



Chapter 4: A Friend in the Garden

JENNIFER HOFFMAN

Wake now, sapling. The voice that was not the Mother whispered to her, pulling at her. *You are safe now.* It said, but it pulled her towards something she did not want and she resisted. Like an infant flailing against its mother's arms, her efforts were feeble and warmly ignored. She was helpless as she was drawn up out of the blackness and back into awareness.

She could feel, and what she felt was agony. Sensation stabbed through her and she would have cried out, but her throat was dry to the point of cracking. It was all she could do to wheeze air into her tortured lungs.

Someone offered her water in a cup, the barest of trickles, and even that much burned as it went down. She was too weak to cough, and shortly someone began rubbing her hands, massaging life into them. She wished they would stop. Each motion was the grinding of stones against tender new shoots. She tried to push it away, to shake off her assailant, but the motion was hardly a twitch and the methodical torture continued. Unwillingly she slipped back into darkness, but it was not the peace of oblivion. Her mind writhed with nightmares, endlessly chasing Cuain through a bleak and snowy wilderness, never quite able to catch him.

She woke and and slept sporadically, and the memories she formed of that time were foggy at best. Her

wakefulness was like a dream and in her sleep the nightmares were vivid.

The first thing she would later recall with clarity was sitting on a tall hilltop, propped up against a tree. The sun was high in the sky and its warmth permeated her, for while the tree was tall and its trunk wide, it was sparse of leaf and offered little shade. The build of it reminded Laurel of the Pale Tree: elegant reaching branches with too few leaves to sustain it.

A sylvari woman bent over her then, black leaves and flesh like lichen trapped beneath ice. For a moment Laurel thought she was in a nightmare again, but the woman was merely pale, not frozen. Her hands moved easily and without pain as she tore a small fish in half and offered it on a broad leaf. Laurel accepted the food weakly. Her own hands were stiff and clumsy, and when she tried to lift the flaky flesh to her mouth, she crushed it instead. Soft morsels tumbled back down to the broad leaf, presenting a challenge that Laurel would have avoided if her stomach weren't so empty. The twisting knots in her gut and the weakness of her arms told her she needed the food, and tedious though it was, she persisted with her pecking until every scrap was gone from the leaf. Then she sagged back against the trunk behind her and let the leaf tumble forgotten to the ground.

Her eyes closed and she was ready to sink back into blackness, but for once her mind was her own and fragments of memory jostled her.

"I was... dead," she choked out. The words came hard to her, both their meaning and their utterance. Her voice was gravelly and broken, but the woman seemed to understand.

"No more dead than a tree in winter." The woman's voice was soothing.

"I was frozen." An involuntary shudder swept through Laurel, waking her pains to newness.

"You're safe now, away from that horrible place." The woman pressed a hand to Laurel's shoulder and the steadiness

of it was comforting. "Few can find the way to my garden, and fewer still know to look."

Laurel managed a nod before slipping again into sleep. This time she did not dream at all.

How many days she spent in the hidden garden, Laurel could not have said. She did not count them, and if anyone else did, she never heard of it. All she knew was that each day beneath the blessed sun she grew a little stronger, the hurts of her body a little more distant. Yet as they retreated, a deeper hurt was revealed. It left a terrible ache within her that had nothing to do with the torture her flesh had endured. Rather it was the pain of thorns in her soul, wrapping a secret and cutting her every time she tried to grasp it. She had not been alone in her pod, had never walked alone in Tyria until now. For a moment she knew it and gripped the truth tightly, but then her strength failed her and it was gone again.

Her body healed more swiftly. The fragile outer leaves which had crumbled to dust from the freezing began to bud again, and while the same could not be said of her cracked and ruined clothing, her caretaker Dierdre showed her the way to grow her own coverings. As she healed, Dierdre tended her body as well as her spirit. She provided both food and shelter, but more importantly, she gave Laurel the promise of safety. In time Laurel grew brave enough to explore the sanctuary alone. With use her body began to remember itself, and her old agility grudgingly returned.

