad to see you on your feet. You’ll be back to normal in no time,” she added casually.

“I can’t wait.”

“Have you thought any more about what you’ll do once you’re well enough?” Naomi inquired curiously.

I nodded. “I was wondering...is there place for me here?” I asked hopefully. “I’ll earn. I’ll clean the latrines if that’s what needs to be done. I just...I just want to help,” I added quickly before waiting for a response.

“All are welcome here. I’m sure we can find something a bit more useful than that for you to do,” Naomi laughed. “But if you want to stick around, you’re going to have to meet the rest of the crew.”

“The crew?”

“There are a lot of people who come and go, helping out where they can when they can. Many of them will come, looking for jobs that need to be done around Draenor and then will go out on their own. But there are about a half dozen of us that have been traveling together for a long time, all with our own...talents. You’ve already met Coralia and Luna, but there are others you will have to get to know,” Naomi explained. *Wait, it sounds like she’s going to have me join them... Would I become part of the ‘crew?’* I wasn’t worthy of that. “But that’s for later. Now, come to the table; I’ve brought some drinks and they’ll be bringing the food up shortly,” she invited.

Slowly, I returned to my chair, moving carefully, conscientiously monitoring each step. They waited for me to be seated before sitting down, themselves. There were a few mugs sitting in the center of the table and Naomi quickly passed them around.

“Do you really think it’s wise for her to be drinking wine in her condition?” Coralia challenged, taking a drink from her mug. “...and apparent age,” she added to the side.

“Relax,” Naomi chuckled. “In a place like this, we all need a chance to unwind. If you’re that concerned, don’t let her have too much. But there’s no harm in a mug...or two...”

I stared down at the opaque red liquid. *I didn’t know people drank wine from a...mug.* I wasn’t exactly experienced when it came to drinking.

“I really must insist,” Coralia declared resolutely, reaching over and pulling the mug from my hands. “It will slow her convalescence.” *I don’t want that!*

“Fine!” Naomi conceded, throwing her hands in the air. “We’ll have them bring something else up.” She stared over at me. “Sorry, I tried,” she apologized, as if I had asked her for it. “What do you want to drink? They have pretty much anything you can think of...or at least anything I can think of.”

“I’ve always liked...um...honey mint tea,” I responded shyly. I didn’t like the idea of asking for something specific, seeing as I was a freeloading guest and all. I would be fine with anything, but Naomi did ask.

So, when someone came up with plates, Naomi sent him back to get me some honey mint tea. By that time, she had downed her large mug of wine and snatched up the one that had been mine. We began eating. “So, Kaelynara...I spent all morning interrogating you on your life story, what do you want to know about me?” Naomi offered suddenly, just as I was taking a bite.

I choked on my food a little and started into a coughing fit – each one making my body ache ever so slightly. “I’m sorry,” I gasped after calming down. “The question took me off-guard.” I fell silent for a moment, thinking. *There are a thousand things I want to ask her...but what is appropriate? What if I make her angry?*

“Don’t overthink it. If you have a question, ask away,” she invited happily.

Coralia started giggling lightly. “Or you could wait until she’s had a few more pints of wine and ask her the questions you *really* want to ask,” she whispered, leaning over. Naomi shot her a bemused look while taking a large swig of wine; it was obvious she had heard.

“Um...well...how did you...uh...” I started, trying to think of a good way to approach the question. “How did you...um...become...”

“How did I become a worgen?” Naomi completed, laughing. I blushed, but nodded. “I was probably about your age when I received the curse. I was bitten by someone I was trying to evacuate from Gilneas when the first wave of worgen attacked,” she explained. “That’s the short version...the whole story is far too long to tell tonight. Perhaps another time.”

“O-okay,” I responded. “What did it...what did it feel like?”

Naomi leaned back in her chair and took another drink. She released a long, thoughtful sigh. “I remember when it happened. I lost control of myself, like something wild had taken over. I killed a lot of people...*a lot* of people.” She took another drink. My stomach twisted painfully. “It was like I was watching myself do it, too. But I couldn’t stop it...not until they captured me...” She trailed off.

Compared to that, my problems seemed like nothing. Naomi managed to keep going despite that, surely I could, as well. “I’m sorry,” I apologized quickly.

“Don’t be, I don’t hide what I am...and what I am includes what I’ve done. It’s one of the reasons I devote every day to the mission of protecting people.”

I still felt horrible for having asked the question. I decided to change topics and start asking her about her adventures. She was much more excited about those stories, explaining all of the different places she’s been. The Icecrown campaign was really her first major engagement. That was how she made a name for herself that followed her through the struggle against Deathwing. She told me stories

of Pandaria, a continent I had only read about in books in the libraries at Dalaran. It all sounded so wonderful...if not for all of the killing.

All the while, the waiter at the inn kept bringing more drinks up for us. Coralia sipped at her wine slowly. Naomi, on the other hand, almost guzzled down the mugs as they were handed to her. As the night went on, she became more and more open and much louder.

Pretty quickly, Naomi was telling stories that I didn't ask about...and didn't really care to know about. This included, of course, her experiences playing "bury the bone" – as she called it – with someone they had met on their travels. She turned very somber and distant when I asked more about him – just trying to derail the course of the conversation – which led me to believe he was no longer around.

All in all, it was an entertaining evening, enjoying the fresh air and watching a living legend get drunk off her furry ass before my very eyes. The food was delicious as well and my stomach was actually settled enough to eat my fill. For the first time in a long time, I actually laughed.

Sometime late that evening, an unexpected visitor came to find us: Serena. "Commander, the...Kaely?" she exclaimed, interrupting whatever business she had with Naomi the moment she laid eyes on me. "You're...you're alive!" she cried, running up and putting her arms around me – which was awkward since I was sitting.

"S-Serana?" I stammered, stunned.

"Archmage Elandra...she told us you were dead!" she told me solemnly. "What happened?" she asked, staring at me earnestly.

"It's a long story....one I...I can't tell right now," I responded, almost sorrowfully. If she didn't know what happened, I didn't want to tell her yet. *What did Archmage Elandra say?*

"What brings you back to us?" Coralia interjected, saving me.

Serena stood up straight. "Archmage Khadgar wishes to see the commander," she announced. "He says it's urgent."

Coralia sighed. "Well, as you can see, the commander is in no condition to travel to Zangarra," she pointed out, nodding towards the seat where Naomi was slumped. Her eyes were half-open.

