



Chapter 6: The Search for Allies

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The route Rhyna chose from Old Sledge to the Valiant outpost was not the easiest of paths. In order to avoid the Inquest in the swamp, they followed the stony shoreline instead. Ragged ridges of earth tore upward from the softer soils and cradled the swamp's stagnant waters away from the deeper salty ones. On one side a bed of muck and foulness filled the bowl of the land. On the other, everything soft had been worn away by the tides until only the uneven bones of the land remained.

To travel the shoreline meant clambering up and down those endless juts of stone, all the while watching their backs for the krait that tailed them. Warning shots kept the serpentine slavers at a distance most of the time, but they were far more curious about these two lone sylvari than they had been about those securely holed up inside Old Sledge. Camping on the water's edge would have been suicide, so instead they slept atop the stony ridge where the krait would not follow. When they were lucky they might find a piece of rock that leveled off into an escarpment. When they were not lucky they tried to tuck themselves into whatever defensible crevices they could find, preferably on the swamp side of the ridge.

They had not been lucky for two days now, but despite the weariness of little sleep, Laurel was glad to be moving through the world again. She recalled fond memories of travelling with Cuain, and for once it eased her loneliness

instead of enhancing it. She was moving towards help, and hope lightened her heart. She imagined a life with her hound after their troubles had passed. For a time she even saw him in her mind's eye scrabbling over the rocks beside her. He was a creature made for loping across flat open spaces, but that had never stopped him from bounding up the rocky slopes that could sometimes be found in the Maguuma. He had delighted in showing off his prowess, proving that he could go anywhere she could.

But the rock face she now scaled would have been beyond him. Strained and sore as her fingers were, her time climbing in Dierdre's garden had taught her to find purchase in the vertical rock. Cuain's dull claws and broad pads would have been useless here. She could just picture him pouting on the ground below, yipping for her to come back down as she climbed up further and further without him. The image struck Laurel to the core. Was he in some Inquest cell right now, whining for his lost master? She had to pause for a moment to regain her composure.

Stupid time to think of that, she berated herself. *Wait until you're up top, at least.*

When her eyes cleared again, she saw the white raven perched on the ledge above her. He was calmly preening himself as if he couldn't care less what she was doing, but Laurel noted that he had chosen to perch almost on top of her. She hauled herself up the last distance and over the edge. This escarpment had been steeper and higher than the others, but that would also make it a better campsite for the night. As Laurel rolled onto her back and panted, the raven quorked at her inquisitively.

"What a whole lot of help you are," she complained, and the raven quorked again innocently. "Oh yes, it's so easy for you, Lord of the Feathers. How do we simple plants ever manage?" With a hop and a half-flap, he floated over to land on her chest and started preening again.

"You're so proud of yourself, aren't you?" Laurel couldn't help but smile. "I think I am going to name you that, you little rascal. Lord of Feathers." She poked him in the chest with one finger, making him caw defiant outrage and buffet her with his wings, but Laurel wasn't fooled. He didn't even try to move away, and as soon as his point was made he went right back to preening.

She stole a few more moments of rest before the sound of Rhyna approaching the ledge forced Laurel to her feet again. Standing up dumped the raven unceremoniously from her chest, which earned her more indignant caws. He turned his fall into a lazy circle before landing just out of her reach. Laurel pretended not to see his reproachful glare as she pulled Rhyna up onto even ground. The older Valiant was having a harder time with the climbing than Laurel was and fell into a heap after a few steps.

"I never want to move a muscle again," Rhyna declared when she had caught her breath.

"You know you'll be up before me in the morning," Laurel chided. Rhyna was of the Cycle of Dawn and always ready to wake in the twilight hours before the sun began to rise.

"I never want to move a muscle again, until the morning," Rhyna corrected wryly. Laurel laughed and sat down on the hard ground. Though her first impression had painted Rhyna as a mirror image of Ethni, nothing could have been further from the truth. What sternness Laurel had detected back in Old Sledge was nowhere to be found. Not once had Rhyna even suggested that Laurel should be practicing her archery daily. Laurel wondered if she hadn't just imagined it all, the piercing glare and the tight lipped grimace, projecting what she knew of Ethi onto this Valiant who looked so like her.

