



## Chapter 5: Among Wardens

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The passing months and her growing strength seemed unimportant to her protesting fibers. Laurel found bows to be unnatural devices, more about self-torture than fighting. She set down the one she had been given and rubbed the back of her neck. It was only a short bow with a small recurve to its shape, but despite the low draw weight her shoulder and arm were perpetually sore.

“Why do these drills always have to be first thing in the morning?” she complained.

“So they’re fresh in your mind all day,” Ethni replied simply.

“They’re fresh in my muscles all day too,” Laurel retorted, but she knew better than to press it. Everyone in Old Sledge was required to have at least a basic understanding of how to use a bow. They were the most useful weapons from the walls or walkways or even from the village doorways themselves. But they were only useful if you could hit your targets without hitting your allies as well, and even those who displayed a practiced ease with the weapon took their turn at the morning drills.

Laurel knew as well that the soreness was not something she could escape. As soon as she showed proficiency with this bow they would simply move her up in draw weight. It had happened twice already. It didn’t help that

she had a distaste for the calmness and concentration which archery demanded.

But despite her complaints, she wanted to own one of the beautiful vine longbows that the elder Wardens carried. Those intricate weapons were of living wood much like the flower horn she still wore, but when she tried to grow her own bow, the attempt came up short. Apparently there was more to the craft than bending a strip of wood, but no one would teach her the way of it until they were sure that she wouldn't kill anyone with such a fine weapon.

Thus she went through town with dead wood strapped to her back. It was oiled and well maintained, but simple and plain. Much like her, though that didn't make her enjoy it any better. She would have left it behind if she were allowed to when she left for patrol duty in the swamp, but at least being required to bring the bow didn't mean she had to leave other weapons behind. The weight of the axe at her belt was more of a comfort than the partner she was assigned.

Overhead her raven gave a loud double caw, the beginning of each trembling with the throaty trills he sometimes used. She wasn't sure if the ravens that responded to her horn were still the same ones she had known in the garden, or if word of her had spread among ravenkind so that others now knew her promise of food as well. Most of them blended together in her mind so that it was hard to tell them apart, but one voice she could recognize. Her little white runt she could pick out of any chorus, and she was even learning to differentiate between the various caws he used. This one, with that intentional tremor, was meant for her. He had found something.

"This way," Laurel said, signaling her partner to follow the white bird through the trees. Guaire looked up to the pearlescent sky and shielded his eyes from the brightness, but he didn't make to follow her. He trusted his own eyes more than those of her bird, despite the latter's better vantage and the number of patrols on which they'd proven themselves.

She pushed on ahead without him, refusing to let a boring job be dragged out any longer than need be.

And it was a terribly boring job, not at all what Laurel would have expected from patrol duty. Rather than scout the swamp for threatening movements from the Inquest, they searched it for the ground up by-products of Inquest crystals which they then rendered harmless with an asuran device. The bitter irony of it was not lost on her as she flicked on the switches and watched the device hum to life.

"You keep running ahead like that and you're going to find yourself in a drake's belly." Guaire's tone said he wouldn't particularly mind if it happened.

"And you wouldn't take so long if you'd open your eyes instead of your mouth." Heat flashed to Laurel's cheeks, but she managed to keep most of it from her voice. *It's the crystals*, she reminded herself. *They affect us as much as the skale or the drakes*. But that wasn't the whole of it. While the energies they were here to dispell did amplify aggression, there was friction between her and her partner that had nothing to do with shattered arcane gems.

"I need to open my eyes?" Guaire scoffed, but the edge of his tone mellowed as the crystals lost their glow. The conversation might have ended there, but Guaire insisted on having the last word and he wasn't about to waste it on a rhetorical question. "You walked yourself right into the hornets' nest the last time you were out in the world alone, then you wonder why you're assigned a babysitter?"

Laurel clenched her jaw. She was here to watch his back as much as he was here to watch hers, but she no longer cared. She hefted her clean-up device as she straightened and looked him in the eye before stalking off. She didn't hear him follow, and she refused to look back. She put him out of her mind and wandered freely in the swamp, taking out her fury on the muck she stomped and the crystals she destroyed. Her raven overhead warned her of trouble before she could stumble onto it, but she kept her own eyes open all the same.