"I'm...fine...." she muttered quietly. *Wow, she crashed hard. How much did she drink?*

"You are many things; but 'fine' is not one of them," Coralia remarked sternly. She turned her attention back to Serena. "Please let the archmage know that the commander will be meet with him in the morning."

"I will have many things to report to him, it seems," Serena commented, looking over at me for a moment. I started to feel nervous again. *What would Khadgar think about what had happened? Did he*

know, already? There was nothing I could do to keep Serena from delivering the message...well, nothing I was *willing* to do. "I am so happy to see you are safe, Kaely," she said with a warm smile. She embraced me again before excusing herself and walking away.

"Well, then, I better get this worthless lump off to bed," Coralia announced. I overheard an annoyed growl gurgling from Naomi's throat. "Will you be able to make it back to your room? I can return if you need," she added to me.

"I'll manage, thank you," I responded politely. I watched as Coralia hoisted Naomi out of the chair and more-or-less dragged her semi-conscious body down the hall.

I sat in the chair for a little while longer, sipping at one last cup of tea, and lost in thought. I tried to image Khadgar's reaction when Serena gave him the news that I was still alive. It sounded like Serena didn't know the whole story, but did Elandra tell more to Khadgar? Would he be mad when he saw me? Would he be disappointed? I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know how I could face him.

After nearly an hour of being lost in my own mind, I decided it was finally time to return to my room. It took some effort, but I was able to slowly move down the hall, hand resting on the wall for support, and return to my room.

I lay down in the bed and my brain immediately went back to dwelling on Khadgar. It kept me up for quite some time. However, I was eventually able to slip into an uneasy sleep.

I awoke early the next morning feeling more energized than I had in a long while. As I stood up, I noticed my legs were not nearly as weak as they had been even the day before. I wasn't quite back to my normal strength, and I could definitely feel that, but it wasn't tiresome to move.

I wandered out of the room and carefully made my way down the stairs, grasping the railing as I took each cautious step. With luck and perseverance, I was able to get to the first floor without gravity doing it for me. The tavern was nearly empty; I wondered if it was too early for breakfast for most people.

I decided I wasn't terribly hungry yet, especially in the case one of my new...friends...wanted to invite me to eat with them later, so I headed for the exit. The morning sun was just peaking over the wall as I stepped onto the stone pathway outside of the inn. Some of the vendors were starting to set up their wagons in the village square, but there were few others moving about.

"Good to see you on your feet," a low, smooth voice commented. Luna walked up to me. "What has you out of bed at this early hour?"

"Oh, I...I guess I was feeling restless," I responded. "What about you?"

Luna smiled. "I often take morning walks around the pond during sunrise. I find it a very relaxing and peaceful use of my time. One has to take time to enjoy the little things here," she explained.

I nodded. I was beginning to understand what they meant. “So, is there...um...a good place for me to bathe?” I asked, realizing that I hadn’t really had a chance to clean myself since I woke up.

“I was just on my way to the bathhouse, myself, to clean up after my walk. Would you care to join me?” Luna invited. I accepted the invitation and walked with her. She needed to slow her gait to allow me to keep up; not only was my body so weak, but she also had significantly longer legs.

When we reached the bathhouse, which was not too far from the inn, we separated in search of empty rooms. I eventually found one and entered to find a simple but sizeable tub near a shelf that was full of urns with various oils and small wash cloths. There was already water in the tub and I could see a bit of steam rising from its surface.

I browsed the urns on the shelf and found one with an enticing aroma – orchids and lavender. I grabbed that vessel and moved it closer to the bath. I stripped down and carefully stepped into the hot water. Before long, my body was submerged and I leaned against the back of the tub, my head resting gently on the lip.

I sighed and closed my eyes, simply feeling the warmth of the water and breathing in the steam. After a moment, I began to clean myself, dipping a cloth in the oil urn and rubbing it along the length of my arms, legs, and torso. Then, it was time to wash my hair. I inhaled longingly through my nose as I applied the flowery oil to my long, golden hair, running a comb through it and get rid of the multiple knots that had accumulated over the last couple of weeks without a proper bath.

Eventually, the water began to cool and I decided it was time to get out. After drying myself off, I retrieved the simple robes from where I had folded them. For a moment, I didn’t want to put it back on, since I had been wearing it for the last couple of days straight, but I didn’t have anything else. *I sure as hell am not going to be walking around naked.* With a sigh, I slipped back into the clothes. *I wonder if anyone would mind if I asked for a change of clothes.*

I walked out of the bathing room and glanced around. I didn’t know what room Luna had gone into, or if she was even still here. So, I made for the exit.

“You were in there quite a while,” I heard Luna’s voice chime in as I emerged from the bathhouse. She was sitting on a small bench just outside. “Enjoying yourself?” she asked with a calm smile.

“It’s been too long,” I responded. *Luna was the one who had sent the robes to me initially.* “Hey, Miss Luna?”

“Hmm?”

“Is there any chance I could get...um...some clean clothes?” I requested uncertainly. It still felt weird to ask people for things. I was suddenly reminded what had happened to the robes I had brought with me from Dalaran – almost all were probably lost in the fire at the camp.

Luna laughed. "Of course. If you would like, I have taken the liberty of mending and cleaning the robes you were wearing when we brought you here."

"You mended them?" It was still so strange that these people committed themselves to such menial tasks.

"I consider myself a bit of a seamstress, yes," Luna replied lightly. "Come with me," she beckoned, rising to her feet and walking past me. I followed her to a small house near a gigantic tree in the far corner of the town. *Is this where she lives?* "I was going to bring these back to your room later today."

She handed me my black and red embroidered robes and gave me some privacy to change. I quickly changed out of the robes I had been wearing to slip my old ones back on. It was a much better fit and I felt a strange sense of attachment to them. They were one of the few possessions I had left in the world...along with my teddy, of course.

I inspected my belly. The robes left part of my stomach exposed around my belly button, but covered the wound – which was near completely gone by this point. My fingers brushed across the area – I could just barely feel Luna's mending work; it felt almost completely the same as before.

I stepped out and found Luna. After warmly thanking her for her work, we made our way back into the town. I gazed all around me in wonder while I was finally seeing all of these different people down on street-level. It felt nice being out and about; it felt better having had a chance to bathe and change my clothes.

As we passed the inn, Naomi stumbled out, rubbing her temples. She was actually wearing her armor this time. "Oh, there you are," she observed with an abnormally strained voice. Her eyes looked red. "I came to see if you wanted to eat with us before we headed out," she invited. "Luna, you're coming with us, right?"

