

A GUILD WARS 2 FAN FICTION

Leaves and Embers



Jennifer Hoffman

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Prologue.....	2
Chapter 1: Through the Maguuma.....	4
Chapter 2: Chasing a Color.....	14
Chapter 3: The Cold Of Night.....	28
Chapter 4: A Friend in the Garden.....	40
Chapter 5: Among Wardens.....	54
Chapter 6: The Search for Allies.....	72
Chapter 7: Courting the Nightmare.....	86
Chapter 8: Of Dreams and Memories.....	102
Chapter 9: Shadows in the Firelight.....	114
Chapter 10: Heart of Flame.....	130
Chapter 11: Promises.....	144
Chapter 12: Echoes of the Past.....	160
Chapter 13: Parting Ways.....	176
Epilogue.....	184



Prologue

Her people were new to the world of Tyria, and she was even newer than most. The Dream of Dreams yet clung to her like the scent of the pod from which she had emerged, and its memories from before birth propelled her forward into life. They filled her head with knowledge for which she had no matching experiences, and she longed to fill that gap as earnestly as a child.

Yet there was only so much she could learn in the Grove where she was born. Sheltered among the roots of the Pale Tree, beneath its leaves as high and distant as floating clouds, the firstborn lectured and instructed with the best of intentions. Those oldest of the Pale Tree's children tried to impart their wisdom on the fresher sprouts, but she was not patient enough for such things. Like a ripened milkseed, she yearned to break free and float where the winds would take her, to see the wider world with her own eyes, to touch it with her own hands and run through it with her own two feet. She had blossomed into this strange land of Tyria with all the strength and vigor her body could ever need, and though her heart soared at the freedom it promised, the Dream of what came before would not leave her.

She could feel its ebb and flow, clinging like a tangible thing to each sapling that stepped forth from a pod. It resonated from her stronger brethren and stirred her

restlessness. She was buffeted by the scents of memory, pushed and pulled in a thousand directions she couldn't quite discern. Not all of her kind could sense the Dream like this. To most it would fade when they left the pod, a life before life that evaporated in the new light of day. She herself was not strong enough in such talents to do more than sense its presence, but like all who were sensitive to it, she did not long remain at the Grove. To some the Dream's presence was an irritant, and they fled the chatter of countless voices that could not be silenced. To her, however, it was a call to action, a glimpse of the things she would learn and do if she went out into the world.

So it was that she set out from home with not even one full summer yet to her name, intent on chasing after what she felt must be her purpose in life. It lead her north and west, ever deeper into the jungle, and well past the normal ranges of her kind.



Chapter 1: Through the Maguuma

Deep in the Maguuma jungle, deeper than civilization dared spread, deeper even than the oldest of men could recall, a sylvari stood on a blue ridge and looked down upon a tiny village that bloomed in the shade. This was no human construction, hewn from the land and fighting against it. This far out that was a battle the jungle would win every time. No, this village grew up like the plants around it, unfurling and gently pushing its brethren back to make space for itself. Such was the sylvari way of construction.

It was a welcome sight, and a smile folded the leaves of the girl's face. Like the buildings below, she too was grown of leaf and vine and stem. Unlike the buildings, however, she was formed in a convincing imitation of humanity.

Her name was Laurel, and where a woman would have had hair upon her head, this young sylvari had leaves the color of autumn. Their reds and oranges fell about her green face in a haphazard way that gave her a wild appearance. The effect was completed by veins of fiery orange which traced her stems and pulsed with a softly glowing life.

"Come, Cuain!" Laurel called over her shoulder as she descended the slope. "They'll have spikefruit in that village, if I see what I think I do."

Excited yips answered her as her leafy travel companion bounded past her with that exuberance which only

a young hound can muster. He was not sylvari, nor was he made by them. He was a distant cousin, imitating in form and mind the essence of a hunting dog. He was as much family to her as ever a dog was family to a human, and then even more so because both had sprouted together from the mother tree.

The hound scrambled up and down the rocky descent several times before stopping to worry the loose cuff of his lady's pant leg in an attempt to hurry her.

"Apparently I'm not the only one tired of eating grubs and old rabbit," Laurel observed as she shook her leg free of her companion's grip. He let it go easily and continued his flight to and from his master. Despite her best efforts, the girl found the hound's energy infectious, and by the time she had reached the first few buildings of the town, the sylvari was nearly as giddy as her animal.

The first person Laurel saw as she entered the village was a tall sylvari with light fuzzy blossoms dotting the dark willow branches that trailed from his crown. His complexion was colorless as well as dark, and his expression was as somber as his coloring. When he saw her, though, he smiled and a milky blend of pink and blue highlighted his features. "We don't get many visitors this far from the Grove."

The two exchanged pleasantries as he led her deeper into town along a winding path between waxy bulb-like buildings. His name was Liath, and he had lived in this village longer than Laurel had been alive. Five whole years, to hear him tell it. They truly didn't get many visitors this deep in Maguuma, and she was the first sylvari to come this way in two years. They saw more of the reclusive jungle centaur tribes than any leafed brethren, and there were also rumors of an asura or two that would come along from time to time. This settlement was surprisingly old by sylvari standards. It had been started by the wandering thirdborn Deorai. Had she heard of him? No? Few had, and since he had disappeared

into the jungle some years back there was little chance of meeting him now.

“To what cycle were you born, dear?” A woman with warm sandy skin and a tumble of purple leaves intercepted them and proffered a plate of cut spikefruit. Laurel took a piece gladly and tossed another to Cuain who caught it in mid-air.

“I’m Laurel, of the Cycle of Noon.”

“No wonder you found us then,” the woman mused. “We have many of Noon here; your kind wander farther than most. Have you been traveling long?”

“Not so long,” Laurel answered before thinking. She chewed her spikefruit slowly, savoring the sweet and sour of it, before adding, “I haven’t been keeping track of the days well. When I left the Grove it was passed mid-summer but not yet as warm as the days would grow.”

“And here we are well into fall! You must be young yet to so lose track of time,” the woman chided, but her admonishment was forgotten when the path they walked came to a fountain. It was made of bell flowers, one nested inside the next, and reached up as tall as the surrounding buildings. Water tinkled pleasantly from the tips of its petals and pooled in a natural hollow beneath. Around it were artfully arranged stones, smooth and low of a size for sitting, their weight pressing them down into the thick moss which blanketed the courtyard. Several sylvari were already there waiting, having heard of the visitor’s approach.

“You’ve come from the Grove?” one asked eagerly, more statement than question, as he drew Laurel to a sitting stone which stood higher than the others. “Have you seen Aife? Dagonet? Are they well?”

“All of the firstborn are well,” Laurel answered. More villagers filtered into the gathering place, and with them came their hounds. Cuain hardly waited to gulp down a few more

pieces of fruit before he bounded off to play with his own kind. Hunger was easier to sate than loneliness. Even as the crowd of sylvari grew, the baying of the hounds could be heard above it.

“And the mother, is she well?”

“Are new pods still swelling?”

“How grows the spiral?”

With more bodies came more questions, and soon they were coming faster than Laurel could answer.

“How long have you been wandering?”

“Did you stop by Rata Sum?”

“Have you seen the spider nests to the south?”

When it seemed that every hole on the green had been filled by a myriad of colorful leaves and the tangle of voices must drown out all further questions, one broke through and hushed the crowd to stillness.

“Will you tell us of your dream?” The woman who spoke was of a deep royal blue with accents of gold and orange. Her eagerness glowed in her like her markings and was reflected in the crowd until the hunger on the air was palpable. All eyes watched Laurel with anticipation, but the attention took her by surprise. So fresh from the Grove and its tumult of dreamers, she could not understand their need, could not understand what difference one more story of the Dream might make to them. But despite that, when her thoughts turned from the gathered faces inward toward her own Dream, the words came easily.

“I dreamt of a red-orange stone resting on a bed of deep blue-green,” Laurel began, the imagery vivid in her mind’s eye. “I dreamt of creatures which were both alive and not alive. Their flesh was stone, and I knew some secret of their heart. It was very important, but once I entered the world it was lost to me. I believe it is my Wyld Hunt to find these creatures and re-learn what the Dream had tried to

teach me.”

“A Valiant!” one voice cried out.

“What an honor!” exclaimed another, and the fountain garden again buzzed with excitement.

“Perhaps the creatures were golems and you will be the first sylvari golemancer!”

“Wouldn’t that be lovely? I would make a golem in the shape of a majestic stag!”

“I would make one in the shape of a honey bee. Such little darlings.”

“I don’t think that’s right.” Laurel shook her head to the disappointment of the beekeeper. In truth, she was uncertain about much of her Dream’s meaning and longed for someone else to find something that she could not. It was an unreasonable expectation, but she was still young and unreasonable and she expected it nonetheless.

“Of course not!” another villager interrupted. “Golems aren’t important enough for a Wyld Hunt.”

“I’ll bet it was the dwarves she saw,” yet another added. “The dwarves would know the secret to fighting the dragons. That’s what Wyld Hunts should be about. Fighting dragons.”

“Oh yes, the dwarves! They did all turn to stone, you know.”

“They were alive first, before that, and now that they’re stone they still walk about and talk.”

“That sounds like alive and not alive, to me.”

“That’s not it either.” Laurel was certain. The wrong suggestion irritated her and she let some of that slip into her voice.

“Yes, that’s silly. Everyone knows the dwarves are already fighting the dragons deep underground,” a man said with the confidence of an elder.

“Then maybe she’ll learn to talk to elementals!” a

much younger man exclaimed.

“What, tame them and make them fight the dragons?”

“There sure are a lot of them about causing trouble. It would be good to put them to work.”

Laurel tried to object twice more and each time her protest merely nudged the river of conversation onto a new course. Each new suggestion was stranger than the last and the only building certainty that Laurel felt was that none of them were right. It chafed her that the elusive truth in her Dream was only becoming hazier as more ideas tumbled forth, but that in turn only invited more ideas.

By the time the conversation had run its course, the night had grown deep. The village paths were lit by strings of colorful flowers and glowing bulbs which, in turn, attracted fireflies whose soft lights flickered overhead. Villagers filtered off in small groups to find their beds, and the hounds had long since curled up into one great pile of leafy ears and tails.

Laurel almost would have joined them. She was used to the company of a hound, and as much as she enjoyed hearing voices again, the day had left her weary and confused. She was ready for a quiet night and not all that sure she would find it staying with one of her own kind. Still, she couldn't very well turn down Liath's offer of hospitality.

As he led her down the quieting paths of the village, Laurel was pleasantly surprised. Liath offered her his silence as if he had known it was what she most needed then. She pushed her confusions aside and instead savored the peacefulness of their walk. Buildings bulged up from the ground, dark shapes against the scatter of fireflies. Glowing flowers twined through the vines that flanked the path they followed and cast the world in pinks and yellows and blues. When the path came to an end, the glowing vines twined upward to embrace this final building.

By day Liath and his home had been as different as

two plants could be. One was tall and wispy and colorless, the other squat and rounded and brilliant red. But now as they approached by darkness the two were remarkably similar. The pale white fuzz of Liath's buds shone rainbows in the flower light and stood out brilliantly against the darkness of the willow branches beneath. Likewise, the red of the home's leaves were faded to black by the dimness while the glowing flowers picked out bright spots of color along it.

"Welcome, my home is your home for as long as you'd like to stay," Liath offered, breaking Laurel from her reverie as he stepped inside. "Though you don't seem like you'll be staying long."

"I don't think I will," Laurel replied as she followed. "I would like to stay long enough to meet a Maguuma centaur. At least once, anyways. But my Hunt is tugging at me like an itch I can't quite scratch."

"Such is the way of Hunts," Liath agreed. Inside the small abode it was blessedly warm. Few sylvari kept hearths in their homes, and Liath wasn't one of them, but even without a fire the waxy walls kept out the damp and chill of the jungle night. Winter never truly settled on the Maguuma, but the humidity in the air would change from an oppressive heat to a clinging damp. Laurel was surprised that she hadn't noticed the change in the season; now that it had been brought to her attention it was unmistakable.

Liath gathered the thick sitting cushions from around his one-room home and arranged them together on the floor. He made of them a makeshift bed and gestured for Laurel to take the real one, a broad low mushroom cap layered with blankets. "Today we heard everyone speak about what your dream might mean, except for you," he said, laying down on his cushions. "If you wish to tell it, I'd be curious to hear where you plan to go from here."

"I believe the red-orange stone on blue-green is a

place,” Laurel began. With her head cleared by the walk, what truth she knew of her Dream settled over her once more. “I know it doesn’t have to be. Nothing else in the Dream says it must be, but somehow I know it to be so.”

Liath nodded. “The Dream often tells us as much with feeling as it does with sight or smell or touch.” He paused for a moment, considering. “My own Dream showed me innocent things, but they came with such dread that rather than seek them I’ve run from them. When I was born, Dagonet named me Valiant—so clear was my vision—but some Valiant I’ve made. I haven’t seen any sign of my Dream since coming here.”

“I think that’s what I’m most afraid of.” In the way of the very young, Laurel saw only herself in her friend’s explanation. When he spoke of fear, the only fear she had to relate was the fear of failure in her Hunt. “I haven’t seen any sign of my Dream yet, and I worry about how long it will take to pick up the trail. I don’t really know which direction to go, but I must find the place of the red-orange gem if I’m to study the stone creatures.

“I plan on heading west. There are said to be red wastes there that break open the jungle like an old fire wound. Red-orange embedded in blue-green, if you were looking down from the high branches of the Pale Tree.”

“There are more centaur tribes out that way,” Liath offered. It made her smile.

“At least it won’t be a wasted trip then.” Her thoughts flitted to the well of knowledge she possessed. Ventari himself, that most sacred profit of her people, had been of a centaur tribe that lived deep in the Maguuma. He had come east out of his secluded homeland and made his first refuge when he encountered the human-centaur wars. While the red wastes had been east for him, they were still far west of where Laurel was. Only when the wars had grown too intense to stay in the

wastes had Ventari pushed south and further east, all the way to the coast to the place where he would begin the Grove. There he found another soul seeking peace, a human who should have been his enemy. Together they had planted the seed that would become the Pale Tree, and together they had nurtured the Mother when she had been just a sapling herself.

The centaurs held a special place in Laurel's heart for that, and she refused to believe that all of them were the brutal beasts that still made war with humans. Surely peaceful tribes still existed somewhere deeper in the Maguuma, past the red wastes perhaps, where humans couldn't reach.

Laurel desperately wanted to meet them, to see a centaur whose coat was soft green velvet or brilliant snowy white. She could imagine it all so clearly, and if she was lucky, her Hunt might take her there. Dreams of it filled her head as sleep claimed her.

Dawn came as early as it ever had. Down in the shadows of the jungle valley there was as yet no hint of the rising sun, but the smell of it was in the air when Liath roused his new friend from her sleep.

"If you wish to be away today, you had best leave before you're caught again."

"Thank you," Laurel yawned and rose. She had few preparations to make before leaving, and for the first time her lack of worldly possessions seemed a sad thing. If she had had something to make ready then her goodbye wouldn't have to be this abrupt, but all that she owned was the simple set of jute and leather clothes she already wore. As she walked to the door she said, "I should like to come back here when my Wyld Hunt is over."

"I look forward to the stories you'll bring back," Liath replied. He handed over a wrapped bundle of spikefruit as she

stepped out the door. It was a kind gesture. Spikefruit only grew where Sylvari cultivated it, and she wasn't likely to get more any time soon.

Before she was two steps away, the calls of excited hounds broke the morning silence. Laurel shook her head and quickened her step. As hard as it might be for her to leave her kin, it was always harder to pry the dog away from his own kind. Oddly though, the hounds' baying moved neither closer nor further away. They were not running off to play nor coming to meet her. Instead their barking took on an alarmed tone.

When Laurel rounded the last bulbed home to see the fountain plaza, she could not have been more surprised. Protectively positioned between a golem and the noisy, nervous hounds, were three small creatures whose elegant attire attempted to lend dignity to their wide toothy faces and long ears. They were asura.



Chapter 2: Chasing a Color

“Hush now,” Laurel soothed as she walked up to Cuain and scratched behind his ears. The hounds quieted some but were still agitated by the three asura and their strange golem. “Don’t mind them,” Laurel bid the new visitors. “They haven’t seen a golem in a while.”

“Hmm, yes. I suppose that’s to be expected.” With a glance, the shortest of the three asura declared that she was the better of everyone present. It didn’t matter that she was less than half Laurel’s height; she still managed to look down her nose at the sylvari.

“It’s been a while for me as well, I must admit,” Laurel continued. The golem unsettled her. Its angles were all wrong, somehow. Yet, if one wanted to get on an asura’s good side, it was hard to go wrong praising their golems. “I passed by Rata Sum after leaving the Grove, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a golem of this design.”

The short asura gave an irritated wave of her hand, which was as much an acknowledgement of the compliment as a dismissal of lessers.

“Simpletons, the lot of them,” she muttered. “They wouldn’t know a useful design if it walked up and pulled their ears.” Still, she gave a curt nod to one of her companions and he led the golem away. As it retreated the hounds settled more, but Laurel noted the deep rents the golem left in the

soft moss. She thought she might understand why the things were not always welcome here.

“Will you be needing food? Supplies?” she asked. “I don’t have much to offer, since I’m just passing through myself, but I’m sure someone here would be happy to help.”

“No, no. We brought plenty of our own supplies,” the asura assured her. “We were just on our way to...”

“Did you see it?” the squealed question came from behind Laurel. Those villagers roused by the hounds were beginning to gather. A man whose face was framed in waxy blue aloe hugged the woman beside him tightly. Her shock of black-spotted orange leaves nearly vibrated with her excitement.

“Red! Its crystal was red!” he confirmed, his own voice rising in pitch.

“You know what this means!” another exclaimed.

The joy in their faces was lost on the asura, however. Her mouth tightened to a thin line, and when she spoke her sharply pointed teeth flashed. “It means nothing. Plenty of golems use red crystals, and...”

“None that we’ve seen!” some called, and Laurel had to agree. She had seen blue crystals and purple and even yellow, but she hadn’t seen golems with red crystals before.

“You must go with them, Valiant. Surely you see that.”

Laurel shook her head. “From here I head further west, towards the red wastes...”

“But it’s just like your Dream,” someone else protested.

“A red crystal in this blue jungle!”

“I suppose it might look like that,” Laurel hesitated. The golem’s power crystal had been the dark, pure red of rubies, faceted and sparkling. In her Dream she had seen a stone that was the warm orangy red of carnelians, flat and unpolished but beckoningly bright. If all the Dream was going

to give her was a color, then she thought she could expect that color to be fairly precise.

“It couldn’t be more clear.”

“I wish my Dream had spoken so plainly!”

Laurel felt herself bristle at the presumption, but before she could put her foot down, the asura butted in.

“We could use a volunteer or two,” she said, weighing Laurel and the other sylvari with her eyes. As she considered them, a hush of anticipation fell and no one made a move to interrupt her. They were insects trapped in the amber of her large, liquid eyes, and she knew it as she dangled her next sentence before them. “We’re on our way to a top secret facility to conduct research on the dragons. Some sylvari could perhaps be useful.”

The taller asura quirked an eyebrow at his leader, almost as surprised as the sylvari themselves, but he contained himself well and merely nodded to his superior. “Yes Zeppi, ma’am! Some sylvari brought along would be most useful.”

“I’ll go.” Liath volunteered from behind Laurel. She hadn’t even noticed his arrival, but of course he would have been drawn to the commotion along with the others, even more so because he had known she would be at the center of it.

His words had cracked the shell of silence, and the next voice cried out, “The Valiant will go for sure!”

“She must, of course,” another agreed. The buzz of the crowd returned tenfold so that when Laurel spoke her protesting words were drown in a sea of accent.

“I go my own way!” She looked to Liath for support, but he was the only sylvari not looking at her. His attention was fixed on the asura. The warmth she had come to expect from him had fled his features to be replaced by an impassive mask. It made him stand out from the crowd almost as much as his subdued palette.

“The Valiant will find her Hunt with them!” The crowd roiled on, bolstered by its sureness and oblivious to the dread on Laurel’s face.

“She can follow the red crystal until she finds a blue blanket.”

“And then she can study the golems!”

“I go west,” Laurel raised her voice to be heard, and the asura followed suit, cutting through the clamor.

“So do we. You might as well travel with us for a time, and shut them all up.” Zeppi clearly had no patience for another round of blathering, and Laurel grudgingly nodded.

“Only if you set out today,” she warned. She hated to lose traveling time, but if she wouldn’t have to wait long, then she didn’t mind travelling with others going the same direction. Besides, if they slowed her down it would be easier to slip away in the wilderness than it would be here in the village.

“We do,” Zeppi confirmed.

“Can I come?” a woman ventured from the crowd. “I’ve always wanted to see a Wyld Hunt!”

“Two is plenty.” The finality in the asura’s voice snubbed more requests so easily that Laurel wondered if she had experience dealing with sylvari. It was unlikely, of course. None of the villagers seemed to recognize her, and this far out what other sylvari would she have contact with? Yet like a seasoned veteran, she moved on quickly before excitement could reignite.

“Flikk, see that our new helpers find their way to the carts by nightfall.” Zeppi didn’t wait to see if her command was heard or understood, but turned her attention back to the crowd. “We were searching for anomalous plant life in the Maguuma areas away from your Grove. We weren’t expecting to find sylvari this far out, and it would be greatly helpful to us if you have records of which plants you’ve brought with you to

propagate and which you found already here.”

The townsfolk were excited to be of help with the Valiant’s Wyld Hunt, and Laurel didn’t have the heart to correct them. She just watched as the lead asura was ushered off into town. Most of the hounds bounded after their owners, caught up in the excitement as well. Cuain stayed behind, however, nuzzling his face into Laurel’s hand. It was probably as much for his own reassurance as it was to comfort her. He didn’t like the asura, as though he could still smell the strange golem on them. He probably could, at that.

“I don’t have much to prepare,” Liath admitted. He hadn’t moved from the spot, and now that the villagers had emptied from around him Laurel could see just how tense he was. “Well, not much that we have time for anyway. I would have liked to see the new garden put in, but it probably doesn’t matter now. I doubt I’ll be back this way again.” He turned down the path that would take him home, and Laurel almost followed him. She wanted to ask what had spooked him so.

“We’ll wait for you here,” Flikk said, and Laurel realized it was for the best. What her friend needed now was some time to clear his head, just like she’d needed the night before.

Waiting with the asura, however, was boring. He showed no desire to see any more of this town than he needed to. His eyes didn’t wander, and his arms remained firmly crossed on his chest. He also showed no desire to talk any more than he needed to, but after a time of sitting in silence and scratching Cuain between his leaves, Laurel couldn’t help asking, “Will you be going as far as the red wastes?”

The asura eyed the surrounding buildings, as though he was unsure if he were allowed to talk to her. After a moment he made up his mind. “The lab isn’t that far. After

you've seen your friend settled in with us, you'll still have a distance to travel."

Laurel nodded at that and wondered what kind of time they would make. She doubted the short-legged asura could match her usual travel pace, but truth be told, if the asura could cut a straighter path through the jungle than the meandering route she had come by, that could more than make up for it. The stars were hard to see from beneath the jungle canopy, and she sniffed after her Hunt like a dog without a trail, casting this way and that, poking and prodding at different paths to make sure she wasn't passing by any clues. The asura would be more focused and would probably have better means of navigating.

"Then you'll see him settled in?" Flikk asked, startling Laurel. She nodded before thinking and his blank mask slipped into a toothy grin. "You'll at least take a look around, won't you? To see where he'll be staying? Our facility is quite amazing, you know."

His pride was infectious and she found her own curiosity pricked. She didn't have to stay, after all, and it wasn't every day you were invited into a secret asuran lab. Surely it wouldn't hurt just to stop in for a moment and see the place with her own eyes, especially if the asura could shave some time off her trip in the first place.

"As long as it doesn't take long," Laurel agreed. Besides, what if the others were somehow right? The golems weren't her Hunt. That much she knew, but it could be possible for the gem from her Dream to still be found in their lab. She wouldn't know until she looked, and one quick look would be enough to put any doubts out of her mind for good. It was a worthwhile trade.

"We study all of the known elder dragons there," Flikk bragged. "And some which are only theorized. We like to bring in specimens of their minions when possible, but it's not easy

to capture and contain them.”

“I would imagine not.” Laurel thought for a moment. “I guess that’s why you’ve built the lab this remotely? For safety?”

“Oh yes. Safety. Yes,” Flikk continued right along, giving Laurel the impression that they might have different meanings of the word. “The facility is quite secure. The only way in or out to the jungle here is through a gate. And the gate is well protected too.”

“How interesting.” Liath returned to them with a small pack slung over one shoulder. He held himself with more ease now, though his cheeriness felt forced.

“We’d better get going.” Flikk hopped up quickly, eager to leave the village behind. Or perhaps he was just eager to return to his Krewe. They were waiting not far outside of town, three of them including the one who had returned with the golem earlier. Flikk and Zeppi would make a total of five.

Completing the picture were five of what must have been the carts they were supposed to wait by. Hovering rectangular constructions, with no wheels that Laurel could see, the carts were of a similar design aesthetic to the golems. They had siding that came up waist high on the two asura working inside them, and each one was a cluttered little lab unto itself.

All five carts were linked together by flickering filaments of energy in triangular patterns to one another. She had seen caravans in and around the Grove, always with one wagon following another in a line. But each of these was linked to two or three others so that no single cart was leading or trailing.

Her curiosity drew her towards them, but Cuain refused to approach the golems and whined when she made to leave him. Liath showed the same hesitation, but with a deep breath he firmed his resolve and then strode confidently

towards the golems. Laurel had to resign herself to waiting as near as Cuain would come. She sat with her hound and pet him soothingly, but she couldn't stop watching Liath from the corner of her eye as he approached the asura alone.

"These are like no carts I've ever seen," he observed.

"Of course they're not," one of the asura rebuked as he hopped down to block the sylvari's way, rolling his eyes as he did so. "These aren't carts. They're C-A-R-Ts. Capacious Anti-Gravity Reticulating Transports. Flikk, why is there a salad poking around at my CART?"

"Volunteers," Flikk answered. That got a surprised glance from the golem engineer, which was quickly forgotten as he returned to his inspections and his data pad. The protective asura gave a grudging nod but didn't move to let Liath closer to the CART. Nor did his scowl lessen.

Eventually a different asura came over to ease the tension. "Lay off it Tarkk," she berated. "He's not going to steal the etheric couplings like some skritt." She rolled her eyes and then graciously smiled at Liath. The congeniality of it was only somewhat lessened by the suspicious glance she also darted at Laurel, although perhaps that was merely worry over the nervous hound that would be traveling with them.

"My name's Mikka, and I, for one, think there's a lot we'll learn from you," she assured Liath, shaking his hand and giving it a squeeze. It released something inside him and the last of the tension flowed out of him. He shook her hand in return, and when he smiled at her, a hint of his old warmth came back to him. The change was not lost on the asura and she added, "I look forward to seeing you settled in at the lab! But for now we still have other work to do."

After that the asura busied themselves with various contraptions both in and out of the CARTs. There were scanners and samplers and other devices which Laurel could put no name to. When the asura spoke it was in low voices

with their heads bent together. No one had much attention to spare for the two sylvari, and any attempt to see what was in the CARTs got Liath hastily shooed away by vigilant frowns. In the end he came back to Laurel and settled beside her to wait for Zeppi's return.

"They are not what I thought they'd be, these asura," he noted. He kept his voice low so as to not unintentionally insult them. Asura were notoriously prickly, but it was likely their preoccupation rather than the volume that kept the asura from hearing. Their overly large ears weren't just for show.

"What you thought they'd be? Have you never seen an asura before?"

Liath shook his head. "I was afraid to. I am of the Cycle of Night, and before I left the Grove I spent much time learning from Malomedies."

Laurel nodded and patted her friend on the shoulder. Malomedies was firstborn; all sylvari knew his story. The cruelty he had suffered at asuran hands, unintentional though it might have been, had nearly led her people to war. Only the wisdom of Ventari had held them back from retribution. She quickly changed the subject.

"They're not what I expected either, at least not Mikka, and I've been to Rata Sum," Laurel admitted. "I think I like her, maybe because of it. In Rata Sum, if one asura said the sky was blue there would be another nearby to argue the shade. And if one asura boasted an accomplishment there were three more ready to diminish it. I don't think I've ever heard one admit that there was something they didn't know, even indirectly."

"Then I'm glad these are the first asura that have found me." Liath smiled and the pink-blue currents beneath his gray skin pressed to the surface. Laurel was glad to see him smile again; the color made him look more alive. He must have

felt more alive as well, for he soon turned to curiosity.

"I've never used an asura gate before. Did you take one when you went to Rata Sum? What does it feel like?"

"If they've attuned it right, you won't feel much of anything," Laurel answered. "But it's still always a shock to be in one place and then suddenly in another." She thought back on her brief visit to Rata Sum. The only way into or out of that floating metropolis was through a gate. She had taken the one from Metrica Province, the partially cleared jungle below Rata Sum.

"When I entered Rata Sum the first time, it was unsettling," she recalled. "One moment I was in the hot sun, and the air was thick with moisture. The next I was in the thin breezy air of the city, chilly and shaded."

"How fascinating!" Liath's face lit with wonder. "Do you think this lab is underground, or floating in the air?"

"Hard to say," Laurel answered. "If the only way in or out is through gates, then it's probably not at ground level. But beyond that, I couldn't guess."

"I hope it's in the sky." Liath looked up as though envisioning the clouds he could not see through the layers of foliage. "I would like to feel the sun again. It's what I miss most about the Grove." That led to recalling memories of the Grove, and Laurel listened as her friend spoke wistfully. His experience of the place had been far different from her own, peaceful and quiet. He had no concept of the churning Dream that lingered there, and Laurel had no desire to intrude on his happy remembrance.

For the same reason, she pushed down the one question she most wished to ask him. If the asura scared him so, why had he volunteered to go with them? He hadn't hesitated at all. He'd been quicker to the draw, in fact, than any other in the crowd. Had he known what they would ask? Laurel swallowed the question. An answer was less important

than seeing her friend happy and whole again.

It was late in the day but not quite evening by the time Zeppi returned. Mikka was the first to notice her coming, and the younger asura sprang to attention. “Zeppi, ma’am! Measurements proceeding according to expectations!”

“Up, you hebetudinous harebrains!” was the only reply Zeppi gave. “We’re moving out!” Her Krewe scrambled to put all of their contraptions back into the proper CARTs even as they jolted into motion.

In the days of travel that followed, the asura kept ever busy. As far as Laurel could tell the only difference between traveling and resting was whether they worked both in and around the CARTs or completely inside them. With five asura and five CARTs it would have made sense if each had his or her own little lab, but that didn’t seem to be the case. They hopped from one to another and back again, often rubbing elbows in the same CART. Three asura must have been the capacity that one CART could handle, for on one occasion Tarkk found himself to be the fourth and spent the better part of an hour glancing over impatiently to see when he would get a turn. Surprisingly, he didn’t complain.