Laurel explored the muddy rents below the hillside, learning to avoid the grumpy elementals that lived there or to dodge the clods of earth they threw at her when she did not. She waded through warm pools and learned to see rainbows in the mist of the small waterfall which fed them. The azure moas there came to expect her visits and the treats she would sometimes bring them. They liked fish, but crab was their favorite. They even enjoyed it when she brought them empty shells. Those they cracked in their massive beaks before picking over the remains for scraps.

Laurel expanded on what Dierdre had taught her of growing, and she fashioned a small horn for herself from a sturdy white flower. She taught the moas to come to its sound in search of food, and it wasn't long before ravens also caught on to the game. They enjoyed testing their reflexes against that of the moas and bravely stealing morsels from the much larger birds. It didn't matter where in the garden she wandered, dark wings would flock to the music of her horn.

Eventually she even climbed the steep bluffs which encircled the garden. Up that high the wind was blustery and hardly a seed could take root. Only the most tenacious of grasses clung to the stone there, and she came to love the wavy patterns the wind made through them. In the billowing gusts the ravens would play, doing their best to impress her and entice her to produce more treats. A single white raven, smaller than the others, brought her gifts in return for her treats. Shiny stones and small sticks, meaningless tokens that made her smile. When she could, she brought special treats just for him.

Through all this, a ghosting of leaves followed in the corner of her eye. Yet each time she turned for it, there was nothing there. A part of her was missing, and that truth grew with her spirits until it was ivy choking her thoughts. Yet try as she might, she could not bear to reach through the thorns and pull it out. She couldn't give voice to her torment, but there was another truth wrapped in less pain. It was easier to face and she confronted it with all the strength she could not spend elsewhere.

"They still have Liath."

Dierdre's eyes were sympathetic, but she only shook her head. "There is nothing you can do for him now."

"He could still be alive," Laurel pressed. *They both could be.* The ivy curled tighter about her heart. "You took me out of that place, surely you know a way to..."

"No." This time Dierdre was firm. "They discarded you on their own, frozen solid and written off as dead. I would

never have found you in the swamp if Deorai hadn't led me to you."

"Who...? Where is she? Maybe she could..." Laurel was desperate, but her grasping was cut off as a wavery apparition appeared before her. She knew it to be Deorai, though she could not have said how. He was no woman, but a man with smooth brown bark that was wrapped in leaves the color of summer. He reminded her of visions of the Mother, glowing as he was, but where the Mother had been solid and strong, he was thin and insubstantial.

The ghostly sylvari knelt and cupped Laurel's chin in his hand. His touch felt of sunlight and the Dream, but it was only a pale shadow of the Mother's embrace.

I cannot find your friend. The voice that was not the Mother's came from his lips but spoke to her mind as strongly and clearly as it had before. *Your friend is beyond my sight. It was only by chance that I found you, hovering as you were at the edge of the Dream.*

"I can't leave him there," Laurel pleaded, trying to sound determined rather than desperate.

You've only just found your life again. Do not waste it needlessly. His face grew sad and he brushed the soft new leaves that once more framed her face. *That place has claimed too many already.*

"And if I do nothing, Liath is sure to be one of them," Laurel grimaced as stubbornness took root inside her. She thought for a moment and then consented, only partly admitting defeat as she promised herself something more. "I won't go back there. In truth, I don't think I can go back there. But I will find someone who can. I won't just leave him."

The apparition smiled a nod as it faded away, and Dierdre moved as though to follow it. Instead, she stood by the tree and fondly rested one hand on its smooth, young bark.

"We roamed the Maguuma together," she said softly, her voice heavy with memory. "We found the most obscure

trails to follow, and no matter how good he thought he was, I could always sneak up on him.”

Her eyes glowed with fondness, then turned colder. “We had seen Malomedies with our own eyes. We knew the dangers of asura. And yet, when we found them there so deep in the jungle, my curiosity was stronger than his caution. I was amazed at their strangeness, those small creatures so unlike us.

“When they saw us, they attacked us. Deorai was better with a blade than I, and where I cowered he fought. But in the end they wounded him and took us anyway.