"Yes, Naomi; I am ready to go when you and the others are," Luna responded.

"Excellent...so, breakfast?" I accepted the offer and followed her back into the inn. She led us back up the balcony where we had dined last night. There were more people sitting at the table. I recognized Coralia, clad in her crystal-adorned, gleaming armor.

But the other three, I did not know. There was another worgen sitting to Coralia's left. Her robes and armor that covered it were largely earthy-colors – dark green and brown – with large, glowing orbs upon her shoulder pads. Her helmet had what looked like antlers attached to them. She appeared somehow wilder than Naomi. Her dark hair was matted and tangled throughout her mane and there was a strange animalistic quality to her eyes that was absent from Naomi.

To Coralia's right, there sat a draenei. Her hair was a pale sea-foam and her horns stuck straight up into the air. Her facial features were soft and youthful, falling somewhere between Nayuuri's and

Coralia's ages. She wore a white and electric-blue robes with impressively spiked shoulders that seemed to be spitting lightning from glowing maelstroms that floated just off the surface.

And then...there was the gnome. She was by far the strangest of the group, and not simply because she was south of three feet tall. Her skin was beyond pale – almost white as snow. This was in very noticeable contrast to her long, bubblegum-pink hair. Her eyes were sunken into her gaunt face and shined with a pale, icy light. She was clad in dark blue armor covered in what looked like teeth or tusks of some sort. Despite this eerie appearance, the gnome happily sat on a booster seat to see the table, which was a strange sort of amusing.

They all stopped eating and stared at me as Luna and I approached the table with Naomi. "Hey Boss, who's the new girl?" the gnome asked. A chill ran down my spine at the sound of her voice; she had a high-pitched, almost squeaky timbre, but there was something darker behind it, almost like her voice had a shadow.

Naomi carefully rubbed her eyes with her thumb and index finger and held up her other hand before plopping down into the chair. She let out a pained groan before looking up. "Sorry, I have a bit of a headache today," she complained. "Please just introduce yourselves," she sighed, resting her snout on the table.

"Naomi may have imbibed a little too much last night," Coralia laughed, passing a large cup of water to the hungover worgen. There were scattered chuckles from the group as their leader chugged the water.

"I'm...um...I'm Kaelynara," I greeted uncertainly. *What do they know about me?* I wondered how big a secret my presence in this town was. After all, Serena had had no idea I was here. I stood there awkwardly while Luna took a seat beside the gnome, leaving a chair next to Naomi open. "Kaelynara Sunchaser," I added as they kept staring at me.

"They call me Mini Millie," the gnome piped up excitedly. That voice still made my skin crawl.

"Gwen Forresier," the other worgan announced. Her voice was deeper than Naomi's, but still as harsh.

"I am Saeliara," the other draenei said with an approving nod. "It's a pleasure."

Warily, I took a seat beside Naomi. Someone shoved a plate of food in front of me. As I started to pick at the meal, I gazed around at each of them. Naomi wasn't kidding when she mentioned they were all very different. I could only imagine what each of them could do...and if they palled around with someone like Naomi, they could do a lot. *I don't fit in with them at all.*

"Um...so..." I started, clearing my throat. "Naomi, you mentioned you guys were going somewhere?"

“Khadgar requested a meeting. We’re leaving for Zangarra after we eat to see what he needs. It’s why I put my armor on this morning,” she grunted, guzzling down another glass of water that had somehow appeared in front of her. “I’m never going to drink again,” she moaned, putting her head back on the table, her ears withdrawn.

“You say that every time. Then you drink even more!” Mini Millie exclaimed, giggling a creepy giggle. “So Kaelynara, where did the boss-lady find you?”

I looked down at my lap. “Oh, well...um...it’s a long story.” Did I really want my first interaction with them to be explaining how my own idiocy almost got myself and others killed?

“Asshole instructor drove her over the edge, I nearly killed her, didn’t kill her, all is forgiven, she’s one of us now,” Naomi cut in quickly. “There, that wasn’t so long, now was it?” I glowed with embarrassment.

“I’m sure the whole story is fascinating. You’ll have to tell us about it, when you’re ready,” Saeliara commented.

I sat and ate silently for a few minutes while the others talked amongst themselves. They all seemed quite curious about the business Khadgar had with them. Naomi seemed to recover from her hangover relatively quickly.

After a few minutes, a guard came in and approached her. “Ma’am, the archmage is...well, he’s here,” the guard reported, looking terribly uncomfortable.

“Here? As in...” Naomi started curiously.

“In the garrison, Ma’am. I came to find you immediately when he arrived,” he clarified.

Khadgar is here? My brain took a little too long to process the idea.

“The old man must be getting impatient,” Naomi sighed, pushing away from the table and rising. The others stood as well; Mini Millie hopped down from her seat and I lost sight of her behind the table. “We would have been along in an hour or so. Well, let’s go see what he wants, shall we?”

They marched away leaving me uncertain of what to do. *Why would he leave his tower?* There was a profound longing building up in my mind. The last time I had seen him was so brief that it could barely be considered a visit. I wanted to see him. But at the same time...

I took a deep breath and stood. Regardless of what he’d think, I had to at least see him; even if it was just a glimpse as he disappeared. I hurried down the stairs and headed for the exit. The closer I got to the front door, the more my anxiety started to overcome me. *What if he’s angry with me?* I wasn’t sure if I could handle disappointing him any more than I had. I slowed my gait and came to a stop at the entrance of the inn.

“Where is she?” I could hear Khadgar’s voice somewhere on the other side of the door. I couldn’t really tell if he was concerned or angry. My heart was pounding in my chest. *Was he talking about me? No...he must not have found Naomi yet.*

“She’s still recovering,” I heard Naomi respond. *Damn.*

“Bring me to her.”

Before I could get any meaningful distance away from the door, it swung open and I was face-to-face with the closest thing I had to a father. I could feel my body quivering a little as my green eyes connected with his. I was trying to read his face, but I was too nervous to come to any real conclusions. His body was tense and he stared at me intently, like he was trying to decide if I was real. After a moment, he relaxed his shoulders.

He crossed the distance between us in an instant and threw his arms around me, resting one hand on the back of my head and pulling me close to his chest. “You’re safe,” he mumbled in disbelief. “Thank god, you’re safe. When Elandra told me what had happened...”