She wouldn't give in to her partner's abuse by proving him right.

Morning wore into afternoon, and even that had nearly passed by the time she returned. A look of relief from the guard at the gate told her Guaire had come back ahead of her. If he had tried to come after her he must have lost her trail in the murky shallows of the swamp. He was not as good a tracker as he liked to think, but Laurel doubted if he had even tried. Likely he'd come straight back with some outlandish tale of their parting. Just as likely he had taken a good scolding from Ethni about the dangers of leaving one's partner alone, especially if what he'd said about being her babysitter were true.

"I'm glad to see you're back," the guard told her sincerely. His flesh was woody and the deep purple hue of crushed blueberries. Snowy white leaves sprouted in bunches from the artistic whorls of his bark; they were not limited to his head. "I knew you'd be fine."

"Thank you Diriblaine," Laurel answered. It took effort to keep from commenting that her partner had no such convictions. How many of the Wardens shared that sentiment? Diriblaine nodded knowingly, and with a shiver of discomfort, Laurel hurried off before he could read anything else from her face.

She was in the awkward hours that belonged neither to afternoon nor evening, and the food in the hall reflected it. The fruit of the afternoon was already gone, taken by those who had gotten there earlier, but much of its juice still remained. She contented herself with soaking hard biscuits in it to soften them, and as she nibbled, a clever thought came to her. The second half of her day was to be spent in guard duty. All she would need to do to judge the others' measure of her would be to ask for duty at the gate. If her normal assignment to the walls was coincidence, then no one should mind her taking a turn at the gate. If they refused her, though, then

maybe they really were trying to shelter her more than she had known.

As soon as her meal was finished she wound her way to where Enyr kept watch on the southern wall. He was in charge of duty assignments, and he'd always been kind to Laurel.

"I love the smell of salt in the air," he confided as she joined him. She nodded absently and pushed straight to her true purpose.

"I thought I might do duty at the gate this afternoon." He watched her casually, saying nothing. He often did that, his silence drawing out more than people wished to tell. Laurel refused to let it work on her this time. Instead she added, "I saw Diriblainé at the gate. He's been teaching me lately and I thought it would be nice to do duty with him as well, maybe use what I've learned."

Enyr turned back to the water as he considered her offer. He drew an arrow and let it sail towards the dark shapes that twined lazily beneath the surface. The krait always lurked too close for comfort, sometimes even slithering up onto the narrow beach that stood between the town and the deep waters. It was as though they kept their own patrol, watching the watchers and waiting for the opportunity to snatch an air breather down beneath the waves. That was one of the hazards of guarding the gate as opposed to the wall. As with the Inquest, there was no hope of rescue for those captured by the krait.

"Not today, I think," he finally answered, eyes still out over the water. "Diriblainé's only just started his shift and you're already well into your day. No need for you to stay late on his account."

"But we're to spar tonight!" Laurel protested. "Whether on or off duty I'll be up and waiting for him anyways."

"Maybe you should take a night off," Enyr suggested. "Shifts that long aren't good for anyone." He was too tactful to

speak of it openly the way Guaire had, but the implication was plain. He thought of her as little more than a sapling as well.

Laurel bristled as she walked the wall, and out of protest she stayed even as the sun dipped to touch the horizon. She was not a weakling who needed to be pampered with short shifts and easy duties. She had survived far worse than facing a single skale or krait with a fort full of allies to her back. But they didn't know that. All they knew was that she had stumbled into their world with fear written all over her face.

A sudden roar and a high pitched whine pulled Laurel's attention to the landward side of town. She sprang forward and raced along the wall until she could see what was happening in the swamp. Through the lengthening shadows, an enraged skale trumpeted its anger and tried to shake loose three arrows from its thick green hide. Great gobs of putrid saliva flew from its streamlined head as it threateningly rattled the ridge of orange fin that traced its spine. The Wardens were neither surprised nor alarmed, and before Laurel could draw her own bow, another volley of arrows descended on the beast. As red spiderwebbed out between its green scales, the beast charged in defiance of its own death. Diriblaine stood his ground.

