



### Chapter 3: The Cold of Night

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The sight that greeted them as they entered the lab was more amazing than anything Laurel had expected, and for the sight alone she was thankful she had waited. The gate itself rested atop a floating platform, surrounded by a multitude of smaller platforms like upside down pyramids scattered in mid air. Below them was a deep pond, almost a lake, and when Laurel eagerly peered over the edge she could see fish darting below the rippling surface. Even if her Hunt wasn't here, a quick look around would definitely be worth her while. Just a quick one.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful the sun was," Liath breathed in awe. His face was up-turned and Laurel saw that above them a few stray clouds scuttled across an otherwise clear blue sky. In the daylight his gray flesh looked warmer, like smoke faintly backlit by a fire. But perhaps the color came from the way that he was beaming, just as the pinks and blues came when he smiled.

Two of the asura broke from the group and set off about some very important business or another. They didn't bother explaining to anyone, which was more typical asuran behavior than the cooperation they had displayed on the journey. That left Zeppi and Mikka to lead the sylvari down from the platform.

Laurel would not have seen the pathways between platforms if not for the asura striding out confidently ahead of

her. The paths were nearly invisible, a faint warping of the light in otherwise empty air. With his lesser vision, Cuain could not see them at all and nearly rolled his eyes in fear as she stepped out onto open air. But as she stood there unharmed and encouraging, he forced himself to follow, clinging to Laurel's side and tapping forward with a paw before each careful step.

From the corner of her eye Laurel kept catching glimpses of other such walkways crisscrossing above and below them. The things were everywhere, and yet any stranger to the lab would have had a hard time finding their way through the maze. The layout of it was anything but straightforward. These asura knew the twisting way by heart, though, and strode quickly along with hardly a downward glance. When they descended to the edge of the pool at last, Cuain was only too happy to leap to solid ground. He jumped clear over the two asura and gave them quite a start. Laurel suppressed a giggle as they shook themselves off and pretended that nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Ahead of them stretched a long, straight hallway. While it gave the impression of being enclosed, it actually had no ceiling. The two walls reached overhead but failed to meet and left the sky visible through a channel at the center.

As they walked, the immensity of the place struck her. This single lab might even rival the size of Rata Sum itself. She had never heard of such a thing, and wouldn't have dreamed it possible. Asura preferred their labs small and personal so they could hide away their secrets from one another, but here was proof that they were capable of something more. It certainly seemed important enough to be worthy of a Wyld Hunt, but she hadn't yet seen anything which triggered recognition. She kept her eyes open, nonetheless, and carefully observed everything they passed.

With the exception of size, the architecture was a typical asuran style. While it lacked the bright colors of Rata Sum, the lab's construction was a marvel of geometry. It was

carved from rough black stone into perfect cubes. Those cubes, however, were arrayed in a sort of perfection that only an asura could see. They jutted out at angles which were simultaneously unnerving and elegant.

Walking beside her, Liath didn't notice a thing. His eyes were raised and there was contentment on his face. It seemed to Laurel like the peace of one coming home, or perhaps the peace of one whose Dream was nearly fulfilled. She wondered what that must feel like.

Near the end of the hallway the floor rose sharply in a ramp and, as they crested that rise, a beautiful chamber opened up before them. It welcomed them as if it had been prepared just for their pleasure. The room was one hexagon set inside another, with the outer ring forming a walkway. Pillars topped by green crystals dotted each point of the interior hexagon, separating the walkway from the wide central space. That was lush with moss and grasses and low-lying flowers so that it looked as though it had been preserved from the original land when the lab was built around it. Sunlight poured in from above and Liath laughed aloud as he ran onto the grass and filled his lungs with the scent of life. It was more like the Grove than his village had been, and it even made Laurel a twinge homesick.

"You'll be helping us to study the natural resistances some plants have to the dragons' corruption," Mikka informed Liath. "Anything you wish to grow in this space you're welcome to. Only check with us first so we can catalogue your efforts and monitor their progress."

"Of course," he agreed. Laurel could see him already planning the space in his mind. It was not quite large enough to grow a typical sylvari home, but nearly so.

"You're welcome to stay as well, if you like," Zeppi offered, but Laurel shook her head. She had seen enough. Her Hunt was not here.

"I need to continue on to the red wastes."

