



Chapter 2: Chasing a Color

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“Hush now,” Laurel soothed as she walked up to Cuain and scratched behind his ears. The hounds quieted some but were still agitated by the three asura and their strange golem. “Don’t mind them,” Laurel bid the new visitors. “They haven’t seen a golem in a while.”

“Hmm, yes. I suppose that’s to be expected.” With a glance, the shortest of the three asura declared that she was the better of everyone present. It didn’t matter that she was less than half Laurel’s height; she still managed to look down her nose at the sylvari.

“It’s been a while for me as well, I must admit,” Laurel continued. The golem unsettled her. Its angles were all wrong, somehow. Yet, if one wanted to get on an asura’s good side, it was hard to go wrong praising their golems. “I passed by Rata Sum after leaving the Grove, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen a golem of this design.”

The short asura gave an irritated wave of her hand, which was as much an acknowledgement of the compliment as a dismissal of lessers.

“Simpletons, the lot of them,” she muttered. “They wouldn’t know a useful design if it walked up and pulled their ears.” Still, she gave a curt nod to one of her companions and he led the golem away. As it retreated the hounds settled more, but Laurel noted the deep rents the golem left in the

soft moss. She thought she might understand why the things were not always welcome here.

"Will you be needing food? Supplies?" she asked. "I don't have much to offer, since I'm just passing through myself, but I'm sure someone here would be happy to help."

"No, no. We brought plenty of our own supplies," the asura assured her. "We were just on our way to..."

"Did you see it?" the squealed question came from behind Laurel. Those villagers roused by the hounds were beginning to gather. A man whose face was framed in waxy blue aloe hugged the woman beside him tightly. Her shock of black-spotted orange leaves nearly vibrated with her excitement.

"Red! Its crystal was red!" he confirmed, his own voice rising in pitch.

"You know what this means!" another exclaimed.

The joy in their faces was lost on the asura, however. Her mouth tightened to a thin line, and when she spoke her sharply pointed teeth flashed. "It means nothing. Plenty of golems use red crystals, and..."

"None that we've seen!" some called, and Laurel had to agree. She had seen blue crystals and purple and even yellow, but she hadn't seen golems with red crystals before.

"You must go with them, Valiant. Surely you see that."

Laurel shook her head. "From here I head further west, towards the red wastes..."

"But it's just like your Dream," someone else protested.

"A red crystal in this blue jungle!"

"I suppose it might look like that," Laurel hesitated. The golem's power crystal had been the dark, pure red of rubies, faceted and sparkling. In her Dream she had seen a stone that was the warm orangey red of carnelians, flat and unpolished but beckoningly bright. If all the Dream was going to give her was a color, then she thought she could expect that color to be fairly precise.

“It couldn’t be more clear.”

“I wish my Dream had spoken so plainly!”

Laurel felt herself bristle at the presumption, but before she could put her foot down, the asura butted in.

“We could use a volunteer or two,” she said, weighing Laurel and the other sylvari with her eyes. As she considered them, a hush of anticipation fell and no one made a move to interrupt her. They were insects trapped in the amber of her large, liquid eyes, and she knew it as she dangled her next sentence before them. “We’re on our way to a top secret facility to conduct research on the dragons. Some sylvari could perhaps be useful.”

The taller asura quirked an eyebrow at his leader, almost as surprised as the sylvari themselves, but he contained himself well and merely nodded to his superior. “Yes Zeppi, ma’am! Some sylvari brought along would be most useful.”

“I’ll go.” Liath volunteered from behind Laurel. She hadn’t even noticed his arrival, but of course he would have been drawn to the commotion along with the others, even more so because he had known she would be at the center of it.

His words had cracked the shell of silence, and the next voice cried out, “The Valiant will go for sure!”

“She must, of course,” another agreed. The buzz of the crowd returned tenfold so that when Laurel spoke her protesting words were drown in a sea of accent.