My heart skipped a beat. *So he does know...* I don’t know why, but suddenly tears were rolling down my face. “I...I...” I stuttered, but couldn’t think of anything to say. *If he was mad for what I did, he had a deeply confusing way of showing it.*

He pushed away and placed his firm hands on my shoulders, staring very seriously at me. “I couldn’t believe what she told me...you have to tell me. Tell me everything,” Khadgar demanded solemnly yet strangely non-judgmentally.

“Um...Khadgar, didn’t you have something urgent to discuss with us?” Naomi questioned uncertainly behind him.

“It can wait a short time,” Khadgar responded. “Right now, my curiosity must be satiated,” he declared.

“Why don’t we move this into the war room in the town hall,” Naomi proposed. “I don’t think the innkeeper would appreciate us clogging up the entrance,” she added with a short laugh.

He nodded and he virtually pulled me out of the inn. He kept one hand on my shoulder as we walked across the town square and up the stairs to a massive building with a huge bell tower jutting up from the above the entrance. It was as if he was afraid I would disappear if he let go. The entire group followed us. *I guess they get to hear the story now.*

We entered the structure and Naomi immediately led us off to the left into an open room with a large table in the center. There was a gigantic map of Draenor spread across the table with various little flags set at different locations. I didn’t study it too closely; my mind was distracted with other things.

Naomi sat in the largest chair at the head of the table. Upon her invitation, I sat to her right and Khadgar – finally letting go of me – took his place directly across the table from me. The others filled in the chairs beside us. They all stared at me expectantly.

I looked to Naomi, who simply nodded supportively. I shot a nervous glance at Khadgar, hoping he'd tell me I didn't have to go through this again – at least not right now and not in front of so many people. But his decidedly inquisitive eyes told me I wouldn't be so lucky.

With a heavy sigh, I began to recount the story, starting with a brief explanation of Astalor's teaching techniques while in Dalaran. Then, I went in to everything that happened after leaving Khadgar's tower. My voice began to waiver as I got to the part where the servant presented me with my letter of dismissal. All I could bring myself to say about it was that it said I had failed the apprenticeship. At that point, Naomi excused herself and left the room. *Where is she going? Why now?*

I closed my eyes for a moment to try to collect myself and keep myself from completely breaking down. Everyone sat in silence, waiting for me to continue. With a shaky breath, I went on with the story. I explained how I had heard the whispers from the mines, entreating me with promises to help me prove I wasn't completely incompetent. I described the power I felt from the crystal and how my mind was consumed with this urge to show that I could be of use to someone. Naomi slipped back in and silently sat back down in her chair right as I reached the conclusion where she and Archmage Elandra confronted and easily dispatched me.

"And then...I...I woke up here," I concluded and fell silent. I couldn't bring myself to look anyone in the face. I saw Naomi pull out the letter from Astalor and quietly hand it to Khadgar, who promptly read through it. *So that's where she went.*

"What a dick!" Mini Millie blurted out angrily. Startled, my eyes shot to the strange little gnome. She was standing on the chair with her hands pressed firmly on the table as she stared imploringly at Naomi and Khadgar. "Can I kill him? Please, can I kill him?" she nearly begged. I blinked a couple times, not entirely sure my ears were working.

"I will have words with Astalor as soon as the threat to Auchindoun is neutralized," Khadgar assured me. I stole a glance over at him and found his compassionate gaze turned on me. "You made a mistake, Kaelynara. You were upset and made a bad decision...a dangerous decision."

I hung my head, trying desperately to keep myself from breaking down into tears. *I knew he would be disappointed in me.*

"However, you are a student and a very young one, at that. As far as I am concerned, the fault here lies with the lack of guidance from your mentor," he continued. *Wh-what?* I stared up at him, not sure if I had heard him right. "I should have known something like this would happen the moment you told me Astalor Bloodsworn took on a pupil. I knew that arrogant fool wasn't capable of actually mentoring." He looked legitimately ticked off. He let out a long, drawn-out exhale. "Kaelynara...I assume you learned something from all of this?" His tone was that of a disappointed parent.

I nodded seriously, doing everything I could to avoid eye contact with anyone.

“Then I will ensure your next mentor will do better,” he promised.

I looked back at him. “My...next...? But...I thought...” but he held up his hand to silence me.

“We can plan for your future later. The important thing is you are all right.” He took another look at the letter and shook his head out of frustration. Then, he nodded to Naomi.

“Kaely, I’m going to need to ask you to step out while we discuss...business,” she commanded. I nodded quickly and fervently, rising and hurrying out of the room, glad to get out there. I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear about the war anyway.

Once outside, I found a bench to collapse on. I took several deep breaths to get my heart-rate down. *Plan for my future...* The words repeated in my head over and over. *I thought my future with the Kirin Tor was over.*

I sat there for quite some time, dwelling on the conversation. Khadgar seemed disappointed, but maybe not entirely with me? It was odd to see him that serious; though, I couldn’t deny it was as serious matter. Mini Millie was angry, but how did the others react? I hadn’t looked at them.

Eventually, Khadgar left the town hall alone. He caught sight of me and approached, taking a seat on the bench beside me. “I really am happy to hear you are alive and well,” he assured me gently.

“I’m sorry about what happened,” I muttered.

“It isn’t something we need to discuss further at the moment. Another time, I think. Unfortunately, other business demands my immediate attention; but, I will return soon. Believe me, I wish I had more time.”

“I understand.”

“When I can manage, I will be back and you and I can talk about continuing your training.” My ears perked up hopefully. “Until then, two things. First, stay safe. Do not do anything to put yourself in any unnecessary danger. I’ve already lost you once and I don’t know if I want to do that again. I’m sure you’re old friend back home would certainly fall apart,” he instructed sternly.

“Nayuuri?”

He nodded. “Of course I notified her when Elandra informed me of what she thought was your fate. And then I sent word to her immediately when Serena returned last night to tell me you were still alive. I imagine another contradictory message from me would be a little much.” He cleared his throat. “And the second thing...” He produced a small, clear orb with a bluish tint. It was about the size of an apple. The center contained an entrancing mist that swirled on its own as he held it in his palm. “Take this and keep it with you. Its inherent magical qualities will help protect you in a pinch. And if you ever need me, channel your power into it and say *diel’or shala’thalas.*” I repeated the phrase while reaching

for the orb. I could feel something inside it as I held on to the smooth orb – it was as if the magic that flowed through me was somewhat amplified. He stood up and stretched. “Now, I best be off. Please take care, Kaelynara,” he announced.

“Th-thank you,” I stammered, not entirely sure what this thing was, but still grateful to have it. It was almost a symbol of the little pieces of my life coming back together.