"I thought as much," Zeppi responded matter-of-factly. "This way please."

She gestured towards the hallway they had come from and began to leave. Mikka was deep in conversation with Liath on the proper protocol for ordering new saplings to be brought to the lab, and Laurel didn't wish to interrupt them. She was in a hurry to be off, however, and her ticket out wasn't waiting. It was too abrupt a good-bye once again, but there was nothing to be done about it. With a small smile and a wave she turned to followed Zeppi back away from the green room.

Having spoken of them aloud summoned the red wastes to mind, and having written off this place as not her Hunt, her mind was free to roam. She wondered again if she would meet some of the jungle centaur tribes on her way, if they really were green. Was that part just the embellishment of legend? She had never heard of a mammal with a green coat. Maybe they grew moss on themselves for camouflage? Maybe beneath the moss they were all as snowy white as Ventari had been. Or maybe the green was truly their own color and their velvet of such a prized color had been sought after by human hunters. That seemed to be the way most old conflicts in human lore began, with the greed after something not their own. How had the human centaur conflict started? Surely the jungle tribes would know. They would value knowledge and history as highly as Ventari had, wouldn't they? Her mind skipped. Maybe the centaurs would know what her stone creatures were or where she could find them. She couldn't think of anyone who would know the deep jungle and its secrets better than them.

Laurel was deep in thought when she realized they had criss-crossed the air walkways and come back down to the edge of the pond again. They hadn't even reached the gate platform. "Is something the matter?"

"The gate has moved on," Zeppi informed her. "Nothing to worry about, we'll just go attune it back." She

gestured Laurel to follow her and set off down another hallway much similar to the first. Laurel hesitated, considered waiting by the gate. She wanted to be away more than ever now, to be chasing after the centaurs who would surely lead her to her quarry. But she also knew asura. If she didn't personally accompany Zeppi, there was no telling what distractions would slow her from the task of re-attuning the gate. She might forget she had left Laurel waiting at all.

"Come on," Laurel grumbled to Cuain as she hurried after the asura. This time, half way down the hall Zeppi took a sharp right turn and Laurel had to hasten to keep up with her. She almost lost sight of her guide twice as they weaved in and out of oddly angled halls, going up and down and up again. Zagging left and right and left until Laurel had no idea how to find her way back to where she had started.

At last they came to a room which was shaped much like the green room had been, save that this room had white crystals topping its six pillars and a pile of snow in the center rather than grass.

"I'll just be one moment," Zeppi assured Laurel as she set to tapping at a control panel along the hexagonal walkway, but it wasn't just one moment. The longer Zeppi tapped at the panel, the more frustrated her face became and the more intently she stared at her work. And the longer Laurel waited, the more curious she became.

Her frustration grew as well, but it was slowly consumed by the allure of the unknown. She had never seen snow before. She knew what it was, in that same amorphous way that she knew what a centaur looked like without having ever met one. She also knew that snow was cold, but the closest she had ever come to experiencing the concept was the relative chill of a fall morning in the shadowy jungle.

Laurel glanced back at the asura nervously as she edged towards the tempting white fluff, but the asura was too absorbed by her misbehaving gate to pay any mind to the sylvari. Surely she wouldn't notice if Laurel took just a small

handful. It wouldn't hurt anything. She reached down and rested her hand on the rough crystals.

Cold was something new to her, and even labeling it as such did little justice to the full amazement she now felt. Laurel boggled at the way her hand tingled, the way the rough feeling of the texture sharpened as she held her hand still. It was like the awareness in her hand compounded itself all on its own, like the cold was a living thing taking up residence in her flesh. What a strange thing indeed! It was as different from a cool jungle night as morning dew was from a summer rain. She laughed despite her best efforts to behave herself and jumped forward to pack together a snowball for Cuain.

"Finally!" Zeppi muttered, and Cuain yelped a warning. Laurel dropped the half-formed snow and spun, prepared to deny she had done anything wrong. She wasn't prepared, however, for the energy field she slammed headlong into as she leapt up towards the walkway. Dazed, she sprawled back in the snow and looked up.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to mess anything up," she apologized, rubbing her sore nose. "Its just that I'd never seen snow before, and I guess I was curious..."

"Not nearly as curious as I'd been counting on," Zeppi heaved a sigh. "I thought I'd have to pretend at that panel all day before you went in."