Her earlier judgement that these asura were odd was definitely on the mark. They worked seamlessly, very much unlike the people of Rata Sum who were always at cross-purposes with one another. Nothing was more odd in asura than open displays of cooperation, but it was rather encouraging. You could almost get lost in the pattern of their deliberate movements, and more than one night Laurel drifted off to the reassuring back and forth of tiny bodies over hovering equipment.

Best of all, they cut their way westward through the jungle like an arrow, straight and true. Surely she was closer now to her Wyld Hunt than she would have been otherwise.

Laurel was almost sad to know that their time

together was coming to an end when on the fourth day they arrived at a small cave, little more than a gap between rocks. Tarkk, as scowly as ever, found a nondescript panel embedded in the stone and began punching in codes while the others rearranged the CARTs into single file so they might fit through the narrow entrance. A brief glimmer of light in the gap indicated an energy field being turned off.

The asura filed inside with Liath close on their heels. Cuain came more hesitantly, sniffing at it tentatively. His anxiety was harder to quell than Liath's had been, but several days of uneventful travel had helped.

"Come on, we've made good time already. We might as well make sure they've nothing else for us. One look around, and if we find no gem we're off again as fast as our feet can take us." Laurel knelt and scratched his leafy ruff heartily. He licked at her nose then, his ears perked forward. "I promise," she assured him. "I'll chase you until I can't run anymore."

Cuain wagged his tail a few times and then let it drop as he faithfully strode ahead into the darkness. Laurel brushed off her knees and followed. The end of the curving tunnel opened into a small chamber where the promised asura gate waited. It was currently inactive, although Tarkk was already busy at the control panel.

"You don't keep it attuned?" Laurel asked, somewhat surprised. She'd never seen a gate without the liquid purple gleam of a portal in its mouth. It looked haunting and lifeless this way.

"There are only two gates inside the lab," Mikka explained as she came over by the sylvari. Cuain sniffed at her when she got near. "One on the upper level and one in the deeper levels. The upper level gate cycles through a schedule of attunements, and that's the one we'll enter through today."

Liath nodded vigorously. He had grown from

acceptance of the asura and generic curiosity to sincere interest and enthusiasm. "It's a double door," he pointed out. "So if there is a problem inside, only one gate can be open at a time and you never completely expose the outside world."

Mikka smiled more deeply. "I think you're going to like it here."

Although they had their own gate attuned relatively quickly, it remained dim and dormant. It wouldn't flare to life until the gate at the other end was also attuned properly, and that would happen on a schedule which was regularly changed.

"How long will this take?" Laurel tried to keep the impatience from her voice, but Cuain had no such subtlety. He fed off her emotions and proclaimed them loudly by pacing the perimeter of the cave.

"There's no way to be certain," Mikka conceded. "The schedule is always changing. It's never longer than a day, usually only a matter of hours." A day seemed a very long time to wait. Cuain paused to look suggestively at the entrance. "I'm sure it won't be more than an hour," Mikka added hopefully.

Laurel shifted her weight and sat down. "An hour," she agreed.

The golems took up positions as guards just inside the chamber's entrance. Two of the CARTs were separated from the others and moved to one edge of the room where Tark promptly busied himself, paying no attention to the remaining three which waited in a triangle before the gate. He was to stay behind and close the gate after them, guarding the location until the next Krewe came on a mission this way. No wonder he was so grumpy all the time, Laurel mused. She wouldn't have liked that duty much either. This place was boring.

Cuain's pacing became their only measure of time. Lap

upon lap he circled as the minutes stretched endlessly. He was the only thing that moved, the only thing of interest to watch. The rock of the cave was as lifeless as the artificial light that lit the chamber. Tarkk stayed in one spot in his CARTs and the other asura sat idly, afraid to start any work lest they be caught in the middle of something when the gate opened. In their own boredom, their eyes followed the hound nervously. He stood taller than they did, after all. It only made sense for them to be nervous when he was agitated.

With no sun to tell by, it was impossible to know how much time truly slipped by. Just when Laurel thought she must surely stand up and walk out, the gate flickered and crackled. A portal sprang up inside it, and the asura burst into action. Cuain leapt to her side as she rose to her feet.

“Lets get this over with.” She almost felt guilty for voicing her sour mood when she saw how Liath glowed and grinned beside her.



Chapter 3: The Cold Of Night

The sight that greeted them as they entered the lab was more amazing than anything Laurel had expected, and for the sight alone she was thankful she had waited. The gate itself rested atop a floating platform, surrounded by a multitude of smaller platforms like upside down pyramids scattered in mid air. Below them was a deep pond, almost a lake, and when Laurel eagerly peered over the edge she could see fish darting below the rippling surface. Even if her Hunt wasn't here, a quick look around would definitely be worth her while. Just a quick one.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful the sun was," Liath breathed in awe. His face was up-turned and Laurel saw that above them a few stray clouds scuttled across an otherwise clear blue sky. In the daylight his gray flesh looked warmer, like smoke faintly backlit by a fire. But perhaps the color came from the way that he was beaming, just as the pinks and blues came when he smiled.

Two of the asura broke from the group and set off about some very important business or another. They didn't bother explaining to anyone, which was more typical asuran behavior than the cooperation they had displayed on the journey. That left Zeppi and Mikka to lead the sylvari down from the platform.

Laurel would not have seen the pathways between platforms if not for the asura striding out confidently ahead of

her. The paths were nearly invisible, a faint warping of the light in otherwise empty air. With his lesser vision, Cuain could not see them at all and nearly rolled his eyes in fear as she stepped out onto open air. But as she stood there unharmed and encouraging, he forced himself to follow, clinging to Laurel's side and tapping forward with a paw before each careful step.

From the corner of her eye Laurel kept catching glimpses of other such walkways crisscrossing above and below them. The things were everywhere, and yet any stranger to the lab would have had a hard time finding their way through the maze. The layout of it was anything but straightforward. These asura knew the twisting way by heart, though, and strode quickly along with hardly a downward glance. When they descended to the edge of the pool at last, Cuain was only too happy to leap to solid ground. He jumped clear over the two asura and gave them quite a start. Laurel suppressed a giggle as they shook themselves off and pretended that nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Ahead of them stretched a long, straight hallway. While it gave the impression of being enclosed, it actually had no ceiling. The two walls reached overhead but failed to meet and left the sky visible through a channel at the center.

As they walked, the immensity of the place struck her. This single lab might even rival the size of Rata Sum itself. She had never heard of such a thing, and wouldn't have dreamed it possible. Asura preferred their labs small and personal so they could hide away their secrets from one another, but here was proof that they were capable of something more. It certainly seemed important enough to be worthy of a Wyld Hunt, but she hadn't yet seen anything which triggered recognition. She kept her eyes open, nonetheless, and carefully observed everything they passed.

With the exception of size, the architecture was a typical asuran style. While it lacked the bright colors of Rata

Sum, the lab's construction was a marvel of geometry. It was carved from rough black stone into perfect cubes. Those cubes, however, were arrayed in a sort of perfection that only an asura could see. They jutted out at angles which were simultaneously unnerving and elegant.

Walking beside her, Liath didn't notice a thing. His eyes were raised and there was contentment on his face. It seemed to Laurel like the peace of one coming home, or perhaps the peace of one whose Dream was nearly fulfilled. She wondered what that must feel like.

Near the end of the hallway the floor rose sharply in a ramp and, as they crested that rise, a beautiful chamber opened up before them. It welcomed them as if it had been prepared just for their pleasure. The room was one hexagon set inside another, with the outer ring forming a walkway. Pillars topped by green crystals dotted each point of the interior hexagon, separating the walkway from the wide central space. That was lush with moss and grasses and low-lying flowers so that it looked as though it had been preserved from the original land when the lab was built around it. Sunlight poured in from above and Liath laughed aloud as he ran onto the grass and filled his lungs with the scent of life. It was more like the Grove than his village had been, and it even made Laurel a twinge homesick.

"You'll be helping us to study the natural resistances some plants have to the dragons' corruption," Mikka informed Liath. "Anything you wish to grow in this space you're welcome to. Only check with us first so we can catalogue your efforts and monitor their progress."

"Of course," he agreed. Laurel could see him already planning the space in his mind. It was not quite large enough to grow a typical sylvari home, but nearly so.

"You're welcome to stay as well, if you like," Zeppi offered, but Laurel shook her head. She had seen enough. Her

Hunt was not here.

“I need to continue on to the red wastes.”

“I thought as much,” Zeppi responded matter-of-factly. “This way please.”

She gestured towards the hallway they had come from and began to leave. Mikka was deep in conversation with Liath on the proper protocol for ordering new saplings to be brought to the lab, and Laurel didn't wish to interrupt them. She was in a hurry to be off, however, and her ticket out wasn't waiting. It was too abrupt a good-bye once again, but there was nothing to be done about it. With a small smile and a wave she turned to followed Zeppi back away from the green room.

Having spoken of them aloud summoned the red wastes to mind, and having written off this place as not her Hunt, her mind was free to roam. She wondered again if she would meet some of the jungle centaur tribes on her way, if they really were green. Was that part just the embellishment of legend? She had never heard of a mammal with a green coat. Maybe they grew moss on themselves for camouflage? Maybe beneath the moss they were all as snowy white as Ventari had been. Or maybe the green was truly their own color and their velvet of such a prized color had been sought after by human hunters. That seemed to be the way most old conflicts in human lore began, with the greed after something not their own. How had the human centaur conflict started? Surely the jungle tribes would know. They would value knowledge and history as highly as Ventari had, wouldn't they? Her mind skipped. Maybe the centaurs would know what her stone creatures were or where she could find them. She couldn't think of anyone who would know the deep jungle and its secrets better than them.

Laurel was deep in thought when she realized they had criss-crossed the air walkways and come back down to the

edge of the pond again. They hadn't even reached the gate platform. "Is something the matter?"

"The gate has moved on," Zeppi informed her. "Nothing to worry about, we'll just go attune it back." She gestured Laurel to follow her and set off down another hallway much similar to the first. Laurel hesitated, considered waiting by the gate. She wanted to be away more than ever now, to be chasing after the centaurs who would surely lead her to her quarry. But she also knew asura. If she didn't personally accompany Zeppi, there was no telling what distractions would slow her from the task of re-attuning the gate. She might forget she had left Laurel waiting at all.

"Come on," Laurel grumbled to Cuain as she hurried after the asura. This time, half way down the hall Zeppi took a sharp right turn and Laurel had to hasten to keep up with her. She almost lost sight of her guide twice as they weaved in and out of oddly angled halls, going up and down and up again. Zagging left and right and left until Laurel had no idea how to find her way back to where she had started.

At last they came to a room which was shaped much like the green room had been, save that this room had white crystals topping its six pillars and a pile of snow in the center rather than grass.

"I'll just be one moment," Zeppi assured Laurel as she set to tapping at a control panel along the hexagonal walkway, but it wasn't just one moment. The longer Zeppi tapped at the panel, the more frustrated her face became and the more intently she stared at her work. And the longer Laurel waited, the more curious she became.

Her frustration grew as well, but it was slowly consumed by the allure of the unknown. She had never seen snow before. She knew what it was, in that same amorphous way that she knew what a centaur looked like without having ever met one. She also knew that snow was cold, but the

closest she had ever come to experiencing the concept was the relative chill of a fall morning in the shadowy jungle.

Laurel glanced back at the asura nervously as she edged towards the tempting white fluff, but the asura was too absorbed by her misbehaving gate to pay any mind to the sylvari. Surely she wouldn't notice if Laurel took just a small handful. It wouldn't hurt anything. She reached down and rested her hand on the rough crystals.

Cold was something new to her, and even labeling it as such did little justice to the full amazement she now felt. Laurel boggled at the way her hand tingled, the way the rough feeling of the texture sharpened as she held her hand still. It was like the awareness in her hand compounded itself all on its own, like the cold was a living thing taking up residence in her flesh. What a strange thing indeed! It was as different from a cool jungle night as morning dew was from a summer rain. She laughed despite her best efforts to behave herself and jumped forward to pack together a snowball for Cuain.

"Finally!" Zeppi muttered, and Cuain yelped a warning. Laurel dropped the half-formed snow and spun, prepared to deny she had done anything wrong. She wasn't prepared, however, for the energy field she slammed headlong into as she leapt up towards the walkway. Dazed, she sprawled back in the snow and looked up.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to mess anything up," she apologized, rubbing her sore nose. "Its just that I'd never seen snow before, and I guess I was curious..."

"Not nearly as curious as I'd been counting on," Zeppi heaved a sigh. "I thought I'd have to pretend at that panel all day before you went in."

"What?" Edges of fear started to circle Laurel, and her sense of alarm went straight to her hound. He growled at the smug asura, but those growls quickly turned to wild barking as golems appeared in pairs from each of the three entrances to

the chamber.

“That took long enough,” an armored guard complained as he came up behind some of the golems. “Where do you want the noisy one? More food for Mordremoth?”

“No,” Zeppi shook her head even as the golems closed in around Cuain. Her hound’s frantic barking phased them not at all, as ineffectual as Laurel’s pounding against the energy field. She heard the asura’s words only distantly. All her attention was focused on her frantic pet and battering the cage that held her from him.

“...don’t even know if that one would... ..hasn’t taken any other bait... ..zone purple... ..at least other plants have... ..see if this one turns...”

As the golems herded her hound away and out of sight, the snarls and barking faded. It didn’t take long. The stern black stone drank sound rather than echoing it. Only when she could no longer hear her beloved Cuain did Laurel sag to the ground against the barrier. Golden tears spilled down her cheeks, and her arms ached to the shoulder from the force of her blows. The cold was becoming uncomfortable, and she hugged her knees to her chest as much for reassurance as for warmth.

She sniffed and scrubbed her face with the back of her hand, stubbornly pushing away the tears. The Pale Tree gave her children all the knowledge they needed to survive. If Laurel could but think on it, surely she would find some detail from her Dream that told her what to do next. So she sat in the cold and thought, or at least she tried to. The tingling in her feet from the cold was already turning sharper and more insistent, and her own thoughts betrayed her, returning constantly to Cuain. His eyes had been wild and his jaws slaving when he had disappeared down the ramp. Sobs tore through her and this time she didn’t try to stop them. Nor did

she try to stop the rivers of ice that crept up from her chin or the black sleep that slowly crept over her.

Wake, my child. It's not yet your time to return to me.

The voice of the Mother drifted to Laurel from across a great distance and roused her from a weary sleep. She instinctively reached out her hand for her hound, but all she found was the cold crunch of snow. She choked on her own breath as memory assailed her, and she made to rise to her feet to shout her anger anew, but her body was stiff with cold and her feet were numb. With a new rush of fear she realized that she needed to get her sap flowing, to keep it moving lest it freeze.

With great effort she stood and stamped her feet, then wished she hadn't. Life returned to them with pain, the pleasant tingles from earlier coming now as stabbing shards of ice. A wordless cry escaped her lips, but she stamped her feet again. Again. The pain in her feet echoed that in her heart and she tried to imagine her anger warming her. When she was confident that she wouldn't fall, she pushed herself into a staggering walk. The snow was thinner at the edges of her hexagonal prison and her limbs responded better as her body warmed. Sylvari didn't generate as much heat as a warm blooded mammal would have, but for now her movement and fury were still enough.

Lap after lap she paced, carving out a trail through the snow. When the circles dizzied her, she changed directions and continued her determined march the other way around. It was what Cuain would have done, and as it had with him, the repetitive movement settled her mind. After a time she felt almost normal, and with her wits about her again, determination took hold.

Reaching up as high as she could, she felt no end to the energy field. Bending down, her fingers could make no mark in the frozen ground, though she did succeed in making

her fingers throb from the abuse. Both climbing over and digging beneath the barrier were out of the question, and no other options presented themselves, so she nursed her complaining fingers as she returned to pacing.

There was no obvious source for the cold that she could see. No cold air blew in, nor new ice was brought. The white crystals on their pillars gave off no chill either. Despite that, what was already here refused to melt and Laurel could almost feel the cold pulsing around her. It was slightly warmer directly against the energy field, or perhaps it was only less cold, but other than that, the cold was simply there. Even and ever present. It was deeply frustrating.

Laurel had grown lonely as well as hungry by the time an asura returned to her chamber. She had not seen this one before.

"I'm cold," she pleaded, and immediately felt stupid. The asura smiled broadly at that, assuming it was a deliberate jest.

"I imagine you are," he agreed.

"What's going on? Where did you take my hound? Why are you keeping me here?" The questions fell out of her in a rush, and she hoped his good humor would work to her benefit.

"Didn't anyone tell you?" he was a bit put off by that. "Quite rude, I say. You should at least know that much." He nodded to himself, his tone indicating how generous he was being when he continued. "You're here to help us study the resistances that sylvari show to the dragons' corruption."

"I don't understand," Laurel shook her head. "How can I help from in here? Let me out and I swear I'll help you."

That earned her a chuckle. "Oh you're already helping wonderfully from right there."

"But how?" Laurel was desperate and it showed in her voice. She was no negotiator on a good day, and this was far

from a good day.

“Why, by either being corrupted or dying first,” the asura replied cheerfully. “The others all seemed to chose the latter, but maybe you’ll break the pattern.”

“Others? What others?” Laurel demanded. “What happened to them? Where’s my hound?”

The asura shook his head and muttered something about “bookahs,” leaving without so much as a backward glance.

Laurel continued pacing through evening and well into the night, but her feet began to drag as the cold sapped her strength. While her body insisted on shivering, she felt as though each rush of spasms simply drew away more precious energy and cast it off into the darkness.

At least her hunger had faded. If she could last until the sun came up, she told herself, she would be alright. The sun would restore her energy and that would make everything alright. She just needed to keep moving until then, no matter how heavy her legs were growing or how they ached with cold.

When the sun finally did return to peer over the walls, it was thin comfort. The light reached her but it held no warmth. She was too tired to care. The sun was up, now she could rest. Curling herself against the energy barrier to leech from its faint warmth, she gave in and sank towards sleep. For a fleeting moment she wished for the warmth and comfort of Cuain’s body beside her, wondering why he wasn’t there. Before she could puzzle it out, sleep claimed her.

Awake, child. You must be awake now. The Mother’s voice was faint this time, a far echoing she hardly heard, but it was persistent and the urgency in it made Laurel want to obey.

Consciousness was slow in coming, and Laurel had to fight to gain hold of it. It was already dark again, and Laurel wondered how that could be when she hadn’t slept for more

than a few minutes. Weariness begged her to lie still and close her eyes again, but the Mother's thin voice would not relent and Laurel forced herself to rise.

Her limbs made awful creaking and popping noises as she gathered them beneath her and forced them to straighten. She stood upright for a moment and then toppled over forward, her legs unable to respond in time to balance her. It took two more tries before she was able to stay upright on those stiff limbs that she could hardly feel. Then she put one foot in front of the other and it was as though she walked on someone else's legs.

This time the movement did little to warm her. The cold had already seeped in too deeply. Her hands were lost to her, and where she could feel, all that she felt was the burning scrape of crystal slush through her veins.

"It's too much," she tried to say, but her lungs rattled and the words were consumed in a fit of coughing. She sank to the ground, too weary even to curl up. On the edges of her consciousness she could feel the Dream. It beckoned to her welcomingly, memories of warmth and kin and kindness, and she reached towards it.

As she did so, she became aware of herself. Or rather, she became aware of the body that had been hers. It lie crumpled in the snow, with hoarfrost creeping over it. The leaves that had once framed her face in vibrant red-orange were now edged in black. The glowing lines that had once drawn traces of fire across her green skin were pulsing so slowly and faintly that they were hardly visible.

She knew it truly then. Here was where she would die.

I'm sorry Cuain, she thought. *I can't help you now, you'll have to find your own way out.* She tried to remember him as he had been in the jungle, racing through the leaves like he could catch the wind itself, but instead she saw him as she had last seen him, eyes wide with terror as he snapped at

the golems.

She let go. Let go of all she had been and of the frozen form she was becoming. This flesh was no longer her. Instead she flung herself at the Dream, at that half-sensed current at the edge of awareness. It reached back to embrace her, but as she touched it, she found something that was not the Dream she had known.

Go back, sapling. A new voice floated to her. It reached her like the Mother's, but it was closer than the Mother had been. With that closeness came strength, and she heard it as clearly as a whisper over her shoulder. *You're not ready to rejoin the Dream.*

She felt herself pushed back towards the frozen form in the snow and she screamed a soundless scream of fear and protest. *That frozen thing is not me! It's dead! I won't go back to it!*

You must. The voice was steady and certain, and even one last surge of defiance could not stop the push which forced her back into the flesh that had been hers.

The silence and blackness that swallowed her then was complete. She drifted peacefully, without thought or awareness, and an eternity passed in which time itself was meaningless.



Chapter 4: A Friend in the Garden

Wake now, sapling. The voice that was not the Mother whispered to her, pulling at her. *You are safe now.* It said, but it pulled her towards something she did not want and she resisted. Like an infant flailing against its mother's arms, her efforts were feeble and warmly ignored. She was helpless as she was drawn up out of the blackness and back into awareness.

She could feel, and what she felt was agony. Sensation stabbed through her and she would have cried out, but her throat was dry to the point of cracking. It was all she could do to wheeze air into her tortured lungs.

Someone offered her water in a cup, the barest of trickles, and even that much burned as it went down. She was too weak to cough, and shortly someone began rubbing her hands, massaging life into them. She wished they would stop. Each motion was the grinding of stones against tender new shoots. She tried to push it away, to shake off her assailant, but the motion was hardly a twitch and the methodical torture continued. Unwillingly she slipped back into darkness, but it was not the peace of oblivion. Her mind writhed with nightmares, endlessly chasing Cuain through a bleak and snowy wilderness, never quite able to catch him.

She woke and and slept sporadically, and the memories she formed of that time were foggy at best. Her

wakefulness was like a dream and in her sleep the nightmares were vivid.

The first thing she would later recall with clarity was sitting on a tall hilltop, propped up against a tree. The sun was high in the sky and its warmth permeated her, for while the tree was tall and its trunk wide, it was sparse of leaf and offered little shade. The build of it reminded Laurel of the Pale Tree: elegant reaching branches with too few leaves to sustain it.

A sylvari woman bent over her then, black leaves and flesh like lichen trapped beneath ice. For a moment Laurel thought she was in a nightmare again, but the woman was merely pale, not frozen. Her hands moved easily and without pain as she tore a small fish in half and offered it on a broad leaf. Laurel accepted the food weakly. Her own hands were stiff and clumsy, and when she tried to lift the flaky flesh to her mouth, she crushed it instead. Soft morsels tumbled back down to the broad leaf, presenting a challenge that Laurel would have avoided if her stomach weren't so empty. The twisting knots in her gut and the weakness of her arms told her she needed the food, and tedious though it was, she persisted with her pecking until every scrap was gone from the leaf. Then she sagged back against the trunk behind her and let the leaf tumble forgotten to the ground.

Her eyes closed and she was ready to sink back into blackness, but for once her mind was her own and fragments of memory jostled her.

"I was... dead," she choked out. The words came hard to her, both their meaning and their utterance. Her voice was gravelly and broken, but the woman seemed to understand.

"No more dead than a tree in winter." The woman's voice was soothing.

"I was frozen." An involuntary shudder swept through Laurel, waking her pains to newness.

“You’re safe now, away from that horrible place.” The woman pressed a hand to Laurel’s shoulder and the steadiness of it was comforting. “Few can find the way to my garden, and fewer still know to look.”

Laurel managed a nod before slipping again into sleep. This time she did not dream at all.

How many days she spent in the hidden garden, Laurel could not have said. She did not count them, and if anyone else did, she never heard of it. All she knew was that each day beneath the blessed sun she grew a little stronger, the hurts of her body a little more distant. Yet as they retreated, a deeper hurt was revealed. It left a terrible ache within her that had nothing to do with the torture her flesh had endured. Rather it was the pain of thorns in her soul, wrapping a secret and cutting her every time she tried to grasp it. She had not been alone in her pod, had never walked alone in Tyria until now. For a moment she knew it and gripped the truth tightly, but then her strength failed her and it was gone again.

Her body healed more swiftly. The fragile outer leaves which had crumbled to dust from the freezing began to bud again, and while the same could not be said of her cracked and ruined clothing, her caretaker Dierdre showed her the way to grow her own coverings. As she healed, Dierdre tended her body as well as her spirit. She provided both food and shelter, but more importantly, she gave Laurel the promise of safety. In time Laurel grew brave enough to explore the sanctuary alone. With use her body began to remember itself, and her old agility grudgingly returned.

Laurel explored the muddy rents below the hillside, learning to avoid the grumpy elementals that lived there or to dodge the clods of earth they threw at her when she did not. She waded through warm pools and learned to see rainbows in the mist of the small waterfall which fed them. The azure moas there came to expect her visits and the treats she would

sometimes bring them. They liked fish, but crab was their favorite. They even enjoyed it when she brought them empty shells. Those they cracked in their massive beaks before picking over the remains for scraps.

Laurel expanded on what Dierdre had taught her of growing, and she fashioned a small horn for herself from a sturdy white flower. She taught the moas to come to its sound in search of food, and it wasn't long before ravens also caught on to the game. They enjoyed testing their reflexes against that of the moas and bravely stealing morsels from the much larger birds. It didn't matter where in the garden she wandered, dark wings would flock to the music of her horn.

Eventually she even climbed the steep bluffs which encircled the garden. Up that high the wind was blustery and hardly a seed could take root. Only the most tenacious of grasses clung to the stone there, and she came to love the wavy patterns the wind made through them. In the billowing gusts the ravens would play, doing their best to impress her and entice her to produce more treats. A single white raven, smaller than the others, brought her gifts in return for her treats. Shiny stones and small sticks, meaningless tokens that made her smile. When she could, she brought special treats just for him.

Through all this, a ghosting of leaves followed in the corner of her eye. Yet each time she turned for it, there was nothing there. A part of her was missing, and that truth grew with her spirits until it was ivy choking her thoughts. Yet try as she might, she could not bear to reach through the thorns and pull it out. She couldn't give voice to her torment, but there was another truth wrapped in less pain. It was easier to face and she confronted it with all the strength she could not spend elsewhere.

“They still have Liath.”

Dierdre's eyes were sympathetic, but she only shook

her head. "There is nothing you can do for him now."

"He could still be alive," Laurel pressed. *They both could be.* The ivy curled tighter about her heart. "You took me out of that place, surely you know a way to..."

"No." This time Dierdre was firm. "They discarded you on their own, frozen solid and written off as dead. I would never have found you in the swamp if Deorai hadn't led me to you."

"Who...? Where is she? Maybe she could..." Laurel was desperate, but her grasping was cut off as a wavery apparition appeared before her. She knew it to be Deorai, though she could not have said how. He was no woman, but a man with smooth brown bark that was wrapped in leaves the color of summer. He reminded her of visions of the Mother, glowing as he was, but where the Mother had been solid and strong, he was thin and insubstantial.

The ghostly sylvani knelt and cupped Laurel's chin in his hand. His touch felt of sunlight and the Dream, but it was only a pale shadow of the Mother's embrace.

I cannot find your friend. The voice that was not the Mother's came from his lips but spoke to her mind as strongly and clearly as it had before. *Your friend is beyond my sight. It was only by chance that I found you, hovering as you were at the edge of the Dream.*

"I can't leave him there," Laurel pleaded, trying to sound determined rather than desperate.

You've only just found your life again. Do not waste it needlessly. His face grew sad and he brushed the soft new leaves that once more framed her face. *That place has claimed too many already.*

"And if I do nothing, Liath is sure to be one of them," Laurel grimaced as stubbornness took root inside her. She thought for a moment and then consented, only partly admitting defeat as she promised herself something more. "I

won't go back there. In truth, I don't think I can go back there. But I will find someone who can. I won't just leave him."

The apparition smiled a nod as it faded away, and Dierdre moved as though to follow it. Instead, she stood by the tree and fondly rested one hand on its smooth, young bark.

"We roamed the Maguuma together," she said softly, her voice heavy with memory. "We found the most obscure trails to follow, and no matter how good he thought he was, I could always sneak up on him."

Her eyes glowed with fondness, then turned colder. "We had seen Malomedies with our own eyes. We knew the dangers of asura. And yet, when we found them there so deep in the jungle, my curiosity was stronger than his caution. I was amazed at their strangeness, those small creatures so unlike us.

"When they saw us, they attacked us. Deorai was better with a blade than I, and where I cowered he fought. But in the end they wounded him and took us anyway.

"They tried to turn us to Nightmare. I still don't understand why. They had seen neither the Dream nor the Nightmare; why would they do such a thing?

"Deorai was already wounded, but they kept him alive. They tortured him and left me to watch. They knew I wouldn't leave him and made a taunt of my supposed freedom. When they killed him they thought me broken, and I let them believe it. But I wasn't going to let the body of my beloved rot in that terrible place. Instead I took advantage of the freedom they flaunted. It wouldn't have been hard to disappear from there alone, but bringing my beloved's body made it more difficult. I hid and ran and hid again, over and over until I finally found my way out.

"Then I searched for a safe place to bury my beloved, a place where they couldn't find him and disturb his rest."

Dierdre sat down then, leaning back against the trunk of the tree beside Laurel. “I buried him here, vowing to stay by his grave and protect it. When the years passed and a tiny sapling pushed up, I thought it an omen. It was a sign he was sending me that he had safely reached the Dream.

“I tended it with the same love that I had tended his grave, and I thought I wouldn’t hear his voice again until I also returned to the Dream.

“But when the sapling grew into a tree, I found that if I slept beneath it I would hear his voice. I couldn’t understand the words, at first. They were too faint to make out, but I recognized his voice all the same and as the years passed it grew stronger.”

Dierdre paused for a time, as though listening. “There is a village not too far from here, south of the marshlands. If you leave here, it’s the only safe place to go.” She shook her head sadly. “I would ask you to stay, but if you must go, then you must make the trip alone. I will not leave my garden.”

Laurel nodded her acceptance. She was alone in Tyria now. Even if Dierdre came, that wouldn’t change.

Laurel left that night, heading south under the cover of darkness and hoping to pass beyond the worst of the asuran threat. While the garden itself was hidden, it wasn’t far from the complex where she had been held.

As Dierdre had predicted, from the stone cliffs that ringed the garden Laurel passed into a black mire. Fear tugged at her like the mud that sucked at her feet, and stilled her to breathless silence at every hint of a noise. She did her best to put distance between herself and the unseen threat, but her frequent pauses slowed her pace and there was little she could do about it. Moving through the swamp was too noisy an affair. She would plunge hip deep into stagnant water, the splashes thundering through the silence. Yet that, at least, was

over quickly. She could stand still and listen until she was certain she remained undetected, and then quietly feel her way forward through the murk. When the deeper water retreated, however, the squelching mud and shallow splashes were constant trials that deafened her to anything beyond her own noises.

Her only comfort was the white form that ghosted ahead of her through the trees. While any sane raven should have been sleeping at this hour, the commotion of her leaving had drawn the attention of her smallest friend. She was grateful for his company, and twice that night he cawed a warning from a distance, giving Laurel the chance to change her course before she could discover what had caught his attention.