“They tried to turn us to Nightmare. I still don’t understand why. They had seen neither the Dream nor the Nightmare; why would they do such a thing?

“Deorai was already wounded, but they kept him alive. They tortured him and left me to watch. They knew I wouldn’t leave him and made a taunt of my supposed freedom. When they killed him they thought me broken, and I let them believe it. But I wasn’t going to let the body of my beloved rot in that terrible place. Instead I took advantage of the freedom they flaunted. It wouldn’t have been hard to disappear from there alone, but bringing my beloved’s body made it more difficult. I hid and ran and hid again, over and over until I finally found my way out.

“Then I searched for a safe place to bury my beloved, a place where they couldn’t find him and disturb his rest.” Dierdre sat down then, leaning back against the trunk of the tree beside Laurel. “I buried him here, vowing to stay by his grave and protect it. When the years passed and a tiny sapling pushed up, I thought it an omen. It was a sign he was sending me that he had safely reached the Dream.

“I tended it with the same love that I had tended his grave, and I thought I wouldn’t hear his voice again until I also returned to the Dream.

“But when the sapling grew into a tree, I found that if I slept beneath it I would hear his voice. I couldn’t understand

the words, at first. They were too faint to make out, but I recognized his voice all the same and as the years passed it grew stronger.”

Dierdre paused for a time, as though listening. “There is a village not too far from here, south of the marshlands. If you leave here, it’s the only safe place to go.” She shook her head sadly. “I would ask you to stay, but if you must go, then you must make the trip alone. I will not leave my garden.”

Laurel nodded her acceptance. She was alone in Tyria now. Even if Dierdre came, that wouldn’t change.

Laurel left that night, heading south under the cover of darkness and hoping to pass beyond the worst of the asuran threat. While the garden itself was hidden, it wasn’t far from the complex where she had been held.

As Dierdre had predicted, from the stone cliffs that ringed the garden Laurel passed into a black mire. Fear tugged at her like the mud that sucked at her feet, and stilled her to breathless silence at every hint of a noise. She did her best to put distance between herself and the unseen threat, but her frequent pauses slowed her pace and there was little she could do about it. Moving through the swamp was too noisy an affair. She would plunge hip deep into stagnant water, the splashes thundering through the silence. Yet that, at least, was over quickly. She could stand still and listen until she was certain she remained undetected, and then quietly feel her way forward through the murk. When the deeper water retreated, however, the squelching mud and shallow splashes were constant trials that deafened her to anything beyond her own noises.

Her only comfort was the white form that ghosted ahead of her through the trees. While any sane raven should have been sleeping at this hour, the commotion of her leaving had drawn the attention of her smallest friend. She was grateful for his company, and twice that night he cawed a warning from a distance, giving Laurel the chance to change

her course before she could discover what had caught his attention.

It wasn't until near dawn that she finally saw any of the swamp's denizens with her own eyes. A group of marsh drakes were wallowing about, gray shapes in the pre-dawn gloom. They were of a size with the marsh drakes that had lived around the Grove, but these were far more menacing. There was a tightness in the way they moved, as though agitated by something, and every now and then one would stop to snap viciously at empty air.

Laurel kept her distance and slowed her pace, doing her best to keep out of sight without straying too far from her path. Circling around the cluster of beasts pushed her east more than she liked, but it was better than a confrontation with a pack of sick animals. The sun was well above the horizon by the time she had maneuvered herself around them and began searching for a safe place to hide. She had no desire to be caught out in the open by daylight, but as she scanned the trees she saw just what she had feared.

Her preoccupation with avoiding the drakes had made her blind to the greater threat until she was too near to flee. How had she not noticed? He wore the elaborate red uniform that marked him as a fellow to her previous captors. Panic rose in the back of her throat even as icy tendrils curled around her heart. There was no way to run without being seen, and no way to be seen without being recaptured. But she hadn't been seen just yet. The asura's ears were laid back and his attention was absorbed by tapping out commands on a control panel which stabbed up through the mucky ground. He was alone, and for the time being he was distracted. It left her only one option.