The long shadows were fading to grayness as the sun sank below the horizon. A relatively peaceful night would be welcome, but still they would take turns at watch. With krait

one could never be too careful, and while they showed no interest in scaling the dry land after the air breathers, Laurel was fairly certain they could if they decided to. She had seen snakes slither up vertical tree trunks. Where the krait really so different?

"You shouldn't judge yourself so harshly, you know," Rhyna said. Her eyes were already closed and the comment was so abrupt that at first Laurel thought she was talking to herself. Rhyna had proved to be a natural talker and sleep was no barrier to that particular talent. She was especially chatty when she lingered on the edge of slumber.

"Not every Hunt succeeds, and most don't succeed on the first try. They don't like to sing about that part though." A lazy laugh turned into a yawn and Rhyna curled onto her side, shifting and settling into the stone as though she could make it more comfortable. "Don't let Ethni and those Wardens bother you. It's not like your Hunt is going anywhere. It won't complete itself; that's why it's a Wyld Hunt. Until you do something about it, it'll just wait for you." Rhyna's voice dwindled to a whisper so that Laurel could barely hear over her own breathing. "I think it's noble, what you're doing. Letting your Hunt wait while you help others. You don't even know us. But you're ready to... face the Court... to help..."

Laurel's heart sank as Rhyna's voice dwindled into the soft breaths of sleep. *It's not strangers I'm so excited to help, she pointed out*, feeling a liar again. She was getting very good at omitting the truths that made her uncomfortable. She was also getting good at ignoring the insistent tugging of her Hunt, but now that Rhyna had brought it to the forefront of her mind, the back of her neck prickled uncomfortably. It was like an insect bite that only itched when you noticed it, and Laurel rubbed her neck even though she knew it would do no good. Rhyna had the right of things. There would be plenty of time to go sniffing after her Hunt's trail when she had Cuain safely at her side once more. The Hunt belonged to both of them, after all. How could she chase it without him?

The next day Laurel rose well rested and ready to face any number of krait, but there was no sign of their dark shadows beneath the waves. It was a relief to make their climbs without fear of ambush, and before long their ridge dwindled. It angled northward away from the shoreline and left a wide, slow-moving river nestled in its gravelly wake.

"Well that explains the krait," Rhyna muttered, pulling a small handful of arrows from her quiver. They had a good vantage from where they were on the rocks, but Laurel saw no movement or sign of threat below.

"There." Rhyna gestured with her arrows, and Laurel made out some figures lying in the shallows of the river. They were unmoving, perhaps victims of the krait, although the krait usually took live captives to use in their dark sacrifices.

"Orrian undead," Rhyna offered. "We're close enough to Orr that they push up from time to time." She paused for a moment, and Laurel half expected her to start driving her arrows into the ground as the Wardens had done for their drills. Arrows staked out in a row were easier to reach than those in a quiver, but the stone outcropping they perched on would sooner ruin an arrowhead than accept one. Rhyna had to have known that, so why had she taken out so many?

"They won't be able to reach us up here," Rhyna observed. "It should be easy to pick them off." She shifted her grip on her arrows so that she was holding them loosely just below the fletching, then she nocked the first one with the rest of them still in her hand.

Laurel had never seen anything so strange.

"Ready for a show?" It was a warning rather than a question. Rhyna drew, sighted, and released before Laurel could answer. Any other time she might have felt shame at her uselessness with the bow, but right now Laurel was dumbstruck. She could not look away from the other archer. With the releasing of that first arrow, Rhyna's hand darted forward and in one fluid motion drew again. It was almost too fast for Laurel's eyes to follow, and only by the thwang of the

string was she sure of how many shots had been fired. In the space of a few short breaths, seven arrows sailed through the air. They landed as quickly as they had been fired, and two of the rotten forms never stirred from their slumber. The last one roared a guttural curse and charged them. Once awakened, it was easily as fast as the charr it had once been, but as Rhyna had predicted, it was stopped short by the steep rock. Rhyna almost looked lazy as she pulled a single arrow from her quiver to finish the job.

"How did you do that?" Laurel's curiosity burst out of her. Only after the words were away did she realize how harsh her tone had sounded, and she winced at it.