It wasn't until near dawn that she finally saw any of the swamp's denizens with her own eyes. A group of marsh drakes were wallowing about, gray shapes in the pre-dawn gloom. They were of a size with the marsh drakes that had lived around the Grove, but these were far more menacing. There was a tightness in the way they moved, as though agitated by something, and every now and then one would stop to snap viciously at empty air.

Laurel kept her distance and slowed her pace, doing her best to keep out of sight without straying too far from her path. Circling around the cluster of beasts pushed her east more than she liked, but it was better than a confrontation with a pack of sick animals. The sun was well above the horizon by the time she had maneuvered herself around them and began searching for a safe place to hide. She had no desire to be caught out in the open by daylight, but as she scanned the trees she saw just what she had feared.

Her preoccupation with avoiding the drakes had made her blind to the greater threat until she was too near to flee. How had she not noticed? He wore the elaborate red uniform

that marked him as a fellow to her previous captors. Panic rose in the back of her throat even as icy tendrils curled around her heart. There was no way to run without being seen, and no way to be seen without being recaptured. But she hadn't been seen just yet. The asura's ears were laid back and his attention was absorbed by tapping out commands on a control panel which stabbed up through the mucky ground. He was alone, and for the time being he was distracted. It left her only one option.

Thought fled then, replaced instead by the still countenance of a predator. Laurel hardly lifted her feet as she moved, gliding them forward through the mire and shifting her weight only once she was certain she had a good footing. A part of her feared that the asura would finish his work and turn before she could get in range, but she gave that part of her no attention. She could spare none from the task ahead of her.

She was still a few steps behind him when the control panel blinked to darkness and he began to turn. Reaction took over then, and she threw herself forward into his back. He bounced off of his control panel and spun as he went down, but Laurel was on top of him. She pinned his axe in the soft mud with a knee while her fingers found his throat.

He was vicious, and he battered her with fist and claw. But she had the advantage of weight and strength, and a cold pressing fear steeled her resolve. The edges of her vision darkened, but she did not let go. She would not let go. She could not.

"He's dead." A shape separated itself from the trees at the edges of her vision. Laurel bolted to her feet, hastily snatching her victim's axe to defend herself, but as color and clarity came back into the world, it was one of her own kind who stood before her in the swamp. He must have been a Warden, for he moved with a greatsword on his back as

naturally as if he had forgotten it was there.

She nearly dropped the axe in her relief, and she must have looked as horrible as she felt for the stranger rushed to hold her up as if she would faint.

"I'm alright," she assured him, warding him off with her certainty and looping the muddy axe through her belt. The weight of it there felt good, even if she had no idea how to use it.

"Either way, let's get away from here," he said as he started south. "The drakes or the Inquest will find the body, and whichever it is, I'd rather not be here when that happens."

It didn't take long to reach the village. Despite her slow pace through the night she had almost reached it on her own. She wondered how they could survive so close to the asura's shadow, and got some answer in the armed guards that met them at the gate.

"Hail Enyr!" one shouted as they approached. "What's this? Collecting strays in the swamp?"

"After the way she killed that Inquest, I wouldn't be picking fun of her too much," the Warden joked back. The guard's expression grew a shade grimmer and he eyed the axe at her waist. Laurel promised herself that she would learn how to use it.

The town was small and simply designed, more of an outpost than a village and as different from the last one Laurel had visited as twilight was from noon. It had walls enclosing it, stout things made of woven vines pressed together so tightly that they resembled the roots of a great tree or a coil of rope laid down by giants. From inside the city it would be an easy thing to scale them. They were less than three paces high with ample footholds, and likely defenders would do just that if need be. Even now guards patrolled along the top. But if it was easy to climb from within, it was another story from without. The outer surfaces were covered in thorns and brambles.

The buildings of the village were raised up above the wall, so that even those who were off duty still lent their eyes to the watch. The walls would not protect the buildings or their inhabitants from arrows, but Laurel doubted it was death or wounding that one needed fear here. Capture was a far scarier prospect.

As they ascended the pathway above the height of the walls, she could see that south of the village spread a great wide swath of water. It was like a great lake, for the water appeared still, but while she could faintly make out land across from them in the hazy distance, she could find no shores to right or left.

The Warden led Laurel towards a building which served as the main hall. It was more door than wall, Laurel saw as they entered, more pavillion than greathall. The entryways were wide and open, each with a long protective overhang. It was an airy place meant as a shelter from sun and rain rather than temperature. Shimmering blue fronds decorated the entryways, and great fat fungi served as both tables and chairs within. The Warden took a seat at one and waved over a golden-leafed fellow.

“Would you fetch Ethni for me?” he asked. “I’ve a feeling she’ll be interested in this.”

As the messenger departed, the Warden removed his helm to reveal a crest of burgundy leaves. He ran his fingers through them to loosen them after the tightness of the helm. “There’s food and drink, if you like. It’s nothing exciting, though, I’ll warn you. Mostly dried fish and water. We don’t get many supplies brought in here and we’ve little room to grow anything.”

“No thank you,” Laurel politely declined. Her stomach was churning and she wasn’t sure she would be able to keep food down. She had been so certain that she would find help here, find someone who could make the rescue she herself

didn't dare, but now that she was here, she was beginning to realize the folly of it. This village wasn't large or populous, and armed though they were, these Wardens wouldn't have the numbers to storm the asuran facility.

It wasn't long before the messenger returned with a green sylvari woman whose coloring matched Laurel's own quite closely. Red orange leaves crowned her head, but unlike Laurel's loose and wild array, this woman's leaves had been tightly trimmed and trained back from her face. She saluted Enyr as she entered and he returned the gesture, Warden-to-Warden.

"My name is Ethni of the Cycle of Noon," she introduced herself formally. "What brings you to Old Sledge?"

"I found her killing an Inquest near the drake nest," Enyr supplied before Laurel could answer. It made her wince. She had hunted grubs for food and eaten the flesh of both fish and beast, but this had been her first unnatural kill. It was her first murder. Remembering it filled her head with sap and made her dizzy.

"And scared herself half to death in the process," Ethni noted as she took a seat with them.

"I escaped from the asura." Laurel spoke slowly, pushing the queasiness from her voice. "They still have my friend, and I think they mean to kill him."

That surprised them both. Enyr's expression became sharper and Ethni gentled her voice when she said, "You'd best tell us everything, friend."

And so Laurel did. Almost.

She skipped past the tales of her Dream. She didn't feel like a Valiant and had no desire to be lauded as a hero just now. Likewise, she left out the part about freezing to death. She didn't think she could face the memory yet. She also left out Dierdre and the garden. Those weren't her secrets to share.

What remained of the tale of her capture and escape was necessarily disjointed. She told them of wandering in the Maguuma and being tricked by the asura, but then her tale jumped abruptly to her kill in the swamp. She feared they would press her and discover the unfair half-truths she had fed them, but the Wardens took her at face value. It made the omission feel more a lie.

“Not everyone’s Dream prepares them the way a Valiant of the Wyld Hunt’s does.” Ethni meant her words as comfort, but the bluntness only made them sting all the more. Laurel could not bring herself to admit that she was supposed to be just such a Valiant. Ethni misinterpreted her chagrin and added, “Each of us makes due the best we can, and any of us can rise to be Wardens. With patience and practice we can grow as strong as any Valiant.”

Laurel nodded, hoping they would change the subject to something less uncomfortable.

“You’re a long way from home,” Enyr admitted when it was clear Laurel wouldn’t speak. He was hesitant, but with a glance at Ethni, he decided to break the news himself. “You may have entered that gate from Maguuma, but that’s not where you came out. We’re south of the Shiverpeak Mountains here, well on the other side of the Sea of Sorrows.”

Laurel nodded again. She knew she should have been horrified. She was so far off course in her Wyld Hunt that it would be all but impossible to continue from here. Yet somehow, compared with everything else, that seemed of little importance.

“A gate does make sense,” Ethni affirmed. Her face was calculating as she rested her chin on a fist. “They don’t move nearly enough supplies through the front door for a facility of that size.”

“But there’s no telling how many gates they have scattered across the world, or where those might be,” Enyr

lamented. "It's kind of hard to send someone after a hidden gate by an unnamed town in the deep Maguuma, especially from half a world away."

"And there's not much we can do to mount a rescue either." Ethni shook her head. "I'll put word out that anyone venturing into the swamp should keep a look out for escapees."

It was as much as Laurel had expected, but not nearly as much as she'd hoped for. "Isn't there something more you can do?"

"I'm afraid not," Ethni said firmly. "We're stretched thin as it is between the Inquest, the skale, and the krait."

"If you found a way out, maybe your friend will as well," Enyr encouraged. "If he makes it out into the swamp, we'll find him."

Laurel knew that wouldn't happen. Liath wouldn't even think to try escaping until it was too late, and Cuain was only a hound. How could he hope to find a way out on his own? Without telling the Wardens that she had had to die in order to escape, however, there was little way to convince them. And even if she did convince them, what more could they do?

"Well, I'd best go put word out." Ethni rose and excused herself with a salute to Enyr. This time it was only half-heartedly returned.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you want," Enyr told Laurel. "Accommodations here aren't cozy like the Grove, but you'll have a dry place to sleep and food to eat if you're willing to take a turn at the watch."

Laurel nodded absently. Where else did she have to go? There was still a chance that Liath or Cuain would escape on their own, and she wanted to be here if that happened.



Chapter 5: Among Wardens

The passing months and her growing strength seemed unimportant to her protesting fibers. Laurel found bows to be unnatural devices, more about self-torture than fighting. She set down the one she had been given and rubbed the back of her neck. It was only a short bow with a small recurve to its shape, but despite the low draw weight her shoulder and arm were perpetually sore.

“Why do these drills always have to be first thing in the morning?” she complained.

“So they’re fresh in your mind all day,” Ethni replied simply.

“They’re fresh in my muscles all day too,” Laurel retorted, but she knew better than to press it. Everyone in Old Sledge was required to have at least a basic understanding of how to use a bow. They were the most useful weapons from the walls or walkways or even from the village doorways themselves. But they were only useful if you could hit your targets without hitting your allies as well, and even those who displayed a practiced ease with the weapon took their turn at the morning drills.

Laurel knew as well that the soreness was not something she could escape. As soon as she showed proficiency with this bow they would simply move her up in draw weight. It had happened twice already. It didn’t help that

she had a distaste for the calmness and concentration which archery demanded.

But despite her complaints, she wanted to own one of the beautiful vine longbows that the elder Wardens carried. Those intricate weapons were of living wood much like the flower horn she still wore, but when she tried to grow her own bow, the attempt came up short. Apparently there was more to the craft than bending a strip of wood, but no one would teach her the way of it until they were sure that she wouldn't kill anyone with such a fine weapon.

Thus she went through town with dead wood strapped to her back. It was oiled and well maintained, but simple and plain. Much like her, though that didn't make her enjoy it any better. She would have left it behind if she were allowed to when she left for patrol duty in the swamp, but at least being required to bring the bow didn't mean she had to leave other weapons behind. The weight of the axe at her belt was more of a comfort than the partner she was assigned.

Overhead her raven gave a loud double caw, the beginning of each trembling with the throaty trills he sometimes used. She wasn't sure if the ravens that responded to her horn were still the same ones she had known in the garden, or if word of her had spread among ravenkind so that others now knew her promise of food as well. Most of them blended together in her mind so that it was hard to tell them apart, but one voice she could recognize. Her little white runt she could pick out of any chorus, and she was even learning to differentiate between the various caws he used. This one, with that intentional tremor, was meant for her. He had found something.

"This way," Laurel said, signaling her partner to follow the white bird through the trees. Guaire looked up to the pearlescent sky and shielded his eyes from the brightness, but he didn't make to follow her. He trusted his own eyes more

than those of her bird, despite the latter's better vantage and the number of patrols on which they'd proven themselves. She pushed on ahead without him, refusing to let a boring job be dragged out any longer than need be.

And it was a terribly boring job, not at all what Laurel would have expected from patrol duty. Rather than scout the swamp for threatening movements from the Inquest, they searched it for the ground up by-products of Inquest crystals which they then rendered harmless with an asuran device. The bitter irony of it was not lost on her as she flicked on the switches and watched the device hum to life.

"You keep running ahead like that and you're going to find yourself in a drake's belly." Guaire's tone said he wouldn't particularly mind if it happened.

"And you wouldn't take so long if you'd open your eyes instead of your mouth." Heat flashed to Laurel's cheeks, but she managed to keep most of it from her voice. *It's the crystals*, she reminded herself. *They affect us as much as the skale or the drakes*. But that wasn't the whole of it. While the energies they were here to dispell did amplify aggression, there was friction between her and her partner that had nothing to do with shattered arcane gems.

"I need to open my eyes?" Guaire scoffed, but the edge of his tone mellowed as the crystals lost their glow. The conversation might have ended there, but Guaire insisted on having the last word and he wasn't about to waste it on a rhetorical question. "You walked yourself right into the hornets' nest the last time you were out in the world alone, then you wonder why you're assigned a babysitter?"

Laurel clenched her jaw. She was here to watch his back as much as he was here to watch hers, but she no longer cared. She hefted her clean-up device as she straightened and looked him in the eye before stalking off. She didn't hear him follow, and she refused to look back. She put him out of her

mind and wandered freely in the swamp, taking out her fury on the muck she stomped and the crystals she destroyed. Her raven overhead warned her of trouble before she could stumble onto it, but she kept her own eyes open all the same. She wouldn't give in to her partner's abuse by proving him right.

Morning wore into afternoon, and even that had nearly passed by the time she returned. A look of relief from the guard at the gate told her Guaire had come back ahead of her. If he had tried to come after her he must have lost her trail in the murky shallows of the swamp. He was not as good a tracker as he liked to think, but Laurel doubted if he had even tried. Likely he'd come straight back with some outlandish tale of their parting. Just as likely he had taken a good scolding from Ethni about the dangers of leaving one's partner alone, especially if what he'd said about being her babysitter were true.

"I'm glad to see you're back," the guard told her sincerely. His flesh was woody and the deep purple hue of crushed blueberries. Snowy white leaves sprouted in bunches from the artistic whorls of his bark; they were not limited to his head. "I knew you'd be fine."

"Thank you Diriblainé," Laurel answered. It took effort to keep from commenting that her partner had no such convictions. How many of the Wardens shared that sentiment? Diriblainé nodded knowingly, and with a shiver of discomfort, Laurel hurried off before he could read anything else from her face.

She was in the awkward hours that belonged neither to afternoon nor evening, and the food in the hall reflected it. The fruit of the afternoon was already gone, taken by those who had gotten there earlier, but much of its juice still remained. She contented herself with soaking hard biscuits in it to soften them, and as she nibbled, a clever thought came to

her. The second half of her day was to be spent in guard duty. All she would need to do to judge the others' measure of her would be to ask for duty at the gate. If her normal assignment to the walls was coincidence, then no one should mind her taking a turn at the gate. If they refused her, though, then maybe they really were trying to shelter her more than she had known.

As soon as her meal was finished she wound her way to where Enyr kept watch on the southern wall. He was in charge of duty assignments, and he'd always been kind to Laurel.

"I love the smell of salt in the air," he confided as she joined him. She nodded absently and pushed straight to her true purpose.

"I thought I might do duty at the gate this afternoon." He watched her casually, saying nothing. He often did that, his silence drawing out more than people wished to tell. Laurel refused to let it work on her this time. Instead she added, "I saw Diriblaine at the gate. He's been teaching me lately and I thought it would be nice to do duty with him as well, maybe use what I've learned."

Enyr turned back to the water as he considered her offer. He drew an arrow and let it sail towards the dark shapes that twined lazily beneath the surface. The krait always lurked too close for comfort, sometimes even slithering up onto the narrow beach that stood between the town and the deep waters. It was as though they kept their own patrol, watching the watchers and waiting for the opportunity to snatch an air breather down beneath the waves. That was one of the hazards of guarding the gate as opposed to the wall. As with the Inquest, there was no hope of rescue for those captured by the krait.

"Not today, I think," he finally answered, eyes still out over the water. "Diriblaine's only just started his shift and

you're already well into your day. No need for you to stay late on his account."

"But we're to spar tonight!" Laurel protested. "Whether on or off duty I'll be up and waiting for him anyways."

"Maybe you should take a night off," Enyr suggested. "Shifts that long aren't good for anyone." He was too tactful to speak of it openly the way Guaire had, but the implication was plain. He thought of her as little more than a sapling as well.

Laurel bristled as she walked the wall, and out of protest she stayed even as the sun dipped to touch the horizon. She was not a weakling who needed to be pampered with short shifts and easy duties. She had survived far worse than facing a single skale or krait with a fort full of allies to her back. But they didn't know that. All they knew was that she had stumbled into their world with fear written all over her face.

A sudden roar and a high pitched whine pulled Laurel's attention to the landward side of town. She sprang forward and raced along the wall until she could see what was happening in the swamp. Through the lengthening shadows, an enraged skale trumpeted its anger and tried to shake loose three arrows from its thick green hide. Great gobs of putrid saliva few from its streamlined head as it threateningly rattled the ridge of orange fin that traced its spine. The Wardens were neither surprised nor alarmed, and before Laurel could draw her own bow, another volley of arrows descended on the beast. As red spiderwebbed out between its green scales, the beast charged in defiance of its own death. Diriblaine stood his ground.

His were a subtler set of skills than most Wardens. He held only a nondescript twist of wood in his hand, and he didn't seem to do anything with it. But as he held it out, deep shadows that had nothing to do with the fading sunlight

collected about the skale's feet. Before the beast could reach the gate it staggered and fell. There it lie, its bulging eyes casting about in panic as more arrows pelted down and its life drained away. It did not rise again.

Laurel shifted her weight uncomfortably as the other Wardens replaced their bows on their backs. Hers had never left its resting place. She was rarely quick enough with it to be of any use up on the wall, and now she was beginning to see how much that counted against her. There was little she could do about it, though. The unnatural motion of drawing and aiming took thought, but by the time she could stop to think, the fighting was already over. Her axe had found its way into her hand, though, for all the good that did her up atop the wall. She slipped it back into her belt and stalked away from the wall, knowing she would prove nothing there. The end of Diriblaine's shift could not come soon enough.

It was fully dark by the time he came to the practice court where she was waiting, and she knew him by the pattern of his glows. He was spotted with a deep blue that burned low and steady like the stars overhead. The larger spots twisted out to trace the shape of the knots in his bark. It was an uncommon pattern and it made him easy to recognize.

"Let's shed some light on the subject, shall we?" he chuckled, and with a touch he kindled to life the glowing vine that ringed the area. Laurel blinked her eyes at the sudden light, and rose to her feet. This was what made the days bearable.

Her axe was alive in her hands, its motions coming naturally. She surged with her strikes, flowing powerfully into each motion and receding only to strike elsewhere. Her weapon was like a part of her own body, joining her with her opponent in a dance. It was energy and movement and life.

She slipped backward out of Diriblaine's reach. The axe was not his preferred weapon and he used it in a strange way,

pressuring her from a distance with quick motions. His blows rarely landed anymore, but the threat of them pushed her back all the same. She knew if she could slip inside his defenses it would be an easy thing to disarm him, and she bounced about on her toes looking for an opening. Of late she had been getting quite good at this little game. If there were any others who would practice with her, she would have surely moved on to them by now, but there weren't. Everyone else saw her as little more than a tender new shoot.

"I yield!" he cried, and Laurel realized she was still holding her weapon aloft despite his own lying in the dirt. She was also glowering. She hid her expression by bending down to retrieve the fallen weapon and returning them both to the weapons rack. They were padded and blunted for practice, but they still hurt when they connected. She wondered how many blows she had landed tonight and knew that she couldn't have guessed. Her mind was in too many places and yet nowhere at all. Perhaps it wasn't her skills Enyr found lacking when he denied her a place at the gate.

"I really don't think there's anything you can learn from me anymore." Diriblaine's words were a confirmation of her thoughts, said as a complaint when to another it could have been a compliment.

She went to a nearby bowl on the ground and splashed water over her face. She was sweating from the heat of the workout, and a thin line of nectar was tickling its way down her back. Compared to a human, what oozed from her pores was refreshing and sweet, but the nighttime insects it would draw were far more annoying than any smell she had ever known. She washed her face and arms to ward them off as routinely as a human would chase away his own stench.

The refreshing coolness cleared her head and she felt a pang of guilt. It wasn't her safety the Wardens feared, but the safety of those fighting with her. That Diriblaine had

continued to work with her when others turned her away said more of his confidence in his ability to disable her while unarmed than his skill with any particular weapon. *If I truly got out of control*, she wondered, *would he bring me down like that skale?* She had no doubt that he could do it. Laurel opened her mouth to try her hand at an apology, but when she lifted her eyes from the washbowl, Diriblaine had already slipped away.

She sighed and rolled her shoulders. He would hold this lapse against her later, him and his flair for the dramatic, but now she saw his motivations in a new light. What had seemed like petty quarrels in the past now suddenly looked liked a game of seeing how far he could push her. Had he been trying to teach her restraint all along?

If he had, it wasn't working very well, and she didn't have the will to go chasing after him now.

The rush of energy from the exercise was slowly subsiding, and in its wake there was nothing to mask the complaints of her body. With dragging feet she climbed the path to the greathall. The gentle upward slope felt like a mountain, but the rumbling in her stomach wouldn't be ignored. The lunch of biscuits had long since left her, but there was a promise of better food now that the day was at an end. There was always plenty to be had in the evening. Wardens filtered in and out on their varied schedules, and food would be waiting no matter what time their duties ended.

It was simple fare. Salt fish and coarse bread was the staple of every meal. It was hard to move goods in or out of Old Sledge, pinned as they were between the Inquest and the krait, but from time to time their resident trader Eirys would prove her cleverness and procure some treat for the town she had adopted. This night it was cheese and nuts which rounded out their meal, and that little touch lifted Laurel's spirits. The one time she had gotten to try cheese before leaving the

Grove, Cuain had loved it. Now she saw his enthusiasm reflected in the faces of her fellow Wardens.

“Isn’t this good, sister? Would you like some? We should always eat things this delicious.”

She couldn’t make out their words, so instead she substituted the ones written on her hound’s face in her memories. They fit surprisingly well as the Wardens flitted about from table to table.

“Oh look at this piece. It’s bigger than the last one I had. I like the pieces that are bigger.”

She chuckled at the thought, then realized what she was doing. She was making up imaginary conversations with a pet that was gone while unable to even muster the effort to sit up straight. And she was doing it out loud. *By the Mother, I’m tired.* She slipped away from the hall unnoticed.

Laurel was more than ready for sleep, but even curled comfortably into bed, sleep did not find her quickly. The weariness of her body was overcome by the weariness of her soul, and as stillness settled without, turmoil rose within. All the worries and doubts she had chased away with activity throughout the day made themselves known again.

She warred over what she should do. Each day she spent here, in this comfortable routine, was one more day that Liath and Cuain were at the Inquest’s mercy. She desperately tried not to wonder what had become of her hound, but tonight she could not escape it and tears burned her eyes. He had followed her into that evil place, trusting her even though he had sensed from the start that those strangers meant danger, and it would probably cost him his life. If it had not already.

She wanted nothing more than to charge into the asuran facility herself, right through the front door, and carve a bloody path through all of them until she found Cuain. She knew it was folly, but even so, if she had trusted her body to

obey her she might have gotten up and charged off right then. Her weary flesh demanded rest, however, and so she lay quietly despite the raging of her mind.

There were other options besides her fool's quest, but she couldn't commit to them.

One option was to return to the Grove and try to get help there. The Grove was a long distance away, however. Even the quickest route around the Sea of Sorrows would still require her to go by foot as far as Lion's Arch. There she could use an asura gate to cut the trip short, but even going to and from Lion's Arch would see her gone for half a year or more. Then, once she made it, there was still no guarantee that she'd be able to muster a force big enough to matter. Her kin would be sympathetic, to be sure, but the Grove wasn't filled with fighters. Of those she might find, how many would follow a young sprout's incoherent tale half way across the world to rescue someone who was probably already dead?

The thought was bitter for Laurel, and she dismissed that option as too unlikely to succeed. Besides, would she forgive herself if Cuain escaped while she was gone? He knew no one here, and unlike Liath no one could tell him to wait for her return. Would he try to return to the Grove by his own instincts? Could he survive that journey or would he simply die in the mountains, cold and alone?

She shuddered, and that thought led her to her next option. She could go into the Shiverpeaks herself. There were several known gathering places of norn which weren't even that far away. A few weeks maybe, certainly not much more than a month. Norn were known for chasing fame and glory, and what better tale could there be than storming a top secret asuran facility to rescue a helpless captive from the clutches of evil and torture?

There was only one problem with that plan. She would have to brave the snow-locked wilderness of the mountains.

The thought of it froze her heart and try as she might she could not find the will to face it.

The guilt she felt at her own lack of courage washed over her then, as it did every night. In warring with herself about what to do, the only thing she ever accomplished was continuing to do nothing. Morning's light would wash away her torment. Busyness and immediate tasks would push aside worries over the future until the idleness of rest made her once again vulnerable to their whisperings.

And underneath all of these currents she still felt the pull of her Wyld Hunt. No one in Old Sledge knew about her dream and she tried to pretend that it wasn't important anymore, but somewhere in the world there was a place she must find and a task she must complete. It seemed impossibly far away and insurmountable, but ignore it as she might, it refused to be forgotten.

Morning came with unusual excitement. Laurel was used to the sounds of activity when she rose. There were many sylvari who would wake with the dawn, but she was never one of them and today she woke later than usual. As she sat up and rubbed her eyes, she pondered the bustle she heard. It was not the typical chatter of Wardens about their duties, nor was it the open good cheer of the night before. There was both a hush and an insistence to the voices, as though they couldn't remain silent despite knowing that they should.

Laurel wondered what was afoot, but others shirking their duties didn't excuse her from her own. Dread of Ethni's scolding overpowered her curiosity, and she forced herself through her normal morning ritual which ended with stringing her bow and heading down to the target yard.

Ethni was always there when Laurel arrived. The woman was ruled by her routines, but this morning she was not at her bows.

With no one to scold her for it, Laurel rushed through her shots and scurried off toward the greathall. Tongues were loosest where food and cheer were strongest, but as she started to climb the path she saw Diriblaine descending. He was of the Cycle of Night, and while not all sylvari woke and slept by their cycle, he most certainly did. His nightly ghosting fed his penchant for rumor and gossip as well. If anyone knew what was happening and would want to tell the tale, it would be him. By his look, he had already spotted her and marked her as a willing ear.

“What’s going on?”

Diriblaine answered with a mischievous grin. “Whatever do you mean?” he asked sweetly. Laurel sighed and prepared herself for another of his games. She was no good at apologizing, but apologizing always seemed to put an end to them the quickest. She was willing to try.

“I’m sorry,” she started. Then, finding no good way to say it, she hastily amended, “I swear I wasn’t going to hit you again after you were disarmed. No matter what it looked like.” She felt sap rushing to her cheeks, and Diriblaine’s smile turned genuine. It only made her blush harder.

“My, what a lovely shade of green,” he teased. When he was done enjoying her discomfort, he went on, “We’ve had a visitor in the night. A Valiant.” He let the word hang for a moment, and Laurel wasn’t sure how she was supposed to respond. People who weren’t born as Valiants tended to adore them as heroes, but Laurel knew that being a Valiant didn’t mean as much as the others thought.

“It shocked me too,” Diriblaine assured her, mistaking her blank silence for something else. “The Valiant’s name is Rhyna, and she came from an outpost maybe a week’s journey away.”

“An outpost?” This time Laurel actually was shocked. “Out here?”

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Diriblaine was excited by Laurel’s reaction, and he hurried his telling. “Enough Valiants have apparently been coming through the area that they decided to start an outpost, just like that! It’s sort of a supply camp or a rest stop, except that everyone there is a Valiant on their Wyld Hunt. Can you imagine so many in one place?”

Laurel’s mind raced, not in wonder or awe, but at possibility. While she knew that being a Valiant didn’t automatically make one a warrior, if there really were that many Valiants passing through the area, then maybe she could find the numbers to rally a rescue into the asuran facility.

With amusement, Diriblaine watched Laurel thinking. He waited long enough for the full impact of his explanation to sink in, then said in a crafty whisper, “But that’s not the most amazing part.”

At first, Laurel hardly heard what he had said. The words found her ears, but they didn’t penetrate any further. She was too lost in her own mental workings. After a time, though, their meaning registered and her eyebrows belatedly rose.

“Valiant Rhyna came here because she knows who founded this village,” Diriblaine dangled the information out like bait. “It was a fellow Valiant she knew back in the Grove when they both first sprouted.” He paused, waiting, but Laurel wasn’t sure what she was supposed to be understanding. He prodded her a little closer to the truth, “Valiant Rhyna came because she was expecting to find that fellow Valiant still here.”

“But there aren’t any Valiants here.” Laurel thought she knew everyone in the village by now, though she admittedly wasn’t the most social of creatures.

“You Nooners are all thick as blocks, aren’t you?” Diriblaine complained. “No sense of subtlety or intrigue at all.” He rolled his eyes at her, but spelled it out all the same. “It was

Ethni. Ethni's been a Valiant this whole time and no one knew."

Rising voices inside the greathall drew away Laurel's attention. "Are they inside?" she asked with disbelief.

Diriblaine was annoyed at the spoiling of his game, and nodded reluctantly. As much as he might bemoan her directness, when Laurel rushed up to the greathall he was right behind her.

They arrived to find the place packed with people. Some sat on chairs, some sat on the floor, and others stood. To one corner of the room Ethni and a stranger were seated at a table, exchanging heated words. There was no doubt in Laurel's mind that this was the Valiant. She and Ethni looked as though they could have been pod-mates. Their flesh was the same warm green and their leaves fell neatly backwards in the same style. The only thing which separated them was the color of those leaves. Where Ethni's were red-orange, Rhyna's were a warm purple edged in fushia.

Laurel stopped in the doorway. She could hear well enough from there and had no desire to go wading through bodies.

"It's been good to see you, Rhyna," Ethni said. If anything, her tone was even more business-like than usual. "But my answer is still no. My place is here. Your outpost is too far from the swamp."

"Yes, yes," Rhyna allowed. "Carmel was only too happy to tell me about your Hunt here. Surely you don't think you have to stay and continue this never-ending clean-up job? You're a Valiant, not a maid for the Inquest!" She sounded both angry and weary. They had no doubt been over this before.

"Not all Wyld Hunts are the glorious slayings of monsters," Ethni rebuked coolly. "Mine is no less important than any other, even if it isn't over as swiftly."

"I was hoping to find another Valiant whose Wyld

Hunt had been completed,” Rhyna relented. “The Nightmare Court is getting bolder and we could use some reliable help. Even an outpost blossoming with Valiants can’t look after itself if they’re all distracted by personal endeavors. We lose Valiants to the Nightmare one or two at a time, and with each of them the Court grows stronger. If you can’t help us, then I’ll just have to keep looking.”