Then, Khadgar was unceremoniously gone, leaving me sitting alone on the bench once again. I just stared down at the orb, wondering what the phrase Khadgar had told me would do. I wanted to try it. *He wouldn't appreciate me just using for no reason.* I resisted the urge, but it still tugged away at me.

A few moments later, Naomi and her squad of adventurers emerged from the town hall. I ran over to Naomi to see what was going on. “Something's about to happen in Auchindoun and the Exarchs have asked us to intervene. Khadgar seems to think Teron'gor, himself, will be there, so we have to be off to start setting a trap,” she explained. “Stay here. Khadgar would turn me into a rug if I let anything happen to you,” she added with an amused grin.

Auchindoun? From what Khadgar said earlier, it sounded like Astalor was still out there. Something swelled within me that replaced my inadequacy – a sort of anger that had once been directed at myself. All of the frustration I had felt over the last several months returned and focused on my former master. *I know Khadgar said he would 'have words' with Astalor, but... I want to be there when he gets what's coming to him.* I didn't want to hurt him, per se, but I couldn't forgive what he put me through so easily.

Naomi just stared at me. “You're not coming with us,” she stated resolutely. “Until I hear otherwise from Khadgar, I'm going to make sure you're as out of harm's way as possible. I'm leaving Millie behind to look after you.”

“But, don't you need her to help with the attack?” I protested. Part of me was considering trying to sneak away while they were gone.

“I imagine the Exarchs are probably a little uneasy about invite outsiders into Auchindoun. I'm sure they would be just a little happier if one of the first outsiders in such a holy place wasn't a death knight,” she explained with a smirk. “I'm sure you two will have fun together. She's a lovable little psychopath.” After a moment, she cleared her throat. “And...if, somehow, something were to happen, she's useful to have around in a fight,” she threw in with a wink. “We'll be back in a day or two. Now stay...good girl.”

Naomi walked away to join the others, who then headed towards a massive stone building off to the east of the town hall. It looked like a military building, maybe an armory or a barracks. *That must be where they keep their weapons.*

I made my way back to my room in the inn and sat down in the chair at the desk. *What did the wink mean? Does she expect me to go do something stupid?* I gazed into the orb, eyes fixated on the whirling vortex within. Just like the crystal, I could feel power in it just waiting to be tapped.

After several minutes, Mini Millie came to find me. “Hey, what’cha doing?” she asked cheerfully as she entered my room without knocking.

“Oh, hi, Miss Millie,” I responded absently.

“Eww, formalities...Just call me Mini Millie...or Mini...or Millie,” she exclaimed energetically. “Is that ball really that interesting?”

“I’m sorry, I’m just distracted,” I sighed.

“I thought you’d be ready to go by now,” she shrugged.

“Go? Go where?” I asked, staring down at the gnome curiously. It was only then that I noticed the hilt of a sword peaking up from over her shoulder. *She’s armed? Why?*

“To Talador, of course,” she replied simply, as if it were obvious. When she noticed my confused stare, she giggled.

“But...Naomi told me to stay here,” I mentioned. *Why am I arguing?*

“Well, she told *me* to look after you and keep you safe. And I’m bored and annoyed from the story you told and I want to go give a rough hello to that Astalor guy. So, if I’m going to look after you *and* go to Talador, that means you have to come to Talador with me. Makes sense, right?”

It didn’t, but I couldn’t see much point in arguing with her. *This could be my chance.* I still didn’t know exactly what I would do when I confronted Astalor, but I knew I wanted to do something. Quickly, I threw my grabbed my satchel from the desk and threw my only personal belongings into it, including the orb.

I followed her out of the inn, my brain hard at work trying to figure out what I was going to do. Do I chastise him? Would that even register with his ego? I had a sinking feeling Mini Millie would try to kill him if given the chance. And surely, Astalor would defend himself. *What if he kills her? Can she be killed? Are death knights alive?* My brain was quickly becoming distracted.

Before I knew it, Mini Millie was telling me to climb onto a gryphon near the stables. “I’m sorry, what?” I blurted out suddenly.

“I’m not going to be able to talk to the mages in the war tower into opening a portal to Talador for us. So, the fastest way is to fly. We can take a flight to Fort Wrynn and it’s only a couple hours’ ride from there to Auchindoun,” she explained matter-of-factly. “So, up you go!”

I grew up in Dalaran – a city floating hundreds of yards above the ground, but I wasn’t sure I was comfortable with this. At least I understood the power of the magic keeping the city afloat. *How could this creature guarantee to get me there safely?* “I...I don’t know if I want to...”

Mini Millie shot me a deadly cold stare. “I said up you go,” she repeated in a threatening voice. The shadowy undercurrent to her voice made my body stiffen.

Without another word, I hopped onto the back of the gryphon – fear overcoming my apprehension. Millie’s demeanor changed in an instant and she began giggling as she climbed up in front of me. The air around the gnome was chilly, but I tried to ignore it.

The gryphon master gave the creature a slap on the behind and it ran off. It spread its wings and my stomach plummeted as we took off. I clutched the saddle so tightly my knuckles turned as white as Mini Millie’s skin. I clenched my eyes shut, unable to watch as the wind whipped my face. I could hear Mini Millie laughing maniacally; I wondered if she knew how much I hated to travel like this.

I’m not going to die here...I’m not going to die here. I kept repeating it in my head as we flew. After what felt like forever, I could feel us starting to descend. I stole a peak before squeezing my eyes shut again. I caught a glimpse of a large fort near the mountains. There was a sizeable mage tower in the center and I remembered the day I arrived in Draenor – Serena was sent with Naomi to see to the tower. *Why couldn’t we have at least tried to bribe the mages?* I wondered, as if I had anything on me to use as a bribe.

Finally, we were grounded. Legs wobbling, I climbed off the beast and took a few cautious steps. *Thank the Light for solid ground!*

“Now, wasn’t that fun?” Mini Millie giggled, giving me a slap on the back of the my thigh – since she couldn’t reach any higher.

“Yeah...fun,” I grumbled. I stumbled around for a moment before Millie rode up riding a strange creature that looked like an antelope the size of a horse with dark violet fur. This was much more doable, so I climbed up behind Millie.

The mount took us out of the camp and down the road. Millie kept it at a swift trot, but didn’t seem to want to take it to a gallop. I guess we had time. “Hey, Millie...can you, um...*not* kill Astalor if you can help it?”

