



## Chapter 9: Shadows in the Firelight

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A faint sound echoed on the thick air and slowed Laurel's stalking. Trickster reflections danced from slick smooth walls, leaping from surface to surface until the entire maze of the underground was lit with the dim threat of fire. Every corner held the promise of molten flows soon to come, but Laurel edged forward without worry. The temperature of the air was the true tell of where lava would lie, and she was in no danger from it here.

Again the sound. It was close now, no longer an echo. A light clinking of stones. Laurel held her breath as her eyes searched the darkness for a familiar form, and she let it out slowly when she spied a place where the reflections ceased. Her quarry drank the light there, its rough, porous body a far cry from the glassy walls of the tunnel. Barely visible were the telltale markings of the beast: faint red lines of light traced it much the same as they traced her. She eased her axe from her belt and smiled into the dimness. The similarity honored her, honored her Wyld Hunt and her connection to this place.

Axe in hand, Laurel slid to the wall and knelt down to watch her prey. This one was only a child, as harmless as its larger brethren were dangerous, but where there was one there were often more. She waited.

The small crab-shaped creature chittered a sound like the tumbling of pebbles, blissfully unaware of its watcher, and amused itself with a game she had seen often. It flipped over

first one stone and then another, expecting something to happen as they clinked back to the ground. Nothing ever came of it, at least not while Laurel had been watching, yet the turning of stones would go on for hours if she let it, until later the crabling would simply wander off. This time she didn't let the game play out. No other Destroyers were coming; this crabling was alone.

"No bonds of family to protect you, little dragon minion," Laurel said aloud as she stepped away from the wall. "No mothers or fathers to miss you, no brothers or sisters to bring back the horde."

The little crabling hissed a cry like raindrops on coals, the traces of light along its shell flaring brightly with its anger. Even standing as tall as it could, it came only halfway up her shin. Any sane animal would have been frightened, but fear and sanity both were unknown to its kind. The crabling waved its claws menacingly, then charged in a flurry of scrabbling claws.

Laurel's axe was swift. A single blow darkened those defiant markings, their light draining away with its life and leaving deep cracks behind. A moment later the tiny body fell apart along those fault lines, and Laurel gathered the pieces into her pack. The darkness obscured them from sight, but her fingers recognized their texture and faint warmth.

"That's enough for today," she whispered to herself as she hefted her pack.

Carefully she wound her way back out of the tunnels. By now she knew which paths the Destroyers favored and which they shunned, and it wasn't difficult to avoid them as she slipped through their warrens towards the surface. Even before the passage brightened with the approach of daylight, the temperature began to plummet. Outside it was as warm as it had ever been, or so Rhyna assured her, but after spending her days beneath the mountain, Laurel found the open air as cold as it was bright.

She squinted as she emerged, blinking away the furious glare of the sun. Her camp was a short walk away, and though her eyes would be bleary for a time, her feet knew the path well. As she started down it, cawing went up and a familiar weight settled on her shoulder.

"Why hello there," Laurel greeted. Both Rhyna and Lord of Feathers refused to enter the underground with her, and while Rhyna's patience with waiting for her had thinned, Feathers was always faithfully expecting her when she emerged. Today he didn't even peck out his displeasure, though the shuffle he danced told of a present he left on her shoulder.

As she walked, her eyes cleared and she looked fondly on the humble home she had built. It was nestled into a fold of the stone ridge that rose east of the mountain, sheltered from wind and view on two sides. There was a small vine light and two broad mushroom tables that doubled as beds beneath a giant leaf shelter. It offered protection from sun and wind and rain, collecting the last into a stone basin. Some small trees had even started, though Laurel wondered how far their roots could go before finding the mountain's underlying bedrock. It seemed like a cruel thing to doom them to this stunted existence, but at least they got more sunlight than they could have found in the jungle itself.

"Another sack of stones?" a familiar voice asked, and Laurel's heart sank as Rhyna stepped out from beneath the leaf shelter. She did her best to keep it from her face, though. No matter how peaceful they were, Rhyna's trips to Breth Ayahusasca couldn't last forever.

Laurel set her pack down with a clunk beside her makeshift workbench. It was little more than a slab of slate piled with simple stoneworking tools and the small mountains of stones she had collected.

