



## Chapter 10: Heart of Flame

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“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 Priory ‘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 crabbling approaching. She slipped her axe from her belt slowly and silently, waited, and then threw. The axe thunked into the crabbling 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 Prio, 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 Prio 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 crablings, 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 crabling'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 loose 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 crablings 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 crablings 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 breathe 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 arched 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.