



## Chapter 8: Of Dreams and Memories

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The Dream surged around Caoimhe and caught Laurel in its eddies. Hopes and hurts swirled together, the thousand fleeting images of a life slipping away. They flitted by too quickly to hold, like the grains of sand in a windstorm, and their brush became insistent, stinging, grinding Laurel away.

Accusation, anger, fear. Fresh currents cut darkly across the brightly roaring background. There was good here, more good than ill, and Laurel recognized herself in the flow. It washed over her, a thousand lives she had never lived. Or had she? Her sense of self frayed, her memories mere drops in that raging sea, impossible to hang onto. She reached after them, but no longer even knew why. What made one drop more special than another? She was a part of it all, and all of it was a part of her.

But then the tide retreated, and her tiny vessel spilled the memories and life it was too small to contain. All flowed away from her save for the small cupful that were Laurel. She felt alone and hollow. Before her Caoimhe's body lay in the dust, a discarded husk stripped of all that had once been a Valiant, yet somehow Laurel was emptier still.

Rhyna knelt beside the body and gently touched its brow. Death had smoothed the hatred from Caoimhe's face, lending a horrific peace to her mismatched and ruined eyes.

"This is a bad place to have died, old friend," she whispered, and Laurel felt the smallest twinge of remorse. No seed would take root in this dry, hard ground.

A sudden clamor of wings and calls wrested her attention to where a flock smudged the jungle skies. Something had stirred them up, and it wasn't hard to guess what.

"We have to go," Laurel urged, pulling Rhyna to her feet. Blessedly, the Valiant didn't resist, though she winced at the arrow still piercing her.

"The Nightmare Court is nothing if not vengeful. We can't stay here," she agreed, reaching up to feel the arrow shaft that stuck out of her shoulder. Abruptly she broke it off, her face going pale as she did so. The wound had only penetrated the fleshy layers of pressed leaves near the surface, and it was a good thing too. If it had struck deeper, hit the corded vine that acted as muscle and sinew or the thorn-hard bones within, surely it would have lodged there. "You'll have to pull it through for me. I can't reach."

This was not something Laurel had done before, and she had no idea if slow or fast would be better. She settled for slow, afraid to inflict more damage, and when the arrow was free Rhyna let out a shuddering breath. Several breaths more passed until her color began returning. Then she looked down at the corpse they were leaving on the ground.

"I can't even see her buried." Her voice shook. "No time. We have to be away, away from the jungle. That's where they'll strike from." She closed her eyes tightly, then looked up to the mountain that loomed above them. It was more massive than anything Laurel had ever seen and would take time to traverse, but time was what they most lacked right now.

A look passed between the two sylvari and they set off at a run up the steepening hillside. There were furrows and ripples and places to hide, but even those were massive and it

was some distance before they could pass behind the first of them.

Laurel did not run far before her fibers were aflame and her breath came in ragged gulps of too dry air, but she dared not stop. Fear pushed her on, fear of what would happen if the Court overtook them, fear of what they would make her do to Cuain. Compared to that, the pains of her body were meaningless. Better to die than to succumb to Nightmare.

By the time they ducked down beyond the first ridge, Laurel's head was spinning. She felt as if she were floating, and that combined with the relief at their relative safety stripped away her last bit of control over her limbs. She staggered, then pitched forward and rolled the short distance to bottom of the furrow.

"We need to keep moving," Rhyna insisted, but she let Laurel lie until her breathing steadied and the world came back into clarity. Here between the basalt flows the ground was covered in loose and shifting stone shards. Their sharp bite against her palms as she pushed herself upright brought her awareness back more quickly.

They followed the furrows upward and eastward where they could, but the creases in the land flowed mostly up and down. They ventured out of the safety of the rents only where they were forced to, making cautious but quick dashes to the next hiding place.

Earlier, the weariness of Laurel's soul had eclipsed the weariness of her body, but no more. She had spent too much of herself in first the fighting, then their haphazard flight. Her limbs no longer even screamed in protest. Now, they quietly malfunctioned. Her steps were shorter than she intended, her arms limp. Her toes dragged over the shallow bed of stones and she teetered at its every shift beneath her feet.