"I hadn't expected to see you back so soon," she admitted, making her way to the water basin and unwrapping the leaf she wore about her shoulders. Feathers protested as

his perch fell away from beneath him, fluttering to the other sylvari instead and stirring the air about Laurel's bare shoulders. She suppressed a shiver and hurried to wash away his mess. Though she moved quickly, it was with a careful and practiced ease. This leaf grew from a thin stem on her chest where a human might have had a breastbone, and she was mindful not to break it off as she unfolded and refolded her living shawl.

"Soon?" Rhyna snorted, and Feathers ruffled himself indignantly on her shoulder. "I've been gone near a month and half! You're no better than the others, your leaves twisted up so tightly in your Hunt that you scarcely notice the sun passing. I'm surprised you remember to feed yourself."

Laurel knelt at her workbench and pulled over her pack. "Feathers reminds me if I forget."

Rhyna laughed at that, which set Feathers to cawing and flapping wildly as he fought to keep his balance. "Only because he'd have to find his own food then, I don't doubt." She prodded his chest, but he was too distracted to care. "Well, at least one of you notices the passing of time."

Laurel supposed it was true. Time didn't seem as important as it once had, not compared to all the things she was learning. She was beginning to understand the rhythms of the Destroyers, the patterns of their lives. What significance it might have, she had no idea, but lately she had noticed something else that caught her fancy too. When a Destroyer died and its light faded, it seemed to become little more than dead stone. Yet if she was careful, she could feel a faint heat coming from the remains. Was there a residual magic left behind? And if so, could she tease it out?

Unfortunately, she had come to her Wyld Hunt blissfully unaware of any useful skills in that regard. On the one hand, she was untainted by the assumptions that might limit her thinking. On the other, it was no easy task to learn stoneworking from scratch by yourself. Chisels and hammers never seemed to do quite what she expected them to.

"If you're back," Laurel said, sorting through her new collection of Destroyer fragments, "then I take it to mean you've found whatever help you insist I need?"

"I'm tired of watching you chip away at all this without a clue where you're going," Rhyna lowered herself to the ground across from Laurel, giving the workbench a distrustful eye as she rehashed the old argument. "While you get nowhere, I spent all my energy running back and forth to Breth. Its impossible to keep an eye on all my Valiants with you out here in the middle of nowhere."

"I don't think they're as helpless as you want them to be," Laurel interjected. "They seem to keep on surviving without you." She didn't need to look up to know Rhyna's expression. "Or you could leave me here. I don't need you to worry over me all the ti-"

"You I will especially worry over," Rhyna snapped, then sighed and made no attempt to cover her worry or smooth her knit brows. "While the number of young Valiants coming to Breth is increasing, the number of old ones returning keeps dropping off."

"So they're finishing their Hunts." *Without me there to recruit them for a rescue.* Laurel couldn't stop her lips from tightening. She tried not to think about whether Cuain was still alive or not. Her Hunt was here and she was doing it. If he had survived this long on his own, he would have to just keep it up for a while longer. If not... She refused the thought.

"If they are finishing, then I haven't heard of it," Rhyna replied, leaning forward heavily with her elbows on her knees. "They set out on a task, and they don't return to Breth. I hate to think where they're disappearing to."

Laurel fell quiet but didn't stop in her work. Rhyna had good reason to be afraid, but Laurel was not as helpless as she had once been. She had fought. She had won. She had killed. And each day she honed those skills beneath the volcano. She could take care of herself now.

She paused. The fragment in her hand was much warmer than the others, and she set it at one end of her bench by two more she had previously found. Her collection made a mountain ridge along her workspace, sorted by strength as best she could tell.

When Rhyna spoke again, the bitterness was gone from her voice. "Since you asked, yes I have found help for you."

"And what did you find?"

"A Durmand Priory Arcanist. He specializes in magic flows and capturing them in objects." That made Laurel look up across her workbench. Her friend had found that old impish streak again.

"It sounds a little too convenient," Laurel admitted.

"I suppose it does," Rhyna mused, "but he is coming, and I can't imagine he's too far behind. We set out together, but by the time we passed through Breth I just couldn't stand his slow pace anymore. I'm sure he'll be here in a day or two. Maybe three; four at most.

"And when he does get here, I expect you to work with him!" There was just enough sternness in the mischief to let Laurel know she meant it. "None of that Valiant do-it-all-yourself nonsense. Just hurry up and get whatever it is you need to do done so we can both go back to Breth. None of you seems to have a care outside of your blasted Hunts."

"The Durmand Priory," Laurel pondered. She had never met a Priory scholar before, but they were known as some of the most knowledgeable people in Tyria. Their reach spread clear across the continent in search of lost wisdom, and they were always willing to share what they knew, provided it wasn't dangerous. There had certainly been some stationed in the Grove, ready to instruct new sprouts, though Laurel had never actually met them.