His were a subtler set of skills than most Wardens. He held only a nondescript twist of wood in his hand, and he didn't seem to do anything with it. But as he held it out, deep shadows that had nothing to do with the fading sunlight collected about the skale's feet. Before the beast could reach the gate it staggered and fell. There it lay, its bulging eyes casting about in panic as more arrows pelted down and its life drained away. It did not rise again.

Laurel shifted her weight uncomfortably as the other Wardens replaced their bows on their backs. Hers had never left its resting place. She was rarely quick enough with it to be of any use up on the wall, and now she was beginning to see how much that counted against her. There was little she could

do about it, though. The unnatural motion of drawing and aiming took thought, but by the time she could stop to think, the fighting was already over. Her axe had found its way into her hand, though, for all the good that did her up atop the wall. She slipped it back into her belt and stalked away from the wall, knowing she would prove nothing there. The end of Diriblainé's shift could not come soon enough.

It was fully dark by the time he came to the practice court where she was waiting, and she knew him by the pattern of his glows. He was spotted with a deep blue that burned low and steady like the stars overhead. The larger spots twisted out to trace the shape of the knots in his bark. It was an uncommon pattern and it made him easy to recognize.

"Let's shed some light on the subject, shall we?" he chuckled, and with a touch he kindled to life the glowing vine that ringed the area. Laurel blinked her eyes at the sudden light, and rose to her feet. This was what made the days bearable.

Her axe was alive in her hands, its motions coming naturally. She surged with her strikes, flowing powerfully into each motion and receding only to strike elsewhere. Her weapon was like a part of her own body, joining her with her opponent in a dance. It was energy and movement and life.

She slipped backward out of Diriblainé's reach. The axe was not his preferred weapon and he used it in a strange way, pressuring her from a distance with quick motions. His blows rarely landed anymore, but the threat of them pushed her back all the same. She knew if she could slip inside his defenses it would be an easy thing to disarm him, and she bounced about on her toes looking for an opening. Of late she had been getting quite good at this little game. If there were any others who would practice with her, she would have surely moved on to them by now, but there weren't. Everyone else saw her as little more than a tender new shoot.

"I yield!" he cried, and Laurel realized she was still holding her weapon aloft despite his own lying in the dirt. She

was also glowering. She hid her expression by bending down to retrieve the fallen weapon and returning them both to the weapons rack. They were padded and blunted for practice, but they still hurt when they connected. She wondered how many blows she had landed tonight and knew that she couldn't have guessed. Her mind was in too many places and yet nowhere at all. Perhaps it wasn't her skills Enyr found lacking when he denied her a place at the gate.

"I really don't think there's anything you can learn from me anymore." Diriblaine's words were a confirmation of her thoughts, said as a complaint when to another it could have been a compliment.

She went to a nearby bowl on the ground and splashed water over her face. She was sweating from the heat of the workout, and a thin line of nectar was tickling its way down her back. Compared to a human, what oozed from her pores was refreshing and sweet, but the nighttime insects it would draw were far more annoying than any smell she had ever known. She washed her face and arms to ward them off as routinely as a human would chase away his own stench.

The refreshing coolness cleared her head and she felt a pang of guilt. It wasn't her safety the Wardens feared, but the safety of those fighting with her. That Diriblaine had continued to work with her when others turned her away said more of his confidence in his ability to disable her while unarmed than his skill with any particular weapon. *If I truly got out of control*, she wondered, *would he bring me down like that skale?* She had no doubt that he could do it. Laurel opened her mouth to try her hand at an apology, but when she lifted her eyes from the washbowl, Diriblaine had already slipped away.

She sighed and rolled her shoulders. He would hold this lapse against her later, him and his flair for the dramatic, but now she saw his motivations in a new light. What had seemed like petty quarrels in the past now suddenly looked



liked a game of seeing how far he could push her. Had he been trying to teach her restraint all along?

If he had, it wasn't working very well, and she didn't have the will to go chasing after him now.

