

Tales of Azeroth

The Meaning of Power

By Florian "Mystler" Meißner

She was completely focused on the book she was reading when a faint voice said, "Alarea?" Startled, she sat upright and turned her head. Alen lay in his bed and watched her. From his expression, Alarea presumed he had been doing so for some time.

Putting her book on the table to her left she smiled and said, "You're awake. How do you feel?"

It had been hours since she had sat down in Alen's room in the hotel in Silvermoon to watch him. Lady Vivesse's spell had knocked him out very effectively. She had not been sure when he would wake up, so she had decided to read while waiting for him to recover. And now, much to her relief, he was conscious again.

"Limp, like my whole body was cooked or something. What happened? The ambush-I..."

She went over, sat down beside him and explained, "Vivesse fired a spell at you. I feared you were dead, but I'm glad she only knocked you out for a few hours."

"So you managed to fight them off?"

"Yes, but we barely got out. There was a bomb."

"What!?" Alen yelled. Alarea retold the encounter with the powerful elf and their escape.

He sighed, "That was close. I'm glad you made it out. The Cube is safe as well?"

Alarea nodded.

After a moment of silence, he asked, "What now?"

"I don't know", she responded, "but we clearly have powerful enemies who want the Cube by all means. And we still have no idea how it even works."

"We can't trust anyone else, it seems."

"I wish we could just destroy it."

"That's a dangerous proposition as well. Besides, its power doesn't have to make it inherently bad."

"Well", she sighed, "we should at least get it out of Silvermoon as soon as possible."

Alen nodded in agreement. Slowly, tried to get up, a clear expression of pain on his face.

Alarea helped him sit. "Does it hurt much?"

"Quite, but I'll be fine", he replied. He slowly stood up and walked a few steps but quickly sat back down.

"In no time", she said and smiled.

Just then, the door opened and Zeno entered.

"Hey, I see A's back among the living", he said. "You should've seen Daggers go on a rampage after you went down."

Alen laughed, then winced. "Too bad I missed it."

Alarea just blushed and looked away when Gaelin entered the room.

"Alright, time to stop the banter. How are you, Alen?", he asked while examining Alen's injuries. After a moment, he nodded. "Well, I suppose that'll be good enough."

"What's the plan?", Alen asked.

"I just called Tasarion to decide on how to proceed", Gaelin explained. "We want to get the Mana Cube back to safety right away. However, there's still something I want to do here in Silvermoon. I need to make sure no more of my connections are compromised, which is why you are going to leave without me."

Zeno coughed and said, "You should not stay here alone. After the explosion at the University, the guards may be searching for us since it's possible somebody saw us. Let me come with you."

Gaelin considered the offer and agreed. "Alright. I hope it won't take long so we can get out of here as well." He took the Mana Cube from his bag and handed it to Alen. "Here, I think I've had it long enough. Keep it somewhere close to you and guard it with your lives. I won't rest until it's safely back in our headquarters."

Carefully placing the small cube in his pocket, Alen nodded.

"Do you want to keep the carriage here?" Alarea asked Gaelin. "If so, how are we supposed to travel back?"

Gaelin smiled. "Have you ever ridden a hawkstrider before?"

Fortunately, they did not require a lot of riding skill, as the hawkstriders they had rented were specifically trained to carry elves on predefined routes. Only a number of commands were necessary to interact with the proud creatures; that and a feeling of how to apply pressure with the knees to make the hawkstrider go faster or slower. Their destination was Nightsorrow Village, not far from the Blades' headquarters. There, they would turn in the hawkstriders and make the rest of the way on foot.

Alarea enjoyed the ride a lot. The noble, feathered mount was capable of amazing speed. The breeze she felt on her skin was invigorating, and being able to see the beautiful Eversong forest from the back of the fast, autonomous hawkstrider was amazing. With Alen riding in front of her, they did not really have a chance to talk. Instead, she lost herself in her thoughts.

Every couple of hours, they halted for a short break. It allowed them to stretch their legs and eat a snack before continuing on their journey. During one stop, after she had spent some time thinking about the unusually strong elf she had fought, Alarea asked Alen, "Do you think we might have found an enemy too powerful for us?"