The Priory was made up of all races. Anyone who wanted to join was welcome, so long as they could avoid destroying the precious scrolls and artifacts that the Priory

kept, and Laurel wondered what sort of fellow this scholar might be.

He wasn't a sylvari, that she could say for sure. Rhyna never would have left a sylvari to make his own way after her through the Nightmare Court's territory. Nor could he be a charr or norn; despite their size, neither would have allowed themselves to be out-distanced by a sylvari. It was unfortunate, because meeting a charr scholar was on her list of things to see. The thought of a wizened berobed cat-beast with crudely curling horns sticking out from a dignified hood made her snicker.

"You better not laugh at him like that when he gets here," Rhyna scolded. "If anyone can find what you're looking for, it'll be this guy. I won't have him turning right back around because you insulted him."

*You'd better hope he's not a charr then, Laurel thought.* Most likely he was human. It was said that the great walls of Divinity's Reach were made of solid stone, the bricks cut and fitted so perfectly that they looked to be all of a single piece, and even the humblest countryside cottage made ample use of masonry. Besides, humans were awful at traveling through the jungle. They relied too heavily on their fat, flat roadways to make decent time or give them direction. No wonder Rhyna had gotten frustrated and left him behind.

*As long as I don't have to pray to Balthazar or some such, she decided, then we should get along fine.* As far as she understood human superstitions, they would attribute any fire-magic she sought to their god Balthazar. She paused as she took the last stone from her pack. The heat it gave off was almost imperceptible, and she dropped it on the last and largest pile with all the rest that wouldn't be of much use.

"Done with that?" Rhyna asked as Laurel stood and brushed the dust from her leaves.

"For today, at least," she agreed, offering a hand to help Rhyna up. Then she picked her strongest stone and took it with her as she settled herself on one of the mushroom

beds, slipping her axe from her belt and propping it on the ground beside her lest it chew up the soft flesh. Rhyna found the other and sat on its edge. With the sun still high in the sky, the vine light between them was dark and neither sylvari had any intention of sleeping, but the mushrooms were more comfortable than sitting on the ground.

"Diermed still has no idea how to get through the krait," Rhyna began as she seated herself on the other mushroom. She loved to bring back news, and Laurel always had to sit through it. "He made one attempt, but it went badly and he barely escaped the waves with his life. He's convinced that he needs reinforcements now, so you needn't worry about missing any recruitment opportunities."

Laurel quirked an eyebrow at that. "If they stay to help him, would they stay to help me too?"

"I don't doubt it," Rhyna agreed. "If any of them were returning."

Laurel shifted uncomfortably and then ventured, "You don't have to worry about me disappearing." Rhyna pretended not to hear, but crashed ahead with more gossip.

"Grauhne is still determined to get a harvest from her artichokes," she said quickly. "It would be great to grow some of our own food in Breth itself, but while she's convinced the artichokes to grow, they're showing no sign of flowering. And of course, the flower is the only edible part." Rhyna shook her head, absorbed by her own retelling. "There's no use in forcing a thing to grow where it doesn't want to be, but she keeps trying anyway. It's too warm here for them, I warned her, and too dark. Best to just go with spikefruit. It takes a bit of space and attention, sure, but it's reliable."

Laurel didn't have the heart to pay attention. The last thing she cared about right now was agriculture. Instead, she turned the stone over in her hands. Its warmth was comforting, like a memory of the mountain's depths that seeped into her as she held it. She was loathe to be without one above ground as of late, even going so far as to keep one



at her side while she slept. If she'd had one back at the Inquest lab, perhaps things might have turned out differently.

It was dark before Rhyna's tales began to slow.

"Then he started trying..." Rhyna abruptly cut off and peered out into the darkness beyond the glow orb's reach. In the sudden hush, Laurel's ears picked up an unfamiliar noise. She jerked upright and instinctively reached for her axe. The pattering grew louder, as of feet at a run, but the sound was wrong to be any creature she knew. The footfalls came too close together and too lightly for the speed it was approaching, then they ceased altogether. The air grew heavy even as Laurel's leaves floated up like the hackles of a cornered beast. Her sap stilled for one breath, two. Then the air itself exploded around her, light searing her eyes and a thunderous crash deafening her ears.

