



## Chapter 1: Through the Maguuma

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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.