The higher they climbed the stronger the wind became, urging them ever upwards. Its caress burned the raw flesh of her wrist where the Courtier's whip had chewed

through her layered press of leaves to gnaw at the harder corded fibers beneath. With their every shift, fire raced up her arm, and her only comfort was the sap which seeped out to coat the wound. It was cooling, soothing, but it flowed faster than it could congeal and what remained of her strength slipped away in lonely drops.

It wouldn't be far now. It couldn't be, could it? How high could one mountain go? But it did keep going, up and up and up. The air grew thin and Laurel began to lose all sense of her body. She floated along on limbs that neither responded to her demands nor cared to tell her their status. One foot went in front of the other by its own accord, and she was merely thankful to be moving, a passenger along for the ride.

When at last Rhyna stopped, Laurel kept walking. Her body's autopilot diligently continued its job, and one foot went in front of the other without heed to the weary mind that begged them to stop. Rhyna only smiled and gently pulled her down into a dip in the ground. Laurel's body didn't have the strength to resist, and she sagged down into the hollow behind a large ripple of basalt. It was the most comfortable place she had ever lain, and she closed her eyes in bliss.

A wilderness in black and white stretched out around her. The sharp division of the horizon was jagged and angular, obsidian against the glare of a too-bright sky. It was frightening, and she ran. Each step was a leap. She flew over the dreamscape as quickly as if she'd had wings, but ever more angles loomed ahead to replace the ones she passed. There was no escape.

As if with her own fear the sky grew gray, yet it was no less blinding. Raindrops began to fall. No, it was blood, and the black landscape drank it in as fast as it could fall. Defiance increased the rain to a downpour, and the downpour to a torrent, the raindrops growing larger and daring the land to consume them all.

Then they froze. Great balls of dark ice thundered upon the ground, hammering it with a fury. She should have

flung her arms up to shield herself, but she was not afraid. Instead she stretched out cupped hands and caught one of the missiles lightly in her palms. It was not ice at all but a seed. She cradled it gently and even as she watched, it sprouted. Roots reached downward, piercing her, twining through her flesh as if she were the earth and feeding from her strength. She was enraptured, and though she distantly felt herself dwindling, she made no move to free herself.

The sapling swelled until it became a flower, a fat rainbowed cabbage, and its bright petals opened. Images were imprinted on them, but they fluttered by too quickly to recognize. Layer after layer of color peeled away, shriveling to black as they fell. As the last flew away like leaves in the wind, a puppy was left in her hands.

It was round and newborn. Its feet were roots, fused into her arms and melting away the last remainder of her hands. Its soft round eyes looked up at her. They blinked once, then turned skyward. Its form lengthened, pulled upward, stretching into the shapes of adulthood then beyond. Limb and body elongated, darting into the sky until only a great pillar of bark remained. It was a tree, and she its roots. It drank her strength like water, and she knew that soon she would willingly give up the last of her life to it.

Laurel woke with a start, flailing her arms to free them from the roots that tangled her, but there were no roots, only sharp stone and empty air. The strange images faded more quickly than the disquiet she felt.

*It was a dream, she told herself. Not even the Dream, just a silly old dream like any creature might have, made up of my own hopes and fears.* It was not very reassuring.

She forced her mind to the present. She was sore from lying too long in one position, and the bed of sharp-edged stones had left her backside itching. Her wrist throbbed, but not as badly as it had. While she slept, Rhyna must have tended to it. It was wrapped tightly with one of her own orange leaves, plucked from her head, in the unusual but

effective sort of first-aid measure she should have expected from a Valiant. Sap had seeped out under the edges of the leaf and hardened, gluing the makeshift bandage in place. Her other arm was heavily dotted by beads of amber, a testament to the fangs that had held her.

Laurel stretched and stood, scratching her back as best she could with her good hand. It felt glorious, even if she couldn't reach all the places where rocks had left their impressions. Aside from her wrist she wasn't much the worse for wear. Sleep had been what she'd really needed.