The rush of energy from the exercise was slowly subsiding, and in its wake there was nothing to mask the complaints of her body. With dragging feet she climbed the path to the greathall. The gentle upward slope felt like a mountain, but the rumbling in her stomach wouldn't be ignored. The lunch of biscuits had long since left her, but there was a promise of better food now that the day was at an end. There was always plenty to be had in the evening. Wardens filtered in and out on their varied schedules, and food would be waiting no matter what time their duties ended.

It was simple fare. Salt fish and coarse bread was the staple of every meal. It was hard to move goods in or out of Old Sledge, pinned as they were between the Inquest and the krait, but from time to time their resident trader Eirys would prove her cleverness and procure some treat for the town she had adopted. This night it was cheese and nuts which rounded out their meal, and that little touch lifted Laurel's spirits. The one time she had gotten to try cheese before leaving the Grove, Cuain had loved it. Now she saw his enthusiasm reflected in the faces of her fellow Wardens.

"Isn't this good, sister? Would you like some? We should always eat things this delicious."

She couldn't make out their words, so instead she substituted the ones written on her hound's face in her memories. They fit surprisingly well as the Wardens flitted about from table to table.

"Oh look at this piece. It's bigger than the last one I had. I like the pieces that are bigger."

She chuckled at the thought, then realized what she was doing. She was making up imaginary conversations with a pet that was gone while unable to even muster the effort to

sit up straight. And she was doing it out loud. *By the Mother, I'm tired.* She slipped away from the hall unnoticed.

Laurel was more than ready for sleep, but even curled comfortably into bed, sleep did not find her quickly. The weariness of her body was overcome by the weariness of her soul, and as stillness settled without, turmoil rose within. All the worries and doubts she had chased away with activity throughout the day made themselves known again.

She warred over what she should do. Each day she spent here, in this comfortable routine, was one more day that Liath and Cuain were at the Inquest's mercy. She desperately tried not to wonder what had become of her hound, but tonight she could not escape it and tears burned her eyes. He had followed her into that evil place, trusting her even though he had sensed from the start that those strangers meant danger, and it would probably cost him his life. If it had not already.

She wanted nothing more than to charge into the asuran facility herself, right through the front door, and carve a bloody path through all of them until she found Cuain. She knew it was folly, but even so, if she had trusted her body to obey her she might have gotten up and charged off right then. Her weary flesh demanded rest, however, and so she lay quietly despite the raging of her mind.

There were other options besides her fool's quest, but she couldn't commit to them.

One option was to return to the Grove and try to get help there. The Grove was a long distance away, however. Even the quickest route around the Sea of Sorrows would still require her to go by foot as far as Lion's Arch. There she could use an asura gate to cut the trip short, but even going to and from Lion's Arch would see her gone for half a year or more. Then, once she made it, there was still no guarantee that she'd be able to muster a force big enough to matter. Her kin would be sympathetic, to be sure, but the Grove wasn't filled with fighters. Of those she might find, how many would follow

a young sprout's incoherent tale half way across the world to rescue someone who was probably already dead?

The thought was bitter for Laurel, and she dismissed that option as too unlikely to succeed. Besides, would she forgive herself if Cuain escaped while she was gone? He knew no one here, and unlike Liath no one could tell him to wait for her return. Would he try to return to the Grove by his own instincts? Could he survive that journey or would he simply die in the mountains, cold and alone?

She shuddered, and that thought led her to her next option. She could go into the Shiverpeaks herself. There were several known gathering places of norn which weren't even that far away. A few weeks maybe, certainly not much more than a month. Norn were known for chasing fame and glory, and what better tale could there be than storming a top secret asuran facility to rescue a helpless captive from the clutches of evil and torture?

There was only one problem with that plan. She would have to brave the snow-locked wilderness of the mountains. The thought of it froze her heart and try as she might she could not find the will to face it.

The guilt she felt at her own lack of courage washed over her then, as it did every night. In warring with herself about what to do, the only thing she ever accomplished was continuing to do nothing. Morning's light would wash away her torment. Busyness and immediate tasks would push aside worries over the future until the idleness of rest made her once again vulnerable to their whisperings.