"With much practice, I assure you," Rhyna laughed, unoffended. She sat on the ledge then slid down the stone, leaping off at the last moment to land lightly on the gravelled slope. She pulled her arrow from the corpse even as the white raven fluttered down to it. He picked disappointedly at the remains, finding them not up to his culinary standards, and cawed angrily after Rhyna as she went to retrieve her other arrows. *You did it wrong!* Laurel read in his outrage. *You've spoiled the meat somehow!* She slid down and shooed him away from the filthy thing. She didn't think he could catch Zhaitan's corruption that way, but elder dragons were even worse to take chances with than krait.

"I've never seen anyone else attempt what you just did." Laurel pointed out as her raven gave up and settled himself on her shoulder. He made a point of glaring at the other sylvari, but she didn't seem to notice. "I don't think anyone else even considered it."

"I saw the way of it in my Dream," Rhyna explained. "It's an old human technique, though it's becoming less common now that the charr are spreading guns everywhere. It's a lot easier to just fire a gun."

"I had to train for years to fire even two arrows back-to-back, and now I still train with a higher draw weight than the bow I'll be using. Not everyone is willing to take all that

time and then still use a lesser draw weight than what they know they could otherwise handle.”

“So it’s a matter of pride?” Laurel asked. The raven picked at one of the cattails in her leaves, irritated that she wasn’t properly noticing his suffering. She idly reached to scratch his head, but earned a bitten finger instead.

“If it is, then I’m lucky I don’t have any,” Rhyna joked. She hoisted her bow out for Laurel to see. It was longer than a shortbow, but not nearly as long as the vine bows that the Wardens used. By their informal measure of draw weight as skill, Rhyna would hardly have competed. Despite that, her bow was of a good design. It had a strongly recurved shape, and a much better range than Laurel’s own bow.

“Pride be damned. Once you learn the way of it, you never want to go back,” Rhyna assured her. “Watching someone else do it, you mostly just notice the speed of fire. But what really hooks you is the awareness of it, the fluidity. Your bow and your arrows both are just another part of you. You could fire on the run, if need be. Or while doing a cartwheel.”

Laurel gaped and Rhyna broke into laughter. “I was only kidding on that last bit.”

Heat rushed to Laurel’s cheeks, but just then she might have believed Rhyna if she had said that she could fly. This archery was so unlike anything Laurel had ever seen before. It was alive. It looked a thing of instinct rather than cold calculation. She had hoped to avoid bow drills after leaving Old Sledge, but now she found herself reconsidering.

“We’d have plenty of time to practice together, if you’d like me to get you started on the technique,” Rhyna offered.

“I think I could learn to like the bow, if I could use it like that,” Laurel agreed.

At its mouth, the river was nearly shallow enough to wade across, but they stuck to the near bank as they headed inland. The stony shores were almost immediately consumed

by jungle, but by wading in the pebbled the shallows they stayed free from the thick foliage.

“Hold two of them in your hand, like so,” Rhyna instructed, demonstrating her grip. She knocked and drew, but then instead of releasing she eased the tension on her string. “For now you needn’t waste arrows, just practice switching which is nocked.” Rhyna didn’t juggle her arrows between different fingers, she merely slotted the next one to her string. “With a normal technique you’re used to nocking with thumb and forefinger. What you need to learn now is to nock with index and middle, or middle and ring. It’s a lot harder than it sounds, but if you just keep going through the motions, your fingers will figure it out.” She demonstrated a few more times, drawing, easing, re-nocking, drawing, easing.

Laurel tried to imitate the motion, but her fingers stumbled clumsily and she nearly dropped one of her arrows in the water.

“It’s alright,” Rhyna encouraged. “At the start everyone feels like a lumbering minotaur. Just don’t forget to keep walking or I’ll leave you behind.” She winked. Laurel hadn’t even realized she’d stopped, and she took a few hurried paces to catch up

The river grew shallower and slower as they followed it inland, but Laurel hardly noticed. She liked the feel of multiple arrows in her hand, of the way they connected to the string. For a time she even tried the routine with her eyes closed. She was pretty sure she could do it, but when she tripped on a rock and nearly stuck her bow in the drink, she decided that was a bad idea. For now, anyways.