“I go my own way!” She looked to Liath for support, but he was the only sylvari not looking at her. His attention was fixed on the asura. The warmth she had come to expect from him had fled his features to be replaced by an impassive mask. It made him stand out from the crowd almost as much as his subdued palette.

“The Valiant will find her Hunt with them!” The crowd roiled on, bolstered by its sureness and oblivious to the dread on Laurel’s face.

"She can follow the red crystal until she finds a blue blanket."

"And then she can study the golems!"

"I go west," Laurel raised her voice to be heard, and the asura followed suit, cutting through the clamor.

"So do we. You might as well travel with us for a time, and shut them all up." Zeppi clearly had no patience for another round of blathering, and Laurel grudgingly nodded.

"Only if you set out today," she warned. She hated to lose traveling time, but if she wouldn't have to wait long, then she didn't mind travelling with others going the same direction. Besides, if they slowed her down it would be easier to slip away in the wilderness than it would be here in the village.

"We do," Zeppi confirmed.

"Can I come?" a woman ventured from the crowd. "I've always wanted to see a Wyld Hunt!"

"Two is plenty." The finality in the asura's voice snubbed more requests so easily that Laurel wondered if she had experience dealing with sylvari. It was unlikely, of course. None of the villagers seemed to recognize her, and this far out what other sylvari would she have contact with? Yet like a seasoned veteran, she moved on quickly before excitement could reignite.

"Flikk, see that our new helpers find their way to the carts by nightfall." Zeppi didn't wait to see if her command was heard or understood, but turned her attention back to the crowd. "We were searching for anomalous plant life in the Maguuma areas away from your Grove. We weren't expecting to find sylvari this far out, and it would be greatly helpful to us if you have records of which plants you've brought with you to propagate and which you found already here."

The townsfolk were excited to be of help with the Valiant's Wyld Hunt, and Laurel didn't have the heart to correct them. She just watched as the lead asura was ushered off into town. Most of the hounds bounded after their owners,

caught up in the excitement as well. Cuain stayed behind, however, nuzzling his face into Laurel's hand. It was probably as much for his own reassurance as it was to comfort her. He didn't like the asura, as though he could still smell the strange golem on them. He probably could, at that.

"I don't have much to prepare," Liath admitted. He hadn't moved from the spot, and now that the villagers had emptied from around him Laurel could see just how tense he was. "Well, not much that we have time for anyway. I would have liked to see the new garden put in, but it probably doesn't matter now. I doubt I'll be back this way again." He turned down the path that would take him home, and Laurel almost followed him. She wanted to ask what had spooked him so.

"We'll wait for you here," Flikk said, and Laurel realized it was for the best. What her friend needed now was some time to clear his head, just like she'd needed the night before.

Waiting with the asura, however, was boring. He showed no desire to see any more of this town than he needed to. His eyes didn't wander, and his arms remained firmly crossed on his chest. He also showed no desire to talk any more than he needed to, but after a time of sitting in silence and scratching Cuain between his leaves, Laurel couldn't help asking, "Will you be going as far as the red wastes?"

The asura eyed the surrounding buildings, as though he was unsure if he were allowed to talk to her. After a moment he made up his mind. "The lab isn't that far. After you've seen your friend settled in with us, you'll still have a distance to travel."

Laurel nodded at that and wondered what kind of time they would make. She doubted the short-legged asura could match her usual travel pace, but truth be told, if the asura could cut a straighter path through the jungle than the meandering route she had come by, that could more than

make up for it. The stars were hard to see from beneath the jungle canopy, and she sniffed after her Hunt like a dog without a trail, casting this way and that, poking and prodding at different paths to make sure she wasn't passing by any clues. The asura would be more focused and would probably have better means of navigating.

"Then you'll see him settled in?" Flikk asked, startling Laurel. She nodded before thinking and his blank mask slipped into a toothy grin. "You'll at least take a look around, won't you? To see where he'll be staying? Our facility is quite amazing, you know."