And underneath all of these currents she still felt the pull of her Wyld Hunt. No one in Old Sledge knew about her dream and she tried to pretend that it wasn't important anymore, but somewhere in the world there was a place she must find and a task she must complete. It seemed impossibly far away and insurmountable, but ignore it as she might, it refused to be forgotten.

Morning came with unusual excitement. Laurel was used to the sounds of activity when she rose. There were many sylvari who would wake with the dawn, but she was never one of them and today she woke later than usual. As she sat up and rubbed her eyes, she pondered the bustle she heard. It was not the typical chatter of Wardens about their duties, nor was it the open good cheer of the night before. There was both a hush and an insistence to the voices, as though they couldn't remain silent despite knowing that they should.

Laurel wondered what was afoot, but others shirking their duties didn't excuse her from her own. Dread of Ethni's scolding overpowered her curiosity, and she forced herself through her normal morning ritual which ended with stringing her bow and heading down to the target yard.

Ethni was always there when Laurel arrived. The woman was ruled by her routines, but this morning she was not at her bows.

With no one to scold her for it, Laurel rushed through her shots and scurried off toward the greathall. Tongues were loosest where food and cheer were strongest, but as she started to climb the path she saw Diriblain descending. He was of the Cycle of Night, and while not all sylvari woke and slept by their cycle, he most certainly did. His nightly ghosting fed his penchant for rumor and gossip as well. If anyone knew what was happening and would want to tell the tale, it would be him. By his look, he had already spotted her and marked her as a willing ear.

"What's going on?"

Diriblain answered with a mischievous grin. "Whatever do you mean?" he asked sweetly. Laurel sighed and prepared herself for another of his games. She was no good at apologizing, but apologizing always seemed to put an end to them the quickest. She was willing to try.

"I'm sorry," she started. Then, finding no good way to say it, she hastily amended, "I swear I wasn't going to hit you

again after you were disarmed. No matter what it looked like.” She felt sap rushing to her cheeks, and Diriblaine’s smile turned genuine. It only made her blush harder.

“My, what a lovely shade of green,” he teased. When he was done enjoying her discomfort, he went on, “We’ve had a visitor in the night. A Valiant.” He let the word hang for a moment, and Laurel wasn’t sure how she was supposed to respond. People who weren’t born as Valiants tended to adore them as heroes, but Laurel knew that being a Valiant didn’t mean as much as the others thought.

“It shocked me too,” Diriblaine assured her, mistaking her blank silence for something else. “The Valiant’s name is Rhyna, and she came from an outpost maybe a week’s journey away.”

“An outpost?” This time Laurel actually was shocked. “Out here?”

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Diriblaine was excited by Laurel’s reaction, and he hurried his telling. “Enough Valiants have apparently been coming through the area that they decided to start an outpost, just like that! It’s sort of a supply camp or a rest stop, except that everyone there is a Valiant on their Wyld Hunt. Can you imagine so many in one place?”

Laurel’s mind raced, not in wonder or awe, but at possibility. While she knew that being a Valiant didn’t automatically make one a warrior, if there really were that many Valiants passing through the area, then maybe she could find the numbers to rally a rescue into the asuran facility.

With amusement, Diriblaine watched Laurel thinking. He waited long enough for the full impact of his explanation to sink in, then said in a crafty whisper, “But that’s not the most amazing part.”

At first, Laurel hardly heard what he had said. The words found her ears, but they didn’t penetrate any further. She was too lost in her own mental workings. After a time, though, their meaning registered and her eyebrows belatedly rose.

"Valiant Rhyna came here because she knows who founded this village," Diriblainé dangled the information out like bait. "It was a fellow Valiant she knew back in the Grove when they both first sprouted." He paused, waiting, but Laurel wasn't sure what she was supposed to be understanding. He prodded her a little closer to the truth, "Valiant Rhyna came because she was expecting to find that fellow Valiant still here."

"But there aren't any Valiants here." Laurel thought she knew everyone in the village by now, though she admittedly wasn't the most social of creatures.