"What do you mean?" he frowned.

"That elf we fought was magically enhanced or something. Vivesse definitely had powerful connections and wanted to get the Cube badly. What if there is even more to this and the whole chase for the Cube just got started?"

“I don’t dare think about that”, he replied. “At least it’s safe for now. Tassarion and Gaelin will make a plan soon enough.”

She nodded. “What I can’t get my head around is one open question: Was Vivesse behind it all or was she merely answering to someone else as well?”

Alen remained silent with a worried look on his face. “There’s no way to know at this point. Perhaps we should wait for further intel. Let’s just ride on.”

As they walked back to the mounts, one of their hawkstriders shrieked and jumped up startled by something. The two of them readied for combat immediately and looked around. There was nothing. The forest lay quiet; the only sound came from some birds singing and the rustling of leaves in the wind. Re-holstering their weapons, they went to calm down the hawkstriders. Regardless of what had startled the mount, it was time to get moving again.

Moments later, Alarea saw a shadow fall from the tree above Alen. She was about to instinctively jump to his side when she noticed another shadow engulfing her own. Before she had time to react, something hit her head. The last thing she saw before her sight blurred and turned black was the grim face of the troll that had similarly dispatched Alen.

When she regained consciousness, she felt dirt on her skin. Something was not right; what had happened again? Yes, they had been ambushed! Alarea jumped up and glanced around. They were in a small hut, mostly likely belonging to the trolls. It was not much bigger than a tent. The only exit, however, was barred. A few logs that were carved into benches constituted the only available furniture. Their bags and weapons were nowhere to be seen.

“I’m glad to see you back up”, Alen said, sitting on one of the logs and holding his head in pain. “May I introduce you to troll prison? Troll prison, this is Alarea.”

She frowned. “Damn! The trolls captured us? Why?”

“I don’t know. Let’s just be glad that we’re still alive!”

After walking to the barred door, through its window, she noticed more troll huts outside. As she expected, the door was locked and did not budge. Focusing on a spot in front of their cell, she reached out to cast a spell in order to shadowstep out. “Can’t we just...”

She could not. Something was negating her power. It was like she was trapped in a bubble, unable to link with the blurry world outside their prison.

“Nope”, he answered. “They installed something that nulls magic. You can’t destroy the thin walls either.”

“Trolls can do that?”

“Apparently”, he replied. “but those that captured us are definitely not the sort who would have any idea how to cast such an incantation, let alone maintain it like this.” His expression turned into a slight grin as he carefully looked out to see if anyone was watching them. He then reached into his pocket.

“The Cube”, she gasped when the blue glowing object came to light. “You still have it!”

Nodding, he said, “Yes. They must be pretty stupid and over-confident not to search us, but we may be able to use this in our favor.”

Alarea backed away instinctively. “No, you don’t mean...”

“It’s our best option. We don’t know how many are out there or what they want to do with us. We can’t just wait.”

She sighed. “I don’t like us messing with that...*thing*. Besides, I don’t even know if we can.”

“I was hoping *you* can.”

“Me?”

“I already tried while you were still unconscious, but you know I have never been good with magical things.” He glanced at the Cube. “This always came much more naturally to you. Remember how quickly you mastered some basic training with Gaelin while others like me took far longer? Your ability to shadowstep, for instance: everyone was amazed by how efficient you were with it, and what you’ve told me about the fight to protect the Cube only further proves that.”

“You exaggerate”, she blushed.

“No, I’m serious. I know you’re worried about the dangers of the Cube, but this is the only chance I see of us getting out of here alive.”

With a sigh, Alarea said, “I suppose I could try to tap into it just a little. I’m not trying to accomplish what Gaelin could not. But what then?”

“We’ll find out”, Alen said with a reassuring smile.

“Fine.”

Alarea took the Mana Cube, and sat down on a log next to Alen. Taking a deep breath, she tried to concentrate on the peculiar object. Its magical essence was radiating so brilliantly, she wondered how the trolls could not have noticed it. She tossed the thought away for now and tried to concentrate.