His pride was infectious and she found her own curiosity pricked. She didn't have to stay, after all, and it wasn't every day you were invited into a secret asuran lab. Surely it wouldn't hurt just to stop in for a moment and see the place with her own eyes, especially if the asura could shave some time off her trip in the first place.

"As long as it doesn't take long," Laurel agreed. Besides, what if the others were somehow right? The golems weren't her Hunt. That much she knew, but it could be possible for the gem from her Dream to still be found in their lab. She wouldn't know until she looked, and one quick look would be enough to put any doubts out of her mind for good. It was a worthwhile trade.

"We study all of the known elder dragons there," Flikk bragged. "And some which are only theorized. We like to bring in specimens of their minions when possible, but it's not easy to capture and contain them."

"I would imagine not." Laurel thought for a moment. "I guess that's why you've built the lab this remotely? For safety?"

"Oh yes. Safety. Yes," Flikk continued right along, giving Laurel the impression that they might have different meanings of the word. "The facility is quite secure. The only way in or out to the jungle here is through a gate. And the gate is well protected too."

"How interesting." Liath returned to them with a small pack slung over one shoulder. He held himself with more ease now, though his cheeriness felt forced.

"We'd better get going." Flikk hopped up quickly, eager to leave the village behind. Or perhaps he was just eager to return to his Krewe. They were waiting not far outside of town, three of them including the one who had returned with the golem earlier. Flikk and Zeppi would make a total of five.

Completing the picture were five of what must have been the carts they were supposed to wait by. Hovering rectangular constructions, with no wheels that Laurel could see, the carts were of a similar design aesthetic to the golems. They had siding that came up waist high on the two asura working inside them, and each one was a cluttered little lab unto itself.

All five carts were linked together by flickering filaments of energy in triangular patterns to one another. She had seen caravans in and around the Grove, always with one wagon following another in a line. But each of these was linked to two or three others so that no single cart was leading or trailing.

Her curiosity drew her towards them, but Cuain refused to approach the golems and whined when she made to leave him. Liath showed the same hesitation, but with a deep breath he firmed his resolve and then strode confidently towards the golems. Laurel had to resign herself to waiting as near as Cuain would come. She sat with her hound and pet him soothingly, but she couldn't stop watching Liath from the corner of her eye as he approached the asura alone.

"These are like no carts I've ever seen," he observed.

"Of course they're not," one of the asura rebuked as he hopped down to block the sylvari's way, rolling his eyes as he did so. "These aren't carts. They're C-A-R-Ts. Capacious Anti-Gravity Reticulating Transports. Flikk, why is there a salad poking around at my CART?"

"Volunteers," Flikk answered. That got a surprised glance from the golem engineer, which was quickly forgotten as he returned to his inspections and his data pad. The protective asura gave a grudging nod but didn't move to let Liath closer to the CART. Nor did his scowl lessen.

Eventually a different asura came over to ease the tension. "Lay off it Tarkk," she berated. "He's not going to steal the etheric couplings like some skritt." She rolled her eyes and then graciously smiled at Liath. The congeniality of it was only somewhat lessened by the suspicious glance she also darted at Laurel, although perhaps that was merely worry over the nervous hound that would be traveling with them.

"My name's Mikka, and I, for one, think there's a lot we'll learn from you," she assured Liath, shaking his hand and giving it a squeeze. It released something inside him and the last of the tension flowed out of him. He shook her hand in return, and when he smiled at her, a hint of his old warmth came back to him. The change was not lost on the asura and she added, "I look forward to seeing you settled in at the lab! But for now we still have other work to do."

After that the asura busied themselves with various contraptions both in and out of the CARTs. There were scanners and samplers and other devices which Laurel could put no name to. When the asura spoke it was in low voices with their heads bent together. No one had much attention to spare for the two sylvari, and any attempt to see what was in the CARTs got Liath hastily shooed away by vigilant frowns. In the end he came back to Laurel and settled beside her to wait for Zeppi's return.

"They are not what I thought they'd be, these asura," he noted. He kept his voice low so as to not unintentionally insult them. Asura were notoriously prickly, but it was likely their preoccupation rather than the volume that kept the asura from hearing. Their overly large ears weren't just for show.