Laurel knew this would be her only chance. If she didn’t return with the Valiant, she would stay here in Old Sledge for another season and get no closer to a rescue. It didn’t sound hopeful that the Valiants would lend much more aid than the Wardens had, but for once she need to do something.

“I’ll go,” she said abruptly. All eyes turned to her.

“Laurel, this is a task for Valiants,” Ethni reprimanded. “They need people who can hold their own against the Nightmare Court, not more bodies to protect.” Everyone here knew her, and their knowledge was in their eyes as they watched her. They knew the story of how she had narrowly escaped the asura and come stumbling into their town. They had been at bow drills together, and on patrol. They knew her skills and her limits, and they knew more than anything that she did not live up to their ideals of a Valiant.

Laurel steeled herself and forced her eyes to meet Rhyna’s gaze.

“I *am* a Valiant,” she said, and the resolve in her voice gave truth to her words. She ignored the gasp from Diribaine, echoed about the room by those that knew her best, and pushed on. “I was born with a Wyld Hunt but was tricked by the asura before I could complete it. It has become lost to me.” Something behind Rhyna’s eyes shifted and her expression softened. If she hadn’t been such a clone of Ethni, Laurel could have mistaken it for sympathy. She knew better, though, and everywhere she looked, she saw the change in the faces of her

friends. They pulled away from her, refused to meet her eyes. A Valiant of the Wyld Hunt was a hero, but to forsake that calling was the vilest of treasons, one bare step better than turning to Nightmare itself.

“I will go with the Valiant.” Laurel met her mentor’s disapproval head on, matching that piercing gaze with her own stubbornness. The accusation was plain. Ethni had never abandoned anything in her life, not even the drudgery of a Wyld Hunt she expected to never complete. She would die at her Hunt if need be. Certainly she would never turn her back on it, and she would spare no sympathy for one who had. But it was a path Laurel could not follow now that a second one had opened up before her, clearer and shorter and closer to her heart. In the choice between Hunt and hound she would follow her hound. No amount of disdain would sway her now.

The next day when Valiant Rhyna departed from Old Sledge, no one tried to stop Laurel from going with her.



Chapter 6: The Search for Allies

The route Rhyna chose from Old Sledge to the Valiant outpost was not the easiest of paths. In order to avoid the Inquest in the swamp, they followed the stony shoreline instead. Ragged ridges of earth tore upward from the softer soils and cradled the swamp's stagnant waters away from the deeper salty ones. On one side a bed of muck and foulness filled the bowl of the land. On the other, everything soft had been worn away by the tides until only the uneven bones of the land remained.

To travel the shoreline meant clambering up and down those endless juts of stone, all the while watching their backs for the krait that tailed them. Warning shots kept the serpentine slavers at a distance most of the time, but they were far more curious about these two lone sylvari than they had been about those securely holed up inside Old Sledge. Camping on the water's edge would have been suicide, so instead they slept atop the stony ridge where the krait would not follow. When they were lucky they might find a piece of rock that leveled off into an escarpment. When they were not lucky they tried to tuck themselves into whatever defensible crevices they could find, preferably on the swamp side of the ridge.

They had not been lucky for two days now, but despite the weariness of little sleep, Laurel was glad to be moving through the world again. She recalled fond memories of

travelling with Cuain, and for once it eased her loneliness instead of enhancing it. She was moving towards help, and hope lightened her heart. She imagined a life with her hound after their troubles had passed. For a time she even saw him in her mind's eye scabbling over the rocks beside her. He was a creature made for loping across flat open spaces, but that had never stopped him from bounding up the rocky slopes that could sometimes be found in the Maguuma. He had delighted in showing off his prowess, proving that he could go anywhere she could.

But the rock face she now scaled would have been beyond him. Strained and sore as her fingers were, her time climbing in Dierdre's garden had taught her to find purchase in the vertical rock. Cuain's dull claws and broad pads would have been useless here. She could just picture him pouting on the ground below, yipping for her to come back down as she climbed up further and further without him. The image struck Laurel to the core. Was he in some Inquest cell right now, whining for his lost master? She had to pause for a moment to regain her composure.

Stupid time to think of that, she berated herself. *Wait until you're up top, at least.*

When her eyes cleared again, she saw the white raven perched on the ledge above her. He was calmly preening himself as if he couldn't care less what she was doing, but Laurel noted that he had chosen to perch almost on top of her. She hauled herself up the last distance and over the edge. This escarpment had been steeper and higher than the others, but that would also make it a better campsite for the night. As Laurel rolled onto her back and panted, the raven quorked at her inquisitively.

"What a whole lot of help you are," she complained, and the raven quorked again innocently. "Oh yes, it's so easy for you, Lord of the Feathers. How do we simple plants ever

manage?” With a hop and a half-flap, he floated over to land on her chest and started preening again.

“You’re so proud of yourself, aren’t you?” Laurel couldn’t help but smile. “I think I am going to name you that, you little rascal. Lord of Feathers.” She poked him in the chest with one finger, making him caw defiant outrage and buffet her with his wings, but Laurel wasn’t fooled. He didn’t even try to move away, and as soon as his point was made he went right back to preening.

She stole a few more moments of rest before the sound of Rhyna approaching the ledge forced Laurel to her feet again. Standing up dumped the raven unceremoniously from her chest, which earned her more indignant caws. He turned his fall into a lazy circle before landing just out of her reach. Laurel pretended not to see his reproachful glare as she pulled Rhyna up onto even ground. The older Valiant was having a harder time with the climbing than Laurel was and fell into a heap after a few steps.

“I never want to move a muscle again,” Rhyna declared when she had caught her breath.

“You know you’ll be up before me in the morning,” Laurel chided. Rhyna was of the Cycle of Dawn and always ready to wake in the twilight hours before the sun began to rise.

“I never want to move a muscle again, until the morning,” Rhyna corrected wryly. Laurel laughed and sat down on the hard ground. Though her first impression had painted Rhyna as a mirror image of Ethni, nothing could have been further from the truth. What sternness Laurel had detected back in Old Sledge was nowhere to be found. Not once had Rhyna even suggested that Laurel should be practicing her archery daily. Laurel wondered if she hadn’t just imagined it all, the piercing glare and the tight lipped grimace, projecting what she knew of Ethi onto this Valiant who looked so like her.

The long shadows were fading to grayness as the sun sank below the horizon. A relatively peaceful night would be welcome, but still they would take turns at watch. With krait one could never be too careful, and while they showed no interest in scaling the dry land after the air breathers, Laurel was fairly certain they could if they decided to. She had seen snakes slither up vertical tree trunks. Where the krait really so different?

“You shouldn’t judge yourself so harshly, you know,” Rhyna said. Her eyes were already closed and the comment was so abrupt that at first Laurel thought she was talking to herself. Rhyna had proved to be a natural talker and sleep was no barrier to that particular talent. She was especially chatty when she lingered on the edge of slumber.

“Not every Hunt succeeds, and most don’t succeed on the first try. They don’t like to sing about that part though.” A lazy laugh turned into a yawn and Rhyna curled onto her side, shifting and settling into the stone as though she could make it more comfortable. “Don’t let Ethni and those Wardens bother you. It’s not like your Hunt is going anywhere. It won’t complete itself; that’s why it’s a Wyld Hunt. Until you do something about it, it’ll just wait for you.” Rhyna’s voice dwindled to a whisper so that Laurel could barely hear over her own breathing. “I think it’s noble, what you’re doing. Letting your Hunt wait while you help others. You don’t even know us. But you’re ready to... face the Court... to help...”

Laurel’s heart sank as Rhyna’s voice dwindled into the soft breaths of sleep. *It’s not strangers I’m so excited to help, she pointed out*, feeling a liar again. She was getting very good at omitting the truths that made her uncomfortable. She was also getting good at ignoring the insistent tugging of her Hunt, but now that Rhyna had brought it to the forefront of her mind, the back of her neck prickled uncomfortably. It was like an insect bite that only itched when you noticed it, and Laurel

rubbed her neck even though she knew it would do no good. Rhyna had the right of things. There would be plenty of time to go sniffing after her Hunt's trail when she had Cuain safely at her side once more. The Hunt belonged to both of them, after all. How could she chase it without him?

The next day Laurel rose well rested and ready to face any number of krait, but there was no sign of their dark shadows beneath the waves. It was a relief to make their climbs without fear of ambush, and before long their ridge dwindled. It angled northward away from the shoreline and left a wide, slow-moving river nestled in its gravelly wake.

"Well that explains the krait," Rhyna muttered, pulling a small handful of arrows from her quiver. They had a good vantage from where they were on the rocks, but Laurel saw no movement or sign of threat below.

"There." Rhyna gestured with her arrows, and Laurel made out some figures lying in the shallows of the river. They were unmoving, perhaps victims of the krait, although the krait usually took live captives to use in their dark sacrifices.

"Orrian undead," Rhyna offered. "We're close enough to Orr that they push up from time to time." She paused for a moment, and Laurel half expected her to start driving her arrows into the ground as the Wardens had done for their drills. Arrows staked out in a row were easier to reach than those in a quiver, but the stone outcropping they perched on would sooner ruin an arrowhead than accept one. Rhyna had to have known that, so why had she taken out so many?

"They won't be able to reach us up here," Rhyna observed. "It should be easy to pick them off." She shifted her grip on her arrows so that she was holding them loosely just below the fletching, then she nocked the first one with the rest of them still in her hand.

Laurel had never seen anything so strange.

"Ready for a show?" It was a warning rather than a

question. Rhyna drew, sighted, and released before Laurel could answer. Any other time she might have felt shame at her uselessness with the bow, but right now Laurel was dumbstruck. She could not look away from the other archer. With the releasing of that first arrow, Rhyna's hand darted forward and in one fluid motion drew again. It was almost too fast for Laurel's eyes to follow, and only by the thwang of the string was she sure of how many shots had been fired. In the space of a few short breaths, seven arrows sailed through the air. They landed as quickly as they had been fired, and two of the rotten forms never stirred from their slumber. The last one roared a guttural curse and charged them. Once wakened, it was easily as fast as the charr it had once been, but as Rhyna had predicted, it was stopped short by the steep rock. Rhyna almost looked lazy as she pulled a single arrow from her quiver to finish the job.

"How did you do that?" Laurel's curiosity burst out of her. Only after the words were away did she realize how harsh her tone had sounded, and she winced at it.

"With much practice, I assure you," Rhyna laughed, unoffended. She sat on the ledge then slid down the stone, leaping off at the last moment to land lightly on the gravelled slope. She pulled her arrow from the corpse even as the white raven fluttered down to it. He picked disappointedly at the remains, finding them not up to his culinary standards, and cawed angrily after Rhyna as she went to retrieve her other arrows. *You did it wrong!* Laurel read in his outrage. *You've spoiled the meat somehow!* She slid down and shooed him away from the filthy thing. She didn't think he could catch Zhaitan's corruption that way, but elder dragons were even worse to take chances with than krait.

"I've never seen anyone else attempt what you just did." Laurel pointed out as her raven gave up and settled himself on her shoulder. He made a point of glaring at the

other sylvari, but she didn't seem to notice. "I don't think anyone else even considered it."

"I saw the way of it in my Dream," Rhyna explained. "It's an old human technique, though it's becoming less common now that the charr are spreading guns everywhere. It's a lot easier to just fire a gun."

"I had to train for years to fire even two arrows back-to-back, and now I still train with a higher draw weight than the bow I'll be using. Not everyone is willing to take all that time and then still use a lesser draw weight than what they know they could otherwise handle."

"So it's a matter of pride?" Laurel asked. The raven picked at one of the cattails in her leaves, irritated that she wasn't properly noticing his suffering. She idly reached to scratch his head, but earned a bitten finger instead.

"If it is, then I'm lucky I don't have any," Rhyna joked. She hoisted her bow out for Laurel to see. It was longer than a shortbow, but not nearly as long as the vine bows that the Wardens used. By their informal measure of draw weight as skill, Rhyna would hardly have competed. Despite that, her bow was of a good design. It had a strongly recurved shape, and a much better range than Laurel's own bow.

"Pride be damned. Once you learn the way of it, you never want to go back," Rhyna assured her. "Watching someone else do it, you mostly just notice the speed of fire. But what really hooks you is the awareness of it, the fluidity. Your bow and your arrows both are just another part of you. You could fire on the run, if need be. Or while doing a cartwheel."

Laurel gaped and Rhyna broke into laughter. "I was only kidding on that last bit."

Heat rushed to Laurel's cheeks, but just then she might have believed Rhyna if she had said that she could fly. This archery was so unlike anything Laurel had ever seen before. It

was alive. It looked a thing of instinct rather than cold calculation. She had hoped to avoid bow drills after leaving Old Sledge, but now she found herself reconsidering.

“We’d have plenty of time to practice together, if you’d like me to get you started on the technique,” Rhyna offered.

“I think I could learn to like the bow, if I could use it like that,” Laurel agreed.

At its mouth, the river was nearly shallow enough to wade across, but they stuck to the near bank as they headed inland. The stony shores were almost immediately consumed by jungle, but by wading in the pebbled shallows they stayed free from the thick foliage.

“Hold two of them in your hand, like so,” Rhyna instructed, demonstrating her grip. She knocked and drew, but then instead of releasing she eased the tension on her string. “For now you needn’t waste arrows, just practice switching which is nocked.” Rhyna didn’t juggle her arrows between different fingers, she merely slotted the next one to her string. “With a normal technique you’re used to nocking with thumb and forefinger. What you need to learn now is to nock with index and middle, or middle and ring. It’s a lot harder than it sounds, but if you just keep going through the motions, your fingers will figure it out.” She demonstrated a few more times, drawing, easing, re-nocking, drawing, easing.

Laurel tried to imitate the motion, but her fingers stumbled clumsily and she nearly dropped one of her arrows in the water.

“It’s alright,” Rhyna encouraged. “At the start everyone feels like a lumbering minotaur. Just don’t forget to keep walking or I’ll leave you behind.” She winked. Laurel hadn’t even realized she’d stopped, and she took a few hurried paces to catch up.

The river grew shallower and slower as they followed it inland, but Laurel hardly noticed. She liked the feel of

multiple arrows in her hand, of the way they connected to the string. For a time she even tried the routine with her eyes closed. She was pretty sure she could do it, but when she tripped on a rock and nearly stuck her bow in the drink, she decided that was a bad idea. For now, anyways.

Her shoulder soon took to complaining. The double duty of both drawing the string and relaxing the tension without firing layered over the strain from their earlier climbing, but this time Laurel powered through it. When she finally put the bow away, the shadows had deepened towards evening and her entire shoulder quivered with weariness. Rhyna shook her head.

"It's a good thing the Court doesn't come out this way," she said. "You're not going to be hitting a thing for a while."

"That's what my axe is for," Laurel replied with a crooked smile, patting the blade on her hip. It was true though, she had probably overdone it. The weariness that burned through her arm would make it hard to use her axe as well. "I should probably ease up on the practice though," she admitted. "And maybe not even do any tomorrow."

"It would be a good idea," Rhyna agreed. "I thought about mentioning it earlier, but you looked so excited that I didn't want to break you out it. I remember being the same way when I first started."

In the fading daylight they found a thicket a short way off the riverbank. It was hardly secure, but it would hide them from travelers and undead both. Those were the only sorts of dangers they really needed to worry about. The local wildlife took no interest in two strange plants, and as if to prove it, that night while Laurel sat awake alone she caught a glimpse of glowing eyes through the leaves. A great hunting cat had paused to twitch its nose at her before vanishing again into the darkness.

“No meat to be had here,” she whispered after it, but only silence and blackness answered her. She was glad that Lord of Feathers had chosen a more worthy sleeping place up in the trees, and she wondered briefly if the cat had still smelled him on her.

For two more days they followed the dwindling river, and Laurel was wiser about her practice. She was in no rush, she reflected, and the overpowering ache in her shoulder acted as a curb to her new found enthusiasm. The pain was still strong, though beginning to recede into stiffness, when a bridge loomed up over them. Although the river was now little more than a trickling stream, the bridge was built of strong thick planking high on the steep banks. The incongruity made Laurel wonder what the river would look like after a heavy spring rain.

“Here we turn back south again,” Rhyna explained, climbing the western bank. As Laurel followed, she found a road curving lazily into the jungle. “Better to travel half a day out of the way along easy landmarks than to try cutting cross-country in this jungle. Who knows where you’d end up that way.”

The road was narrow, just wide enough for a wagon to pass, but it looked as if it had seen a recent increase in use. Soil and vegetation both had eroded with the passage of many feet, but the small rounded stones which remained as paving were not yet polished by wear or weather. The sides of the road told a tale of what had been here before. The thick black embankments were topped by verdant green that spilled over the edges and sometimes trailed down far enough to be trodden flat. If the traffic stopped, how long would it take for the jungle to reclaim this?

Half a day’s easy walking brought them to a dip in the road. The jungle pulled away as they entered the hollow, opening up a clearing that was at once both strange and

familiar. Laurel had never been here before, never seen this place in her Dream, but she recognized the great tent-like leaves that were favored by nomadic sylvari. They were a common sight in the wilderness around the Grove, and she had slept under several when she had traveled the Maguuma. The fragrance of glowing vine flowers wafted through the air, but another growing sense overpowered them.

The feeling of the Dream was strong here. It was not as noisy as the Grove, but so vivid were the eddies of the Dream in her awareness that she felt if she closed her eyes she could step through the veil and back into a time before Tyria. The world was a mutable thing around her, wavery at the edges. It was intoxicating, and Laurel's head spun with dizziness. The hum of insects fell to a distant whisper, and Rhyna drifted away to converse with a couple of sylvari who waved for her attention. To one side of the road several Valiants sat around a glow-orb as if it were a campfire, but their colors ran together like watercolor. Blue bled into purple and yellow and brown. Across from them three hounds lounged on the ground with tongues lolling. Three fern hounds, just like Cuain.

The world suddenly crashed back into rigid clarity.

Could one of them be him? Did she see that crimped downward leaf over his left ear? What about that small spot of blue on his chin? It took a moment for reality to reign in Laurel's frantic search for a familiar sign or mark. It was in vain, as a part of her had known it would be. The likelihood of Cuain finding his way here was small, and if he had, he would have recognized her long before she could have recognized him. None of these so much as glanced her way; to them she was just another stranger passing through.

False hope was a cruel thing, and weariness washed over her. It almost pulled her to the ground right there in the middle of the road, but shakily she dragged herself to where

the Valiants were sharing each other's company and sat herself amongst them. Her raven flapped down to her shoulder and quorked encouragingly while bothering her cattails, but it did little to cheer her.

"Yes, it is quite tricky," one of the Valiants was saying. "But you don't necessarily have to engage with all of the krait."

"No," another sylvari agreed. "I should prefer to avoid that, but if there is a way to get at the Blood Witch without the whole swarm descending on me, the Dream didn't show it to me."

"A shame," the first sighed. "At least I know how I'm supposed to go about my Hunt, though what exactly I'm supposed to achieve by it, I haven't any idea."

"And what about you?" a third asked. She sat under the protection of the five-pointed leaf shelter, her knotted joints creaking as she shifted for a better view. At her question, the others noticed Laurel for the first time.

"I don't believe we've met you before," said the one whose Wyld Hunt was a Blood Witch. His eyes were as red as his quarry's namesake and stood out vividly against his golden flesh. The absurdness of it all was completed by a shock of blue ferns that tumbled down around his face.

"I've only just arrived," Laurel agreed. "I came with Rhyna."

"To save us all from Nightmare?" Amusement curled the line of the woman's mouth, split bark peeling back to reveal smooth white teeth.

"Stop frightening her, Caoimhe!" the red-eyed man chided. "You'll scare her off!" Then to Laurel, "We really do appreciate your help, watching our backs so we can focus on our Hunts."

The woman laughed, spoiling her intimidating visage. "Don't worry. Rhyna's recruited me as well." She reached out a hand in apology and Laurel took it.

A handshake was a less common greeting among sylvari than it was among humans, and for a moment Laurel understood why. With the physical contact, shadows of images flitted through her vision, blurred and distorted so that she could not make them out. They were gone again as quickly, but even that brief touch left Laurel reeling.

“Are you well?” the sylvari nearest her asked. He reached a pastel purple hand toward her shoulder to support her, but she hastily shook her head and waved him off.

“I’m fine.” She put as much confidence into the words as she could lest another of them reach for her. “It’s just this place. I can feel the Dream so strongly here.” It was true. While Valiants always carried the Dream with them more forcefully than others, she had known Valiants in the Grove. Firstborn Valiants even. Never had her sensitivity been this amplified.

“Yes, this place is very close to the Dream,” he agreed, waxy succulent leaves bobbing on his head as he nodded. The small spines that poked from his upper lip in thin mockery of a moustache spread thinner as he smiled. “Many of us can sense it. It draws us here.”

“That and all the Hunts!” the first man agreed, his red eyes burning with excitement. “Surely you have one as well? Or did?”

“Have some tact, Diermed,” Caoimhe rebuked. “Not everyone is so eager to boast, not here.”

“No, it’s alright.” Laurel shook her head. *I have a Hunt, but I don’t expect to find it here*, she meant to say, but even that brief thought summoned a flashing image of the orange gem on blue green. It intensified the itch at her neck into a nettle’s burning sting, and she clenched her jaw against it. It receded slowly. The words she said next had nothing to do with her Hunt. “Here is where I’ve wound up, so here is where I’ll do some good.”

Diermed had the courtesy to look abashed. He’d had

no intention of causing her discomfort. Likely, he couldn't even understand what he'd done. She'd hardly felt anything herself when she had eagerly run through the Maguuma, for while the pull was a thing all Valiants knew of, it was far worse for those who tried to ignore it. Still, she had never heard of it being like this. The pull was an itch, an irritant, a constant reminder. No one ever spoke of it bordering on pain.

The sooner she was gone from here the better.

"I was actually hoping I might find some help as well as give it." The words came out before Laurel realized what she was saying, but as it was true, there was no point in dancing around it. "A friend of mine is being held prisoner by some asura a few days east of here. Do you know if there are many Valiants who might be able to help?"

"Stealing my recruits so quickly, are you?" Rhyna teased as she and a few others joined them around the glow orb.

"I know of the place," Caoimhe offered. "It will take more than a few Valiants to enter there and come back out alive."

Laurel nodded. The more backs she watched, the more Hunts she helped finish, the sooner she would have the allies she need. She only hoped it would be soon enough. "In the meantime, we hunt Courtiers."

Rhyna smiled grimly.



Chapter 7: Courting the Nightmare

Despite the number of Valiants that were staying in Breth Ayahusasca, their hunting party was small indeed. Besides Ryhna and Laurel there was only Caoimhe, three Valiants alone to push back the Nightmare. No wonder Ryhna had made the trek to Old Sledge.

“They are fewer in number here than back home,” Ryhna had tried to explain, “and well spread out to track our Valiants. They haven’t yet formed a nest of vipers, but they’re trying. They’ve begun growing an outpost of their own. It’s still weak and hardly guarded, if we could stunt it now that would be a great help.”

“Hardly guarded?” The warning bells had gone off for Laurel then. “Doesn’t the growing require careful attention? Why don’t they pull back and concentrate their numbers until the place is finished?”

Ryhna had shaken her head in dismissal. “The Nightmare makes little sense; I have long since stopped trying to understand it. But I do take your point. I plan to scout the area well and be certain no trap awaits us before we approach.”

That had been two days ago. Now they were deep in the wilderness with no river nor road nor even the night skies to guide them. And despite her having no idea where they were going, Laurel had been put in the lead. So thick was the

vegetation here that even the light-footed sylvari who could normally bob and weave without a trace through the thickest undergrowth were forced to resort to the tactics of men and charr. Her axe led them, shearing a path through soft leaves and stubborn vines alike.

"I thought you said we could get dangerously off course moving headlong through the jungle like this," Laurel noted.

"Sure, if you're looking for one small outpost in the middle of it all," Rhyna replied. "But it would be impossible to miss where we're going. Though you can't see them now, ridges of rock funnel us from east and west. All we need to do is head south until the jungle stops. Then we'll be able to see quite clearly where we've wound up and where we need to go."

"Mount Maelstrom has the jungle burned back," Caoimhe added. "It erupts from time to time, and the ground is all stone with no place for roots to take hold. So when you reach a certain point, the jungle just stops."

Laurel was skeptical, but before she could question the others further, her foot caught on something squishy. She whirled with her momentum and managed to gather her feet under her again. The movement had carried her forward into a small clearing, and now silky pods surrounded her on all sides.

In the trees above, shiny carapaces clung to the trees like great, smooth boulders. First one broke away, and then another. They slid down like a lazy drips of syrup, then unfolded neatly into the shapes of spiders, landing lightly on the jungle floor and brandishing their dagger-like forelegs. Soon more began to drop from the vegetation above, chittering menacingly as they came to defend their communal nest.

Laurel drew her axe and motioned for Rhyna and Caoimhe to stay back. With any luck, she thought, they could

retreat into the thick jungle and face only a few pursuers as they pulled out. That was before a gob of hissing liquid arced through the air towards her.

It was said that spider venom could burn like acid and paralyze with the slightest touch. Laurel couldn't make her legs work fast enough, the world playing out in slow motion around her, but as the venom sailed towards her, a shimmering curtain lept up to catch it. It splattered harmlessly against the wavering air and dripped to the ground. The foiled attack spurred the spiders charge, but their speed only bounced them back the harder when they collided with the barrier.

Caoimhe held out a gnarled staff as she came up beside Laurel. Blue tendrils shimmered from it as she gave the younger Valiant a wink. "Let's see what you're really capable of, shall we?" Her eyes fluttered closed as she touched the top of her staff to her own forehead. Wisps of blue raced out from it across her skin, currents of ghostly flame consuming her dark figure in a blinding aura.

Laurel could not look away. The light burned her eyes, but she could not close them. It bored into her, reached through her and lit a matching fire in her soul. Every flicker and snap sent energy racing through her limbs until she thought she might burst. She felt invincible, invulnerable.

It was too much to contain.

She threw herself at the spiders. Nothing mattered except releasing the torrent that battered her from within. She let it out through the song of her axe, through the feeling of metal biting into chitin. Each swing was a blessed relief, a puff of steam let out of a kettle that ensured the lid wouldn't blow just yet.

Time was a blur, but eventually the rush dwindled. As the last sighs of power drained out of her, she awoke from her frenzy to find herself hacking the limbs from an already dead

spider. Arrows embedded in its head had likely done the job some time ago, but that hadn't stopped her from playing the butcher.

She dropped her axe to her side and took a step backwards as her eyes went wide.

There was nothing left. The vegetation was trodden and tattered. Body parts and shards of exoskeletons were scattered over a gooey bed of spider innards. It had gone past self-defense and into mindless slaughter. It was an atrocity, and there putting her stamp on it was Feathers, helping himself to the choicest bits before other scavengers could join in. He quorked happily to her as though she had purposely made this feast for him.

Horror and embarrassment colored her cheeks. How had this happened? Why hadn't she seen what she was doing?

Rhyna pushed away from the ruined nest and bolted into the jungle.

"Rhyna!" Laurel called after her. "Wait! I didn't mean..." A firm hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"Let her go." Caoimhe's calm was almost as unnerving as Rhyna's distress. "That one couldn't hold a grudge if her life depended on it. Her trail will be easy enough to follow if we have too, but for now let's give her some time to think."

"The Wardens knew." Laurel stared at the gore that covered her hands. "They saw this potential in me. They were afraid of me." She was afraid of herself, she realized.

"I saw it in you as well." Caoimhe's voice remained flat. "Sorrows swirl in you, but there's a fire as well. It hardly needed a nudge to be let free." Laurel recoiled from the words, but Caoimhe's grip held her in place.

"You did this!" she accused wildly. "On purpose!"

"Fire in your spirit is not a bad thing, sapling." The coolness of the words, their superiority, put Laurel in mind of the Firstborn in the Grove and the fight went out of her.

Caoimhe felt the change and gave her a reassuring squeeze before letting her hand fall away.

"I haven't been called sapling in a long time." Laurel wilted at the memory. It felt a lifetime ago: before the Wardens had trained her, before she had murdered an asura with her bare hands, before she had walked to the edge of the Dream and stared into the jaws of death. She was no sapling anymore. This was not something a sapling could have done.

"You fear yourself." It was not a question. "You shouldn't. I watched your bird flutter down in the midst of the carnage and though you didn't slow, neither did you harm a feather on him."

Lord of Feathers cawed angrily as black wings descended onto his personal feast. The larger ravens bullied him and in turn were bullied by vultures. The small bird did the only thing he could, he cawed a final defiance at his kin and flapped to Laurel's shoulder to preen. First, though, he rubbed his beak on her leaves to clean himself.

"He has the right of it," Caoimhe said, eyes scanning the jungle around them. She found a wide, soft leaf a few steps past the battle damage and broke it off at its stem. "Here, you will feel better when you're clean as well."

Wiping the gore away was a relief, but Laurel had hardly finished when they were discovered by boars. Three of them trotted boldly into the clearing, stirring up the vultures and ravens and adding their own squeals to the cacophony of angry caws. They ignored the sylvani, caring only about the feast and anyone who might get in the way of it. The wet sounds of their gorging nearly made Laurel sick, but Caoimhe was unphased as she watched the newcomers.

"In nature, nothing is wasted," she noted, and Laurel glimpsed for the first time the small farrow of piglets that pranced in delight. "Each death makes other lives possible. You should not be afraid of it, nor of inflicting it."

“All things have a right to grow,” Rhyna countered as she stepped through the undergrowth to rejoin them. “Come, you don’t want to stay here. This is not the only attention that will be drawn.” Laurel followed gladly, but as she turned she she heard Caoimhe say something more. The words were so softly spoken that she couldn’t be sure of what she heard, and in a moment more, Caoimhe followed her into the jungle.

As they continued on, Laurel’s feelings mellowed. She couldn’t hold a grudge, not even against herself, while her body was in constant motion. It was too strong a balm on her soul. The next time she would be more careful. The next time she would only kill in self defense and not step beyond those bounds, but what had happened had already happened. One family’s death had fed another’s children, and it was done. Rather than dwell on it she allowed her mind to be captured by the world around her. The jungle was a continuous tale of life and death and yet more life layered one over top of the next, and beneath that the bones of the land spun their own story as well.

Laurel had never seen land behave like this before. The jungle floor rose and fell so that in her imagination they were clambering over the buried roots of some great tree. She wondered what such a tree must be like. Roots this size would make it as large as the Pale Tree itself, if not larger, but could any tree compare to the Mother’s size? It was a concept she couldn’t quite wrap her mind around, and it slipped away when the real reason for the shape of the land revealed itself.

Abruptly the vegetation of the jungle fell away and laid the stony undulations bare for the eye to see. A bleak slope extended ahead of them, reaching higher and higher. It was not a tree that competed with the Mother for height, but the earth itself. Twining down that steepness were streams of black basalt. They looked like the raised burrows of massive worms, and it was these that gave the land its ripples.