“Aw, that’s no fun. Why?” she whined with a squeaky voice.

I was quiet for a moment. “Because I don’t want to get *that* kind of revenge,” I responded quietly. I remembered what had led me into the mines to begin with. I wanted to save people. I couldn’t go around killing people who were technically fighting against the legion and the iron horde; even if those people were like Astalor. There had to be another way to get back at him.

My mind was hard at work the whole ride. Soon, I came to a familiar, crystal-clear lake. We passed the courtyard with the impressive draenic statue. Then came the bridge over the pond. Finally, the towering dome and spires of Auchindoun could be seen in the distance.

Oh no, I’m out of time. What do I do? What do I do? I started to panic again. I still couldn’t come up with anything by the time we reached the path that surrounded the ancient crypt and headed south towards the where the demons still fought against the defenders of Auchidoun. There were significantly

fewer demons than I remembered. We must have been winning the battle. Either that, or most of the forces were being funneled elsewhere.

We dismounted as we entered the base camp near the battle. I could see my old master in the back, continuing to power more blood golems and sending them to aid in the fight.

"Is that him?" Mini Millie asked, pointing at Astalor. I nodded uneasily. She marched across the encampment towards him. I couldn't help but notice the chilling little gnome was receiving some very concerned glances from the draenei nearby.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," I whimpered quietly. "Maybe we should just go back. Naomi will be angry if she hears about this."

"Hears about it? She basically told me to bring you out here," she laughed. *What?* "Hey, you! Mage!" Mini Millie called out. Astalor just continued about his business; he didn't even look. "Astalor!" she yelled, coming to a halt about ten yards from my former master.

I heard the magister sigh and maneuver the blood back into the cauldron. "What is it?" he groaned, turning around. "Another complaint from the...oh, Kyliara," he commented as he caught sight of me.

"It's...it's Kaelynara," I corrected. *Now that I'm here, I'm sure this wasn't a good idea.*

"Bah, no matter. I mostly forgot all about you. Someone told me you'd died or something," he stated with a wave of his hand. "I guess you were no good at that, either. Fortunate for you, I suppose," he added with a sneer. "Now run along, I'm a very busy man. Take that obnoxious little...*thing*...with you." I assumed he meant Mini Millie. He turned around and started back at his work on the blood golems.

"Hey! We're here to make you answer for what you did to Kaelynara!" she threatened angrily.

"Did?" he scoffed. "I *did* nothing to her. I simply gave her a chance to prove that she had the potential all of the mages around Dalaran said she had. Obviously, they were wrong," he declared. My confidence shrank away. "I had hoped leading that felguard to the camp would be enough to get her to actually apply my instructions...sink or swim, as they say. But she took the easy way out."

He...he was the one who set the demon loose on the camp? Some of his servants died in that attack! "How...how could you?" I questioned in utter disbelief. "Those poor people are dead because of that thing!"

"They are dead because you did not protect them with the magic I taught you," he argued, still with his back to us.

"Can I kill him? Please?" Mini Millie pleaded. "I'll only kill him a little, I swear!" *I'm not sure I know what that means.* She pulled the sword from its sheath on her back. Blue-white runes ran up the length of the blade, which was as long as Millie was tall. An icy mist emanated from the blade.

“How barbaric,” Astalor scoffed. “Kaelynara, watch carefully to see what power you could have wielded had you applied yourself more.” *Uh-oh.* I quickly turned my head and saw the others in the camp backing away from us.

He finished charging up a golem and it charged directly at us. I swung down with a powerful, metallic arm. With a shriek, I dove to the side, even though it wasn't aiming for me. “Millie!” I screamed, twisting around to see what had happened to her.

The golem stood still, its hand partially buried in shattered stone. But Millie wasn't under the fist. It stood up and the body began twisting around, as if scanning for its target. Something strange began to happen to the vessel containing the blood. The glass started to frost over; I could hear a nearly silent crackling noise as the ice accumulated.

“It can break stone...wow, this magic is strong,” I heard Millie comment sarcastically. I followed the sound and caught sight of her standing behind the construct. It spun around and charged at her. In one swift move, she brought the blade down on the vessel, shattering it with what looked like ease. The golem stopped moving as blood spilled out onto the ground, quickly spreading out along the cracks in the pavement. “I have to say, I'm not impressed.”

I hesitant smile spread across my face. *She beat it so easily!*

“That was only a taste. Let's see how you handle this,” he yelled. The blood began to regroup and mixed in with the blood from the cauldron. It started to pulsate, hovering above the ground. I could feel a strong magical presence surging through it. Then, suddenly, a barrage of what looked like needles made of pure blood were launched in all directions.

I'm going to die! The thought flashed through my mind as I realized I was in the way of the spell and I instinctively collapsed, hugging my knees and trying to protect my head. In an instant, Mini Millie put herself between the orb and me, a visible shell made of an eerie green light floating around her.

Cautiously, I looked up when the blood bolts had passed. Millie seemed untouched. I looked around in horror to see small puncture holes in the stone pathway. The blood oozed out and returned to the orb. *That should have punched through us like it was nothing!*

Astalor seemed to be a combination of bewildered and angry. He ground his teeth and then yelled, “Band'or shore'aran!” *He's going to unleash something horrible!*

“Millie, get out of the way!” I cried. *I'm not going to let her die for me!* I scrambled in front of her to protect her from whatever was about to come. I could feel the volatile magic in the blood burst violently. *It's coming.*

Millie held up a hand, which began to glow with a violet light. She smashed her palm into the ground and power pulsed from it, flying out from her hand, passing through me and creating a purplish shell around us.

I could barely breathe as the power passed through me. I felt strange; weak and helpless. I could not feel the magic that had coursed through my body all my life. It was like it had been drained from my body.

“Don’t worry; I’ve got this,” Millie stated calmly.

Body shaking, I turned around and saw a solid beam of blood crashing against the shell and then falling to the ground harmlessly. After a few seconds, the blood had been expended and the zone retracted back into Millie. I took several deep breaths once I was free. I could feel my strength returning as my connection with my power was re-established.

“No magic allowed,” she laughed before shooting a deathly glare at Astalor. He staggered back a step, his face filled with terrified incredulity. “My turn!” she declared. Mini Millie held out her arm towards Astalor, her hand contorted like she was trying to choke someone. A violet fog danced around her fingers.

My eyes turned to Astalor who had turned very pale. He seemed to be gasping for breath and was clawing at his neck. Slowly, he began to lift off the ground, his feet flailing helplessly below him. I could hear him desperately trying to breathe.