Her shoulder soon took to complaining. The double duty of both drawing the string and relaxing the tension without firing layered over the strain from their earlier climbing, but this time Laurel powered through it. When she finally put the bow away, the shadows had deepened towards evening and her entire shoulder quivered with weariness. Rhyna shook her head.

"It's a good thing the Court doesn't come out this way," she said. "You're not going to be hitting a thing for a while."

"That's what my axe is for," Laurel replied with a crooked smile, patting the blade on her hip. It was true though, she had probably overdone it. The weariness that burned through her arm would make it hard to use her axe as well. "I should probably ease up on the practice though," she admitted. "And maybe not even do any tomorrow."

"It would be a good idea," Rhyna agreed. "I thought about mentioning it earlier, but you looked so excited that I didn't want to break you out of it. I remember being the same way when I first started."

In the fading daylight they found a thicket a short way off the riverbank. It was hardly secure, but it would hide them from travelers and undead both. Those were the only sorts of dangers they really needed to worry about. The local wildlife took no interest in two strange plants, and as if to prove it, that night while Laurel sat awake alone she caught a glimpse of glowing eyes through the leaves. A great hunting cat had paused to twitch its nose at her before vanishing again into the darkness.

"No meat to be had here," she whispered after it, but only silence and blackness answered her. She was glad that Lord of Feathers had chosen a more worthy sleeping place up in the trees, and she wondered briefly if the cat had still smelled him on her.

For two more days they followed the dwindling river, and Laurel was wiser about her practice. She was in no rush, she reflected, and the overpowering ache in her shoulder acted as a curb to her new found enthusiasm. The pain was still strong, though beginning to recede into stiffness, when a bridge loomed up over them. Although the river was now little more than a trickling stream, the bridge was built of strong thick planking high on the steep banks. The incongruity made

Laurel wonder what the river would look like after a heavy spring rain.

“Here we turn back south again,” Rhyna explained, climbing the western bank. As Laurel followed, she found a road curving lazily into the jungle. “Better to travel half a day out of the way along easy landmarks than to try cutting cross-country in this jungle. Who knows where you’d end up that way.”

The road was narrow, just wide enough for a wagon to pass, but it looked as if it had seen a recent increase in use. Soil and vegetation both had eroded with the passage of many feet, but the small rounded stones which remained as paving were not yet polished by wear or weather. The sides of the road told a tale of what had been here before. The thick black embankments were topped by verdant green that spilled over the edges and sometimes trailed down far enough to be trodden flat. If the traffic stopped, how long would it take for the jungle to reclaim this?

Half a day’s easy walking brought them to a dip in the road. The jungle pulled away as they entered the hollow, opening up a clearing that was at once both strange and familiar. Laurel had never been here before, never seen this place in her Dream, but she recognized the great tent-like leaves that were favored by nomadic sylvari. They were a common sight in the wilderness around the Grove, and she had slept under several when she had traveled the Maguuma. The fragrance of glowing vine flowers wafted through the air, but another growing sense overpowered them.

The feeling of the Dream was strong here. It was not as noisy as the Grove, but so vivid were the eddies of the Dream in her awareness that she felt if she closed her eyes she could step through the veil and back into a time before Tyria. The world was a mutable thing around her, wavery at the edges. It was intoxicating, and Laurel’s head spun with dizziness. The hum of insects fell to a distant whisper, and Rhyna drifted away to converse with a couple of sylvari who

waved for her attention. To one side of the road several Valiants sat around a glow-orb as if it were a campfire, but their colors ran together like watercolor. Blue bled into purple and yellow and brown. Across from them three hounds lounged on the ground with tongues lolling. Three fern hounds, just like Cuain.

The world suddenly crashed back into rigid clarity.

Could one of them be him? Did she see that crimped downward leaf over his left ear? What about that small spot of blue on his chin? It took a moment for reality to reign in Laurel's frantic search for a familiar sign or mark. It was in vain, as a part of her had known it would be. The likelihood of Cuain finding his way here was small, and if he had, he would have recognized her long before she could have recognized him. None of these so much as glanced her way; to them she was just another stranger passing through.