“We’re here,” Rhyna said, staying close to the cover of the jungle and pointing west. Beyond the treeline, not too great a distance from where they had come out and in the last dip before the land began climbing, a small fort hunched in defiance of the desolation. It was clearly of sylvari construction, though incomplete and twisted, as different from Old Sledge or Breth Ayahusasca as anything Laurel could imagine. Its half grown walls were made of woven vines like those of Old Sledge, but where the walls of Old Sledge had flowed around the town with a solid and unified purpose, these twisted about themselves in a tortured dance. They filled in unevenly with wicked arcs of sharpened wood standing beside gaping wrents. It was as though in its haste to grow strong the wall was tearing itself to pieces.

“One grower inside, three hounds, no defenders,” Rhyna listed off what she saw. “We need to do a sweep of the jungle to make sure there are no others waiting to fall on us, but if that’s all the resistance they’ve left, we can make swift work of things here.”

The jungle was dense and easy to hide in, but difficult to pass through without leaving a trace. They found several trails which led away from the fort and followed them carefully. There was no sign of recent passing, and Caoimhe probed the surrounding vegetation with her staff as they went. No hidiers were stirred up; no animals cried alarm in the distance. When Rhyna was satisfied there would be no trap, they returned to the edge of the jungle to peer down at the fort.

The lone sylvari inside was seated with her gray-green head bowed. Two dark hounds circled her sulkily with none of the playfulness or curiosity that Cuain would have shown.

“We could take her out from here,” Laurel whispered. There was no reason to whisper this far away, but it felt safer. “Or at least, you could. Your bow could reach.”

Rhyna shook her head. "I won't kill unless I have to. She may yet be swayed back from madness."

"There is no turning back from the Nightmare," Laurel argued. It was well known. All saplings were taught to be wary of the lure of Nightmare, for once it had you in its clutches there was no escape.

"But she may not be fallen yet. To sympathize with Nightmare is not the same as to walk in it. I will talk to her before I draw weapons against her." Rhyna's tone left no room for debate, and Laurel had no choice but to follow when the others started down towards the fort. While her bow might have been able to reach the fort, her skills were no match for the distance. It would do little good to give themselves away with a missed shot, better to wait and get within reach of her axe.

The dark hounds saw them first. Their sulkiness shifted swiftly into rigid aggression as they formed up on their lady, and the sight of it broke Laurel's heart. She had known that those who joined the Nightmare Court turned dark and twisted over time as the Nightmare took root in them, had known it would happen to their hounds as well, but she had never seen it with her own eyes before. These beasts were more wolf than hound. The lush greens of their leaves had withered away and hardened to thorn. Purple and red streaked through their brown stems, and their faces were contorted with a pain inseparable from rage. That someone could do this to a hound made heat rise inside Laurel. The certain knowledge that these would be Cuain if he were found by the Court fanned that heat into flames and curled her lip in a snarl. It was matched by snarls from the hounds, and the grower rose to her feet.

"How nice of you to come visit us!" she greeted as she strode to the largest gap in the wall. There she remained with her animals about her, her eyes as mocking as her voice. "Have

you come to turn away from false teachings?"

"We've come for you," Rhyna answered. "Help us tear down this place and come home."

"After all the work I've put into it?" The Courtier smiled sweetly. "Now why would I want to do that?"

"So that you might live," Rhyna returned. The Courtier only laughed.

"You come to threats so quickly! What a fine Knight of Nightmare you'll make."

Rhyna reach for her bow, but Caoimhe raised a hand to stop her. "Wait. There may be another way."

"There is always another way." A cruel smile turned up the corners of the Courtier's mouth. "Not all of them are painful, though my favorite ones are. I can show you. I've shown many others already." For the briefest instant her eyes flickered down to the wolves at her side while her fingertips caressed the whip at her belt.

Rage exploded inside Laurel. She didn't need the mystic fire from Caoimhe to light her emotions this time. She had found her own wellspring of power and it easily drowned out the fear that tried to nag at her. Even a repeat of the spiders would be better than this woman deserved.

The wolves sensed the change in Laurel, and then everything seemed to happen at once.

The beasts charged, clearing the gap in the wall just before Caoimhe could seal it off with a barrier. Six arrows were already streaming from Rhyna's string, but when they reached the shimmering blue curtain, they ricocheted sharply. One caught her in the shoulder even as the wolves fell on them. Rhyna was the first to be tackled, the trained animal throwing its weight against her and carrying them both to the ground. Laurel angled her shoulder into the rush as another bore down on her, tucking her head away from the seeking fangs even as the animal's weight bowled into her. She stepped into it,

pushing back with every bit of strength she could summon, and for a moment it was as if the Mother's own roots embraced her, holding her steady and keeping her on her feet. The beast floundered backwards, knocked off balance as much by surprise as by a final thrust with her arm.

"Stop this!" The words were Caoimhe's, but Laurel didn't have attention to spare for them. Her world shrank to two as she traded feints with the wolf, knowing that she could neither give an opening nor miss one. Her weapon was small and light, meant for an asura, flashing out and dodging back almost as fast as if it had been a sword. It kept the animal at arm's length as they circled.

Laurel did not make the first mistake. An angry command flitted at the edge of her awareness, and the wolf leapt. This time she was ready with her axe. Although it was light, what weight it did have was centered behind the blade. When it found its mark in the side of the leaping beast's throat, it bit deeply. The force deflected the animal's body aside, and after two staggering steps it collapsed to the ground.

There was a moment of stillness as Laurel looked up to the rest of the fight. Rhyna had managed to get the wolf off of herself and was struggling to her feet, the stunned animal lying nearby. Caoimhe stood well back, her staff out before her, but the third wolf was nowhere near her. Instead its eyes were locked on Rhyna.

"You leave her be!" Laurel roared, drawing its attention. The last thing she saw before the animal overtook her was Caoimhe's barrier beginning to dissipate, but she didn't have time to worry about the Courtier joining them.

This wolf was bigger than the last one, and faster. Laurel was only just able to turn aside its lunges, and though her steel left marks in its hardened hide, she couldn't find the time nor space to put power behind her blade. Rather than

ending it quickly, she left a progression of slowly oozing gashes on the beast's muzzle. Each wound she inflicted cut her as if she were inflicting it upon her own hound, but she closed herself to that pain, forcing each slash to become another layer of armor hardening around her heart, another bough tossed on the blaze of her fury until it became a condensed thing, white-hot. In it she found a precision to her movements that she had never before achieved. She pressed the tortured beast back, vowing to put it down for the sake of the hound it had once been.

But as she raised her axe for the next strike, a sharp pain cut her wrist and threatened to make her drop the weapon. She tightened her grip in defiance, and dozens of tiny thorns hooked into her like the claws of a cat. The Courtier's whip wrapped itself more tightly around her wrist, savoring her resistance.

Fangs closed on Laurel's forearm, pinning her free arm to her chest as sylvari and beast crashed together to the ground. The air was knocked from her lungs even as pain blossomed in her shoulder from her restrained arm wrenching backwards.

She wrestled one-armed with a flurry of leaves and thorns, desperately using her own flesh as a barrier, feeding a forearm to the beast to keep it from her throat. She kicked at the hind legs of the animal atop her, and in that moment of distraction when the jaws slackened, she threw her weight to the side, rolling with enough force to jerk the taught whip from the Courtier's hand.

It didn't buy her much time, the wolf's weight falling again on her back, but this time she had an arm beneath her and she thrust herself upward at the same time as she jerked on the whip. Its fine teeth scored the creature's belly, giving it a start that allowed her to regain her feet. One haggard breath was all she got before the beast was on her again.

Fangs closed once more on her forearm, but this time she let them. She still had another hand free, and that she wrapped behind the animal's head as she drove forward, forcing her forearm deeper into the beast's maw. It gagged and jerked, trying to pull away, but Laurel's grip was solid. Then, with a final surge of strength, she made the quick motion that would end the creature's life. A sharp snap rang through the thin dust on the air.

As the body fell away limply, Laurel set to prying the thorn whip free of her wrist. It was not shy about taking flesh as it was removed, but that was the least of her worries just then. A quick glance showed her that the remaining wolf was atop Rhyna again, the wood of her bow holding its fangs at bay, yet Caoimhe still stood back. A flicker of confusion sparked through Laurel.

Then a burning orb issued from Caoimhe's staff, brilliant like the sun. It drifted as if in slow motion towards Rhyna. Then it exploded.

Confusion roared to fury. They were betrayed.

Laurel whirled her axe as she charged, and though Caoimhe's staff leapt up to meet it, turning aside the blade did not stop the assault. Laurel flowed with the movement and struck again. Once, twice, three times her blade bit into her opponent's weapon, too fast for the larger weapon to make a counter attack. Then they found the limit of how much abuse the staff would bear. With the fourth strike it splintered.

"You would turn on me?" Caoimhe demanded, tossing aside the ruined pieces, but Laurel had no use for a traitor's indignation. Her blade flashed again. This time Caoimhe knocked it aside with her own flesh. The audacity of it spurred Laurel on, but the next attack was caught as easily. Caoimhe brought her arms up and took the full force of the blow on her forearms. The steel left hardly a mark in that toughened bark. It was as hopeless as chopping down an ancient oak with a

pocket knife.

“Delightful!” the Courtier called, and the closeness of her voice startled Laurel. Though she was still well back from Laurel’s range, she inched towards her whip. Laurel grimaced, but pulled back to stand between the Courtier and her weapon.

Caoimhe lowered her arms and regarded Laurel coolly, seemingly unphased by the attack. This was a sylvari well acquainted with her own limits; she’d known how little Laurel could do against her from the start. It cast a new light on the spider incident. When Caoimhe spoke, her tone held the same calm certainty it had then. “You’ve already turned to the Nightmare.”

“And the Nightmare has made you strong,” the Courtier supplied. All that Caoimhe lacked in reaction, the Courtier made up for with glee. “That strength is welcome to us, not shunned. Embrace it.”

“I serve the Dream,” Laurel asserted, denying their power over her. The Courtier moved nearer, closing in on her from the opposite side as Caoimhe, but they were both still unarmed. Laurel gripped her axe more tightly. The first one to come within her range would regret it.

“What is the Dream but an illusion?” The light of fanaticism burned in the Courtier’s eyes, and Laurel felt herself giving ground despite her best efforts, inching backwards as the Courtier’s presence pressed in on her. “The Dream clouds our vision, sends us scurrying after meaningless tasks, but the Nightmare can cut through it! The Nightmare can set you free. You were made for it, your strength! We would encourage it, grow it, put it to use fighting the dragons, not chasing the blind ambitions of a centaur’s ghost!”

An arrow suddenly took her through the throat. Rhyna was alive.

“The hounds attacked us, not her.” Caoimhe’s voice

betrayed a hint of heat, but she made no move to close with Rhyna and finish the job she'd started. "No sylvari needed to die today. Is this what the Dream has reduced us to? Righteous anger that pits sister against sister?"

"The Dream is more than that," Laurel said stubbornly. *It's what Cuain and I shared, what still binds us.* "It's who we are, what makes us."

"I make myself," Caoimhe spat. "Better free in the Nightmare than chained to the Dream, if this is what it brings us."

"You don't mean that." Rhyna rose unsteadily to her feet.

"But I do," Caoimhe returned. "I've seen you Laurel. In Breth Ayahasca. In that handshake. I know the power of your anger, the depth of your sorrows." She drew in a slow breath through her nose. "If that is what the Dream has brought you, I want no part of it."

Laurel quivered as a new fear spread over her. She was so accustomed to seeing the Dream in a way others could not that she hadn't even considered it might have been a mutual sharing. Always before the visions had been one way.

This was new. How much of her dark secret had leaked out of her? It would be like candy to the Court. If they knew, they would stop at nothing to possess her. She would be hunted, and if they took her they would turn her, would turn Cuain. Her precious hound would become no more than a soulless, slaving beast.

But she could still stop it, here and now. No one else yet knew.

Laurel carefully slipped her axe into the loop on her belt and raised her horn to her lips. It's crystal note rang in the open air, and before three heartbeats could pass, a flurry of white feathers fell on Caoimhe's face. She cried out and made to grab the raven, but she was too slow. He was gone again as

quickly as he'd come, flapping up out of harm's way. Caoimhe clutched at her ruined eye, and in the time it bought her, Laurel took her bow from her back and put a single arrow to the string. Caoimhe looked up and took in the arrow trained on her. One dark eye stared into Laurel, burning with hatred, daring her to take the next step.

"Wait!" Rhyna's voice was shaky but clear. "No matter what she says, she is not of the Nightmare! Doubts rule her heart, not darkness. Doubts can be set aside."

Laurel held for a moment. Maybe Rhyna was right. Maybe Caoimhe hadn't yet fallen to Nightmare, but after all this day had seen, it was unlikely. Even if she only teetered on the brink, her descent would come soon and happen swiftly. They wouldn't know it until she was gone, and then it would be too late to stop her from bringing her knowledge to the Court. If that happened, then Cuain... *No. I have to end it here.*

Laurel fired one shot. At this range she could not miss.



Chapter 8: Of Dreams and Memories

The Dream surged around Caoimhe and caught Laurel in its eddies. Hopes and hurts swirled together, the thousand fleeting images of a life slipping away. They flitted by too quickly to hold, like the grains of sand in a windstorm, and their brush became insistent, stinging, grinding Laurel away.

Accusation, anger, fear. Fresh currents cut darkly across the brightly roaring background. There was good here, more good than ill, and Laurel recognized herself in the flow. It washed over her, a thousand lives she had never lived. Or had she? Her sense of self frayed, her memories mere drops in that raging sea, impossible to hang onto. She reached after them, but no longer even knew why. What made one drop more special than another? She was a part of it all, and all of it was a part of her.

But then the tide retreated, and her tiny vessel spilled the memories and life it was too small to contain. All flowed away from her save for the small cupful that were Laurel. She felt alone and hollow. Before her Caoimhe's body lay in the dust, a discarded husk stripped of all that had once been a Valiant, yet somehow Laurel was emptier still.

Rhyna knelt beside the body and gently touched its brow. Death had smoothed the hatred from Caoimhe's face, lending a horrific peace to her mismatched and ruined eyes.

"This is a bad place to have died, old friend," she

whispered, and Laurel felt the smallest twinge of remorse. No seed would take root in this dry, hard ground.

A sudden clamor of wings and calls wrested her attention to where a flock smudged the jungle skies. Something had stirred them up, and it wasn't hard to guess what.

"We have to go," Laurel urged, pulling Rhyna to her feet. Blessedly, the Valiant didn't resist, though she winced at the arrow still piercing her.

"The Nightmare Court is nothing if not vengeful. We can't stay here," she agreed, reaching up to feel the arrow shaft that stuck out of her shoulder. Abruptly she broke it off, her face going pale as she did so. The wound had only penetrated the fleshy layers of pressed leaves near the surface, and it was a good thing too. If it had struck deeper, hit the corded vine that acted as muscle and sinew or the thorn-hard bones within, surely it would have lodged there. "You'll have to pull it through for me. I can't reach."

This was not something Laurel had done before, and she had no idea if slow or fast would be better. She settled for slow, afraid to inflict more damage, and when the arrow was free Rhyna let out a shuddering breath. Several breaths more passed until her color began returning. Then she looked down at the corpse they were leaving on the ground.

"I can't even see her buried." Her voice shook. "No time. We have to be away, away from the jungle. That's where they'll strike from." She closed her eyes tightly, then looked up to the mountain that loomed above them. It was more massive than anything Laurel had ever seen and would take time to traverse, but time was what they most lacked right now.

A look passed between the two sylvari and they set off at a run up the steepening hillside. There were furrows and ripples and places to hide, but even those were massive and it

was some distance before they could pass behind the first of them.

Laurel did not run far before her fibers were aflame and her breath came in ragged gulps of too dry air, but she dared not stop. Fear pushed her on, fear of what would happen if the Court overtook them, fear of what they would make her do to Cuain. Compared to that, the pains of her body were meaningless. Better to die than to succumb to Nightmare.

By the time they ducked down beyond the first ridge, Laurel's head was spinning. She felt as if she were floating, and that combined with the relief at their relative safety stripped away her last bit of control over her limbs. She staggered, then pitched forward and rolled the short distance to bottom of the furrow.

"We need to keep moving," Rhyna insisted, but she let Laurel lie until her breathing steadied and the world came back into clarity. Here between the basalt flows the ground was covered in loose and shifting stone shards. Their sharp bite against her palms as she pushed herself upright brought her awareness back more quickly.

They followed the furrows upward and eastward where they could, but the creases in the land flowed mostly up and down. They ventured out of the safety of the rents only where they were forced to, making cautious but quick dashes to the next hiding place.

Earlier, the weariness of Laurel's soul had eclipsed the weariness of her body, but no more. She had spent too much of herself in first the fighting, then their haphazard flight. Her limbs no longer even screamed in protest. Now, they quietly malfunctioned. Her steps were shorter than she intended, her arms limp. Her toes dragged over the shallow bed of stones and she teetered at its every shift beneath her feet.

The higher they climbed the stronger the wind

became, urging them ever upwards. Its caress burned the raw flesh of her wrist where the Courtier's whip had chewed through her layered press of leaves to gnaw at the harder corded fibers beneath. With their every shift, fire raced up her arm, and her only comfort was the sap which seeped out to coat the wound. It was cooling, soothing, but it flowed faster than it could congeal and what remained of her strength slipped away in lonely drops.

It wouldn't be far now. It couldn't be, could it? How high could one mountain go? But it did keep going, up and up and up. The air grew thin and Laurel began to lose all sense of her body. She floated along on limbs that neither responded to her demands nor cared to tell her their status. One foot went in front of the other by its own accord, and she was merely thankful to be moving, a passenger along for the ride.

When at last Rhyna stopped, Laurel kept walking. Her body's autopilot diligently continued its job, and one foot went in front of the other without heed to the weary mind that begged them to stop. Rhyna only smiled and gently pulled her down into a dip in the ground. Laurel's body didn't have the strength to resist, and she sagged down into the hollow behind a large ripple of basalt. It was the most comfortable place she had ever lain, and she closed her eyes in bliss.

A wilderness in black and white stretched out around her. The sharp division of the horizon was jagged and angular, obsidian against the glare of a too-bright sky. It was frightening, and she ran. Each step was a leap. She flew over the dreamscape as quickly as if she'd had wings, but ever more angles loomed ahead to replace the ones she passed. There was no escape.

As if with her own fear the sky grew gray, yet it was no less blinding. Raindrops began to fall. No, it was blood, and the black landscape drank it in as fast as it could fall. Defiance increased the rain to a downpour, and the downpour to a

torrent, the raindrops growing larger and daring the land to consume them all.

Then they froze. Great balls of dark ice thundered upon the ground, hammering it with a fury. She should have flung her arms up to shield herself, but she was not afraid. Instead she stretched out cupped hands and caught one of the missiles lightly in her palms. It was not ice at all but a seed. She cradled it gently and even as she watched, it sprouted. Roots reached downward, piercing her, twining through her flesh as if she were the earth and feeding from her strength. She was enraptured, and though she distantly felt herself dwindling, she made no move to free herself.

The sapling swelled until it became a flower, a fat rainbowed cabbage, and its bright petals opened. Images were imprinted on them, but they fluttered by too quickly to recognize. Layer after layer of color peeled away, shriveling to black as they fell. As the last flew away like leaves in the wind, a puppy was left in her hands.

It was round and newborn. Its feet were roots, fused into her arms and melting away the last remainder of her hands. Its soft round eyes looked up at her. They blinked once, then turned skyward. Its form lengthened, pulled upward, stretching into the shapes of adulthood then beyond. Limb and body elongated, darting into the sky until only a great pillar of bark remained. It was a tree, and she its roots. It drank her strength like water, and she knew that soon she would willingly give up the last of her life to it.

Laurel woke with a start, flailing her arms to free them from the roots that tangled her, but there were no roots, only sharp stone and empty air. The strange images faded more quickly than the disquiet she felt.

It was a dream, she told herself. Not even the Dream, just a silly old dream like any creature might have, made up of my own hopes and fears. It was not very reassuring.

She forced her mind to the present. She was sore from lying too long in one position, and the bed of sharp-edged stones had left her backside itching. Her wrist throbbed, but not as badly as it had. While she slept, Rhyna must have tended to it. It was wrapped tightly with one of her own orange leaves, plucked from her head, in the unusual but effective sort of first-aid measure she should have expected from a Valiant. Sap had seeped out under the edges of the leaf and hardened, gluing the makeshift bandage in place. Her other arm was heavily dotted by beads of amber, a testament to the fangs that had held her.

Laurel stretched and stood, scratching her back as best she could with her good hand. It felt glorious, even if she couldn't reach all the places where rocks had left their impressions. Aside from her wrist she wasn't much the worse for wear. Sleep had been what she'd really needed.

"I'm glad to see you're among the living again," Rhyna teased as she rolled onto her side, "but I really would rather you didn't show yourself off for anyone who might be watching."

Laurel knelt quickly. She remembered thinking that the ridges they crawled over were giant, but now as she looked, she saw that this one was hardly a hump. All around them the land had flattened as it had steepened. They were very high indeed.

"We can probably keep moving this evening, once the sun sets," Rhyna pointed out. "If we travel by night we'll be quite hard to see up here. We may glow orange, but its a faint light to travel so far, and seeing orange on the volcano, if we are noticed, will probably just keep people away." Rhyna closed her eyes and squirmed down deeper into the loose stones. She knew how to rest when and where she could, and Laurel intended to heed her wisdom.

Waiting patiently was not something Laurel was made

for, especially when echoes of her nightmare still taunted her, but she bent her will to the task. She forced herself to sit still and turn her face to the sun, putting all else out of her mind. She managed it with only a little fidgeting.

After a while, the climbing sun began to work its magic upon her. It bathed her with heat and a quiet power that tingled just beneath the surface. It was a pleasant sensation, one she had almost forgotten. She'd felt it in the Grove and the hidden garden, but both times she had been too preoccupied to pay it any attention. Well, there were no distractions left now. Her hound was on the other side of the jungle with a seething nest of Courtiers between, and her Hunt was even further. There was nothing for her here but to wait, and so for the first time she simply drank in the moment.

Feathers floated where the thin air stirred in rising columns over the sun-baked stone. Wind whispered over the rocks, a gentle breeze punctuated by occasional gusts that chased the warmth from her skin and made her appreciate the sun's kiss all the more when it returned.

From where she sat, Laurel could not see the Nightmare Court's thorn walls, but she could still see the lush trees beyond. The vast emptiness of the mountainside dwarfed the distance between them and made her feel as though she could reach out and touch the jungle below. It didn't look like trees at all but rather a soft, blue-green blanket of moss, and for a time Laurel pretended that she could stand up, take a few steps, and then sprawl out on that comfortable bed. She could think of little else that would be as relaxing as a soft bed in the warm sunlight. Perhaps someday she would find a place to settle and make herself such a bed in the sunlight.

With her fancies to occupy her, what could have been a very long day passed quickly, and too soon the sun's warmth waned as it made its way down towards the horizon. In

farewell, it painted the sky with deep russet tones. Hints of pink and purple bloomed in the clouds, and a ruddy light bathed the mountainside. It was a sunset such as Laurel had never seen before.

As if knowing what she might miss, Rhyna stirred in time to watch the sun's departure.

"I never tire of seeing it from here," she said, when the last golden drop had winked out below the treetops. "Come, its time we moved on."

Laurel stretched, surprised to find that she was not stiff. The sun's warmth had permeated her and it kept her fibers limber despite her long stillness. She stood with a smile and suddenly realized just how close to the peak they were. Another five minutes up and they would reach the summit, or at least they would reach a summit. She couldn't see any higher peaks further on, but such things could be deceiving.

It was silly that standing should have given her a better vantage than sitting. What was one sylvari's height compared to the height of the mountain? But it had made a difference, and this far up each new step promised to show her more. Her old curiosity took hold then. What harm could come of taking an extra five minutes and getting to stand at the tip of the world? She started upward before Rhyna could object.

"If you haven't been to the top before, then I guess it would be unfair to stop you after you'd come this far," Rhyna admitted. The dying daylight revealed glowing markings of yellow-orange around her eyes. It was much paler than Laurel's own redder tones.

"It won't take long," Laurel promised. "There may not even be anything to see, but I want to look down at least once."

"Oh there's definitely something to see," Rhyna promised in return, and Laurel hurried her pace.

As they neared the top, the broken bed of stone

underfoot gave way to solid sheets of rock which themselves fell away jaggedly, leaving a dusky darkness to yawn open ahead of them. The dwindling light made Laurel cautious about approaching the broken edge, but Rhyna urged her forward.

“Well go on, you haven’t seen the best part!”

In further encouragement, Lord of Feathers fluttered down to perch on the edge. He cawed at her, taunting her for a coward.

“Easy for you,” she chided. “You don’t have to worry about tipping off the edge!” Feathers cawed again, and despite her protests, Laurel inched her way carefully towards him. She slid her feet along the ground and tested each footing before shifting her weight into the next step. It wouldn’t do to go tumbling now, but when she reached the precipice, all caution fled her mind.

The stone fell away, stretching impossibly deep into the heart of the mountain. Laurel looked down as though standing in the highest branches of the Pale Tree, and there, nestled deep within the collecting shadows, was the bright red-orange gem from her Dream.

A red-orange stone resting on a bed of deep blue-green. Creatures which were both alive and not alive, their flesh of stone. After all this time, she had somehow found herself exactly where she was meant to be. It made her head swim, and shortly Rhyna was pulling her away from the edge.

“Are you alright?” the older sylvari asked. “I know heights can get to some. I’m sorry if I scared you. I thought you were doing fine with all this climbing and I didn’t mean...”

“I’m alright.” Laurel assured her. Feathers found her shoulder and nipped her ear, just to be sure. “I’m fine,” she repeated, fending off his nibbling. “I remembered something, that’s all.”

Rhyna was unconvinced, but let Laurel have her excuse

nonetheless. They made their way across the mountainside, circling around to descend on the opposite side from where they'd come, and Feathers settled himself comfortably on Laurel's shoulder. There was no good place for him to roost here, so she would have to be perch enough.

Laurel hardly noticed him. Somewhere beneath this mountain were the stone creatures she would study. Their presence tugged at her. Could Cuain feel it, wherever he was? The Wyld Hunt belonged to them both, given to them in the pod they had shared. Surely he could feel it too. Perhaps fulfilling this ache in her soul would give him some comfort as well. If she couldn't rescue him yet, then at least let her offer this distant comfort.

Night settled over the mountainside and the stars began to show themselves. In the darkness, Laurel's eyes slowly adjusted and revealed a world she had never seen. She was accustomed to the impenetrable blackness of a night in the jungle, but here there were no leaves or branches to hide the wan lights in the sky. The moon and stars shone down, giving a ghostly shape to the land. The only clouds were weak, misty things hovering over the volcano's peak. Reflected light tinged their undersides red even as Laurel's own glow glinted back at her from the stones underfoot.

When Rhyna turned their path downhill, Laurel tried to find some sign or mark to remember this spot by. A stone was a stone, and with so many here it would be hard to remember any particular one as important, but nonetheless she picked out the most unique stone she could see and tried to memorize its shape.

It was as though something new had switched on inside her brain. Every detail around her was precious and she was determined to store away as many of them as she was able. Who knew what secret she might discover that others had previously overlooked? She noticed how the sharp stone

fragments underfoot were glossy and reflective while the large basalt flows were dull and dark. She noticed the way the single cloud over the volcano's peak grew stronger as the night wore on, and she noticed the way the breezes all seemed to be drawn uphill towards it.

When the ground finally leveled out around them and the sharp stones beneath her feet were replaced by soft earth, Laurel knew the time had come.

"Rhyna," she called softly, "This is as far as I go."

"Don't be silly, there's plenty of time yet until dawn," Rhyna continued walking a few paces before she realized that Laurel wasn't following. Uncertainty marked her glowing features as she came back. "Are you alright? If your injuries are bothering you we can stop to rest for a bit."

"No, its not that," Laurel assured her, but that only provoked a dark look.

"There's nothing here but waiting for Nightmare to find you."

"My Hunt is here." Silence hung in the air between them, and Laurel felt a pang of guilt. It was a long way back to Breth Ayahusasca, and there were surely Courtiers on the lookout for them. Was she really going to force Rhyna to make the trip alone?

"Well, we'd best find a place to camp down then." Rhyna's voice was weightier than Laurel was used to. "You'll find your way around better once the sun's up."

"But how will you hunt the Court if you stay?" Laurel asked though she already knew the answer.

"I can't very well leave you here alone for the Court to find, now can I?" It was a question that didn't need answering, and Rhyna pushed on ahead without waiting for one. "Come, there's a ridge ahead where we'll at least be sheltered from the wind."



Chapter 9: Shadows in the Firelight

A faint sound echoed on the thick air and slowed Laurel's stalking. Trickster reflections danced from slick smooth walls, leaping from surface to surface until the entire maze of the underground was lit with the dim threat of fire. Every corner held the promise of molten flows soon to come, but Laurel edged forward without worry. The temperature of the air was the true tell of where lava would lie, and she was in no danger from it here.

Again the sound. It was close now, no longer an echo. A light clinking of stones. Laurel held her breath as her eyes searched the darkness for a familiar form, and she let it out slowly when she spied a place where the reflections ceased. Her quarry drank the light there, its rough, porous body a far cry from the glassy walls of the tunnel. Barely visible were the telltale markings of the beast: faint red lines of light traced it much the same as they traced her. She eased her axe from her belt and smiled into the dimness. The similarity honored her, honored her Wyld Hunt and her connection to this place.

Axe in hand, Laurel slid to the wall and knelt down to watch her prey. This one was only a child, as harmless as its larger brethren were dangerous, but where there was one there were often more. She waited.

The small crab-shaped creature chattered a sound like the tumbling of pebbles, blissfully unaware of its watcher, and

amused itself with a game she had seen often. It flipped over first one stone and then another, expecting something to happen as they clinked back to the ground. Nothing ever came of it, at least not while Laurel had been watching, yet the turning of stones would go on for hours if she let it, until later the crabbling would simply wander off. This time she didn't let the game play out. No other Destroyers were coming; this crabbling was alone.

"No bonds of family to protect you, little dragon minion," Laurel said aloud as she stepped away from the wall. "No mothers or fathers to miss you, no brothers or sisters to bring back the horde."

The little crabbling hissed a cry like raindrops on coals, the traces of light along its shell flaring brightly with its anger. Even standing as tall as it could, it came only halfway up her shin. Any sane animal would have been frightened, but fear and sanity both were unknown to its kind. The crabbling waved its claws menacingly, then charged in a flurry of scrabbling claws.

Laurel's axe was swift. A single blow darkened those defiant markings, their light draining away with its life and leaving deep cracks behind. A moment later the tiny body fell apart along those fault lines, and Laurel gathered the pieces into her pack. The darkness obscured them from sight, but her fingers recognized their texture and faint warmth.

"That's enough for today," she whispered to herself as she hefted her pack.