"What?" Edges of fear started to circle Laurel, and her sense of alarm went straight to her hound. He growled at the smug asura, but those growls quickly turned to wild barking as golems appeared in pairs from each of the three entrances to the chamber.

"That took long enough," an armored guard complained as he came up behind some of the golems. "Where do you want the noisy one? More food for Mordremoth?"

"No," Zeppi shook her head even as the golems closed in around Cuain. Her hound's frantic barking phased them not at all, as ineffectual as Laurel's pounding against the energy

field. She heard the asura's words only distantly. All her attention was focused on her frantic pet and battering the cage that held her from him.

"...don't even know if that one would... ..hasn't taken any other bait... ..zone purple... ..at least other plants have... ..see if this one turns..."

As the golems herded her hound away and out of sight, the snarls and barking faded. It didn't take long. The stern black stone drank sound rather than echoing it. Only when she could no longer hear her beloved Cuain did Laurel sag to the ground against the barrier. Golden tears spilled down her cheeks, and her arms ached to the shoulder from the force of her blows. The cold was becoming uncomfortable, and she hugged her knees to her chest as much for reassurance as for warmth.

She sniffed and scrubbed her face with the back of her hand, stubbornly pushing away the tears. The Pale Tree gave her children all the knowledge they needed to survive. If Laurel could but think on it, surely she would find some detail from her Dream that told her what to do next. So she sat in the cold and thought, or at least she tried to. The tingling in her feet from the cold was already turning sharper and more insistent, and her own thoughts betrayed her, returning constantly to Cuain. His eyes had been wild and his jaws slaving when he had disappeared down the ramp. Sobs tore through her and this time she didn't try to stop them. Nor did she try to stop the rivers of ice that crept up from her chin or the black sleep that slowly crept over her.

*Wake, my child. It's not yet your time to return to me.*

The voice of the Mother drifted to Laurel from across a great distance and roused her from a weary sleep. She instinctively reached out her hand for her hound, but all she found was the cold crunch of snow. She choked on her own breath as memory assailed her, and she made to rise to her feet to shout her anger anew, but her body was stiff with cold and her feet were numb. With a new rush of fear she realized

that she needed to get her sap flowing, to keep it moving lest it freeze.

With great effort she stood and stamped her feet, then wished she hadn't. Life returned to them with pain, the pleasant tingles from earlier coming now as stabbing shards of ice. A wordless cry escaped her lips, but she stamped her feet again. Again. The pain in her feet echoed that in her heart and she tried to imagine her anger warming her. When she was confident that she wouldn't fall, she pushed herself into a staggering walk. The snow was thinner at the edges of her hexagonal prison and her limbs responded better as her body warmed. Sylvari didn't generate as much heat as a warm blooded mammal would have, but for now her movement and fury were still enough.

Lap after lap she paced, carving out a trail through the snow. When the circles dizzied her, she changed directions and continued her determined march the other way around. It was what Cuain would have done, and as it had with him, the repetitive movement settled her mind. After a time she felt almost normal, and with her wits about her again, determination took hold.

Reaching up as high as she could, she felt no end to the energy field. Bending down, her fingers could make no mark in the frozen ground, though she did succeed in making her fingers throb from the abuse. Both climbing over and digging beneath the barrier were out of the question, and no other options presented themselves, so she nursed her complaining fingers as she returned to pacing.

There was no obvious source for the cold that she could see. No cold air blew in, nor new ice was brought. The white crystals on their pillars gave off no chill either. Despite that, what was already here refused to melt and Laurel could almost feel the cold pulsing around her. It was slightly warmer directly against the energy field, or perhaps it was only less cold, but other than that, the cold was simply there. Even and ever present. It was deeply frustrating.

Laurel had grown lonely as well as hungry by the time an asura returned to her chamber. She had not seen this one before.

"I'm cold," she pleaded, and immediately felt stupid. The asura smiled broadly at that, assuming it was a deliberate jest.

"I imagine you are," he agreed.

"What's going on? Where did you take my hound? Why are you keeping me here?" The questions fell out of her in a rush, and she hoped his good humor would work to her benefit.