False hope was a cruel thing, and weariness washed over her. It almost pulled her to the ground right there in the middle of the road, but shakily she dragged herself to where the Valiants were sharing each other's company and sat herself amongst them. Her raven flapped down to her shoulder and quorked encouragingly while bothering her cattails, but it did little to cheer her.

"Yes, it is quite tricky," one of the Valiants was saying. "But you don't necessarily have to engage with all of the krait."

"No," another sylvari agreed. "I should prefer to avoid that, but if there is a way to get at the Blood Witch without the whole swarm descending on me, the Dream didn't show it to me."

"A shame," the first sighed. "At least I know how I'm supposed to go about my Hunt, though what exactly I'm supposed to achieve by it, I haven't any idea."

"And what about you?" a third asked. She sat under the protection of the five-pointed leaf shelter, her knotted

joints creaking as she shifted for a better view. At her question, the others noticed Laurel for the first time.

"I don't believe we've met you before," said the one whose Wyld Hunt was a Blood Witch. His eyes were as red as his quarry's namesake and stood out vividly against his golden flesh. The absurdness of it all was completed by a shock of blue ferns that tumbled down around his face.

"I've only just arrived," Laurel agreed. "I came with Rhyna."

"To save us all from Nightmare?" Amusement curled the line of the woman's mouth, split bark peeling back to reveal smooth white teeth.

"Stop frightening her, Caoimhe!" the red-eyed man chided. "You'll scare her off!" Then to Laurel, "We really do appreciate your help, watching our backs so we can focus on our Hunts."

The woman laughed, spoiling her intimidating visage. "Don't worry. Rhyna's recruited me as well." She reached out a hand in apology and Laurel took it.

A handshake was a less common greeting among sylvari than it was among humans, and for a moment Laurel understood why. With the physical contact, shadows of images flitted through her vision, blurred and distorted so that she could not make them out. They were gone again as quickly, but even that brief touch left Laurel reeling.

"Are you well?" the sylvari nearest her asked. He reached a pastel purple hand toward her shoulder to support her, but she hastily shook her head and waved him off.

"I'm fine." She put as much confidence into the words as she could lest another of them reach for her. "It's just this place. I can feel the Dream so strongly here." It was true. While Valiants always carried the Dream with them more forcefully than others, she had known Valiants in the Grove. Firstborn Valiants even. Never had her sensitivity been this amplified.

"Yes, this place is very close to the Dream," he agreed, waxy succulent leaves bobbing on his head as he nodded. The small spines that poked from his upper lip in thin mockery of a moustache spread thinner as he smiled. "Many of us can sense it. It draws us here."

"That and all the Hunts!" the first man agreed, his red eyes burning with excitement. "Surely you have one as well? Or did?"

"Have some tact, Diermed," Caoimhe rebuked. "Not everyone is so eager to boast, not here."

"No, it's alright." Laurel shook her head. *I have a Hunt, but I don't expect to find it here*, she meant to say, but even that brief thought summoned a flashing image of the orange gem on blue green. It intensified the itch at her neck into a nettle's burning sting, and she clenched her jaw against it. It receded slowly. The words she said next had nothing to do with her Hunt. "Here is where I've wound up, so here is where I'll do some good."

Diermed had the courtesy to look abashed. He'd had no intention of causing her discomfort. Likely, he couldn't even understand what he'd done. She'd hardly felt anything herself when she had eagerly run through the Maguuma, for while the pull was a thing all Valiants knew of, it was far worse for those who tried to ignore it. Still, she had never heard of it being like this. The pull was an itch, an irritant, a constant reminder. No one ever spoke of it bordering on pain.

The sooner she was gone from here the better.

"I was actually hoping I might find some help as well as give it." The words came out before Laurel realized what she was saying, but as it was true, there was no point in dancing around it. "A friend of mine is being held prisoner by some asura a few days east of here. Do you know if there are many Valiants who might be able to help?"

"Stealing my recruits so quickly, are you?" Rhyna teased as she and a few others joined them around the glow orb.

“I know of the place,” Caoimhe offered. “It will take more than a few Valiants to enter there and come back out alive.”

Laurel nodded. The more backs she watched, the more Hunts she helped finish, the sooner she would have the allies she need. She only hoped it would be soon enough. “In the meantime, we hunt Courtiers.”

Rhyna smiled grimly.