Thought fled then, replaced instead by the still countenance of a predator. Laurel hardly lifted her feet as she moved, gliding them forward through the mire and shifting her weight only once she was certain she had a good footing. A part of her feared that the asura would finish his work and

turn before she could get in range, but she gave that part of her no attention. She could spare none from the task ahead of her.

She was still a few steps behind him when the control panel blinked to darkness and he began to turn. Reaction took over then, and she threw herself forward into his back. He bounced off of his control panel and spun as he went down, but Laurel was on top of him. She pinned his axe in the soft mud with a knee while her fingers found his throat.

He was vicious, and he battered her with fist and claw. But she had the advantage of weight and strength, and a cold pressing fear steeled her resolve. The edges of her vision darkened, but she did not let go. She would not let go. She could not.

"He's dead." A shape separated itself from the trees at the edges of her vision. Laurel bolted to her feet, hastily snatching her victim's axe to defend herself, but as color and clarity came back into the world, it was one of her own kind who stood before her in the swamp. He must have been a Warden, for he moved with a greatsword on his back as naturally as if he had forgotten it was there.

She nearly dropped the axe in her relief, and she must have looked as horrible as she felt for the stranger rushed to hold her up as if she would faint.

"I'm alright," she assured him, warding him off with her certainty and looping the muddy axe through her belt. The weight of it there felt good, even if she had no idea how to use it.

"Either way, let's get away from here," he said as he started south. "The drakes or the Inquest will find the body, and whichever it is, I'd rather not be here when that happens."

It didn't take long to reach the village. Despite her slow pace through the night she had almost reached it on her own. She wondered how they could survive so close to the

asura's shadow, and got some answer in the armed guards that met them at the gate.

"Hail Enyr!" one shouted as they approached. "What's this? Collecting strays in the swamp?"

"After the way she killed that Inquest, I wouldn't be picking fun of her too much," the Warden joked back. The guard's expression grew a shade grimmer and he eyed the axe at her waist. Laurel promised herself that she would learn how to use it.

The town was small and simply designed, more of an outpost than a village and as different from the last one Laurel had visited as twilight was from noon. It had walls enclosing it, stout things made of woven vines pressed together so tightly that they resembled the roots of a great tree or a coil of rope laid down by giants. From inside the city it would be an easy thing to scale them. They were less than three paces high with ample footholds, and likely defenders would do just that if need be. Even now guards patrolled along the top. But if it was easy to climb from within, it was another story from without. The outer surfaces were covered in thorns and brambles.

The buildings of the village were raised up above the wall, so that even those who were off duty still lent their eyes to the watch. The walls would not protect the buildings or their inhabitants from arrows, but Laurel doubted it was death or wounding that one needed fear here. Capture was a far scarier prospect.

As they ascended the pathway above the height of the walls, she could see that south of the village spread a great wide swath of water. It was like a great lake, for the water appeared still, but while she could faintly make out land across from them in the hazy distance, she could find no shores to right or left.

The Warden led Laurel towards a building which served as the main hall. It was more door than wall, Laurel saw as they entered, more pavillion than greathall. The entryways were wide and open, each with a long protective overhang. It

was an airy place meant as a shelter from sun and rain rather than temperature. Shimmering blue fronds decorated the entryways, and great fat fungi served as both tables and chairs within. The Warden took a seat at one and waved over a golden-leafed fellow.

"Would you fetch Ethni for me?" he asked. "I've a feeling she'll be interested in this."

As the messenger departed, the Warden removed his helm to reveal a crest of burgundy leaves. He ran his fingers through them to loosen them after the tightness of the helm. "There's food and drink, if you like. It's nothing exciting, though, I'll warn you. Mostly dried fish and water. We don't get many supplies brought in here and we've little room to grow anything."

"No thank you," Laurel politely declined. Her stomach was churning and she wasn't sure she would be able to keep food down. She had been so certain that she would find help here, find someone who could make the rescue she herself didn't dare, but now that she was here, she was beginning to realize the folly of it. This village wasn't large or populous, and armed though they were, these Wardens wouldn't have the numbers to storm the asuran facility.

