

# Bloodline

Book One: Alliance

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*For Naomi, my first and truest fan.*



# In the Beginning

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The Apparye gave birth to the rulers long before man knew corruption, for the Timeless One had ordained it. The Timeless One gave to the chosen Apparye a mark – hair the colour of fire – so that no one could claim to be Apparye when they were not.

But peace did not live past a thousand years, for men rose up to demand power. The strongest, they said, would rule, not the fairest.

The races warred, nearly destroying the Apparye. But there was hidden in the land a race unlike any other. The Lorshan, the most powerful of any race, revealed their secret concealed since the dawn of time and used it to strike down the enemy and reclaim the throne for the chosen Apparye leaders.

The Sheranai of the Elvenkind, counsellors to the Apparye leaders, forged a crown of gold. The Timeless One blessed the crown with powers that only the Apparye could wield. With this crown, the Apparye could turn the elements against evil and so the Apparye were once again established as the true leaders of the world.

Peace reigned.

Then came the Dark Time, when the Guardians of the heavens separated; some still served the Timeless One, others formed a league of their own. The rebels, seeking to bring chaos to the world the Timeless One created, allowed the crown to be

stolen. Amidst the upheaval, the Apparye were slaughtered one by one, until at last they were gone for all eternity.

In the absence of a ruling authority, man made a grab for land and power. Soon hundreds of leaders scattered across the country, each lusting for money and striking the land with cruelty. Creatures of darkness spread through the land, ruled by the prince of the Guardian rebellion.

The races, pushed back further and further from their land, crumbled under the power of the Demon Prince until the Lorshan again rose up to save them. Using their power, the Lorshan repelled the Demon Prince from what was left of the Lightlands. Retreating beyond his borders, the Demon Prince cursed the lands he owned, turned them into wastelands so that no mortal would ever reclaim their motherland. The lands became known as the Darklands, and, fearing Lorshan power, the Demon Prince remained there, sending what minions he could to the lands of light, bent on destruction.

The Lightlands grieved heavily for their lost Apparye. In the absence of a ruling authority, the races split and bickered. The Lorshan shrank back into obscurity. 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.

# Part One

The races split and bickered . . . but there was hidden in the  
land a race unlike any other.

# 1

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**A** *re they worth it, Master?*

From her vantage point, she could see the two strangers clearly despite the darkening evening. Brown eyes and unearthly silver pupils watched the travellers keenly. They rode in silence, wary of every shadow.

The thin road, tawny against sallow grass around it, cut like a river between two barren hills. Coarse grass flattened up the opposite slope and bristled on the ridge, golden in the dying light.

The two riders looked inky against the pale track. They stood out perilously from the arid hills, even in a darkening hour like this.

The valley road offered only danger for anyone with enough gold to attract the brutal thieves of Acran. Although no thief of Acran, Shenna had seen their heavy purse. A purse like that would feed her for weeks. She would wait and see. If an easy task, she would take it.

She clutched the bow and arrow to her side. A breath of steam issued from her mouth. It would be cold, bitterly cold, before the dawn.

Wolf let out a low rumble.

“Steady, Wolf.” Shenna stroked the shaggy silver coat.

*Shall we go, Master?* Wolf asked.

*No, Wolf, not yet. What do you make of them?*

*The big one – he may be trouble for us. And the raven-haired woman is unusually cautious. See the way she peers around.*

*Imperials in disguise?*

*No. The woman does not have the height to be an Imperial.*

*What about the man?*

*He is certainly not Korzekan, but he is obviously a fighter.*

Shenna shuddered involuntarily. Imperials and hired help came often to these parts disguised with heavy purses, trying to flush the corruption from the mountains.

*Maybe they're hired help, Wolf.*

*You could be right.*

Although desperate, Shenna remained cautious, for she did not have the numbers of the mountain thieves. She had only Wolf and a bow her father taught her to master, before he died saving Shenna's life.

Shenna heard a growl form in Wolf's throat and knew he had overhead her anger. *I'll avenge my father one day, Wolf, for both our sakes.*

A hawk circled the dusty-pink sky. Its screech alerted the strangers on the road to its presence. The massive brown-haired man glanced up warily.

Although within earshot, the strangers murmured secretively. Shenna strained to hear. *Friend through the years; lend me your ears.*

*At once, Master.*

Shenna tuned into Wolf's hearing. The clarity of sound, despite familiarity, was instantly but briefly startling.

"Do you think they'll be there?" The raven-haired woman turned to the man.

The burly man responded in a deep voice, “Hopefully. They have two more days though.”

“I have to say, I’m worried they won’t show.”

“Right now, Kendra, I’m more worried about those damned Acran thieves everyone talks about.” The man’s eyes narrowed towards the hill where Shenna sat. “If they’re everything people say they are, it might be you and I who don’t turn up.” He turned from regarding the hill with suspicion. “What will you do if they don’t show?”