"I'm glad to see you're among the living again," Rhyna teased as she rolled onto her side, "but I really would rather you didn't show yourself off for anyone who might be watching."

Laurel knelt quickly. She remembered thinking that the ridges they crawled over were giant, but now as she looked, she saw that this one was hardly a hump. All around them the land had flattened as it had steepened. They were very high indeed.

"We can probably keep moving this evening, once the sun sets," Rhyna pointed out. "If we travel by night we'll be quite hard to see up here. We may glow orange, but its a faint light to travel so far, and seeing orange on the volcano, if we are noticed, will probably just keep people away." Rhyna closed her eyes and squirmed down deeper into the loose stones. She knew how to rest when and where she could, and Laurel intended to heed her wisdom.

Waiting patiently was not something Laurel was made for, especially when echoes of her nightmare still taunted her, but she bent her will to the task. She forced herself to sit still and turn her face to the sun, putting all else out of her mind. She managed it with only a little fidgeting.

After a while, the climbing sun began to work its magic upon her. It bathed her with heat and a quiet power that tingled just beneath the surface. It was a pleasant sensation, one she had almost forgotten. She'd felt it in the Grove and

the hidden garden, but both times she had been too preoccupied to pay it any attention. Well, there were no distractions left now. Her hound was on the other side of the jungle with a seething nest of Courtiers between, and her Hunt was even further. There was nothing for her here but to wait, and so for the first time she simply drank in the moment.

Feathers floated where the thin air stirred in rising columns over the sun-baked stone. Wind whispered over the rocks, a gentle breeze punctuated by occasional gusts that chased the warmth from her skin and made her appreciate the sun's kiss all the more when it returned.

From where she sat, Laurel could not see the Nightmare Court's thorn walls, but she could still see the lush trees beyond. The vast emptiness of the mountainside dwarfed the distance between them and made her feel as though she could reach out and touch the jungle below. It didn't look like trees at all but rather a soft, blue-green blanket of moss, and for a time Laurel pretended that she could stand up, take a few steps, and then sprawl out on that comfortable bed. She could think of little else that would be as relaxing as a soft bed in the warm sunlight. Perhaps someday she would find a place to settle and make herself such a bed in the sunlight.

With her fancies to occupy her, what could have been a very long day passed quickly, and too soon the sun's warmth waned as it made its way down towards the horizon. In farewell, it painted the sky with deep russet tones. Hints of pink and purple bloomed in the clouds, and a ruddy light bathed the mountainside. It was a sunset such as Laurel had never seen before.

As if knowing what she might miss, Rhyna stirred in time to watch the sun's departure.

"I never tire of seeing it from here," she said, when the last golden drop had winked out below the treetops. "Come, its time we moved on."

Laurel stretched, surprised to find that she was not stiff. The sun's warmth had permeated her and it kept her fibers limber despite her long stillness. She stood with a smile and suddenly realized just how close to the peak they were. Another five minutes up and they would reach the summit, or at least they would reach a summit. She couldn't see any higher peaks further on, but such things could be deceiving.

It was silly that standing should have given her a better vantage than sitting. What was one sylvari's height compared to the height of the mountain? But it had made a difference, and this far up each new step promised to show her more. Her old curiosity took hold then. What harm could come of taking an extra five minutes and getting to stand at the tip of the world? She started upward before Rhyna could object.

"If you haven't been to the top before, then I guess it would be unfair to stop you after you'd come this far," Rhyna admitted. The dying daylight revealed glowing markings of yellow-orange around her eyes. It was much paler than Laurel's own redder tones.

"It won't take long," Laurel promised. "There may not even be anything to see, but I want to look down at least once."

"Oh there's definitely something to see," Rhyna promised in return, and Laurel hurried her pace.

As they neared the top, the broken bed of stone underfoot gave way to solid sheets of rock which themselves fell away jaggedly, leaving a dusky darkness to yawn open ahead of them. The dwindling light made Laurel cautious about approaching the broken edge, but Rhyna urged her forward.

"Well go on, you haven't seen the best part!"

In further encouragement, Lord of Feathers fluttered down to perch on the edge. He cawed at her, taunting her for a coward.