Carefully she wound her way back out of the tunnels. By now she knew which paths the Destroyers favored and which they shunned, and it wasn't difficult to avoid them as she slipped through their warrens towards the surface. Even before the passage brightened with the approach of daylight, the temperature began to plummet. Outside it was as warm as it had ever been, or so Rhyna assured her, but after spending

her days beneath the mountain, Laurel found the open air as cold as it was bright.

She squinted as she emerged, blinking away the furious glare of the sun. Her camp was a short walk away, and though her eyes would be bleary for a time, her feet knew the path well. As she started down it, cawing went up and a familiar weight settled on her shoulder.

“Why hello there,” Laurel greeted. Both Rhyna and Lord of Feathers refused to enter the underground with her, and while Rhyna’s patience with waiting for her had thinned, Feathers was always faithfully expecting her when she emerged. Today he didn’t even peck out his displeasure, though the shuffle he danced told of a present he left on her shoulder.

As she walked, her eyes cleared and she looked fondly on the humble home she had built. It was nestled into a fold of the stone ridge that rose east of the mountain, sheltered from wind and view on two sides. There was a small vine light and two broad mushroom tables that doubled as beds beneath a giant leaf shelter. It offered protection from sun and wind and rain, collecting the last into a stone basin. Some small trees had even started, though Laurel wondered how far their roots could go before finding the mountain’s underlying bedrock. It seemed like a cruel thing to doom them to this stunted existence, but at least they got more sunlight than they could have found in the jungle itself.

“Another sack of stones?” a familiar voice asked, and Laurel’s heart sank as Rhyna stepped out from beneath the leaf shelter. She did her best to keep it from her face, though. No matter how peaceful they were, Rhyna’s trips to Breth Ayahasca couldn’t last forever.

Laurel set her pack down with a clunk beside her makeshift workbench. It was little more than a slab of slate piled with simple stoneworking tools and the small mountains

of stones she had collected.

"I hadn't expected to see you back so soon," she admitted, making her way to the water basin and unwrapping the leaf she wore about her shoulders. Feathers protested as his perch fell away from beneath him, fluttering to the other sylvari instead and stirring the air about Laurel's bare shoulders. She suppressed a shiver and hurried to wash away his mess. Though she moved quickly, it was with a careful and practiced ease. This leaf grew from a thin stem on her chest where a human might have had a breastbone, and she was mindful not to break it off as she unfolded and refolded her living shawl.

"Soon?" Rhyna snorted, and Feathers ruffled himself indignantly on her shoulder. "I've been gone near a month and half! You're no better than the others, your leaves twisted up so tightly in your Hunt that you scarcely notice the sun passing. I'm surprised you remember to feed yourself."

Laurel knelt at her workbench and pulled over her pack. "Feathers reminds me if I forget."

Rhyna laughed at that, which set Feathers to cawing and flapping wildly as he fought to keep his balance. "Only because he'd have to find his own food then, I don't doubt." She prodded his chest, but he was too distracted to care. "Well, at least one of you notices the passing of time."

Laurel supposed it was true. Time didn't seem as important as it once had, not compared to all the things she was learning. She was beginning to understand the rhythms of the Destroyers, the patterns of their lives. What significance it might have, she had no idea, but lately she had noticed something else that caught her fancy too. When a Destroyer died and its light faded, it seemed to become little more than dead stone. Yet if she was careful, she could feel a faint heat coming from the remains. Was there a residual magic left behind? And if so, could she tease it out?

Unfortunately, she had come to her Wyld Hunt blissfully unaware of any useful skills in that regard. On the one hand, she was untainted by the assumptions that might limit her thinking. On the other, it was no easy task to learn stoneworking from scratch by yourself. Chisels and hammers never seemed to do quite what she expected them to.

"If you're back," Laurel said, sorting through her new collection of Destroyer fragments, "then I take it to mean you've found whatever help you insist I need?"

"I'm tired of watching you chip away at all this without a clue where you're going," Rhyna lowered herself to the ground across from Laurel, giving the workbench a distrustful eye as she rehashed the old argument. "While you get nowhere, I spent all my energy running back and forth to Breth. Its impossible to keep an eye on all my Valiants with you out here in the middle of nowhere."

"I don't think they're as helpless as you want them to be," Laurel interjected. "They seem to keep on surviving without you." She didn't need to look up to know Rhyna's expression. "Or you could leave me here. I don't need you to worry over me all the ti-"

"You I will especially worry over," Rhyna snapped, then sighed and made no attempt to cover her worry or smooth her knit brows. "While the number of young Valiants coming to Breth is increasing, the number of old ones returning keeps dropping off."

"So they're finishing their Hunts." *Without me there to recruit them for a rescue.* Laurel couldn't stop her lips from tightening. She tried not to think about whether Cuain was still alive or not. Her Hunt was here and she was doing it. If he had survived this long on his own, he would have to just keep it up for a while longer. If not... She refused the thought.

"If they are finishing, then I haven't heard of it," Rhyna replied, leaning forward heavily with her elbows on her knees.

“They set out on a task, and they don’t return to Breth. I hate to think where they’re disappearing to.”

Laurel fell quiet but didn’t stop in her work. Rhyna had good reason to be afraid, but Laurel was not as helpless as she had once been. She had fought. She had won. She had killed. And each day she honed those skills beneath the volcano. She could take care of herself now.

She paused. The fragment in her hand was much warmer than the others, and she set it at one end of her bench by two more she had previously found. Her collection made a mountain ridge along her workspace, sorted by strength as best she could tell.

When Rhyna spoke again, the bitterness was gone from her voice. “Since you asked, yes I have found help for you.”

“And what did you find?”

“A Durmand Priory Arcanist. He specializes in magic flows and capturing them in objects.” That made Laurel look up across her workbench. Her friend had found that old impish streak again.

“It sounds a little too convenient,” Laurel admitted.

“I suppose it does,” Rhyna mused, “but he is coming, and I can’t imagine he’s too far behind. We set out together, but by the time we passed through Breth I just couldn’t stand his slow pace anymore. I’m sure he’ll be here in a day or two. Maybe three; four at most.

“And when he does get here, I expect you to work with him!” There was just enough sternness in the mischief to let Laurel know she meant it. “None of that Valiant do-it-all-yourself nonsense. Just hurry up and get whatever it is you need to do done so we can both go back to Breth. None of you seems to have a care outside of your blasted Hunts.”

“The Durmand Priory,” Laurel pondered. She had never met a Priory scholar before, but they were known as

some of the most knowledgeable people in Tyria. Their reach spread clear across the continent in search of lost wisdom, and they were always willing to share what they knew, provided it wasn't dangerous. There had certainly been some stationed in the Grove, ready to instruct new sprouts, though Laurel had never actually met them.

The Priory was made up of all races. Anyone who wanted to join was welcome, so long as they could avoid destroying the precious scrolls and artifacts that the Priory kept, and Laurel wondered what sort of fellow this scholar might be.

He wasn't a sylvari, that she could say for sure. Rhyna never would have left a sylvari to make his own way after her through the Nightmare Court's territory. Nor could he be a charr or norn; despite their size, neither would have allowed themselves to be out-distanced by a sylvari. It was unfortunate, because meeting a charr scholar was on her list of things to see. The thought of a wizened berobed cat-beast with crudely curling horns sticking out from a dignified hood made her snicker.

"You better not laugh at him like that when he gets here," Rhyna scolded. "If anyone can find what you're looking for, it'll be this guy. I won't have him turning right back around because you insulted him."

You'd better hope he's not a charr then, Laurel thought. Most likely he was human. It was said that the great walls of Divinity's Reach were made of solid stone, the bricks cut and fitted so perfectly that they looked to be all of a single piece, and even the humblest countryside cottage made ample use of masonry. Besides, humans were awful at traveling through the jungle. They relied too heavily on their fat, flat roadways to make decent time or give them direction. No wonder Rhyna had gotten frustrated and left him behind.

As long as I don't have to pray to Balthazar or some

such, she decided, then we should get along fine. As far as she understood human superstitions, they would attribute any fire-magic she sought to their god Balthazar. She paused as she took the last stone from her pack. The heat it gave off was almost imperceptible, and she dropped it on the last and largest pile with all the rest that wouldn't be of much use.

"Done with that?" Rhyna asked as Laurel stood and brushed the dust from her leaves.

"For today, at least," she agreed, offering a hand to help Rhyna up. Then she picked her strongest stone and took it with her as she settled herself on one of the mushroom beds, slipping her axe from her belt and propping it on the ground beside her lest it chew up the soft flesh. Rhyna found the other and sat on its edge. With the sun still high in the sky, the vine light between them was dark and neither sylvari had any intention of sleeping, but the mushrooms were more comfortable than sitting on the ground.

"Diermed still has no idea how to get through the krait," Rhyna began as she seated herself on the other mushroom. She loved to bring back news, and Laurel always had to sit through it. "He made one attempt, but it went badly and he barely escaped the waves with his life. He's convinced that he needs reinforcements now, so you needn't worry about missing any recruitment opportunities."

Laurel quirked an eyebrow at that. "If they stay to help him, would they stay to help me too?"

"I don't doubt it," Rhyna agreed. "If any of them were returning."

Laurel shifted uncomfortably and then ventured, "You don't have to worry about me disappearing." Rhyna pretended not to hear, but crashed ahead with more gossip.

"Grauhne is still determined to get a harvest from her artichokes," she said quickly. "It would be great to grow some of our own food in Breth itself, but while she's convinced the

artichokes to grow, they're showing no sign of flowering. And of course, the flower is the only edible part." Rhyna shook her head, absorbed by her own retelling. "There's no use in forcing a thing to grow where it doesn't want to be, but she keeps trying anyway. It's too warm here for them, I warned her, and too dark. Best to just go with spikefruit. It takes a bit of space and attention, sure, but its reliable."

Laurel didn't have the heart to pay attention. The last thing she cared about right now was agriculture. Instead, she turned the stone over in her hands. Its warmth was comforting, like a memory of the mountain's depths that seeped into her as she held it. She was loathe to be without one above ground as of late, even going so far as to keep one at her side while she slept. If she'd had one back at the Inquest lab, perhaps things might have turned out differently.

It was dark before Rhyna's tales began to slow.

"Then he started trying..." Rhyna abruptly cut off and peered out into the darkness beyond the glow orb's reach. In the sudden hush, Laurel's ears picked up an unfamiliar noise. She jerked upright and instinctively reached for her axe. The pattering grew louder, as of feet at a run, but the sound was wrong to be any creature she knew. The footfalls came too close together and too lightly for the speed it was approaching, then they ceased altogether. The air grew heavy even as Laurel's leaves floated up like the hackles of a cornered beast. Her sap stilled for one breath, two. Then the air itself exploded around her, light searing her eyes and a thunderous crash deafening her ears.

She stumbled backwards, landing hard on her mushroom and rolling off it to the side so she could scramble behind it. She stood in the stillness, blinking away the spots from her vision and cursing the glow orb's anemic light. Then she saw him, a shadow cloaked in blood.

She vaulted over the mushroom, her axe coming down

in an arc, but streamers of ear and cloth flowed around her blade. The asura was nimble, unharmed, and his huge carnelian eyes glittered back at her, glowing through the darkness.

“What in the Eternal Alchemy is wrong with you?” he demanded, and his anger caught Laurel off guard. She hesitated, and that was enough time for Rhyna to catch her arm and hold it. Laurel tugged to be free, but Rhyna was firm.

“He’s not Inquest,” she whispered, and Laurel looked again. The uniform was different, she admitted. There was as much orange in it as scarlet, more perhaps, and the designs were standard asura—horizontal barring broken by staggered diamonds—without the extra sharpness that the Inquest favored. Laurel lowered her axe but did not slip it into her belt.

“So glad you warned your associate of my coming,” the asura remarked, talking past Laurel but still appraising her derisively. “I’m sure you also pointed out that I’m Arcanist Agghi. Not Explorer Agghi. Not Archaeologist Agghi. *Arcanist Agghi!*”

“Yet you seem to have come through just fine, and you made better time than I expected.” The elder sylvari released Laurel’s arm gently and returned to her seat.

“Better time? What sort of excuse is that? I could have been eaten out there! Or worse, I could have been lost.”

“And yet you were neither.” A small smile played on Rhyna lips.

“That’s irrelevant. You had no way to know that I’d-”

“Historian Derek spoke highly of your fieldwork,” Rhyna cut in.

“He... he did? I mean, of course he did.” The asura lifted his chin and ears, making the ridiculous spike of hair he wore list to one side and ruining the dignified pose he was trying to strike.

Laurel reluctantly set her weapon down and forced

herself to sit. The Inquest wouldn't be caught so off guard if they had a trap planned; they'd be hiding behind toothy words and sugary smiles. She schooled her face to calmness, but did not take her eyes off the asura.

If not for the topknot, he might have been a head shorter than most she had seen. He was slightly built, with a too large head and round, wide-set features. His ears were almost comically large and floppy, but where most asura took pride in their ears, his were ragged around the edges. In an animal it would have been a sign of aggression, but here Laurel suspected absentmindedness. Wide strips of lighter skin marked his nose and forehead in a blast pattern, the last remnants of a long-healed scar. The asura either didn't see or chose to ignore the way Laurel studied him.

"I hadn't realized Derek was the one who referred you to me," he said loftily.

"He said you were quick on your feet, but I didn't expect you to keep up with me on those short little legs." Rhyna's was a friendly prod, and Agghi chose to ignore that too.

"He would, but only because he's a sluggard." A floating contraption drifted out of the darkness behind the asura. It came up silently and bumped him from behind, setting him off balance. His ears shot up in alarm, but when he saw the device he dusted himself off as though nothing had happened. It was made of four stone cubes ringed with horizontal carvings and pressed together into a block with a bulky canvas bundle resting atop. Agghi calmly guided it further into camp. "He doesn't get out often enough, that Derek, doesn't appreciate how exercise sharpens the mind. He just sits with his nose in those moldy old Krytan texts all day. I wouldn't doubt if his brain has gone to mold as well."

"I have to admit," Rhyna interrupted, "with the pace you were setting I doubted you could do anything but waddle."

“How quickly one can move is irrelevant to how quickly one should move.” Agghi rolled his eyes. “Only a simpleton would travel through new territory without taking notes. Do you know how many discoveries I might have passed up rushing after you like this? I only have ten pages of notes to show for today. Ten!” With a touch, the four stone cubes pulled apart and the canvas bundle thumped to the ground between them. It was attached to them, however, so as they continued to float apart, the canvas began to stretch. Then additional, smaller cubes emerged from within the larger ones and lifted up the corners, pulling the canvas taut into the shape of a tent. “And all for some stones. I’ve seen nearly every naturally occurring arcanomatrix known to exist, and yours are probably a simple aetherostatic triaxis tetrahedronic formation.”

“Aethero-static..?” Laurel’s tongue tripped over the strange word. Some asuran words had no meaning as far as she could tell, but she didn’t like not understanding something that might pertain to her hunt.

“So she can speak,” Agghi remarked. Then, mistaking Laurel’s question, he shook his head. “Sorry to disappoint, but I’d be quite surprised if they were anything better. And I highly doubt you’ll have found something as interesting as a multidynamic pentaxis dodecahedronic formation. Those are some fine arcanomatrices.” He peered into the elaborate doorway of the tent as it revealed itself—since when did tents have doorways rather than flaps?—and a small, rounded golem hovered out. Agghi, of all things, clambered atop it to take a seat. A golem as a stool was simultaneously the most un-asuran and un-Inquest thing Laurel had ever seen one asura actually do. He was oblivious to the fact.

“I’d be surprised if she has anything other than plain stones,” Rhyna added dryly.

“So weak aetherostatic formations then.” Agghi

sighed. "They're pretty common to find, especially around elementals."

"They're not normal lodestones," Laurel repeated. She had seen plenty of those littered about in the hidden garden, but none of them had given off the sort of heat that these stones did. Not that she had spent any time collecting or paying attention to lodestones back then.

"Well, I guess I should take a look."

"Now? Don't you want to wait until morning, get some food and rest first?" Rhyna was hinting rather than being hospitable, but Agghi was oblivious to that as well.

"What, and let this whole day have been a waste?" He scoffed in a way that made his ears flop. "Well? What are you waiting for? Fetch my arcanic scanning module!" He looked expectantly at the golem he was perched on, then started when he realized his mistake. "Oh. Right!" He hopped down, and the newly freed servant scooted inside the tent to fetch for its master.

Laurel picked up the stone she had dropped earlier and offered it to the asura. He waddled over to take it, and for one brief moment as he drew near visions of ending him danced through her mind. He was so close to her and her axe, not even Rhyna could stop her from here.

The stone shook in her hand.

"Well?" the asura prompted. Rhyna shifted uncomfortably, but the moment was passed. Laurel dropped the stone into Agghi's waiting palm and tried not to shudder as her fingers brushed his.

Unimpressed, he turned the stone over carefully. After a moment, he held out his other hand expectantly and his golem glided up to place a gun-like contraption in his palm. It was short and fat, with a square view screen on the close end. He passed it carefully over the stone, end to end, and then back again, all the while peering intently at the display on the

screen.

“Ah, you’re right. Not a lodestone at all. Or not a natural one, at least.” Agghi handed his scanner back to the golem, which promptly disappeared with it into the tent. “This has signatures of dragon energy, from Primordus. You’ve been collecting Destroyer fragments, haven’t you?”

Laurel nodded. It was an effort to find her voice, but she wasn’t about to let the asura see how shaken she was.

“You know of them?” she asked.

“Oh yes. Wherever you find Destroyers you’re sure to find pieces of their corpses as well.” Another eye roll and the asura handed back the Destroyer fragment.

Taking it was easier than giving it, and Laurel ran her fingers over the familiar texture. “And you know the way of working them?”

“Affirmative. They can be made into all manner of weapons, and items, even armor.” Agghi ticked off things on his fingers. The numbers didn’t match up with his words.

Laurel clenched her jaw. Was this what her Hunt would come to, begging help from an asura? *No, never beg.* “You’ll teach me, then.”

His ears flattened to the sides and his eyes widened. Something inside Laurel relaxed.

“That’s not what I signed up for,” he protested. “I signed up to identify your materials and possibly, if they were new or unknown, experiment with their usefulness. Well, your materials are identified. Common Destroyer fragments. Any weaponsmith could show you how to make use of them. You don’t need me for that.”

“See?” Rhyna breathed out the word with relief. “Let’s go back to Breth and find you a weaponsmith willing to teach you. There’s not much reason to stay out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“No.” Between the asura's discomfort and her own

rising stubbornness, Laurel felt herself gaining the upper hand. "I am going to discover something here. The Pale Tree saw it, and now that I'm here I can feel it too. If you won't teach me, I'll just figure it out on my own."

A sharpness came into Agghi's eyes then, and he searched her face for something. She met his gaze boldly, and for a moment she thought she saw a smile twitch his lips. It made her stomach clench, but so swiftly did he slip back to goofiness and arrogance that she wondered if she had imagined it.

"I *do* like hunches," he said, absently rubbing the scar on his forehead. "Especially when they come from that tree of yours. Perhaps I'll stay a short while after all. There are things here to document, and at least that way it won't have been a completely wasted trip."

Rhyna took that as her last best hope to get everyone fed and settled down so she could find some sleep. Agghi scoffed at the notion of keeping watch and instead set up proximity scanners. The meticulously carved purple crystals in their square stone housings made Laurel uneasy. She expected to sleep lightly, but after laying down her head, the first time consciousness returned to her it was already morning.



Chapter 10: Heart of Flame

“And you say she does this every day?” A pause. “The aggression could be related. Were she any other than sylvari, I’d say it was a severe risk of contamination and recommend immediate quarantine. Either way, its probably best if you watch for-”

The conversation broke off as Laurel sat up and rubbed her eyes. Rhyna and Agghi were both already awake, alert despite the early hour. Laurel yawned until her jaw cracked without any attempt to stifle it. *Morning people*, she mused, *no matter how early you rise you’ll find them already up to no good*. She meant it as a friendly jest to herself, a fond puzzling over her long time friend, but even as the thought formed she realized that the asura’s ears were keenly fixed on her, waiting for something, waiting... for her to notice that he sat at her very clean workbench.

“Where are my stones?”

Agghi’s ears twitched back and he quickly glanced at Rhyna who herself watched Laurel carefully. Then he looked back to the workbench, as if unconcerned.

“All those inferior samples?” he asked, absently brushing some nonexistent dust from the empty surface. “I disposed of them. If I’m going to be working here I demand we use only the best. *Honestly*,” he dropped the word heavily, “how you *ever* expected to achieve anything in those

conditions is absolutely beyond me.”

“My Dream-”

“Yes, yes, of course. If not for your Dream I’d have left by now, but a Dream of accomplishing something doesn’t get the thing done on its own, does it?” He turned back to look at her again, his round eyes calculating. Then his ears sagged as he let the tension run out of him and sat up straighter. “It’s no matter,” he assured her. “You’ve a proper genius to attend to such things now. For your part, I presume you at least know where I can find the larger Destroyers?”

“Of course,” Laurel answered. Rhyna regarded her quietly, eyes darting back and forth between Laurel and Agghi with a significant look that Laurel couldn’t quite place. “I’ve things to do before we leave,” Laurel said quickly, then forced herself to deliberate calm as she gathered her bow and walked a short distance out of camp.

Around to one side she found the dessicated mushroom that she used for target practice. It was her first failed attempt at growing a bed, about an arm’s width across and heavily marked with the scars of previous arrows. She gave it a push, checking to see that it still held firm where she had nestled it against the stony outcropping. It held, and she briefly brushed her hand over the woody surface to remove any loose debris that might turn an arrow. Then she counted off 100 paces, pulled out some arrows, knocked, and drew.

“1, 2, 3...” She held steady as she began the count to a minute. She was up to working with four arrows now, one between each of her fingers. They were learning their roles well, but moving on to five presented a whole new challenge. It would require her to double up somewhere, and she hadn’t yet figure out the trick to knocking only one arrow when two were held in the same place.

As her count continued, thought drained away. Her mind became an empty place, blank and clear except for the

progression of numbers. "...58, 59, 60."

Laurel cycled through all four arrows without releasing, the way Rhyna had taught her. Then she held again, steadily sighting down the arrow and renewing her count. A burning feeling built in her shoulder, but it was mild and existed somewhere outside of her awareness. All she knew were the string and the arrows and the numbers.

"...51, 52, 53..." Laurel breathed out slowly and completely. For the last second she was the mountain itself. Unbreathing. Unmoving. Then *thwang, thwang, thwang, thwang!* The thrum of her string faded before the first arrow thumped solidly into the woody mushroom.

For seven sets she continued while her aim worsened. By the time she was inspecting her aim and retrieving her arrows after her seventh round, she found one of her arrows was dangerously close to the edge of the target. Arrows were precious out here and not a thing to waste. Rhyna could make new ones, but it required feather "donations" from Feathers and a trek over the stone ridge to collect very particular reeds from the waterfront there. Rhyna was about as fond of climbing as Feathers was of plucking.

"Better stop before I break anything," Laurel muttered to herself. That left only breakfast between her and a return to the tunnels, and as she rounded the broad back of the leaf shelter on her return to camp, she saw Agghi had already helped himself to their stores. His sharp teeth flashed brightly as he greedily gobbled an assortment of roasted bugs from a bowl in front of him. Rhyna would not be pleased, or she should not have been in any case, since she did all of the scavenging for food, but there she stood with a barely contained grin tugging at her lips.

"He proposed a trade," she said. "His PRIORITY 'rations' for our scrounged grub." She tossed a small but heavy package of tightly-wrapped waxed paper to Laurel. The strong scent of

cinnamon assailed her as she caught it and turned it over in her hands. Peeling back the folds released another wave of scents, brandy chief among them, and another second layer of wrapping, this time linen. It was slightly damp to her touch, but that was not as surprising as the dense bread that awaited her inside. Bits of dried fruit and nuts peeked out through the dark, moist crust. Laurel looked incredulously from the treasure she held to Agghi's bowl of legs and carapaces. Insects were the only thing that seemed to thrive on this barren mountainside, and she'd had quite enough of eating them. Even dead and roasted they still seemed to wiggle.

Laurel quickly stuffed a corner of the bread in her mouth before Agghi could change his mind. It was richly honied and still moist. *Not bread, cake!* Laurel marveled. It was a bit too chewy, but pleasantly punctuated by the soft crunch of nuts. Her eyes drifted closed in pleasure. She had never tasted anything so good.

"You're welcome to it!" Agghi paused in his own feasting to glance at Laurel, and his teeth glinted as his lips curled up. He was as amused watching her as Rhyna was watching him. "I can't stand the stuff, darn near poison if you ask me! Never trust a food that has a longer shelf life than you do, that's my rule."

Laurel took another bite and tried not to let the asura get in the way of her enjoyment.

"Now this guy, on the other hand," Agghi reached in his bowl and fished out one particular bug. It had a long round body and its legs had curled up tightly when it had cooked. "He would have lived for precisely 17 years if nothing came along to eat him first. For you bookahs, that's a prime number. That makes him a special sort of delicacy." Agghi ran one sharp claw along the ridged carapace, dragging each curled leg open and then letting it snap shut again. "So soft and juicy," he sighed, "with a pleasantly crisp crunch, and a proper respect

for the Eternal Alchemy that put him in my stomach.” He popped the bug in his mouth gleefully, crunching once and then swallowing without chewing. With a sick start, Laurel realized he hadn’t been chewing the others either.

“I’m trying to eat,” she pointed out.

“Bookahs never could appreciate math,” Agghi laughed, but despite the insult he did let her enjoy the rest of her meal in peace.

When the last splendid crumb of cake had been picked out of the cloth wrapping, Laurel set it aside reverently. “Rations” like that would make it worth joining the Priory, she mused.

“Well, I guess I’d best get going,” she said as she dipped her sticky fingers in their water basin and rubbed away the traces of honey and spice oils.

“Now wait just one minute, I’m almost done here,” Agghi said indignantly as he raised the bowl to his lips and tapped out the last bits of settled debris from the bottom.

“You’re coming?” Somehow Laurel had expected him to change his mind, expected that she would be doing the hunting and fetching alone while he stayed back in camp barking orders.

“Of course I’m going,” he said simply, oblivious to her surprise. “I said I was, didn’t I?”

“But I thought you were Arcanist Agghi, not Explorer Agghi,” Rhyna prodded, grinning like a fool.

“So now you find your wits?” Agghi raised one eyebrow but didn’t bother looking at her. “Well yes. I am an Arcanist, but I also like to see to gathering my own materials. Never trust what someone else finds for you, especially if you want to make exceptional products. You have to feel things with your own hands, test them with your own scanners.” For emphasis, he slung a tiny sack across his shoulders. It was odd to see an asura doing his own heavy lifting, even if the term

'heavy' was relative in this case.

"Your golem isn't coming?"

"Oh goodness no!" Agghi eyed Laurel as if she were crazy. "All those hover mechanisms whirring about would give us away at precisely the wrong time, I'm sure! That is, you were planning on being stealthy, weren't you?"

Laurel nodded. Part of her wanted to like this odd little asura, and the cake certainly helped that, but the part of her that was wary pushed it aside. *Sweetness can mask poison*, she reminded herself. *He as much as admitted it himself*. No, she didn't have to like him or trust him. She just had to learn from him.

She kept her silence close as she led the way beneath the mountain, relishing the familiarity of her little realm. Its heat came first as eddies drifting through the higher air with a cool breeze slithering past their ankles to counter it, but as they pressed deeper it became all encompassing, then smothering.

It was just as well that her Priory tutor was an asura, she reflected. A human scholar would have found it hard not to complain in this heat. A charr or norn might not have made the trip at all, but the asura bore it well. His people were made for the tight spaces beneath the earth, their instincts born of the dark and the damp. He would as soon complain of the heat and close air as she would of sunshine and green fields.

A touch at her knee stopped Laurel. Her eyes were not yet adjusted, but she searched the darkness anyway. She could trust his eyes, if nothing else. They were meant for this as much as the rest of him. He would be seeing everything before her sun-dependant sight could catch it. At last she picked out the darker shape of a crabling approaching. She slipped her axe from her belt slowly and silently, waited, and then threw. The axe thunked into the crabling and it went dark, broken stony fragments scattering on the ground with a rattle.

She crept up and retrieved her axe, slipping it back into her belt.

“No wonder your samples were so inferior. That Destroyer was exceedingly tiny.”

So much for stealth. Laurel didn’t know which prickled her more, the offhanded insult or the way Agghi’s voice echoed. Despite her best intentions she rose to the bait.

“Children usually are,” she whispered sharply.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Destroyers don’t have children. They don’t reproduce.” Agghi waved it off with hardly a thought.

“Well the little ones come from somewhere, and they grow into the big ones.” Laurel retorted. She knew her mistake as the next words began tumbling from his mouth.

“Preposterous! Rata Sum has meticulous archives, the foremost in the world. It has clearly been demonstrated that Destroyers are propagated from corrupted lava currents which can be traced back through magma pathways to Primordus himself. Furthermore, Destroyers emerge from such lava flows fully formed.” As he spoke, his voice continued to rise. “I will admit that these particular specimens are smaller than any we’ve recorded so far, but that simply means you’ve found a new variant. One that I’ll be able to input into the registries, I might add! Crediting you, of course, but no bookah would be allowed into the databases so I’ll just have to enter it for you.”

Agghi paused and Laurel almost breathed a sigh of relief. Almost, because she was cut off with further muttering, none of it particularly quiet.

“How exciting! We haven’t seen new Destroyer varieties in some time. I should also submit the findings to the Priority, probably before I make a full report to the Arcane Council. They’re a prickly bunch, you know, and touchy when it comes to Destroyers. They might try to suppress the findings. Yes, better to have a copy safely in the hands of the Priority

before I approach the Council.”

It was inevitable that the blather would draw attention, and so it was with resignation that Laurel watched as a large shadow sidled into the tunnel ahead of them. It was a perfect copy of the tiny crabblings, but stood nearly as tall as Laurel herself. Like the little ones, it had traces of fiery light accenting its body. They shone strongly in the darkness, rippling with an unnatural life.

By some small miracle, the asura had the good sense to shut up when he saw it. The creature lurched after them, but half-heartedly. While it had heard something, it didn't appear to know what or where exactly the sound had come from, and it soon lost interest in the search. Laurel took the opportunity to pull the asura back into the deeper shadows and crouch down.

As they watched in silence, the Destroyer began to rake the ground with the downwardly hooked shovels that served as its claws. They glowed with heat and sank easily into the stone, bringing up great chunks of solid rock with each heave. Those were pushed back into the hole it had made.

“What's it doing?” Agghi whispered. Laurel was loath to encourage him, but for the moment, the Destroyer itself was making enough noise to cover their voices.

“It's making a nest.”

“Soon you'll be telling me they have mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles, little lava houses, and Wintersday parties.” Agghi's irritable rant was interrupted by the Destroyer spewing a stream of fire into the rubble pile it had collected. It exhaled one long breath of flame, then inhaled for another and didn't stop until the stones it had gathered were melted. At that point, it settled itself comfortably into the pool with its belly floating in the lava but its claws all firmly set on solid ground.