“You’re stupid blood tricks were nothing. I’ve fought conventional mages that have put up a better fight,” Millie taunted. “And after all that, you just as helpless as a baby.” Her voice was cold, emotionless.

I had no doubt in my mind she would kill him if I didn’t intervene. “Millie, stop, let him go!” I cried desperately. “Please!” I could feel tears gathering in my eyes; it was horrifying seeing

She looked like she was taking a moment to think about it. But finally, she relaxed her hand and Astalor collapsed to the ground in a heap. Millie marched up to him and stared at him as he gasped, trying to catch his breath. “You’re lucky she didn’t spend more time around you. She still has decency in her,” she spat. Millie glanced back at me and her expression softened. “So what should we do with him.

Finally, an idea popped into my head and a devious grin spread across my face. I began to channel the magic in my body, muttering an old incantation – one I had learned years ago. This time, however, I made a few little tweaks to it.

I finished my chant and threw out my hands, a wave of energy flying from me directly into my former master. I saw him hold his arm in front of his face, as if trying to shield himself. But it was no use. My smile widened as the spell began to take effect.

Mini Millie watched and began giggling uncontrollably. She hopped around in excitement. “Ooh, ooh, quick! Someone get a cage,” she exclaimed.

I straightened myself up and brushed my hair out of my face, letting out a long sigh. *That should be enough to prove myself*, I thought happily. I felt a weight lift off my chest, like I was finally free from

anything my former master had ever instilled in me. I no longer doubted myself. Whatever Khadgar decided about my future, I was sure I could take it.

I guess...the only thing left to do is talk to Khadgar about this...

“Kaelynara, I thought I told you not to do anything stupid!” Khadgar scolded in a patriarchal tone. His face was contorted into a look of stern disappointment.

I was sitting at a table in his mage tower, surrounded by Naomi, Mini Millie, and the others. Millie and I waited outside of Auchindoun for them to complete their task. Naomi didn’t look surprised at all to see us. Together, we journeyed to Zangarra so Naomi could deliver her report. But before we got there, word had already reached Khadgar about the fight with Astalor.

“What were you thinking? I told you I would deal with Astalor. You could have been killed,” he continued. It was definitely strange hearing him raise his voice like this. I tried to avoid eye contact while he was chastising me. My eyes floated over towards a small box, covered in cloth, resting by my feet. *I wonder how he’s going to react.*

He turned on Naomi. “I thought I made it clear she was supposed to be kept safe,” he accused. Naomi didn’t seem fazed, but I still didn’t like that she was getting backlash for it.

“It was my decision to go,” I half-lied. “I wanted...I wanted to try to get some closure.” *Or something...*

“But why did you fight him? I know he is part of the Kirin Tor, but you had to know how dangerous it was to pick a fight. He’s not known for caring much for his colleagues. Why would you fight him?”

I was beginning to feel foolish. Voice wavering, I explained what he had said about setting the demon on the camp. I told him how Astalor acted when I confronted him about it. It made me so angry, but Mini Millie stepped in on my behalf. *Not to pass the buck off to Millie, but it is the truth.*

“He did what?” Khadgar’s disbelief mirrored my own. He shook his head. “And now he’s gone missing. You should have let me confront him. We’d be able to make sure he saw justice. But now he’s gone missing; probably on the run,” Khadgar sighed. “Kaelynara, you can’t keep putting yourself in danger and making mistakes like this. What do you have to say for yourself?”

This is my chance. I procured the box from the floor and set it on the table near Khadgar. I could feel movement from within and a quiet whimper. “Well...I...um...I think I was a little more creative this time,” I mentioned, flashing a sheepish smile before resuming a more apologetic expression.

Khadgar raised an eyebrow at me like he didn’t know what I was talking about. I nodded to the box. Warily, he pulled up part of the cloth and peered inside. “Is that...?” I nodded. In an instant, Khadgar’s whole demeanor changed and he started laughing uncontrollably.

He whipped off the cloth, revealing a small cage. Contained in the cage was a very tiny dog with stubby legs and a long torso. It was cowered in the corner of the box, shaking in fear and trying to shrink away from the archmage. I believe the correct term for the breed was corgi. "Bit of a little more than you could chew with this apprentice, didn't you Astalor," he laughed, his voice cracking from the lack of breathing. The others put two-and-two together – I hadn't told any of them what I did to him – and joined in with the laughter, especially Naomi. Millie, the only other one who knew, still seemed endlessly entertained by it.

After several more moments of unrestrained laughter, Khadgar began to calm himself down. "Well, I guess our lessons in originality paid off," he mentioned. He stared down at the dog. "You and I are going to have a chat in a little bit. Until then, sit there quietly," he commanded. "Well, I suppose that's that. Commander, what's the news from Auchindoun?"

I still couldn't believe he prioritized chewing me out over reports of the war.

"We were able to reveal several traitors among the Auchenai's ranks and located and eliminated Teron'gor," she reported, placing a large vial on the table. "As you requested, we were able to collect a sample of his blood. As far as we know, the demons have ceased their assault on Auchindoun for the time being." I felt a little relieved, since we had deprived the defenders of more blood golems.

"Excellent. We are making wonderful progress. We'll make our next move on Gul'dan soon," Khadgar commented with a smile. "Kaelynara, I need to speak with the commander and her friends for a moment. Would you mind..." I rose from my seat and he nodded at me.

I sighed as I left the room. *One of these days, I'll get to sit in on the war room discussion.* At least, I hoped so.

As I wandered out of the tower, I was nearly tackled by someone. "Kaelynara!" a wonderfully familiar and welcoming voice cried out.

"Nayuuri?" I gasped as she threw her arms around me and pulled me against her chest. I pushed away a moment later and gasped for air. "What...what are you doing here?"

"Archmage Khadgar sent for me, specifically. He told me you were alive and asked me to come to Draenor immediately. Like he had to ask!" There were tears in her white eyes. "I was so worried for you!"

"I'm sorry," I apologized shyly. "I've missed you so much," I told her.

"Me, too; it's like there was a whole in me. When I had first heard you had died, I...but you're alive!" she squealed, hugging me again. She planted a friendly kiss on my forehead. "You have to tell me everything."

I nodded and began to retell my story. This time, I focused more on the happy, peaceful parts, like the lake with Barum and Melani. The others emerged from the tower mid-story and I stopped. Khadgar was not with them.