She stumbled backwards, landing hard on her mushroom and rolling off it to the side so she could scramble behind it. She stood in the stillness, blinking away the spots from her vision and cursing the glow orb's anemic light. Then she saw him, a shadow cloaked in blood.

She vaulted over the mushroom, her axe coming down in an arc, but streamers of ear and cloth flowed around her blade. The asura was nimble, unharmed, and his huge carnelian eyes glittered back at her, glowing through the darkness.

"What in the Eternal Alchemy is wrong with you?" he demanded, and his anger caught Laurel off guard. She hesitated, and that was enough time for Rhyna to catch her arm and hold it. Laurel tugged to be free, but Rhyna was firm.

"He's not Inquest," she whispered, and Laurel looked again. The uniform was different, she admitted. There was as much orange in it as scarlet, more perhaps, and the designs were standard asura—horizontal barring broken by staggered diamonds—without the extra sharpness that the Inquest favored. Laurel lowered her axe but did not slip it into her belt.

"So glad you warned your associate of my coming," the asura remarked, talking past Laurel but still appraising her derisively. "I'm sure you also pointed out that I'm Arcanist Agghi. Not Explorer Agghi. Not Archaeologist Agghi. *Arcanist Agghi!*"

"Yet you seem to have come through just fine, and you made better time than I expected." The elder sylvari released Laurel's arm gently and returned to her seat.

"Better time? What sort of excuse is that? I could have been eaten out there! Or worse, I could have been lost."

"And yet you were neither." A small smile played on Rhyna lips.

"That's irrelevant. You had no way to know that I'd--"

"Historian Derek spoke highly of your fieldwork," Rhyna cut in.

"He... he did? I mean, of course he did." The asura lifted his chin and ears, making the ridiculous spike of hair he wore list to one side and ruining the dignified pose he was trying to strike.

Laurel reluctantly set her weapon down and forced herself to sit. The Inquest wouldn't be caught so off guard if they had a trap planned; they'd be hiding behind toothy words and sugary smiles. She schooled her face to calmness, but did not take her eyes off the asura.

If not for the topknot, he might have been a head shorter than most she had seen. He was slightly built, with a too large head and round, wide-set features. His ears were almost comically large and floppy, but where most asura took pride in their ears, his were ragged around the edges. In an animal it would have been a sign of aggression, but here Laurel suspected absentmindedness. Wide strips of lighter skin marked his nose and forehead in a blast pattern, the last remnants of a long-healed scar. The asura either didn't see or chose to ignore the way Laurel studied him.

"I hadn't realized Derek was the one who referred you to me," he said loftily.

"He said you were quick on your feet, but I didn't expect you to keep up with me on those short little legs." Rhyna's was a friendly prod, and Agghi chose to ignore that too.

"He would, but only because he's a sluggard." A floating contraption drifted out of the darkness behind the asura. It came up silently and bumped him from behind, setting him off balance. His ears shot up in alarm, but when he saw the device he dusted himself off as though nothing had happened. It was made of four stone cubes ringed with horizontal carvings and pressed together into a block with a bulky canvas bundle resting atop. Agghi calmly guided it further into camp. "He doesn't get out often enough, that Derek, doesn't appreciate how exercise sharpens the mind. He just sits with his nose in those moldy old Krytan texts all day. I wouldn't doubt if his brain has gone to mold as well."

"I have to admit," Rhyna interrupted, "with the pace you were setting I doubted you could do anything but waddle."

"How quickly one can move is irrelevant to how quickly one should move." Agghi rolled his eyes. "Only a simpleton would travel through new territory without taking notes. Do you know how many discoveries I might have passed up rushing after you like this? I only have ten pages of notes to show for today. Ten!" With a touch, the four stone cubes pulled apart and the canvas bundle thumped to the ground between them. It was attached to them, however, so as they continued to float apart, the canvas began to stretch. Then additional, smaller cubes emerged from within the larger ones and lifted up the corners, pulling the canvas taught into the shape of a tent. "And all for some stones. I've seen nearly every naturally occurring arcanomatrix known to exist, and yours are probably a simple aetherostatic triaxis tetrahedronic formation."

"Aethero-static..?" Laurel's tongue tripped over the strange word. Some asuran words had no meaning as far as

she could tell, but she didn't like not understanding something that might pertain to her hunt.

