

Part Two

But the Sheranai of the Elvenkind watched, waited, and hoped for salvation, as they had foreseen in a distant future, a dark time unlike any that had gone before.

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Shenna waited for the excruciating pain to come.

With her back on damp grass, she stared through the oak canopy to the sunset's red and orange tints. Long streaks of cloud soaked in the vivid colours, and the dying light flared them to the intensity of a forest fire.

Shenna blinked several times to purge watery fatigue. The canopy smudged, then cleared, as the salty swell drained from her eyes.

Should she get up? She did not know why she expected pain. She only knew it was important she move slowly, test for damage; wait for her body to show her what was broken.

She dared to lift her arms. No bones severed the skin.

Gingerly, she rolled to her right side. No pain. Not yet. She pushed to her knees. So far nothing warned of wounds.

Where was she?

Disoriented, she noted the grassy edge of a wide river. The tawny waters rushed between sheer riverbanks where shrubs and spidery roots arrested the erosion of the sandstone. Ferns carpeted the soil beneath leaf-heavy oaks across the river. The haunting flute of cuckoos, high above, joined the husky voice of the river. Recent rains had cleaned and thinned the air. It was probably summer, for the acorns were yet to brown on the trees.

“Where are you going?”

Shenna startled, twisted left. Ben! Sitting in the grass, he was an arm's length from her side. How did he get here?

Ben gave a half-smile, as if she amused him. How long had he been beside her? Her thoughts stopped pitching as her gaze anchored on his

tanned face and luminous eyes. She must have fallen asleep some time ago. She had dreamt, though the images escaped her now.

“Are you all right?” Ben tugged her hand to pull her from her knees into a sit.

Shenna shuffled to a comfortable patch of soil. Now oak roots cradled her back. “Did I fall asleep?”

“You were tired.” When he put an arm about her, its warmth spread right around her shoulders.

Ben shuffled the few inches between them until his thigh pressed hers. He stared out across the river; a handsome, boyish profile.

Shenna frowned. “I feel strange.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t seem to remember . . . Where are we again?”

“By the river,” Ben teased.

“No, I mean . . .” What did she mean? She could not name any part of this place. An obscure memory seeped through the questions. “I remember my daydream now. It was about the battle. But it’s all a little . . . How long ago was it?”

“The battle?”

She nodded.

“Months ago.” His slight squint said her question was odd.

“Really? That long? Where is this place?”

Ben’s eyes crinkled with boyish good humour, and he gave a pleasant laugh that tickled the silver strands around Shenna’s face.

“No, I mean it. Where are we?”

His grin faded, though he kept a lightness about him as if sure she jested. His radiant blue eyes were the brightest of spring skies. His tanned skin smelled of familiar fresh linen and a hint of costly soap. A breeze toyed with his mellow-honey hair. The same breeze brushed silver locks along Shenna’s cheek and across lips that abruptly ached for Ben’s kiss. She remembered his lips on hers, but not from recently; from long ago beside a different river. Kisses had mixed with tears; grief over something.

“We’re on our way home,” Ben finally answered.

The frown did not leave Shenna’s face. “Oh.”

“You’re strange today. Are you all right?”

“It’s just my dream, I think. It’s still quite hot and uncomfortable in my head. But I don’t remember much of it . . .”

“Then no more daydreams for you,” Ben jested. He pulled Shenna closer to him, and she let him. “You’re supposed to be dreaming about us – about our future.”

Her closed lips curled in a smile. “I do that when I’m awake.” Then the light in her face dimmed. “Where is home?”

Ben drew back from her, troubled. His bright blue eyes searched her face, trying to understand her words. But she seemed to baffle even his acute Teshian senses. “What do you mean?”

“Home. You said before that we were heading home. Where is that?”

Ben’s troubled expression deepened. “Tesh. My home. Don’t you remember? Shenna, you’re acting rather oddly today. Maybe we should head back to the camp.”

“Camp?”

“The tents. The others are back there.”

“Others?”

With each of her disturbing questions, he drew back a little further. “We’re all heading to Tesh.”

“Ahh yes, I remember now.” She brightened.

And Ben relaxed, drew to her again. “I think you’ll love going back to Tesh. Your childhood village isn’t even one of the prettiest parts. And the cities are alive with people and markets and music, and things to do at any hour.” His eyes danced as he spoke.

Shenna found herself smiling at him. Excitement made her stomach somersault.

“But the best part is,” he said, “we’ll be together. You still want to go, don’t you?”

“I . . . think so.”

“Are you sure? You *look* like you’re changing your mind. I thought you wanted this – wanted *me*.”

“You know I want you.” She managed to sound more definite.

