



Chapter 12: Echoes of the Past

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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. Diarmed 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 Kralkatorrik 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.