The light of the lava lit Agghi's face, and his orange

eyes glowed with intensity. There was no sign of his earlier derision as he committed every detail to memory. His notes later would be thorough, Laurel didn't doubt.

The lava bubbled a few lazy plops, and in no time began to cool again. Rather than wait to be fused to the floor, the Destroyer lifted itself up and slid to the side. It didn't shake like a wet animal might have, but instead let the lava cool and harden on its belly. Laurel knew that not all of the full-sized crab-type Destroyers had such an extra shell, but the largest ones did. Some of them had a considerably thick one, as though they had dipped themselves many times.

The lava dimmed as it cooled, but even as a crust of solid stone formed, cracks emerged in it. Laurel pushed Agghi lower to the ground, and made herself as flat as she could. Moments later the stone broke open and shattered fragments clattered off of the tunnel walls. No heat or light was left inside the hole, so Laurel had no way of seeing Agghi's expression when a dozen crablings came scrambling out. She wondered what shock would look like on him.

"This unusual behavior will have to be documented so that a proper explanation can be worked out," he began, then raised his voice. "For now, let's collect some fragments." The avalanche of pebbly chittering could easily have drown out his words, but he had purposely spoken for both her and the Destroyers to hear. From his tone, he was grinning.

He's mad! was all she had time to think before the ground itself seemed to lurch forward. Not one of the crablings held back from the charge, but her axe was in her hand and each sweep of it flung back three crablings at a time, their darkened debris clattering over their clamoring brethren. Others washed against her like a tide, tugging and jarring against her shins and calves, but she kept her feet. The leaves that shielded her legs to the knee were hardened to better than bark. If she had learned one thing from Caoimhe, it was

the strength of living armor. The crabbling's claws tore uselessly at it, leaving scraping scorch marks, but the material would neither give nor ignite. Yet beneath that protective casing, her toes quested freely for a foothold. She gripped the lose detritus and knew its shifting almost before it happened. Her nimble feet adjusted, repositioned, and her balance never wavered.

But there were limits to this gift of the Mother. It was an excellent foil to these infant Destroyers, but would do little against an adult whose claws could sink into solid stone. And the armor also hampered mobility, so she had only bothered to cover her lower legs in it. She would be fine as long as she dodged the adults and never fell down into the seething brood. A sulfur roar heralded the charge of the adult Destroyer, and it trampled its own children to reach her. She needed to move, yet the mass of clinging crabblings mired her to the spot.

Then a ball of energy burst beside her, depositing the small asura with an electric crash. Agghi twisted and leapt backward, sending a great gust of air which cleared a space around Laurel and staggered the greater beast for a moment. It was all the opening she needed. Her axe flashed as she leapt and darted as she dodged. The Destroyer crab could not turn fast enough to keep up with her—it was made for sideways charges and passing claw sweeps—and as she danced about its backside, her axe found the weak places where its segmented legs came together. Down it went, and then Laurel was atop it. But even as she chopped freely at its head, the creature was slow to die.

Its lights drained out in stages, parts of its form crumbling even as the rest resisted still. When the last of them went dark, Laurel spilled to the ground with the tumbling remains. She readied herself to deal with the wave of crabblings again, but all was still save for Agghi. He wasted no time in

rifling through the fragments.

“No, no, no, *no!*” Agghi’s pitch rose with each word, his frustration evident. “None of these will do. The signature is too degraded; there’s not a complete shard anywhere among them. Even the core is damaged!”

“Core?”

“Yes, here.” He tossed a few more stones aside before picking one up and handing it to Laurel. It was round, nearly the size of the asura’s head, and warm to the touch. The outer surface was far smoother than most of the fragments she had dealt with, but one side fell away in a jagged tear that was as sharp as shattered glass.

Agghi shook his head, setting his ears to flapping, and then returned his scanner to his pack. “We need to find better specimens. Cores don’t get much bigger than that, but they do get stronger.”

“I know where to find them,” Laurel said slowly as she dropped the shattered core to the ground. “Bigger Destroyers, I mean. But it’s not wise. I can’t take them alone.”

Agghi grinned at that. “Well you’re not alone, are you?”

Laurel wasn’t sure how to answer without insulting him. He had helped, true, but cleaning up crabblings was a far different thing than taking on multiple adults. Could he really fight without a golem? Asura were so small, so lightweight. A memory of squeezing the life from one with her bare hands briefly flashed through her mind and a rush of adrenaline surged as her past fear and desperation echoed her current misgivings. Dare she trust him with her life?

“Stop your worrying and show me the way,” Agghi cut across her thoughts. “If I have to search them out myself this will take much too long.”

Laurel’s mouth tightened into a line. She was no longer the helpless thing she had been back then. If she couldn’t face

the challenges of her Hunt now, would she ever? *Oh Cuain, what am I getting myself into?*

“It’s this way.”

She led the dark asura deeper into the volcano. The air was already oppressive, but as they left the side passages and ventured towards the molten heart of the mountain, it grew hotter still. The change in temperature was not a thing that could be measured in the way the air felt on her skin. It was past that sense’s ability to discern. It could be measured, though, in the sheen of honied sweat which would not evaporate, in the way her breath grew shorter, in the way her limbs felt too light and her vision blurred if she turned her head too fast. Even as accustomed as she was to the heat, pushing so near her body’s limits was discomfiting.

They twisted and turned through the deepening passage until one side of the tunnel suddenly widened and brightened. A rent in the wall opened up to a great hollow chamber, but the greater openness was the opposite of relief. That way lay the heart of the furnace itself, and here at the juncture of hot and hotter, the air writhed and wavered like a living thing. Agghi dared a look, unphased by the warping currents that curled around him. Laurel stayed well back.

“Destroyers?” he asked. Shapes moved through the shimmering air, but Laurel shook her head. A Destroyer would have dimmed the light around it, not shone so brightly. These were beings of pure flame walking on a mockery of legs, so much hotter still than the furnace which bore them that their shining bodies were clothed in distortion. The tortured air twisted about them and made them difficult to see. She had no desire to get any closer.

“Not even the Destroyers venture there.” Laurel skirted around the reaching tendrils of heat and followed the dark passage deeper down. She sought the cooler air beyond the breach without waiting to see if Agghi had followed. She

could breath again, unsteadily at first, but deeply. The dizziness slowly passed.

“I can hear them,” Agghi whispered, suddenly at her side. His show of caution was more unsettling than her own knowledge of what was to come. He slid wickedly arced daggers from within the close-fitting cuffs of his sleeves, and Laurel didn’t have time to ponder how they had fit. She slid to the wall for cover, and as she touched that smooth stone she felt the vibration of movement echoing within it.

The horde was near. Very near.

She eased her axe from her belt. *Mother, let this not be my last fight.* Then she inched forward to the next bend and peered out. The glowing marks of Destroyers shifted in the dim chamber beyond, mixing and mingling to mask their true number. There had to have been more than a dozen, though how many more was impossible to say. Every one of them was larger than the crab queen they had fought earlier.

“Daunting,” Agghi ventured the thinnest of whispers, “but we can take them. Are you ready?”

Laurel breathed slowly. It was time to see what the asura could do with those daggers of his.



Chapter 11: Promises

“If you want to survive this, listen to me very carefully.”

Laurel’s attention snapped to the small asura. His sudden change in demeanor gripped her more than the words themselves. He was still right down to the tips of his ears, his eyes fixed on the seething Destroyers ahead of them.

“I’m going to start this fight,” he said. “You’re going to wait for my signal before joining, and you had best be ready. When I call, I want you there. No questions. I will need cover. Not for long, but that time is crucial.” For a moment his too-calm eyes broke from the danger ahead to lock onto hers. All the response she could muster was a bob of her head.

“Good.” His eyes slid back to the chamber ahead. “Remember to wait. No matter what you see. Now get back and stay hidden.”

He didn’t give her time to argue or comply. A surge of blue-white energy streaked forward, piercing into the heart of the mob and carrying his small form with it. Despite having seen it twice previously, Laurel still started, jumping back behind the last hook in the tunnel. Destroyers stumbled, blinded by the intensity of the flash as an explosive crack deposited the small asura amidst their lumbering stone bodies. Before they could locate him in the sudden dark that followed, he twisted and arced backward through the air, suspended on the same invisible flows that he lashed against

his foes. It opened a small pocket where he had been, but the space quickly collapsed with the rush of angry beasts.

In the dimness she could not see him. She could see the press of Destroyers with their burning markings, but of the small asura there was no sign. Her breath caught and her adrenaline rose. Did he need help? She gripped her axe more tightly. Then a flash of fire outlined his form against the backdrop of writhing stone. She nearly leapt out from hiding, but the weight of his words held her and she waited. She let him ride his flames through the horde unassisted and pushed down the traitorous feelings that tried to stir.

A blast of flame rushed harmlessly past the Destroyers, revealing the scene in sharp contrasts. Any one of the beasts could strike him at any time if they could catch him, but the asura nimbly danced between their thudding fists and striking claws. A stomp of his foot summoned stone fangs from the floor of the chamber, and those the Destroyers felt. Spears of glassy obsidian shattered against the hardened basalt of their shells, but Agghi was not done yet. The broken shards hummed and skittered to life, lifting and swirling through the air like a swarm of angry daggers, stirring the debris into a whirlwind of glassy sand.

“Now Laurel, now!” Came the shout, and she was moving before she could think. Forward into the storm she pushed as the fires dwindled and the light again fled. Whirring shards pelted her and she choked on the dust of the impacts, but both storm and shadow hid her from the Destroyers. She danced into their midst with her axe spinning, but it was a blind dance. She felt her blade rebound uselessly as it caught all the wrong angles.

Her great surprise attack came to a crashing end as a spiked claw caught her shoulder and sent her reeling. The storm was subsiding, revealing the glowing hides of sylvari and Destroyer alike. It was not much to see by, but it was

something. She spun with the momentum of her stumble and turned it into an attack, sheering the fingers from the next claw that came for her.

Not completely useless, she consoled herself, but before the thought could finish, pain seared up her arm. She roared in defiance, a thin sound, pathetic beside the deep rumblings of her foes.

She dodged back, and a blunted fist crushed the stone where she had stood. *Too dark!* she thought frantically as the floor beneath her rocked and she lost her footing. She rolled further away before scrambling to her feet.

She could survive. She had to. Just a bit longer.

Her lungs burned with the sulfur breath of her enemies, and the Destroyer's markings smeared together as her eyes watered. Sticky sap leaked from pores and cuts alike. With the next attack she dodged again, but the battle had taken its toll. Her feet tangled and the blow caught her full-on, flinging her to the ground.

Then lightning flashed beside her, a thin shaft shearing the darkness for one terrifying moment before all was again hidden. The ground beneath her heaved violently, tossing her like a rag-doll, and before she could catch herself, her head rebounded from the hard stone floor. She clawed to keep hold of her wits, to push herself back to her feet, but the last thing she saw was a crackle of energy surrounding her.

Her consciousness fled.

When she woke again, Agghi knelt above her with her head in his hands. The touch of his fingers was sweet spring water against the scorched acid air, the only sign of the Destroyers a pile of shining cores that sat beside him.

Laurel's leaves prickled at the memory, and she banished it to focus on the task at hand. She ran her hands over the core she now held, examining it carefully in the light of day. It wasn't

the first one she had worked. There had been many hunts and many lessons in carving since that first foolish battle. But this core was special.

It wasn't particularly large or powerful. Once she might have passed it by without a second glance. It was only the size of a melon, smooth and glassy and almost cool to the touch, but now she knew to look deeper. This core had a rare character that matched her purpose. She had watched for one like this with every new core they had scanned, uncertain if such a thing were even possible, but now she had found it. The scans were quite conclusive. This was her chance to see her vision realized.

With determination she ran her fingers over the surface once more, trying to feel what the scanner had shown her. She needed to find just the right place to start. There was no undoing a wrong cut.

The golem beside her patiently held out a tray of instruments. When Agghi had agreed to teach her, she had never imaged such tools existed, much less that they would be at her disposal. No wonder he had looked disdainfully upon her chisels and mallets. They were so barbaric compared to these instruments of science and magic.

She ran her hands over the core a final time. This was the spot. She chose one tool to start, a fine spindle of silvery metal, and averted her eyes as she carefully set the tip to the glassy surface of the core. A blinding point of light flared to life at the contact, but the tiny torch-tip faded again quickly as it sank into the stone. She pressed it in carefully, ignoring the after-images that danced at the edge of her vision. Then she drew it out again and set down the tool, thumbing over the clean hole that now marked her spot on the core's surface. It was the last key point to need marking.

The first cuts were basic, roughing out a form. The amber blade of her next tool crackled with energy and slid

easily from one guide mark to the next, but she still stopped frequently to turn the core over in her hands, feeling for the currents of heat that lived within it. If in doubt, she consulted Agghi's scanners. At this early stage every cut had to be precise so that the final form would enhance the flows within. If she misjudged and cut across the grain of its magic, not only would the final product be inferior, but she risked killing the entire core itself. One bad cut and it would go dark, wasting this unique prize altogether.

Soon root-like tangles began to emerge as the stone wove around itself in a cylinder, following the unusual patterns of energy in this particular core. That was the thing she hadn't understood before Agghi. The personality of the core dictated the shape you must carve it into.

She held it up against her wrist, eyeing the eventual fit, then reached for the next tool. A fine filament of energy arched between two thin prongs, and Laurel carefully drew it along the stone, shearing away the roughly textured surface to leave a smooth plane in its wake.

Sheet by papery sheet she stripped the surface down until it became as smooth and sure as if fashioned from strips of metal. No metal was this black, however, this dull and light-devouring. That could change with polish and finery, but before she started that lengthy task, first she wanted to know if her creation would work.

Plucking a small yellow crystal from the golem's proffered tray, she ran it along the curving lines. Yellow was for the inside edges, then she switched to blue for the outer ones. A rainbow of crystals was arrayed neatly on the tray and each had its purpose, pushing or pulling on the energies it came up against. With these she could nudge the magical flows locked inside the stone, aligning them bit by bit so they knit together and bent to her purpose. She checked her progress on the scanners frequently.

At last came the moment of truth, the time to try on her creation and see if her careful work had amounted to anything. She clutched the finished bracer nervously.

"I'm ready," she called across the camp. Agghi was watching Rhyna reinforce reed knocking with sinew. Even with all the fancy tools at his disposal, he was fascinated by the making of these most basic arrows, but at her call his ears tilted in her direction.

"Let's see what you've got then," he said, hopping to his feet and waddling over.

Laurel hesitated. Her plan was risky. When making armor from Destroyer magic you were supposed to suppress it and turn it outward. She had turned it inward instead, hoping to make something that would warm its wearer. She was just as likely to set herself on fire.

"Well, get on with it," Agghi urged, crossing his arms. "Either it will work or it won't."

With a quick intake of breath, Laurel pushed a hand through the loops of stone and pulled it snugly into place on her wrist. As it settled, a tongue of flame licked up from the edges and she instinctively began to tug it off.

But then she paused. The flame was warm, very warm, but it was not actually burning her. She let out the breath she'd been holding and pushed the bracer back, twisting it to find a more comfortable position. The flames sputtered and reignited with each movement, but still they did not burn her.

"It... worked!" Agghi exclaimed, poking a finger into the orange flames to make them flicker and dance around the intrusion. "I never would have guessed you capable after those horrid torches you began with! But trust to chances, I always say, and never bet against a tree with half its roots in the Mists." He smiled broadly in that sharkish asuran way which showed far too many teeth. "My data crystals are nearly full, but I'll find room for a scan of this. Just... just give me a

moment.” He hurried into his tent.

“You always know an asura’s excited when he scurries after his own errands,” Rhyna mused as she set down the reed she was working on. “I have to say, I didn’t think you’d pull it off.”

“I was starting to doubt myself,” Laurel admitted as she shifted the bracer again. It was quite uncomfortable. She would have to adjust it and give it some polish as well, but before she took it off she closed her eyes and studied the warmth that tickled up her forearm. With a complete set of armor like this she could brave any frozen hellscape. Perhaps she could finally seek out the norn in the Shiverpeaks and ensure a rescue for Cuain. That is, if she could find enough suitable cores in time. Laurel dropped her hand to her workbench.

Her Wyld Hunt was ending.

She had tried to deny it at first, certain that there was some mistake. She hadn't done anything noteworthy, yet the hooks in her soul were slipping free one by one, the tingle at the back of her neck fading to a memory. There was nothing to hold her to this place any longer, but worse, there was nothing to hold Agghi here. He was more than ready to return to the Priors, and with him would go all the tools she needed to ply this new craft.

“What’s that?” Rhyna reached for her bow, snapping Laurel from her thoughts. Now that she listened, she heard it as well, the sound of feet approaching at a run. Light. A medium sized stride. Sylvari.

Laurel leapt to her feet and pulled out her axe, and Agghi even reemerged from his tent, datapad forgotten, at the sound of the commotion. A moment later the sylvari burst into view.

“Diermed?” Rhyna flew to his side and put a hand on his shoulder. “What is it? Has something happened at Breth?”

The golden sylvari shook his head as he bent over and panted.

“Nothing wrong,” he got out, the energy in his red eyes giving lie to his words. Something had certainly happened. Rhyna drew a cup of water from the basin and offered it to him, the subtle shake of her hands telling all her cool face tried to hide. Diermed drained the cup and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “We’re all three of us needed,” he said. “I’ve found the missing Valiants.”

Rhyna quavered and Laurel would have run to hold her up, but the set of her jaw fended off any aid. “Tell me.”

“The Vigil,” he answered simply. “They’ve been recruiting Valiants as soldiers east of Breth. They’re planning a strike at the Inquest complex.”

Laurel only heard three words: soldiers, strike, and Inquest. Hopes fluttered about her like songbirds, and she froze as if mere acknowledgement would scatter them. Yet her own thoughts became a whirlwind within her. If she went into that place again, would she come out alive? Could Cuain have survived all this time? What sort of tortures must he have endured if he had? What had become of her friend?

With a blush of guilt she realized that she didn’t even remember the gray sylvari’s name, only his sad eyes and the shy colors that had peaked out when he had smiled. It firmed her resolve.

“When do we leave?”

“Yes, when do we?” Agghi was already gathering up his tools and packing them into their travel cases.

“You’re coming?” Rhyna’s surprise mirrored Laurel’s own.

“Of course I’m coming!” He shook his head at them. “What would you have me do? Let a bunch of bookahs poke around an Inquest lab without at least one genius present to report on it?”

Laurel smiled despite herself. “Oh no, we couldn’t

have that at all.”

“Most certainly not!” Agghi gave a curt nod to himself before disappearing into his tent.

“We should rest here tonight.” Rhyna suggested, moving to the woven baskets that held their food and fishing out bar of Agghi’s cake for Diermed. He accepted it gratefully and collapsed on the nearest mushroom bed to eat. Rhyna sat next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “We’ve all been waiting for this for some time, but one more night won’t hurt.” She looked up at Laurel. “Tomorrow we fly.”

And fly they did.

At first light they were off, crashing headlong through the wilderness like marauding charr. Laurel’s axe lead the way, slashing a path through the jungle that even a blind asura could have followed. North they went, following the base of the stone ridge, and when that landmark failed them Rhyna took point, steering them west by northwest towards Breth Ayahusasca. They missed the mark, as she had feared they might, but she had erred on the side of caution and they came out on the road north of the outpost. It was a simple matter to follow it back south into Breth Ayahusasca for an evening’s rest.

“So you’ve an interest in the Inquest?” Agghi asked as Laurel dozed that evening. He hadn’t bothered to unpack his tent for just one night and instead lie on the open grass about a vine light with the rest of the sylvari.

“They took something from me,” she answered, shifting the way her arm was propped beneath her cheek. “I mean to get it back.”

“They’ve taken something from everyone, as far as I can tell,” Agghi muttered. After that he was silent long enough for Laurel to drift to sleep.

Their days became a cycle of running, stopping to eat or drink or pant, more running, and sleeping. By any sane

measure, the trip from Laurel's Hunt camp to the Vigil fort should have taken a week. They did not limit themselves to sane measures, however. Despite the weariness she saw in her friend's faces and the stiffening way they moved day by day, no one complained or asked to slow the pace. Diermed counted the days, and with each one their determination grew.

Neither sylvari nor asura were known for their ability to run long distances particularly well, yet this small band pressed onward as though their lives depended on it. And perhaps, each in their own way, they did.

They passed landmarks both familiar and strange: the wooden bridge over the Broken Arrow River, thinning jungle turned scraggly forest, a cave so foul smelling that Laurel thought perhaps they had found the Inquest's garbage pit. Then, on the fourth day of their headlong flight they arrived.

The ground was well cleared from around the fort, the forest pushed back so that the defenders could see all who approached well in advance. Glistening helms dotted the tops of the walls, poking out between the sharpened tips of the vertically driven logs that composed it. The high walkway there was set deeply enough so that the wall shielded its defenders from sudden attack without obscuring their vision.

As they watched, blue surged across the wall, bold energy arcing along the steel banding that reinforced the otherwise wooden structure. None of the defenders flinched. It was by design.

Laurel gathered her courage and, without looking back, strode from the safety of the few scrappy trees that made up the treeline. The gate itself was less impressive than the rest of the fort. The outer walls connected to twin stone towers—ancient remnants whose like still dotted the surrounding hillside—but no door stood in the gap between them. Only the two guards were left to bar entry, and their imposing statures were well chosen for the job. These two

were norn, covered head to heel in the stark black and white armor that the Vigil was known for.

“Who goes there?” called the taller of the two guards as Laurel approached.

“We’ve come to join the strike against the Inquest.” Laurel’s voice sounded stronger than she felt. She quivered inside, but it wasn’t this norn she was afraid of. It was what he stood for. The Vigil could save Cuain, but would they?

“Have you now?” The guard grinned through the opening in his helm. “And what makes you think we take just anyone?”

Because you have to. Because I need you to. Laurel pulled her axe from her belt and looked up at the norn, refusing to be daunted. They were twice her size, but the Destroyers had been bigger. She could prove her worth to them.

“Har!” The second norn barked out a laugh. “This one’s got spunk! Mostly naked, but she found herself half a piece of armor and now she thinks she can fight norn.”

“These leaves *are* armor!” Laurel growled, heat rising to her cheeks. “And the bracer I made. If you’re going to challenge me, then be done with it! Or are y-” Rhyna cut her off with a touch on the arm. The others had joined her before the gate.

“More sense in this one,” the first norn observed. “Go on through then. The commander’s inside.”

“Besides, I’d never turn away a naked warrior,” the second norn chuckled.

Laurel slipped her axe back into her belt and strode through the gate as though nothing were out of the ordinary, hoping her face hadn’t gone too green.

“Are you crazy?” Rhyna whispered at her side. “These are Vigil. Did you intend to fight the whole fort of them?”

“It wouldn’t have come to that,” Laurel insisted. “They

only needed a little convincing to let us through.”

“Is that what you call it?” Rhyna snorted, but before the argument could develop, one of the soldiers inside paused to stare at them.

“Rhyna? Is that you?” Rhyna stopped in her tracks and stared back at him. He had the height of a sylvari, and blue skin peeked out from his helm.

“Cynwrig?” Rhyna rushed forward to peer more closely at him. “You’re alive! After the wind rider flock dispersed, I thought maybe...”

“You should know I’m harder to kill than that!” He nudged Rhyna’s shoulder with a playful fist. “But why are you here? Come to join the Vigil?”

“No.” Rhyna’s voice dropped unusually low, and she gripped one arm awkwardly. “I had to see it with my own eyes. How many of you are here?”

Cynwrig didn’t reply right away. He watched Rhyna for a moment, then pulled off his helm and tucked it under his arm. Deep green leaves spilled down over his pastel flesh, framing an intense gaze.

“You really thought we’d turned to Nightmare,” he said. There was resignation in his voice and he searched Rhyna’s face for a denial that would not come. “Oh Rhyna! If I’d known, I would have sent word. After all we’d been through I thought you’d know I could never-”

“They have ways, Cynwrig,” Rhyna scolded, though her eyes dropped from his. “They can turn the strongest. They can turn anyone.”

A sigh answered her.

“Come, the others are this way,” Cynwrig said, gently prying Rhyna’s fingers free and taking her hands in his. “I see we’ve much to talk about and little time in which to do it.” Laurel watched him lead Rhyna away until they disappeared behind a line of tents. Then she turned, intending to ask the

others who might be in charge around here, but instead found that three more Vigil had joined them unannounced.

“So who do we have here, disturbing my soldiers’ routines?” The one who spoke was asura, and he wore his heavy armor as easily as his own skin. The sword on his hip was scarcely larger than a dagger, but Laurel did not doubt he could wield it effectively. Her fingers twitched towards her axe, but she kept control of herself and didn’t reach for her weapon. It was a good thing too. A norn and a charr shadowed the small warrior, and the charr in particular looked none too pleased with their presence.

“I’m here to ask assistance from the Vigil,” Diermed answered, saluting and standing to attention with the ease of familiarity. Sometimes Laurel envied those with useful Dreams. “But I’m willing to give help in order to get it,” Diermed continued. “We’ll be joining the strike against the Inquest.”

“And it’s your decision to make, is it?” the asura asked, crossing his arms on his chest. Though he only came up waist high on her, he was actually quite tall for an asura. It highlighted just how short Agghi really was.

“I make my own decisions,” Laurel replied. “And I’ve decided that if others are going into the complex, then so am I.” The norn’s eyes twinkled with amusement, but his face remained impassive as the asura turned a critical eye on her.

“Who you assign on your mission may not be the jurisdiction of our young sylvari here,” Agghi interjected, flourishing a ridiculous, ear-flopping bow, “but it is mine.”

“Do I know you?” The armored asura was unimpressed, and the charr behind him hardly held back a sneer at Agghi’s presumption.

“I am Arcanist Agghi of the Durmand Priory,” Agghi introduced grandly, his cheer contrasted by the flashing of his carnivorous white teeth.

“Your point?” It was the charr that spoke, and though

her superior's ears twitched, he didn't correct her.

"My point is that, unless I miss my mark, this is a Pact mission," Agghi explained, grinning with satisfaction. The other asura took a second more appraising look at him.

"It is," he admitted slowly.

"It's no use, Warmaster. This lot has no discipline. It's written all over them," the charr growled in a liquid rumble. Her words were accented by the way she spoke around the long fangs that jutted from her maw. She shifted uncomfortably when her commanding officer stayed silent. "With all due respect, we need more soldiers on this mission, not untrained civilians."

"Your position is noted, Commander," the Warmaster replied finally, his eyes never leaving Agghi, "but this is a Pact mission and the Pact includes civilians. You'd best get used to that. And last I checked, a Commander in the Pact outranks a Commander in the Vigil. Outranks a Warmaster too." The charr's lip pulled back as though she were about to say something, but then her jaw clacked shut and her tail swished violently.

"Welcome to our fort, Commander Agghi," the Warmaster said grudgingly. "I do remember you now, and if you screw up this mission too with your blasted meddling I'll personally see your ears hauled out before Trahearne. Don't think you're above discipline."

"Not to worry," Agghi assured them, oblivious to the deepening frown directed at him, "I've no interest in interfering with the military side of your operation. You may proceed as you have no doubt already planned. I'm merely here to gather data on the nature of the Inquest experiments. My, ah... krewe... will be assisting me in that endeavor."

"Don't expect us to be saving your skin," the Warmaster warned.

"No need," Agghi agreed. He gave Laurel a meaningful

look. "My apprentice and I can look after ourselves."

"Very well." The Warmaster nodded. "The operation commences at dawn. Commander Stormfoot is leading. Report to her at 0500 if you don't want to be left behind." He walked away without another word, nor even a glance back. The charr followed, but not before tossing a noiseless snarl in their direction. When they were gone, Laurel found her voice again.

"You made that look easy," she said. "Thank you."

"Bookahs!" Agghi exclaimed, waving her off and leading his storage contraption towards the neat line of tents. "Always thanking people for things that need no thanks! As if I could let you bungle this opportunity on me! But, if you really must thank me, then see that you don't get yourself killed tomorrow."

"I won't," Laurel said. And she meant it.



Chapter 12: Echoes of the Past

Laurel didn't sleep at all that night. She lay on the wide wood railing of the wall walk and stared up at the sky. The Inquest complex had no true ceiling, so if Cuain was still alive he would have spent this past year and a half staring up at these stars. It was a recognition of fact, not a question. She no longer wondered what had become of him, she didn't need to. Tomorrow she would know.

Feathers ruffled himself where he perched above her on the wall and resettled his head on his shoulders before drifting back to sleep. He knew something was different and had enjoyed their headlong rush through the wilderness, but Laurel wondered if he realized what tomorrow would bring. If anything happened to her, she hoped he would find his way back to his flock or Dierdre. Dierdre, at least, would still be around.

"So this is what Mr. Feathers sees all day when he looks down on us." Rhyna walked up beside Laurel and leaned on the railing, but her movements didn't have the quick energy she usually showed in the pre-dawn hours. "You were right," she said softly, watching the still camp below.

"I was?" Laurel puzzled at that. What had she ever said about Feathers that Rhyna had disputed?

"I wasn't protecting them from the Nightmare," Rhyna went on, and thoughts of her bird fled Laurel's mind. "I wasn't

even helping. I was..." She slid to the wooden floor and leaned back against the beams of the railing. Laurel sat up slowly, then swung her feet out over the edge to watch the camp below. The campfires had been allowed to burn low with the promise of approaching morning, and the only light up on top of the wall came from the two sylvari. Even Rhyna's glow was dimmer than normal.

"You helped me," Laurel said simply. "If not for you, I'd never have found food on that mountainside, much less Agghi. I might not have even found the volcano in the first place. I was ready to go marching straight back for the Maguuma and I would have if not for..." It was Laurel's turn to trail off. Tomorrow she would finally search for Cuain, but she still hadn't shared the secret of him with those closest to her.

They sat in silence for a time, the only sound that of the crickets and night insects that were singing their last songs.

"Caoimhe was my friend," Rhyna said at last, "one of the oldest friends I had left. We had hunted Courtiers together once before, when I was only a headstrong sapling."

Laurel felt a weight settle on her.

"She'd seen too much," Rhyna went on. "She was the only one who listened to me when Muirne died, and ever since then she talked of becoming Soundless, of how peaceful it would be to cut herself off from the rest of us, from the Mother, from our noise. If I had realized how it would look to you, I would have--"

"It's done, Rhyna," Laurel said gently but firmly. "Let it go." *And if Cuain is dead, will you just let that go?* She closed her eyes for a moment and then added, "Tomorrow is too big a day for me to look back now."

Rhyna's markings glinted as she turned toward Laurel, and her eyes caught some of the light as well. "What was he like, this friend of yours?"

“I hope today you’ll find out.”

Below them, life crept into the fort. The sky still clung to darkness, but stirring soldiers began to trudge about their morning duties. The last flickering light of the fires highlighted the movement on the ground, glinting off of proudly polished armor, and before long soldiers began to gather by the gate. Rhyna still sat in the shadows of the railing, but Laurel felt the familiar itch for action begin to rise.

