



## Chapter 13: Parting Ways

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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 unmistakeable. 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 leafing."

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.”