"Easy for you," she chided. "You don't have to worry about tipping off the edge!" Feathers cawed again, and despite her protests, Laurel inched her way carefully towards him. She slid her feet along the ground and tested each footing before shifting her weight into the next step. It wouldn't do to go tumbling now, but when she reached the precipice, all caution fled her mind.

The stone fell away, stretching impossibly deep into the heart of the mountain. Laurel looked down as though standing in the highest branches of the Pale Tree, and there, nestled deep within the collecting shadows, was the bright red-orange gem from her Dream.

A red-orange stone resting on a bed of deep blue-green. Creatures which were both alive and not alive, their flesh of stone. After all this time, she had somehow found herself exactly where she was meant to be. It made her head swim, and shortly Rhyna was pulling her away from the edge.

"Are you alright?" the older sylvari asked. "I know heights can get to some. I'm sorry if I scared you. I thought you were doing fine with all this climbing and I didn't mean..."

"I'm alright." Laurel assured her. Feathers found her shoulder and nipped her ear, just to be sure. "I'm fine," she repeated, fending off his nibbling. "I remembered something, that's all."

Rhyna was unconvinced, but let Laurel have her excuse nonetheless. They made their way across the mountainside, circling around to descend on the opposite side from where they'd come, and Feathers settled himself comfortably on Laurel's shoulder. There was no good place for him to roost here, so she would have to be perch enough.

Laurel hardly noticed him. Somewhere beneath this mountain were the stone creatures she would study. Their presence tugged at her. Could Cuain feel it, wherever he was? The Wyld Hunt belonged to them both, given to them in the pod they had shared. Surely he could feel it too. Perhaps fulfilling this ache in her soul would give him some comfort as

well. If she couldn't rescue him yet, then at least let her offer this distant comfort.

Night settled over the mountainside and the stars began to show themselves. In the darkness, Laurel's eyes slowly adjusted and revealed a world she had never seen. She was accustomed to the impenetrable blackness of a night in the jungle, but here there were no leaves or branches to hide the wan lights in the sky. The moon and stars shone down, giving a ghostly shape to the land. The only clouds were weak, misty things hovering over the volcano's peak. Reflected light tinged their undersides red even as Laurel's own glow glinted back at her from the stones underfoot.

When Rhyna turned their path downhill, Laurel tried to find some sign or mark to remember this spot by. A stone was a stone, and with so many here it would be hard to remember any particular one as important, but nonetheless she picked out the most unique stone she could see and tried to memorize its shape.

It was as though something new had switched on inside her brain. Every detail around her was precious and she was determined to store away as many of them as she was able. Who knew what secret she might discover that others had previously overlooked? She noticed how the sharp stone fragments underfoot were glossy and reflective while the large basalt flows were dull and dark. She noticed the way the single cloud over the volcano's peak grew stronger as the night wore on, and she noticed the way the breezes all seemed to be drawn uphill towards it.

When the ground finally leveled out around them and the sharp stones beneath her feet were replaced by soft earth, Laurel knew the time had come.

"Rhyna," she called softly, "This is as far as I go."

"Don't be silly, there's plenty of time yet until dawn," Rhyna continued walking a few paces before she realized that Laurel wasn't following. Uncertainty marked her glowing

features as she came back. "Are you alright? If your injuries are bothering you we can stop to rest for a bit."

"No, its not that," Laurel assured her, but that only provoked a dark look.

"There's nothing here but waiting for Nightmare to find you."

"My Hunt is here." Silence hung in the air between them, and Laurel felt a pang of guilt. It was a long way back to Breth Ayahusasca, and there were surely Courtiers on the lookout for them. Was she really going to force Rhyna to make the trip alone?

"Well, we'd best find a place to camp down then." Rhyna's voice was weightier than Laurel was used to. "You'll find your way around better once the sun's up."

"But how will you hunt the Court if you stay?" Laurel asked though she already knew the answer.

"I can't very well leave you here alone for the Court to find, now can I?" It was a question that didn't need answering, and Rhyna pushed on ahead without waiting for one. "Come, there's a ridge ahead where we'll at least be sheltered from the wind."