“He’s having a word with your former master,” Naomi informed me, an amused smirk spread across her snout.

Nayuuri stared at the strange hodge-podge of adventurers in disbelief. With a laugh, I began to introduce them, at least the ones I knew. I let Saeliara and Gwen introduce themselves since I had not had an extended conversation with them. When I got to Coralia, I stopped.

Coralia stared at Nayuuri’s face uncertainly – blinking a few times – looking as if she had seen a ghost. Nayuuri returned the gaze and I could see the moment her brain recognized the draenei that shared her horns and face. It was a tear-filled reunion that I was happy to watch.

After some time, Nayuuri implored me to continue the story, so I went on. I stopped again when I heard angry shouting coming from inside the tower, but it was too muffled for me to hear. A couple of minutes later, Khadgar emerged, alone. “Kaelynara...Nayuuri, please come inside for a moment so we can have a word.”

We followed him inside. *What happened to Astalor?* I looked around but didn’t see him anywhere. We sat down at the table; Nayuuri sat right beside me, while Khadgar took his place across the table.

“You two have been under my care since you were barely five years old. Everything that’s happened in the last couple of weeks has made me realized how devastating it would be to lose either of you, or to see you travel down a dark path,” he started. I squirmed a little, guiltily. *Is he going to send us away? Back to Dalaran?* “Therefore, I have made my decision. As of today, you are both under my instruction as my new apprentices. I have already spoken with Commander Malmin and she has graciously agreed to allow you to stay in her garrison, where you will be more than safe, while we remain here on Draenor.”

My eyes lit up. *He can’t be serious!* I couldn’t suppress an excited grin. Apparently, neither could Nayuuri. “Are...are you serious?” I gasped, mind playing on the shred of doubt that lingered.

“I am very serious. I’m hoping I can do a slightly better job than your last teacher, Kaely,” he responded with a wink. “The orb I gave you...with the incantation I told you, will create a portal to this very tower. You can use it to travel from your homes to here for your training. Of course, there may be days where your training is better suited to take place in the garrison.” He paused and we stared at him, questioningly. “Give me a break, I came up with this five minutes ago and have not worked everything out yet.” Nayuuri and I let out a short laugh.

He stood up, and so did we. “This is a deep, deep honor, sir,” Nayuuri exclaimed, doing a better job than me at containing our excitement.

"I...I won't let you down!" I stammered, unable to fully form any thoughts. *This is unreal!*

"I know you won't," he replied. "Oh, and as for Astalor Bloodsworn..." He trailed off before bending over and picking the cage up off the ground and setting it on the table. The light-haired corgi still sat within it. "I have talked things over with your former master. His actions at the camp were inexcusable. Under normal circumstances, he would have had to stand before the council and was potentially looking at time in the Violet Hold and dismissal from the Kirin Tor," he started. I just nodded; that made sense.

"However, since these are not normal circumstances, given those involved, I decided to present him with two options. The first option was I would turn him into a very ordinary rat and he would live out the rest of his days scavenging in the sewers of Dalaran. The second option was I turn him back into this little dog and he would live with you as your pet until such a day arrives that you feel he has been punished enough," he explained with a smirk.

I made eye contact with the dog and could see a pleading look in his eyes. "So, I have to change him back?" I asked. *I think I like him better like this. No, I definitely like him better like this.*

"You don't have to do anything. You get to choose if he ever gets to be an elf again. This way, he gets a chance to learn to be a good boy," he added in a very condescending voice. Astalor's ears fell and he began to whimper. "So, he's yours now. I imagine he'll be compliant; I doubt he'd do anything to hurt his chances to have the spell lifted."

I slid the cage over to my side of the table. I opened it, reached in, and pulled Astalor out. "I think I like this arrangement," I declared, running a hand along the length of his diminutive, furry body. "So what now?" I asked.

"Now, we get you settled in at Lunarfall. Tomorrow, the fun begins," he announced, throwing his arms around both of us and leading us out of the tower.

The others were still waiting just outside. Naomi and Millie took one look at the dog in my arms and began to snicker. Khadgar briefly explained the arrangement regarding my new pet, eliciting more than snickers, and then opened up a portal to return us to Lunarfall. Standing side by side with Nayuuri, I took a step through the swirling ball of light and was transported to where I would build a good life and a good name for myself. *I couldn't be happier...*

A year passed quickly. Every day, Nayuuri and I met with Master Khadgar to learn and master new and more powerful magic than we could have ever dreamed of. The best part was that it was actually magic that was capable of being mastered. There were times Master Khadgar would have to suspend training for some time due to the war, but he always came back.

Then, each night, Nayuuri and I would return to Lunarfall to relax and spend time with our new friends – a handful of the most powerful heroes in all of Draenor. According to Naomi, the armies of the

Horde and the Alliance had managed to overcome the Blackrock clan and dismantled the foundry. It sounded like they were preparing for an assault on the final Iron Horde stronghold in the Tenaan Jungle. But that was still a ways away. They had earned a breather and spent most days training with each other and, otherwise, taking some much-needed rest.

Nayuuri and I stayed in the inn for the first few weeks. But Naomi decided we needed a more permanent residence and had a home built for us near where Luna resided near the massive tree. Coralia came by daily to spend time with her little sister. On some occasions, I would leave them to catch up and do sibling things. During these times, I often found myself accompanied by Naomi. She was a very interesting individual to be around, so I welcomed the company. She talked about Nayuuri and I joining with her group of adventurers once our training and this war was over – an offer I was inclined to accept. But of course, I would have to see what the future held when the time came.

Astalor turned out to be a very obedient pet. After the first few months passed, he even stopped being somber and reserved and became more upbeat and affectionate. I wondered if he decided to switch tactics to try to put me in a good enough mood to change him back. Or maybe he was trying to tell me he had learned his lesson. On the other hand, it could simply be that he was growing more and more used to his body and the idea that he was a pet. I chose to believe the latter. I still haven't decided if I'll change him back. Right now, I'm leaning towards no. He makes such an adorable dog; it would be a shame to allow him to return to being an arrogant high-born.

Even years ago while I lie dreaming in my bed in Dalaran, I would never have expected my life to turn out like it was. Of course, as everyone knows, it was not smooth sailing and mistakes were made along the way, but I moved passed them – like Naomi said: one day at a time. Now, I was surrounded by incredible people – incredible friends. Now, I was an apprentice to possibly the most powerful magus in history. I knew that I could not do everything alone. But with the help of those around me, nothing could stop us. There was no mistaking our potential.

End.