"Didn't anyone tell you?" he was a bit put off by that. "Quite rude, I say. You should at least know that much." He nodded to himself, his tone indicating how generous he was being when he continued. "You're here to help us study the resistances that sylvani show to the dragons' corruption."

"I don't understand," Laurel shook her head. "How can I help from in here? Let me out and I swear I'll help you."

That earned her a chuckle. "Oh you're already helping wonderfully from right there."

"But how?" Laurel was desperate and it showed in her voice. She was no negotiator on a good day, and this was far from a good day.

"Why, by either being corrupted or dying first," the asura replied cheerfully. "The others all seemed to chose the latter, but maybe you'll break the pattern."

"Others? What others?" Laurel demanded. "What happened to them? Where's my hound?"

The asura shook his head and muttered something about "bookahs," leaving without so much as a backward glance.

Laurel continued pacing through evening and well into the night, but her feet began to drag as the cold sapped her strength. While her body insisted on shivering, she felt as though each rush of spasms simply drew away more precious energy and cast it off into the darkness.

At least her hunger had faded. If she could last until the sun came up, she told herself, she would be alright. The sun would restore her energy and that would make everything alright. She just needed to keep moving until then, no matter how heavy her legs were growing or how they ached with cold.

When the sun finally did return to peer over the walls, it was thin comfort. The light reached her but it held no warmth. She was too tired to care. The sun was up, now she could rest. Curling herself against the energy barrier to leech from its faint warmth, she gave in and sank towards sleep. For a fleeting moment she wished for the warmth and comfort of Cuain's body beside her, wondering why he wasn't there. Before she could puzzle it out, sleep claimed her.

*Awake, child. You must be awake now.* The Mother's voice was faint this time, a far echoing she hardly heard, but it was persistent and the urgency in it made Laurel want to obey.

Consciousness was slow in coming, and Laurel had to fight to gain hold of it. It was already dark again, and Laurel wondered how that could be when she hadn't slept for more than a few minutes. Weariness begged her to lie still and close her eyes again, but the Mother's thin voice would not relent and Laurel forced herself to rise.

Her limbs made awful creaking and popping noises as she gathered them beneath her and forced them to straighten. She stood upright for a moment and then toppled over forward, her legs unable to respond in time to balance her. It took two more tries before she was able to stay upright on those stiff limbs that she could hardly feel. Then she put one foot in front of the other and it was as though she walked on someone else's legs.

This time the movement did little to warm her. The cold had already seeped in too deeply. Her hands were lost to her, and where she could feel, all that she felt was her sap burning like the scrape of crystal slush through her veins.

"It's too much," she tried to say, but her lungs rattled and the words were consumed in a fit of coughing. She sank to the ground, too weary even to curl up. On the edges of her consciousness she could feel the Dream. It beckoned to her welcomingly, memories of warmth and kin and kindness, and she reached towards it.

As she did so, she became aware of herself. Or rather, she became aware of the body that had been hers. It lie crumpled in the snow, with hoarfrost creeping over it. The leaves that had once framed her face in vibrant red-orange were now edged in black. The glowing lines that had once drawn traces of fire across her green skin were pulsing so slowly and faintly that they were hardly visible.

She knew it truly then. Here was where she would die.

*I'm sorry Cuain, she thought. I can't help you now, you'll have to find your own way out.* She tried to remember him as he had been in the jungle, racing through the leaves like he could catch the wind itself, but instead she saw him as she had last seen him, eyes wide with terror as he snapped at the golems.

She let go. Let go of all she had been and of the frozen form she was becoming. This flesh was no longer her. Instead she flung herself at the Dream, at that half-sensed current at the edge of awareness. It reached back to embrace her, but as she touched it, she found something that was not the Dream she had known.

*Go back, sapling.* A new voice floated to her. It reached her like the Mother's, but it was closer than the Mother had been. With that closeness came strength, and she heard it as clearly as a whisper over her shoulder. *You're not ready to rejoin the Dream.*

She felt herself pushed back towards the frozen form in the snow and she screamed a soundless scream of fear and protest. *That frozen thing is not me! It's dead! I won't go back to it!*

*You must.* The voice was steady and certain, and even one last surge of defiance could not stop the push which forced her back into the flesh that had been hers.

The silence and blackness that swallowed her then was complete. She drifted peacefully, without thought or awareness, and an eternity passed in which time itself was meaningless.