She began to carefully reach out as she normally did with her Mana Ring. Despite its clear presence and power, it was as if the Cube was eluding her. Her mind’s grip onto it was being deflected. Try after try, she increased her effort to tap into it, each attempt with more force, with no noticeable effect each time. It was now clear why Alen had given up.

“This is difficult”, she assessed. “Compared to the Cube, tapping into our Mana Rings is preschool magic.”

“I know”, he said, “but I also know you can do it.”

Again, she threw her mind at the Cube a couple more times, and again, she failed. “No. I can’t do this, Alen.”

He took her hand. “Maybe tap your ring first and use the extra power to force into the cube. I believe in you, Alarea.”

Alarea blushed, but she was also worried. However, the touch of Alen’s hand seemed to give her strength. Tapping into her ring, she let its magical energy flow through her and launched her mind at the Cube. Something happened. She could not explain what; it was as if she had cracked the surface.

From her open eyes, Alen seemed to notice her new experience. “Did you make progress?”

“I think so.”

Once again, she repeated what she had done before. The crack widened. This had now become a challenge and she was getting eager to beat it. A whole hour had passed since her first attempt, and in one final push, she squeezed Alen’s hand and smashed through the Cube’s power barrier in her mind. She could feel her soul almost drowning in the Cube’s torrent of energies, as if swimming through the currents of a great ocean. Filled with panic, she tried to pull back, her soul kicking and treading in order to reach the surface.

Finally, her spirit was reassumed fully into her body and she fell back. Alen barely managed to catch her in his arms.

“Wow, are you alright?”

Alarea took a deep breath as she got back up and tried to calm down. She could still feel some of the lingering energies into which she had tapped. In an odd way, it had been quite thrilling.

“I did it”, she proclaimed victoriously.

Eagerly, she repeated what she had done before and braced her mind for the huge inflow of power. She had to be careful not to lose herself in the Cube’s energies and rather try to make use of its flow this time. As she entered the realm of the Mana Cube’s power once again, the flood in her mind had transformed into rain. She could live with rain. Yes, this was *her* rain and she had command over it. She clung to that small portion of that energy and focused on their prison. Alarea had no idea what to do to get them out of it, even with her newfound power. However, some instinctual part of her mind did not need to think about it and she just...knew. She focused through the door window on the outside of the hut and, empowered by the Cube, shadowstepped out. She could feel the magical barrier shatter as she did so.

Alen must have noticed the same. As she slid the small Cube into her pocket, he appeared beside her.

“That was amazing.”

Alarea grinned, “Indeed.”

“Now let’s find our things and get away from here as quickly as possible.”

There was another troll hut that had their belongings stored nearby: a very fortunate circumstance that saved them a lot of time and yet another testament to the trolls’ lack of strategy. They equipped their weapons and got their bags.

When they were about to leave and get out of the troll village, deep voices began to roar from nearby. Whirling around, Alarea could see a group of three trolls coming down a path from a hill in the forest. One had been carrying something on a tablet but as he had seen them he had put it down and unfastened an axe from his belt. His companions readied their weapons as well. Together they charged right at them.

“Damn!” Alen cried. “Get ready to fight.”

Before he had even finished his sentence, Alarea had drawn her daggers. She wanted to end this quickly. The tallest of the trolls was carrying a spear and lifted it, ready to throw it right at Alen. The tingling presence of the Mana Cube in her pocket called out to her, and once again, she accessed its power, this time with more ease.

As soon as the connection was established, time seemed to slow down. Trolls were very agile and strong and as he threw his spear at Alen behind her, she knew he didn't have much time to dodge. But her enhanced senses were quicker. Reaching out with her hand, she caught the spear mid-air, spun around, and launched it back at its owner. The spear had so much residual force that it not only pierced through the troll's chest, but it also pinned it to a nearby tree.

Without a moment of hesitation, she stepped through the shadows. Appearing behind the second troll, she slit its throat. The last of the three reacted quickly enough to strike out at her with its axe. Channeling power into her weapons, she infused them with strong shadow magic and parried his blow. His tribal weapon was not of great craftsmanship; the axe broke in two as it smashed into her empowered daggers. With the following counter-attack, she dispatched the defenseless foe.