"So she can speak," Agghi remarked. Then, mistaking Laurel's question, he shook his head. "Sorry to disappoint, but I'd be quite surprised if they were anything better. And I highly doubt you'll have found something as interesting as a multidynamic pentaxis dodecahedronic formation. Those are some fine arcanomatrices." He peered into the elaborate doorway of the tent as it revealed itself—since when did tents have doorways rather than flaps?—and a small, rounded golem hovered out. Agghi, of all things, clambered atop it to take a seat. A golem as a stool was simultaneously the most un-asuran and un-Inquest thing Laurel had ever seen one asura actually do. He was oblivious to the fact.

"I'd be surprised if she has anything other than plain stones," Rhyna added dryly.

"So weak aetherostatic formations then." Agghi sighed. "They're pretty common to find, especially around elementals."

"They're not normal lodestones," Laurel repeated. She had seen plenty of those littered about in the hidden garden, but none of them had given off the sort of heat that these stones did. Not that she had spent any time collecting or paying attention to lodestones back then.

"Well, I guess I should take a look."

"Now? Don't you want to wait until morning, get some food and rest first?" Rhyna was hinting rather than being hospitable, but Agghi was oblivious to that as well.

"What, and let this whole day have been a waste?" He scoffed in a way that made his ears flop. "Well? What are you waiting for? Fetch my arcanic scanning module!" He looked expectantly at the golem he was perched on, then started when he realized his mistake. "Oh. Right!" He hopped down, and the newly freed servant scooted inside the tent to fetch for its master.

Laurel picked up the stone she had dropped earlier and offered it to the asura. He waddled over to take it, and for one brief moment as he drew near visions of ending him danced through her mind. He was so close to her and her axe, not even Rhyna could stop her from here.

The stone shook in her hand.

"Well?" the asura prompted. Rhyna shifted uncomfortably, but the moment was passed. Laurel dropped the stone into Agghi's waiting palm and tried not to shudder as her fingers brushed his.

Unimpressed, he turned the stone over carefully. After a moment, he held out his other hand expectantly and his golem glided up to place a gun-like contraption in his palm. It was short and fat, with a square view screen on the close end. He passed it carefully over the stone, end to end, and then back again, all the while peering intently at the display on the screen.

"Ah, you're right. Not a lodestone at all. Or not a natural one, at least." Agghi handed his scanner back to the golem, which promptly disappeared with it into the tent. "This has signatures of dragon energy, from Primordus. You've been collecting Destroyer fragments, haven't you?"

Laurel nodded. It was an effort to find her voice, but she wasn't about to let the asura see how shaken she was.

"You know of them?" she asked.

"Oh yes. Wherever you find Destroyers you're sure to find pieces of their corpses as well." Another eye roll and the asura handed back the Destroyer fragment.

Taking it was easier than giving it, and Laurel ran her fingers over the familiar texture. "And you know the way of working them?"

"Affirmative. They can be made into all manner of weapons, and items, even armor." Agghi ticked off things on his fingers. The numbers didn't match up with his words.

Laurel clenched her jaw. Was this what her Hunt would come to, begging help from an asura? *No, never beg.* "You'll teach me, then."

His ears flattened to the sides and his eyes widened. Something inside Laurel relaxed.

"That's not what I signed up for," he protested. "I signed up to identify your materials and possibly, if they were new or unknown, experiment with their usefulness. Well, your materials are identified. Common Destroyer fragments. Any weaponsmith could show you how to make use of them. You don't need me for that."

"See?" Rhyna breathed out the word with relief. "Let's go back to Breth and find you a weaponsmith willing to teach you. There's not much reason to stay out here in the middle of nowhere."

"No." Between the asura's discomfort and her own rising stubbornness, Laurel felt herself gaining the upper hand. "I am going to discover something here. The Pale Tree saw it, and now that I'm here I can feel it too. If you won't teach me, I'll just figure it out on my own."

A sharpness came into Agghi's eyes then, and he searched her face for something. She met his gaze boldly, and for a moment she thought she saw a smile twitch his lips. It made her stomach clench, but so swiftly did he slip back to goofiness and arrogance that she wondered if she had imagined it.

"I *do* like hunches," he said, absently rubbing the scar on his forehead. "Especially when they come from that tree of yours. Perhaps I'll stay a short while after all. There are things here to document, and at least that way it won't have been a completely wasted trip."

Rhyna took that as her last best hope to get everyone fed and settled down so she could find some sleep. Agghi scoffed at the notion of keeping watch and instead set up proximity scanners. The meticulously carved purple crystals in their square stone housings made Laurel uneasy. She expected

to sleep lightly, but after laying down her head, the first time consciousness returned to her it was already morning.