



Chapter 11: Promises

JENNIFER HOFFMAN

“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 Priory, and with him would go all the tool 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 sylvani'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. Diarmed 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 helmets 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.