“How did you do that?” Alen cried out in amazement.

“I don't know. I just...did”, she answered truthfully, fascinated by her own actions.

“Wow”, he said and went over to examine what the troll had been carrying on his tablet. He jolted back. It was an elven head. The trolls must have decapitated the poor soul, most likely to use the head as a trophy. It was a disgusting sight.

Seeing this, Alarea got very angry. “Follow me”, she commanded and ran up the path to where the trolls had come from before Alen could reply. If there was a massacre going on, she was eager to end it and avenge the dead elf.

At first, the forest became denser as she followed the way up. At the top, she reached a glade. A few dozen yards in front of her, she could see a gathering of about twenty or so trolls surrounding some kind of altar.

She inhaled as she noticed another blood elf kneeling in front of the altar with an armed troll next to him. Alen arrived at her side just as the kneeling elf was decapitated as well. The gathered trolls cheered as they funneled his blood into a bowl.

Alen shook his head in disgust. “We're too late.” It must have been the last victim to whatever bloody ritual the trolls were performing. They could only assume that their own imprisonment would have been for the same purpose. “Let's get away from here before they see us.”

“No”, Alarea said in determination. What she had just experienced filled her with fury. Even more so the fact, that she did not prevent it in time.

“What!?”

She put down her bag and, with a furious cry, she charged full speed at the trolls, completely undeterred by the sheer size and number of her enemies. She was able to take out two of them before they could even draw weapons. Alen groaned, ran in, and took care of another troll. After that, the two found themselves surrounded by several surprised but furious trolls.

“This is crazy”, he yelled as they both exchanged heavy blows with their foes.

Even after her previous stunts, Alarea was nowhere near exhausted. In fact, she felt more vibrant and powerful than she ever had before! She was determined to make sure these trolls would never sacrifice anyone *ever again*.

What followed was a massacre as she used her newfound power to deftly move between the group of trolls, appearing behind multiple enemies and stabbing them in the back in rapid succession. The remaining trolls realized there was a greater power at play here and began to flee. Escaping was *not* an option Alarea was willing to allow. One by one, she set out to hunt them down.

“Alarea, stop! It’s over, let them flee”, she heard Alen shout, but she ignored him as she focused on the remaining trolls. They were fast, but the power of the Mana Cube allowed her to be much faster. She was not really sure how she managed to do it, but it was all coming to her naturally now, as if this was how it had been for many years. She followed the flow as the vast power source fed into her existing knowledge and skill, enhancing all of her abilities beyond even what she felt were her limits.

The glade with the simple stone altar had turned into a bloodbath when she was done. The fight being over, she caught her breath. She felt Alen place his hand very gently on her shoulder.

“This was not necessary, Alarea. Come on.”

She hesitated. Still filled with a fury that burned in her very soul, she said, “We have to go back down to the village. There may be more of them.”

His grip on her shoulder tightened. “No.” Alarea started to move, but Alen held her back. “Come to back to your senses!” She turned around, but Alen stepped in her way. “Please!”, he cried desperately.

“Get out of my way”, she cried and shoved him back. She was still channeling the Cube’s power; while her intention was to simply get out of his grip and move him aside, she instead sent him flying several yards across the glade.

The unexpected scream caught her by surprise and finally shattered her connection to the Cube. Blood ran down one of Alen’s arms as he lay still between other troll corpses. Rushing over, she found what she had done: her mighty push had made him land hard on the sharpened axe of one of the trolls. The force was so great, the weapon had sliced deep through the flesh of his arm.

“Oh no!” she cried and ran over to him. “Alen! I’m-I’m so sorry!”

As Alen groaned in pain, she quickly realised this was not the time for apologies. She had to act. As she examined the wound, she was relieved to see that it had missed any major artery. Desperately, she rummaged through their bags to get bandages. Stopping the bleeding should be enough to help him, so they could at least get to safety.