"What you thought they'd be? Have you never seen an asura before?"

Liath shook his head. "I was afraid to. I am of the Cycle of Night, and before I left the Grove I spent much time learning from Malomedies."

Laurel nodded and patted her friend on the shoulder. Malomedies was firstborn; all sylvari knew his story. The cruelty he had suffered at asuran hands, unintentional though it might have been, had nearly led her people to war. Only the wisdom of Ventari had held them back from retribution. She quickly changed the subject.

"They're not what I expected either, at least not Mikka, and I've been to Rata Sum," Laurel admitted. "I think I like her, maybe because of it. In Rata Sum, if one asura said the sky was blue there would be another nearby to argue the shade. And if one asura boasted an accomplishment there were three more ready to diminish it. I don't think I've ever heard one admit that there was something they didn't know, even indirectly."

"Then I'm glad these are the first asura that have found me." Liath smiled and the pink-blue currents beneath his gray skin pressed to the surface. Laurel was glad to see him smile again; the color made him look more alive. He must have felt more alive as well, for he soon turned to curiosity.

"I've never used an asura gate before. Did you take one when you went to Rata Sum? What does it feel like?"

"If they've attuned it right, you won't feel much of anything," Laurel answered. "But it's still always a shock to be in one place and then suddenly in another." She thought back on her brief visit to Rata Sum. The only way into or out of that floating metropolis was through a gate. She had taken the one from Metrica Province, the partially cleared jungle below Rata Sum.

"When I entered Rata Sum the first time, it was unsettling," she recalled. "One moment I was in the hot sun,

and the air was thick with moisture. The next I was in the thin breezy air of the city, chilly and shaded."

"How fascinating!" Liath's face lit with wonder. "Do you think this lab is underground, or floating in the air?"

"Hard to say," Laurel answered. "If the only way in or out is through gates, then it's probably not at ground level. But beyond that, I couldn't guess."

"I hope it's in the sky." Liath looked up as though envisioning the clouds he could not see through the layers of foliage. "I would like to feel the sun again. It's what I miss most about the Grove." That led to recalling memories of the Grove, and Laurel listened as her friend spoke wistfully. His experience of the place had been far different from her own, peaceful and quiet. He had no concept of the churning Dream that lingered there, and Laurel had no desire to intrude on his happy remembrance.

For the same reason, she pushed down the one question she most wished to ask him. If the asura scared him so, why had he volunteered to go with them? He hadn't hesitated at all. He'd been quicker to the draw, in fact, than any other in the crowd. Had he known what they would ask? Laurel swallowed the question. An answer was less important than seeing her friend happy and whole again.

It was late in the day but not quite evening by the time Zeppi returned. Mikka was the first to notice her coming, and the younger asura sprang to attention. "Zeppi, ma'am! Measurements proceeding according to expectations!"

"Up, you hebetudinous harebrains!" was the only reply Zeppi gave. "We're moving out!" Her Krewe scrambled to put all of their contraptions back into the proper CARTs even as they jolted into motion.

In the days of travel that followed, the asura kept ever busy. As far as Laurel could tell the only difference between traveling and resting was whether they worked both in and around the CARTs or completely inside them. With five asura and five CARTs it would have made sense if each had his or her

own little lab, but that didn't seem to be the case. They hopped from one to another and back again, often rubbing elbows in the same CART. Three asura must have been the capacity that one CART could handle, for on one occasion Tarkk found himself to be the fourth and spent the better part of an hour glancing over impatiently to see when he would get a turn. Surprisingly, he didn't complain.

Her earlier judgement that these asura were odd was definitely on the mark. They worked seamlessly, very much unlike the people of Rata Sum who were always at cross-purposes with one another. Nothing was more odd in asura than open displays of cooperation, but it was rather encouraging. You could almost get lost in the pattern of their deliberate movements, and more than one night Laurel drifted off to the reassuring back and forth of tiny bodies over hovering equipment.