“Yes, but at what cost? What would you give up to have me?”

“I suppose I already gave up my people. Did I? Did they win the battle?”

“Of course they did. We wouldn’t be here if they didn’t.”

“And . . . they’re safe? Was anyone hurt?”

“No. No one.”

“One of my people?”

“No. Why?”

“Wasn’t there a man who . . . Never mind.”

“Do you regret it, Shenna?” Ben snatched her attention from her patchy thoughts. “Giving up your people?”

She shook her head, though she could not recall what her people were even like.

“What would you give up for me?”

Why was he asking her that again? “Everything.” She *would* give up everything for Ben. And yet, not everything. She wouldn’t give up her people – not yet. And yet she had. That didn’t seem right.

Ben’s blue eyes studied her face. His eyes seemed to pull the insights out of her, a hand reaching into a private bag and exposing its contents.

“Yes, I would too,” Ben’s honey voice said. “We’re meant to be together. We’re two halves of each other. Twice I nearly lost you to death. I would have given my own life to save you if I could have. Would you ever do that for me?”

A cold snap chilled her. She shivered, drew knees to her chest and wrapped arms about them. “Yes – I would. But not just for you. For all my friends.”

Ben smiled sweetly at that – almost too sweetly. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Glad?”

“Only because I feel the same way.” A long pause, then to the air in front of him he said, “To think I was your enemy once.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“You are capable of loving your enemy – someone you once hated.”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with –”

“So is that the darkness inside you, or the light?”

She stared at him, trying to understand his thoughts.

Ben fixed on shadows across the murmuring river. “To go against your people and love someone they forbid – is that doing the right thing or the wrong thing? Are you capable of giving yourself over to someone even more hated than that? Someone hated by the whole world?”

“You are not making any sense, Ben,” Shenna said crisply.

He turned to her, chuckling, his eyes mirthful crescents. “And you are?”

She found herself giggling. “I suppose that’s fair.”

Ben’s arm, now around her waist, kept her soothingly close to his side. She slumped over her bent knees, let arms drape around them. They sat quietly awhile, staring at the trees and river beneath the dying light.

Ben’s words began rubbing at Shenna’s mind like sand in a boot. “Ben?”

“Mmmm?”

“The battle. We *did* actually have it, didn’t we?”

He chuckled again. “You *are* strange today. Of course we had it.”

Shenna nodded slowly, still frowning. She could remember the battle up until that strange white light. She had been injured, hadn’t she? The memory of the white light bothered her. It tried to demand her attention, but her mind was sluggish, and she just wanted to enjoy Ben before nightfall forced them back to the camp. She hoped Kendra was there. And Jeremun and Tanalay. And the others. She wasn’t sure who was coming with them, and supposed it was odd that she didn’t know.

The sky turned a sharper shade of red when the sun slipped behind the trees. And the wind began to hiss in her ear. Afraid, and not sure why, she sat up and tapped Ben on the arm.

He turned from watching the last of the light on the river. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I just – don’t feel right.”

He twisted to her, drew her to his chest. Warm arms curled across her back. Her ear pressed against his clean linen shirt. The thump, thump, thump, of his calm heartbeat was joined by another, abrasive noise. She sat up to hear.

Barking and growling shredded the silence. Wolf! Her heart leapt with a joy that surprised her, as if she had not seen him for years. Wolf prowled the closest bank, showing all his jagged little teeth. He snapped at Ben. Fur shot up along Wolf’s spine like a ridge of silver grass.

“Wolf, what are you doing?” Shenna scolded. “Be quiet.”

Another husky snarl broke into barking, and then fell back to a throaty growl.

Ben turned an annoyed frown to Wolf. It was not a frown she recognised on him, but she understood it. She wore the same frown. *What are you doing, Wolf?* she demanded.

Wolf’s harsh snarls and barks reverberated through the clearing. Wolf seemed to grow larger. Or did he come closer? No, he still prowled the river’s edge, ominous in his intent to frighten Ben. Or something behind her?

She scanned sideways, and behind, but no one was there. And Wolf’s pale, round eyes were on Ben. There was no mistaking it.

“Be quiet, Wolf!” Shenna commanded, but Wolf would not desist. He came closer with his throaty snarl.

A growl rumbled within Ben’s chest. It was a sound Shenna had never heard from him before. Gaping, she drew back from him. His blue eyes were not luminous anymore, but clear, deep, penetrating. And not Ben’s.

Unfamiliar feminine, pink lips curled in an annoyed snarl. Ben’s skin paled to pearl. And his smell: it grew dusty, like a dry summer. A new face appeared. It burned hers like the scorching sun.

The Demon Prince!