"You Nooners are all thick as blocks, aren't you?" Diriblainé complained. "No sense of subtlety or intrigue at all." He rolled his eyes at her, but spelled it out all the same. "It was Ethni. Ethni's been a Valiant this whole time and no one knew."

Rising voices inside the greathall drew away Laurel's attention. "Are they inside?" she asked with disbelief.

Diriblainé was annoyed at the spoiling of his game, and nodded reluctantly. As much as he might bemoan her directness, when Laurel rushed up to the greathall he was right behind her.

They arrived to find the place packed with people. Some sat on chairs, some sat on the floor, and others stood. To one corner of the room Ethni and a stranger were seated at a table, exchanging heated words. There was no doubt in Laurel's mind that this was the Valiant. She and Ethni looked as though they could have been pod-mates. Their flesh was the same warm green and their leaves fell neatly backwards in the same style. The only thing which separated them was the color of those leaves. Where Ethni's were red-orange, Rhyna's were a warm purple edged in fushia.

Laurel stopped in the doorway. She could hear well enough from there and had no desire to go wading through bodies.

"It's been good to see you, Rhyna," Ethni said. If anything, her tone was even more business-like than usual. "But my answer is still no. My place is here. Your outpost is too far from the swamp."

"Yes, yes," Rhyna allowed. "Carmel was only too happy to tell me about your Hunt here. Surely you don't think you have to stay and continue this never-ending clean-up job? You're a Valiant, not a maid for the Inquest!" She sounded both angry and weary. They had no doubt been over this before.

"Not all Wyld Hunts are the glorious slayings of monsters," Ethni rebuked coolly. "Mine is no less important than any other, even if it isn't over as swiftly."

"I was hoping to find another Valiant whose Wyld Hunt had been completed," Rhyna relented. "The Nightmare Court is getting bolder and we could use some reliable help. Even an outpost blossoming with Valiants can't look after itself if they're all distracted by personal endeavors. We lose Valiants to the Nightmare one or two at a time, and with each of them the Court grows stronger. If you can't help us, then I'll just have to keep looking."

Laurel knew this would be her only chance. If she didn't return with the Valiant, she would stay here in Old Sledge for another season and get no closer to a rescue. It didn't sound hopeful that the Valiants would lend much more aid than the Wardens had, but for once she need to do something.

"I'll go," she said abruptly. All eyes turned to her.

"Laurel, this is a task for Valiants," Ethni reprimanded. "They need people who can hold their own against the Nightmare Court, not more bodies to protect." Everyone here knew her, and their knowledge was in their eyes as they watched her. They knew the story of how she had narrowly escaped the asura and come stumbling into their town. They had been at bow drills together, and on patrol. They knew her

skills and her limits, and they knew more than anything that she did not live up to their ideals of a Valiant.

Laurel steeled herself and forced her eyes to meet Rhyna's gaze.

"I *am* a Valiant," she said, and the resolve in her voice gave truth to her words. She ignored the gasp from Diribaine, echoed about the room by those that knew her best, and pushed on. "I was born with a Wyld Hunt but was tricked by the asura before I could complete it. It has become lost to me." Something behind Rhyna's eyes shifted and her expression softened. If she hadn't been such a clone of Ethni, Laurel could have mistaken it for sympathy. She knew better, though, and everywhere she looked, she saw the change in the faces of her friends. They pulled away from her, refused to meet her eyes. A Valiant of the Wyld Hunt was a hero, but to forsake that calling was the vilest of treasons, one bare step better than turning to Nightmare itself.

"I will go with the Valiant." Laurel met her mentor's disapproval head on, matching that piercing gaze with her own stubbornness. The accusation was plain. Ethni had never abandoned anything in her life, not even the drudgery of a Wyld Hunt she expected to never complete. She would die at her Hunt if need be. Certainly she would never turn her back on it, and she would spare no sympathy for one who had. But it was a path Laurel could not follow now that a second one had opened up before her, clearer and shorter and closer to her heart. In the choice between Hunt and hound she would follow her hound. No amount of disdain would sway her now.

The next day when Valiant Rhyna departed from Old Sledge, no one tried to stop Laurel from going with her.