As she worked on Alen’s arm, the realization of how she had lost control disturbed her much more than the wound she had inflicted on her friend. Carefully, she patched Alen up and helped him sit, his pale face beginning to regain color. While she gave him some time to recover, she took the Cube from her pocket. Disgusted by what she’d done, she put it in Alen’s bag, just to get it as far away from herself as possible.

After several agonizing moments, Alen shakily stood up. The treatment of his wound seemed enough for the moment.

“I’m so sorry”, she repeated once more. “Let’s just get away from here, okay?”

Alen simply nodded and looked around. “I don’t expect to find our hawkstriders. If we follow the forest westward, we should reach a road sometime soon. We can follow it to the next village and see how to get back to our headquarters there”, he suggested.

For a while the two of them walked together in awkward silence, until finally, Alarea could not bear it anymore.

“You haven’t said anything, Alen. I know, I was *completely* carried away by the power of the Cube. I put both of our lives and our mission at risk. Hell, I’m horrified to think that I might have killed you if things had gone differently.”

She stopped him and moved to face him. “Can you please forgive me?”

“Yes, I can. What you did with the power of the Cube was impressive. It’s also the reason why I think the Cube should be studied further. However, you have no experience at all in controlling it properly. It seemed to amplify some rage and fury in you. I could barely stop you, but I had to try”, he hesitated, his face blushing, “for I was afraid to lose you to it.”

Alarea continued to look into his eyes, her heart filled with joy at his kind and understanding response. In her mind, memories suddenly flashed up. Moments of their talks, their training, their journeys and all the support he had given her so far during the time with the Eversong Blades.

She also drifted back to that awkward moment when they were alone in Silvermoon. It was clear that she had developed feelings for him over the years. His kind and compassionate gaze encouraged her to take his hands and move her mouth close to his ear. Very gently, she whispered, “And why is that?”

He gazed unflinchingly into her eyes and whispered back, “Because I love you.”

Slowly, their lips met and locked into a passionate kiss.

Bolstered by their mutual revelations, they had moved on with renewed determination and soon reached the road, just as Alen had predicted. The next village was not too far away; if they could just find the hawkstriders, they could make it the rest of the way to their base within a few hours.

Nevertheless, there was one fear on Alarea’s mind:

“What do I do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tasarion will certainly boot me from the Blades after what happened. He can’t allow his agents to lose themselves and harm a partner so easily. I’ll be considered a danger to everyone.”

“Alarea, it is very clear to me that you have learned from this. The fact that you know the power of the Cube is not to be taken lightly proves you are not a danger, and regardless of what happened, you only used it to destroy those that would harm others.”

He then glanced at her. “Besides, Tassarion does not have to know.”

“Are you serious?”

“Well, we should tell him that we were ambushed, of course. Also that you had to learn to use the Cube to get us out, but after that...let’s just say that we got into a short fight with trolls while we escaped and that you refrained from using the Cube any further. The rest will be our little secret.”

As they arrived back at the Blades’ headquarters, their modified report was accepted, and the Mana Cube was locked away safely. When Gaelin and Zeno arrived later, the mage was understandably curious, asking Alarea numerous questions about her experience with the Cube. She did her best in answering truthfully, but left out what she wanted to keep to herself.

The only secret they could not keep was their new relationship. Gossip about them started very soon after their arrival, not surprisingly thanks to Zeno. Tassarion did not seem to mind as long as it did not interfere with their missions. He did, however, stop assigning them to the same missions.

For the foreseeable future, they had to spend what time they had together when they were not dispatched separately. After their incident with the trolls, Tassarion made sure he had enough solo scouting missions to keep them both occupied. The danger of these cultist forest trolls needed to be investigated.

Such was the plight of the Eversong Blades.

It had been almost a year since his minions’ failed attempt to acquire the Mana Cube. He had been waiting eagerly for the right occasion to make another play for it, but it had not come.

Now Kyrien was losing patience. Knowing that the Cube was out there and that he could most likely use it to skip years, or even decades, of tedious work, he had to have it. Any cost was irrelevant now.

He called for his three remaining empowered soldiers. For something as important as this, he needed to invest all of his resources.

It was time for a new plan.

THE END