It wasn't long before the messenger returned with a green sylvari woman whose coloring matched Laurel's own quite closely. Red orange leaves crowned her head, but unlike Laurel's loose and wild array, this woman's leaves had been tightly trimmed and trained back from her face. She saluted Enyr as she entered and he returned the gesture, Warden-to-Warden.

"My name is Ethni of the Cycle of Noon," she introduced herself formally. "What brings you to Old Sledge?"

"I found her killing an Inquest near the drake nest," Enyr supplied before Laurel could answer. It made her wince. She had hunted grubs for food and eaten the flesh of both fish and beast, but this had been her first unnatural kill. It was her

first murder. Remembering it filled her head with sap and made her dizzy.

“And scared herself half to death in the process,” Ethni noted as she took a seat with them.

“I escaped from the asura.” Laurel spoke slowly, pushing the queasiness from her voice. “They still have my friend, and I think they mean to kill him.”

That surprised them both. Enyr’s expression became sharper and Ethni gentled her voice when she said, “You’d best tell us everything, friend.”

And so Laurel did. Almost.

She skipped past the tales of her Dream. She didn’t feel like a Valiant and had no desire to be lauded as a hero just now. Likewise, she left out the part about freezing to death. She didn’t think she could face the memory yet. She also left out Dierdre and the garden. Those weren’t her secrets to share.

What remained of the tale of her capture and escape was necessarily disjointed. She told them of wandering in the Maguuma and being tricked by the asura, but then her tale jumped abruptly to her kill in the swamp. She feared they would press her and discover the unfair half-truths she had fed them, but the Wardens took her at face value. It made the omission feel more a lie.

“Not everyone’s Dream prepares them the way a Valiant of the Wyld Hunt’s does.” Ethni meant her words as comfort, but the bluntness only made them sting all the more. Laurel could not bring herself to admit that she was supposed to be just such a Valiant. Ethni misinterpreted her chagrin and added, “Each of us makes due the best we can, and any of us can rise to be Wardens. With patience and practice we can grow as strong as any Valiant.”

Laurel nodded, hoping they would change the subject to something less uncomfortable.

“You’re a long way from home,” Enyr admitted when it was clear Laurel wouldn’t speak. He was hesitant, but with a

glance at Ethni, he decided to break the news himself. "You may have entered that gate from Maguuma, but that's not where you came out. We're south of the Shiverpeak Mountains here, well on the other side of the Sea of Sorrows."

Laurel nodded again. She knew she should have been horrified. She was so far off course in her Wyld Hunt that it would be all but impossible to continue from here. Yet somehow, compared with everything else, that seemed of little importance.

"A gate does make sense," Ethni affirmed. Her face was calculating as she rested her chin on a fist. "They don't move nearly enough supplies through the front door for a facility of that size."

"But there's no telling how many gates they have scattered across the world, or where those might be," Enyr lamented. "It's kind of hard to send someone after a hidden gate by an unnamed town in the deep Maguuma, especially from half a world away."

"And there's not much we can do to mount a rescue either." Ethni shook her head. "I'll put word out that anyone venturing into the swamp should keep a look out for escapees."

It was as much as Laurel had expected, but not nearly as much as she'd hoped for. "Isn't there something more you can do?"

"I'm afraid not," Ethni said firmly. "We're stretched thin as it is between the Inquest, the skale, and the krait."

"If you found a way out, maybe your friend will as well," Enyr encouraged. "If he makes it out into the swamp, we'll find him."

Laurel knew that wouldn't happen. Liath wouldn't even think to try escaping until it was too late, and Cuain was only a hound. How could he hope to find a way out on his own? Without telling the Wardens that she had had to die in order to escape, however, there was little way to convince

them. And even if she did convince them, what more could they do?

"Well, I'd best go put word out." Ethni rose and excused herself with a salute to Enyr. This time it was only half-heartedly returned.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you want," Enyr told Laurel. "Accommodations here aren't cozy like the Grove, but you'll have a dry place to sleep and food to eat if you're willing to take a turn at the watch."

Laurel nodded absently. Where else did she have to go? There was still a chance that Liath or Cuain would escape on their own, and she wanted to be here if that happened.