Best of all, they cut their way westward through the jungle like an arrow, straight and true. Surely she was closer now to her Wyld Hunt than she would have been otherwise.

Laurel was almost sad to know that their time together was coming to an end when on the fourth day they arrived at a small cave, little more than a gap between rocks. Tarkk, as scowly as ever, found a nondescript panel embedded in the stone and began punching in codes while the others rearranged the CARTs into single file so they might fit through the narrow entrance. A brief glimmer of light in the gap indicated an energy field being turned off.

The asura filed inside with Liath close on their heels. Cuain came more hesitantly, sniffing at it tentatively. His anxiety was harder to quell than Liath's had been, but several days of uneventful travel had helped.

"Come on, we've made good time already. We might as well make sure they've nothing else for us. One look around, and if we find no gem we're off again as fast as our feet can take us." Laurel knelt and scratched his leafy ruff heartily. He licked at her nose then, his ears perked forward. "I

promise,” she assured him. “I’ll chase you until I can’t run anymore.”

Cuain wagged his tail a few times and then let it drop as he faithfully strode ahead into the darkness. Laurel brushed off her knees and followed. The end of the curving tunnel opened into a small chamber where the promised asura gate waited. It was currently inactive, although Tarkk was already busy at the control panel.

“You don’t keep it attuned?” Laurel asked, somewhat surprised. She’d never seen a gate without the liquid purple gleam of a portal in its mouth. It looked haunting and lifeless this way.

“There are only two gates inside the lab,” Mikka explained as she came over by the sylvari. Cuain sniffed at her when she got near. “One on the upper level and one in the deeper levels. The upper level gate cycles through a schedule of attunements, and that’s the one we’ll enter through today.”

Liath nodded vigorously. He had grown from acceptance of the asura and generic curiosity to sincere interest and enthusiasm. “It’s a double door,” he pointed out. “So if there is a problem inside, only one gate can be open at a time and you never completely expose the outside world.”

Mikka smiled more deeply. “I think you’re going to like it here.”

Although they had their own gate attuned relatively quickly, it remained dim and dormant. It wouldn’t flare to life until the gate at the other end was also attuned properly, and that would happen on a schedule which was regularly changed.

“How long will this take?” Laurel tried to keep the impatience from her voice, but Cuain had no such subtlety. He fed off her emotions and proclaimed them loudly by pacing the perimeter of the cave.

“There’s no way to be certain,” Mikka conceded. “The schedule is always changing. It’s never longer than a day, usually only a matter of hours.” A day seemed a very long time

to wait. Cuain paused to look suggestively at the entrance. "I'm sure it won't be more than an hour," Mikka added hopefully.

Laurel shifted her weight and sat down. "An hour," she agreed.

The golems took up positions as guards just inside the chamber's entrance. Two of the CARTs were separated from the others and moved to one edge of the room where Tark promptly busied himself, paying no attention to the remaining three which waited in a triangle before the gate. He was to stay behind and close the gate after them, guarding the location until the next Krewe came on a mission this way. No wonder he was so grumpy all the time, Laurel mused. She wouldn't have liked that duty much either. This place was boring.

Cuain's pacing became their only measure of time. Lap upon lap he circled as the minutes stretched endlessly. He was the only thing that moved, the only thing of interest to watch. The rock of the cave was as lifeless as the artificial light that lit the chamber. Tarkk stayed in one spot in his CARTs and the other asura sat idly, afraid to start any work lest they be caught in the middle of something when the gate opened. In their own boredom, their eyes followed the hound nervously. He stood taller than they did, after all. It only made sense for them to be nervous when he was agitated.

With no sun to tell by, it was impossible to know how much time truly slipped by. Just when Laurel thought she must surely stand up and walk out, the gate flickered and crackled. A portal sprang up inside it, and the asura burst into action. Cuain leapt to her side as she rose to her feet.

"Let's get this over with." She almost felt guilty for voicing her sour mood when she saw how Liath glowed and grinned beside her.