“Today is a new day,” were her last words to Rhyna before she swung over the edge and shimmied down the wooden framework to the ground. It earned her a chuckle from the gathered soldiers.

“So you must be Rhyna’s latest pet,” one of them said, and Laurel bristled. “That’s a yes, then. I hope she hasn’t been too hard on you. I remember when she was ‘helping’ me on my Hunt. I-”

“Stormfoot Squad form up!” a voice like thunder bellowed. Female or no, a charr could roar. The soldiers snapped to attention and saluted as their commander cast a critical eye over them. One or two stragglers came stumbling over themselves at the call, hurrying to find their places. Diermed was with them, his soreness after their speedy flight apparent in his movements. Agghi came as well, though he was neatly and properly ready, waddling out as though he had only been awaiting the summons.

Rhyna came last of all, walking down the wooden stairs. On the wall above, Feathers gave a quiet half-caw in irritation at the disturbance and groggily watched her leave the fort. With any luck, he would stay there. Laurel didn’t know if she could bear to lose another pet.

The trip to the Inquest complex was neither long nor difficult. South and east of the fort the terrain became jagged, and the soldiers followed furrows between thrusting stone. Once Laurel had traveled atop these formations, and she

couldn't help but sniff for the salt water that she knew was out there. She could find no hint of salt or swamp on the air though, and now that gray had begun to seep into the world, the soldiers stopped their march.

"We'll find the gate around this next outcropping," Commander Stormfoot informed them. Her voice was low but easy to hear in the still morning air. "It's sure to be guarded, typical unit of six. Make sure you keep at least one alive, or we won't be able to open the door.

"Once we're inside we split into 4 units. One to guard our exit, one to head up the center, and one each to flank left and right. We do a full sweep of the grounds. Put down any dragon minions you find; free any prisoners. We don't have the manpower to hold this place and, likely, reinforcements will start pouring through the gate once they realize we're in. If you get the signal to withdraw, don't hesitate. Just get yourselves back in one piece." The squad saluted as one then drew their weapons.

"We go in right on their heels." Agghi's eyes were wide with excitement his long ears perked up attentively.

"I thought you said we'd stay out of their way." Some amusement had found its way back into Rhyna's voice, but she shifted her quiver to reassure herself it was still there.

"Of course we will," Agghi replied. "Let them deal with the messy stuff at the gate and just inside it, and then we'll stay out of their way right behind them. I want to see the lay of things deeper in before they're destroyed. It's the only way I'll really know what's been going on in there."

"You do what you want," Diermed said, drawing his sword as the Vigil began to move. "I'm going to stay with the soldiers at the gate. The longer we can hold there, the more Vigil can get out safely, and I want as many of them alive as possible to help with my Hunt when this is over."

"Of course." Agghi wagged a hand dismissively at

Diermed and peered out after the soldiers as they left the cover of the outcropping. Laurel rested a hand on her axe and crept up beside him to watch.

There were indeed six guards outside the gate, but they were outnumbered two to one. When they saw the Vigil formation falling on them, they rushed to open the door and get the support of the guards stationed inside. That evened the numbers, but it didn't make up for their comparative lack of training. The Vigil fought with a unity that the Inquest lacked, and quickly the defenders scattered deeper into the complex.

"That's our cue." Agghi rushed out, and as Laurel started after him, she felt a brush of wind at her cheek. White wings sped ahead of her and slipped through the doors of the complex. Laurel grimaced as she ran. Lord of Feathers kept his own agenda, and today that would include fresh carrion. Hopefully it would also include exiting via the door without a fuss. While there was no ceiling on this place, there was a rather visible energy barrier extending up from the outer walls. Glowing runes scrolled along its surface as it arced up into the sky. Her bird would not be able to just fly out wherever he wished.

"Left." Laurel pointed as she came through the door. Up the center would just lead to the annoying platform maze, that much she knew. Beyond that, though, she couldn't have said.

Agghi eyed her contemplatively for a moment, but he didn't question and simply spun left as if it had been his own decision. Diermed saluted them as they broke off, and if the Vigil soldiers thought it odd that he stayed behind, they made no comment.

They ran unhindered down that first hallway, the sloping walls and black stone as familiar as anything Laurel knew. It wasn't the same hallway she had gone down on her

first visit here, or at least she didn't think it was. One hall was much the same as another in this place. There was no upward ramp at the end, however, and the hexagonal chamber that opened up around them was unfamiliar. It had the same six, crystal-topped pillars that Laurel remembered, but these crystals were red. Red and smashed. Inquest bodies and golem pieces littered the chamber, as did what Laurel now recognized as Destroyer fragments. The familiar scent of the volcano bolstered her, and despite the urgency of the day, habit made her look about the rubble for an intact core.

"I thought all your datapads were full," Rhyna quipped as Agghi darted about the chamber, furiously punching out notes.

"They were, but those were my regular datapads." Even busy as he was, Agghi found time to roll his eyes. "You always keep empty back-ups just in case something like this would happen. Only progeny are stupid enough to put normal notes on a backup datapad."

Laurel shifted her weight as she tossed the last useless fragment aside. The Vigil had been quite thorough. There would be nothing useable from these bodies, and with that reflex past, she was ready to be moving on. Catching her look, Agghi tucked his pad away in his shirt front. "Let's keep going. There's more to see than I'll ever fit into one visit."

The next hexagonal chamber they came upon was one Laurel knew. It was the green room, the place she had last seen her shy gray friend, but of him there was no sign. There was the same grass, the same scattering of flowers, and handful of larger plants he must have had brought in. One was a gnarled but willowy tree, oddly twisted and with too thick a trunk for it to have grown here from seed in the time she had been away. There were also some purple and white striped flowers that stretched almost as tall as Laurel herself. She had never seen their like before, and as Rhyna drew near one, its

petals peeled back to vomit a noxious green cloud.

"Nightmare blossoms," she choked out. "I've heard the Court uses them, though I hadn't seen one before now."

"What are they doing here?" Even though she asked, Laurel didn't want to know the answer. Had the Court allied itself with the Inquest, or had the Inquest simply stolen from the Court? Either way her gray friend could have been exposed to Nightmare. Could he have fallen? Could he even now be one of those Courtiers that wallowed in the volcano's shadow? Could he have taken Cuain with him?

"There's evil here," Rhyna breathed, nudging Laurel towards the door. "I feel it, like a siren song. We shouldn't be here."

"My friend..." Laurel whispered.

"Is dead," Rhyna said with certainty. "If this is where they had him, he is gone. Let him go."

Her own words given back to her snapped Laurel out of her thoughts, and she saw that Rhyna was right. The Nightmare still lingered here, and Laurel was only too happy to be away.

As they continued on, the signs of battle increased. Not only were there more bodies now, but there were also scorch marks. They even passed two wounded Vigil members helping one another back towards the exit. It was ghastly, but the next chamber they entered was far, far worse.

It shouldn't have been possible to pass from the green room to the white one with a simple straight hallway. Laurel remembered the winding path she'd been led and realized with a twisting in her gut that it had been a distraction, a deliberate confusion. Here in front of her now was the one place in all of Tyria that she did not want to be. With the white crystals shattered, that sinister cold poured out into the rest of the room, snow spilling over onto the walkway and stirring in the air. Ice nipped at her toes and sent a wave of shuddering

through her whole body.

She clutched her wrist to her chest, clinging to the bracer she wore as though it were the only real thing in the world, oblivious to the way it brought her axe dangerously close to her own face. Despite the chill, sweat beaded on her skin. The snow seemed to be calling her, rooting her to the spot.

“Laurel?” Rhyna’s voice sounded far away, like an echo through a mist. “Agghi help me, something’s wrong with her!”

Laurel was tall for a sylvari, and strong. It was not an easy thing for her friends to forcibly drag her from the room, but they did and only after she was out did her head begin to clear. The chill lingered in her flesh, worsened by the cold sweat, but her senses were her own again and her armbrace, that glorious burning product of her Hunt, spread heat back into her.

“What’s gotten into you?” Agghi demanded. There was concern in his voice, but he also held his datapad at the ready. She shook her head sickly and pushed off down the hallway.

“We need to get out of here. The sooner the better,” Rhyna muttered, and as shaken as Laurel felt, it brought a smile to her face. It was good to see her friend back to normal.

In the next hexagonal room they caught up with the fighting, or rather, the fighting caught up with them. Three Vigil soldiers were being pushed back, fighting both creatures of purple crystal as well as Inquest and golems. Laurel dove into the fray with hardly a thought, and before she knew it the last of the creatures was falling.

“That one looked like a charr,” Rhyna said with a note of sadness as she pulled her arrows from a corpse. The Vigil saluted her though she wasn’t one of their own.

“Yes,” Agghi agreed. He talked without slowing his

tapping at the datapad. “Zhaitan, Jormag, and Krakatorrik all corrupt the living, or the once-living, as the case may be. Only Primordus creates his minions from inanimate objects.”

A horn blew in the distance, a thin hollow wail that could easily have been missed beneath their talking.

“This stone, the way it muffles sound, it gives me the creeps,” one of the Vigil soldiers griped.

“That’s our signal to retreat,” another said. “And none too soon if you ask me. Let’s get out of here while we still have an exit.” They turned back to go the way they had come, but Inquest poured into the hallway from a side passage and forced them onward instead. They fled as one, Vigil and civilians, and the the central gate chamber with its invisible walkways opened up around them. The gate wasn’t active now, likely still on its forced rotations, if such a thing had ever been true. Inquest poured out of the adjoining hallways to their right and the group darted left.

They began what to Laurel seemed an impossible zig zag. Each time they darted aside from enemies ahead, a trapped feeling nipped at her. *This is how you die*, it whispered, but Agghi was ahead of her, confidently undaunted by the twists and turns. He even looked like he was enjoying himself.

Then they emerged again into a long straight hallway. At its end Laurel could see the door out and the beleaguered defenders who still held it open.

That, of course, was when Lord of Feathers chose to misbehave. Overhead he gave a caw and veered out of view.

“You can’t get out that way!” Laurel called. “Feathers, to me!” A double caw replied to her, still from the wrong direction, and no white wings appeared in the sky. “Blasted bird,” she cursed and put a hand to the dark stone walls. Though planar, they were rough to the touch. Their angular slope wouldn’t be too difficult to climb.

“What are you doing?” Rhyna demanded. The horn called again, still sounding far off despite the fact that Laurel could now see the horn blower ahead. “We have to go. Now!”

“I’m not losing anyone else to this cursed place!” Laurel bit off the words bitterly. She hefted herself up onto the edge of a cube and began to scale the surface.

“We can’t leave her!” Rhyna’s voice was quickly swallowed by the stone, but Laurel didn’t look back. There was no time to waste. Agghi and the soldiers would see to Rhyna’s safety, only Laurel could look after Feathers.

From beneath, the cubes had looked almost orderly, arranged so that each angle hinted at wall or ceiling or stairway. As she went up, however, it soon became a chaotic jumble. It was like climbing a rockfall that somehow managed to have only 90 degree corners. There were more than enough footholds, at least, and soon she was on top. A jagged black desert stretched out in all directions, and Laurel didn’t see any sign of Feathers.

“Where are you, you rotting beggar?” Laurel growled, and a contented quork answered her. Sound traveled much better up here in the clear air, but Laurel did not. Everything was planar and yet nothing was flat so that she had to climb up and down for every bit of forward progress she made over the angular landscape. Deep crevices opened in places, gaps between oddly positioned cubes, and she knew that if she fell in one she would not come out again.

The sounds of battle rose and fell behind her, and Laurel knew that her friends had been forced to move on. She would have to find her own way out after she retrieved her good-for-nothing companion.

As she scrambled up and crested the next cube, however, her grumbles died on her lips. Feathers sat atop of pile of yellow-brown leaves which were settled in the trough between two stones. He quorked happily to see her, and then

went back to picking and prodding at his find. At first Laurel didn't realize what she was seeing, but then she noticed two withered paws poking out from beneath the leaves. Her breath stood still even as her body leapt to motion. Her tumbling rush to the bottom startled Feathers, and he took wing with a chorus of angry cawing. Laurel paid it no mind.

She placed her hand on the desiccated form. The hound had wrapped itself up to sleep, ears laid back and face covered with its tail. Only its two front feet stuck out from beneath the thin pile of leaves that was what was left of its body. Dropped leaves littered the stone around it, and as Laurel gently laid her hand on the creature's back, the leaves which remained were so dry that they cracked and crumbled under her fingers. The form beneath was still and knobby.

This could be any hound, she told herself. Cuain would not have been the only one trapped here over the years. But she knew that climbing was a very un-hound-like thing to do, and one which Cuain had a peculiar taste for. Carefully she moved aside the tail, gently brushing off the leaves that fell onto the creature's face. She lifted that head, as light as a feather in its dryness, and there was no mistaking the faded brown spot on its chin. Once it had been blue.

Laurel had imagined this moment so many times over the past year and half. She had seen herself blinded by tears and crippled by grief. Roaring to the high heavens and slaughtering in a bloody rampage of vengeance. None of that happened. Now that the moment had really come, all that mattered was getting her Cuain home so he could rest beneath the embrace of the Mother. It gave her a quiet strength she had not expected, and no tears came to her eyes. As she slid her hand down under the knobby flank to get some leverage, she thought she felt a twinge of movement and froze in place, waiting, but it did not come again. It had probably just been her own shifting of the hound's weight. Cuain was

dead, as she had known he must be.

Laurel lifted him delicately, one arm around his rump and one around his chest. He weighed almost nothing at all, and she easily shifted him so that his head would rest on her shoulder. "We're going home," she whispered.

If moving through this angular black landscape had been hard before, it was nearly impossible now. Laurel didn't care. It wasn't far to the gate, and she had all the time in the world.

It was full dark when she came to the final jut of stone. If not for the energy field she could have slid down and outside right then and there, but things were never that easy. She pressed her shoulder to the rising stone ahead and pushed herself slowly up with her feet until she could just peer over the edge. Below, the doors stood securely closed with three asura and two golems standing guard. She lowered herself back down from the edge and gently set Cuain to the side. She brushed a hand over his dry muzzle. *Not long now, she thought. I'll have you out of here soon, old friend.*

She pulled her bow from her back and counted out some arrows. She still hadn't mastered more than four at a time, but there was no way she could trust one shot to take down a golem alone. The element of surprise was her only real advantage; stopping to draw more arrows would leave her open to attack herself, and golems were often equipped with missiles. She needed seven arrows at the very least, one arrow each for the three asura and then two per golem.

If she could have done more, she would have, but even this would be stretching her skills. It would have to be enough.

Laurel leaned against the stone again and pushed herself up far enough to hook her elbow over the lip. Carefully, silently, she swung one leg up and over and straddled the ridge of the cube. She knocked, drew, and released. It was a

mechanical, automatic motion. Her hands and fingers knew their jobs well, and one after another the arrows thrummed from her string. From above she had no clear shot at the asuras' necks or the armor joint beneath their arms, but asura had one great weakness when it came to arrows, particularly at this range. Their giant eyes, luminous in the moonlight, made excellent targets. So did their feet. Even their warboots often left their wide, prehensile side-toes open.

Her first two arrows struck home almost at the same time as her third. The last asura, pinned to the ground, howled with pain as his fellows crumpled soundlessly beside him. Laurel's fingers tripped over the next arrow, but she let it fall and focused on the ones she had left. Two arrows smashed into the edge of the near golem's power crystal, wedging there and cracking it. Even a small crack was enough to upset the delicate asuran magic, and before the golem could locate a target, its floating joints were released. It clattered to harmless pieces. The final golem turned, as Laurel knew it must, but her last arrow hit at a wrong angle and deflected from the crystal without a scratch.

Laurel rolled off her perch backwards, shielding herself behind the stone. She took four more arrows from her quiver, knocked, and pondered how she might get a clear firing angle without being fired upon first. Before she could decide, however, a white streak plummeted down into the fray. Erratic fire blasts pounded out a spurting rhythm below and Laurel didn't waste a moment. She leapt to her perch, knocked, and drew. Below, Lord of Feathers dove and spun about the golem. Balls of fire blasted uselessly in all directions, but the golem could only keep up the offensive so long before it overheated. Laurel held her aim and waited. This time when her shot came she did not miss. Three arrows shattered the golem's glowing red heart and a fourth struck the empty socket for good measure. She pulled another arrow from her quiver and

almost lazily sent it through the other foot of the Inquest who was desperately trying to limp away. A new wave of howling went up into the night, but the black stone drank the sound.

Feathers fluttered down to help himself to the choicer bits of the fresh kills. Today had been a day of gorging for him, and the sight of the red spattered bird cut off the surviving Inquest's shrieks. Laurel replaced her bow on her back and looked for the best way to take Cuain down. One was much the same as another, it seemed. Any way she chose would have her sliding down on her butt most of the way. As she scanned the stones, a small noise came from behind her and she spun to face it. In the moonlight she saw nothing but Cuain's body. She waited, unmoving, her hand hovering over her axe, and this time when the noise came again her sap tingled.

"Whuf," came the noise on the edge of hearing. "W-whuf." Laurel slid down to the body of her hound and held her breath. "Whuf," it came again, softer, but this time she saw it as well as heard it. Somehow a life still held out inside that tortured body. He hibernated, trapped inside the shell of his own flesh.

"I'm here," Laurel whispered, laying her hand on his back. At the touch he fell again to the still silence of death, and she didn't try to coax more out of him. He would need every bit of his strength. She lifted him once more, so gently, and laid his head again at her ear. Her heart ached that she could hear no breathing. "I'm here," she repeated, "and I'll never leave you again."

Below, the crippled Inquest cowered away from the gory raven and the eyeless remains of his companions. It was only a matter of time before a patrol found them, and Laurel didn't intend to wait for one to show up.

"Open the gate and I leave. You live," she said simply. "Keep it closed and we both die, but not before my raven has

his way with you.”

There was no hesitation. The asura dragged himself towards the red glowing control panel, helped along by Feathers’ cawing. He could have called for back-up, but it was an unavoidable risk. She forced herself to breathe normally as he punched in codes at the panel, and then the gate made a gentle whirring noise, opening into the empty night. No guards stood watch on the outside where they would be easy prey for another Vigil squad. Laurel disappeared into the darkness flanked by white wings.



Chapter 13: Parting Ways

Finding her way back to the Vigil fort was not difficult, and Feathers flew on ahead without her. He disliked being up past dark more than Rhyna, and in seeking a safe roost he heralded Laurel's return. When she arrived, the Fort was awake and waiting. The gate guard gave her a grave nod as she passed.

"There, you see? Safe and sound just like I told-"

"You crazy fool!" Rhyna cut Agghi off, her face a darker shade of green than usual, though perhaps it was only a trick of the firelight. "You had me worried half to death! I... by the Mother's roots! Is that...?" The anger went out of her voice as light flickered over the form in Laurel's arms. He'd lost even more leaves in the jostling of travel and was now mostly woody cord. Only a stubborn few still clung on, a grim reminder of what he once had been.

"His name is Cuain," Laurel said as she eased him to the soft packed dirt beside a tent. It was just enough out of the way of traffic that they shouldn't be disturbed, and she sat on the ground beside him.

"Your missing friend," Rhyna's voice cracked, "he was a hound all along?"

"No." *He's more than a hound. Half my soul.* "My friend is dead. In the Nightmare room, like you said."

"I'm sorry." Rhyna knelt down beside Laurel and reached a hand toward Cuain, but then she pulled back, afraid

to touch him. "Is he...?"

"I don't know," Laurel answered. She rested her hand on his head and smoothed away dusty bits of dead leaf from his muzzle. "I can't sense him at all."

"Let me have a look." Agghi pushed past Rhyna and bent down to peer at Cuain.

"Hmmm," he mumbled to himself, then pulled a datapad from his shirt front. Laurel almost protested, but rather than tapping at it, he angled the pad on the ground by Cuain's nose. He waited a moment, then frowned. "No fogging, but with the heat here, your kind's lower body temperature, and his lack of moisture that isn't very conclusive."

He stood, tucking the datapad safely back into his shirt, and circled Cuain twice before kneeling down. "He's all dried up and withered," Agghi announced as if revealing something profound, "like one of Master Brakk's plants left too close to the aetheric conductors without any water." Then he stretched out and pressed his hands to the hound's side.

It happened too fast for Laurel to protest, and she wasn't even sure she would have if she could, but in that moment with Cuain at an asura's mercy she felt more vulnerable than she ever had. More vulnerable than when she was choking on sulfur, more than when she was trapped and half frozen.

The moments stretched on and nothing happened. Slowly her chest unclenched.

"There's nothing you can do. It's alright," Laurel assured him, but the asura wasn't listening. All of his attention was on the hound, and a moment later Laurel noticed the water beading at his wrists. "What are you...?"

She almost didn't hear it under her own voice, but the sound was unmistakable. Cuain drew in one wheezing breath, and her own sap stood still.

“What you both need right now is some food,” Agghi said with a nod, pushing himself to his feet. He patted her shoulder as he walked past, and she heard him whisper, “At least one of us can take back what they stole.”

She wished she could believe it so easily. One breath was all she heard before Cuian’s form fell again to stillness.

Some time later a norn soldier appeared carrying a tray with food. Laurel recognized him as the one who had been shadowing the Warmaster yesterday, and as he knelt, a rich aroma wafted to her from one of the two bowls. A thick stew peeked out from it, and she could also see hard, dark bread and a bit of cheese. She knew she should be hungry. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d eaten hot food, but right now food held no promise for her.

“It was a fool thing you did back there,” the norn said, giving her a stern glance as he set down the tray beside her. “But then, bravery is a good part foolishness. And you did come out in one piece. That counts for something.”

He cast a thoughtful eye over Cuain, then stuck the bread in the stew and handed it to Laurel. She took it almost without noticing.

“That part’s for you. Eat,” the norn commanded as he took the second bowl from the tray. It was filled with a dark liquid, broth of some sort or watered gravy. “Let old Ulfr son of Volf have a look at your beast. Old Ulfr has nursed many a wolf in his day.”

Ulfr leaned over and pulled gently on Cuain’s jaw then dripped some of the liquid into the corner of the hound’s mouth. He ran his fingers down the hound’s throat, massaging it, before repeating the process. Pull, drip, massage. Pull, drip, massage. He stayed with it until the bowl was drained.

“Eat,” Ulfr commanded her again, and she startled, looking at the bowl in her hands as if seeing it for the first time. “Old Ulfr has never seen a wolf in as much trouble as this

since he was a boy, but the Spirit of Wolf is strong. Hope isn't lost yet, little leafling."

Laurel felt tears sting her eyes. They ran unchecked down her cheeks and into her stew as she resolutely took her first bite.

"Thata girl," Ulfr encouraged, getting to his feet. "Eat tonight, and sleep. Old Ulfr will come check on you tomorrow." To Rhyna, "Make her eat." Then he was gone.

The next morning Laurel woke in the dirt, curled protectively around Cuain. She didn't remember finishing her stew or lying down or having the tray and dishes taken away, but the dishes were gone and here she was, so at least two of those must have happened. Cuain lay much the same as he had been the night before.

True to his word, Ulfr son of Volf came again that morning to see to Cuain. He brought stew and water and once more set to carefully feeding the hound. After a few rounds of dribbling in broth, however, Cuain's throat began to work on its own. It was a small thing, the movement of a jaw, but it meant that he lived and that he could grow stronger.

After that first day, Ulfr's visits became the highlight of Laurel's schedule. Every morning and evening was her chance to hope that she might once more look into those big black eyes. Days passed, stretching into a week, and as her old companion came nearer, her new ones began to drift away. Agghi was the first to leave.

That he had stayed at all after the raid was over probably counted for more sentiment than she had any right to ask of the asura, but all the same, when he showed up one morning with his packed up tent floating behind him, the only thing she wanted was to beg him to stay. No harm had ever befallen her since he'd arrived, and now she realized that it felt like that protection might extend to Cuain.

What a childish thing to think, she berated herself.

“Time to empty those datapads?”

“Past time,” he agreed with a short nod. “I’ve got quite the report to make. Both to the Priory and the Arcane Council. I never expected this trip to be so enlightening.” He was quiet for a moment, then added simply, “I never did record scans of your bracer. So don’t think you’re rid of me just yet. As soon as I have new datapads, you can expect to be tracked down.”

“Of course.” Laurel couldn’t help but smile.

“Good,” he nodded again, this time his ears twitching. “Well, that’s that then.” He waved as he turned. “Don’t die on me before my notes are done.”

“I won’t,” she promised, but he was already walking away.

Later that day as Laurel sat stroking Cuain's head, his eyes opened for the first time. With a slow stutter his lids lifted, and Laurel's heart broke. His liquid black eyes had, like the rest of him, been drained of color. Pale blue-gray irises looked up at her, strewn with streaks and smudges of charcoal.

“I’m so sorry,” she breathed, pressing her forehead to his, but there was no accusation in those eyes, no sorrow or grief. There was only the joy at seeing his long-lost master. For the last time tears spilled down Laurel's cheeks.

From there Cuain's condition seemed to improve more quickly, though perhaps that was only an impression given by the way his sharp blue eyes tracked the people who passed or the way his tail thumped weakly whenever he saw Ulfr. Ulfr's visits themselves became something of a ritual, not just for Laurel, but for the entire camp. Morning and evening they came to see the ghost-eyed hound that stubbornly refused to die. The story took on a life of its own, and they began to make a shrine of sorts out of the place where he lie: first a make-shift canvas shelter, then a full-blown tent with one side pinned back to let in the sun, and then they began to accumulate whatever spare pillows and blankets could be

found. Eventually even the warmaster himself showed up to see what the fuss was about.

"Would've been better had you thought ahead and gone in with a plan and backup," he told her as he leaned against a chest that had been shoved to one side of the tent. "Or at least you could have let someone know you had a hound to rescue. I'd really like to know how you managed to get out of there alive. Word is that you're a bloody rampager when cornered." He cast one questioning eye at Laurel, letting her know he didn't quite believe it himself, then reached down and scratched Cuain's chin. It was rumored to be good luck before a mission.

"I thought I had planned it that day," Laurel admitted, "but it seems all the plans I make fall to ashes in my hands, and the direction I most resist turns out to be the right one."

"Plans never do last as long as we'd like, not once the fighting starts," the warmaster agreed. He straightened and took a step away, then paused. "That's where back-up comes in, by the way. Keeps a mistake from turning fatal. If you ever get tired of flying solo, you'd be welcome in the Vigil." He chuckled to himself. "Provided we could teach you some discipline first."

"Good luck with that." Rhyna grinned as she entered. She'd stayed longer than Agghi had, sticking to Laurel's side and watching over her as she in turn watched over Cuain, but eventually even Rhyna found her path leading another direction. A month had come and gone when Diermed returned to the fort, fresh on the completion of his Wyld Hunt. He brought with him news, and that news tugged at Rhyna.

"There are new Valiants coming to Breth now," she said as she sat on a pillow and rubbed Cuain's head. "Rumor has it that the Nightmare Court finished their outpost. They're bolder than ever."

"It sounds like you've got your work cut out for you,"

Laurel ventured, staring hard at her hound.

“It does.” Rhyna fell quiet, and Laurel couldn't bring herself to look up. After all this time together, how did one say good bye?

“You'll be safe here with the Vigil,” Rhyna added awkwardly, “for as long as you want to stay. And if you ever need me for anything-”

“I know where to find you.” Laurel smiled. “Go rescue some Valiant sprouts.”

“May the Pale Tree guide you,” Rhyna's returned smile was in her voice, “until our paths cross again.”



Epilogue

No one paid any mind to one more sylvari walking into the Grove that day, especially not when there were so many Vigil soldiers to gawk at. Some few did notice her, but they looked away hastily from the bedraggled hound that limped at her heels. While some color had come back to him, his new leaves were growing in slowly and unevenly, leaving him thin and still mostly bare. The question was plain in every eye that fled the sight: what had she done to the poor animal? Did it teeter on the edge of Nightmare?

The clamor of their emotions washed against her, and a sliver of fear whispered, *How many of you can feel me as well?* It tightened her throat, but she was determined to give her weary hound rest.

Up she climbed through the city, through the white roots that were the bones of her people to where they gathered into one great trunk. Step by step she dragged herself out of the tide of lives that swirled below. Few came up here to this sacred place, and then only when summoned by the Tree, but she had not been summoned. The voice of the Mother was as silent as it had been since she had first lost hound and hope.

Well, I have won back the first, at least. She leaned back against the ivory bark as her hound nestled himself in a bed of flowers. The journey had been hard on him, and he

groaned in the way that only hounds could as he rolled onto his side to let the sun warm his belly. It seemed such a waste. The Hunt she had chased was not worth the price they had paid for it, and now she longed for the voice of the Mother to whisper reassurances, to tell her she was wrong and it had all been for a larger purpose. But still the Mother did not appear.

Instead it was another sylvari who eventually joined her, an elder of her cycle. Niamh, the Luminary of Noon, first to be born in the strong light of day and first to take up arms against a foe.

“Dagonet felt your return,” she said plainly as she leaned back beside Laurel and looked up. The great trunk stretched like a mountain above them. “A shadow clings to you.”

Laurel winced at the bluntness, but the elder sylvari only watched skyward, unconcerned. “The brightest light casts the sharpest shadows. We are of the Noon, blazing like the high sun, and so we must learn to live with the shadows we cast.”

“There is too much darkness,” Laurel replied. “It spills out into the Dream; that’s why Dagonet could feel my approach. How can I just accept that? How can I inflict these things on new saplings? I should leave, go into hiding, take this away where it can hurt no one else.”

Niamh shook her head gently, rattling the long tail of branches that arched back in place of hair.

“You will have to forgive me. Words are not as easy for me as they are for Aife or Kahedins.” Her sky blue eyes met Laurel’s and an understanding passed between them. Dawn was for the talkers and Night for the thinkers, but those of Noon were of action and their words often failed them. The familiar struggle eased Laurel’s tension a notch, and when her elder continued, she tried to listen past just the words.

“Kahedins would quote Ventari. He would say, ‘The

only lasting peace is the peace within your soul.' It is true, of course, but not so easy as that to understand." Niamh paused a moment, considering. "When I say to accept the shadows you cast, I mean you must make peace with yourself. Make peace with the things done against you, and the things you yourself have done. Then bring that peace and understanding to the Mother. It will shape the Dream far more than any cruelty you have seen in the world."

Laurel breathed out slowly, letting go of a weight she had carried too long. "You are wise, Luminary."

"You mean I am old." Niamh chuckled as she pushed away from the smooth bark. "Yours is not the first hardship faced by our people, and it will not be the last. There is much darkness and danger to be found in Tyria, but learning to face these things without losing sight of Ventari's wisdom, that is what it means to be sylvari."

Niamh retreated, and once more Laurel was left alone with her sleeping hound in the place where the Mother sometimes spoke. Still the Mother's voice was silent, but it was alright. There were new saplings that needed tending more than her. She could live with her shadows, thrive beside them. She had proved that much, and in time she would even cast new ones, for she knew that she would again blaze brightly. She stretched out beside her hound in the sun. They both would.