“Carry on without them I suppose. We don’t have time to wait and we certainly can’t take the risk to look for them.”

The beefy man shrugged and gazed up; eyes followed the hawk calmly.

*I need a closer look*, Shenna thought to the wolf beside her. She watched the hawk’s slow circles. *Friend of the skies*, she sent to the majestic bird, *may I borrow your eyes?*

The bird continued to circle. *Of course, friend. At once.*

Shenna’s vision flickered slightly, then she was soaring above the earth almost over the strangers. With unnatural sight she saw heavy saddlebags on sullen geldings with ragged autumn coats.

The two riders had been travelling a long time. Their purses, although weighty, carried a heavier burden of risk. Still, if these were the last strangers on the road to Acran, she would have missed out, and she and Wolf would not eat.

Shenna’s borrowed vision turned from the purse to the owner. He carried a sword and dagger, hidden from Shenna’s view in the hills. The woman too wore a sword. It seemed they were well used to trouble and would not relinquish their money easily.

Her temporary eyes calmly followed the bends of the dirt road. Nothing moved along its length. Not even farmers herding cattle in the distance where the dangerous hills finally gave way to the lush flats of the next town. The sun looked large and orange from up here, brilliant with colours the hills concealed from Shenna's earth-bound view. But it was swiftly sinking, and there would be no more travellers tonight.

*Thank you, friend.* Shenna began to withdraw to her own mind. *I hope you find a meal soon so you can go home.*

*Thank you, friend.* The bird tilted to the west and flew away.

*It's not worth the risk, Wolf. He's got to be a well-seasoned fighter because his scabbard is old and worn, and his dagger has been pulled from the pouch many times. The woman carries a sword too.*

*Is there anyone after them?*

*Not for miles. They're the last. I guess we'll have to scout the village tonight.*

*I am tired of scraps, Master.*

*So am I, Old Friend – so am I.* Shenna sagged against the ledge and noted the cold earth of the slope against her back. Even the ground would chill her tonight. *Well, at least we don't have to visit the Dark Man tonight to trade tenaries for food.*

*He troubles you, Master?* Wolf's perception no longer surprised Shenna.

*He scares me, Wolf.* Wolf waited patiently for clarification. *I think you were right in saying there's more to him than we first thought.*

Shenna shifted further back into shadows and resolved to eat pilfered scraps from inns' rubbish heaps again. She could get by with little, but Wolf grew thinner as the wildlife in the hills became scarce – the thieves of Acran saw to that.

A noise startled Wolf, and Shenna's head jerked left.  
*Thieves, Wolf?*

*Yes.*

*Damn it! They are not getting these two.*

*But you resolved not to attack them. What does it matter to you?*

*No one deserves to be captured by the Acran thieves. I won't sit by and watch the cruelty.*

Shenna scrambled from the ledge into a squat. She cocked an arrow and with alarming accuracy, fired it at the front right hoof of the burly man's horse.

The horse reared in fright. Swiftly the man drew his sword. Shenna cocked another arrow and loosed it. The string of the bow snapped past her ear, thudded back to taut. The second arrow landed an inch from its brother.

"Show yourself coward," the man roared.

The woman whisked out her weapon. "Thieves?"

"Probably." The man scowled heavily.

*Why doesn't he run? Shenna sent. He's supposed to run.*

At the edge of vision, Shenna saw the thieves approach. There were many of them, all well armed. The two would die before the night ended, probably after torture supplied amusement.

*Run, stupid people, run! Why won't they run, Wolf?*

"We should get out of here," the woman said.

"And let them attack us further up? Those arrows were

meant to make us run. They were too accurate for anything else.”

*Damn it.* Shenna scolded herself without mercy. *I shouldn't have aimed so well.*

The thieves were close now. Shenna burned with anger and guilty pity for the strangers.

She jumped up. “Run you fools,” she yelled, and leapt down the hill.

“What is this?” The big man frowned deeply.

“Thieves are coming. Run! There is no attack up ahead.”

“Stand your ground, Kendra.” The man moved to shield his raven-haired companion. “It’s another part of their trap.”

Shenna reached the base of the hill just as an arrow whirred through the air and crunched into her shoulder. Her bow clattered to the dusty road.

Wolf’s angry roar ripped through the air; he flew at her. His stiff paws smacked against her shoulder blades. She toppled forward. Dirt dissolved to mud on her wet lips pushed against compacted earth. She felt Wolf’s substantial weight on her back. He snapped and snarled and shielded her with his body.

Shenna’s mind swelled with pain, then a strong hand grabbed her neck. “Move, dog,” she heard. “I’m trying to save her life.”

Wolf’s weight vanished, then the firm hand hauled her onto a horse, belly down. The horse leapt forward and pain increased. Air whooshed from her lungs as the horse’s jostling saddle punched her ribs. For a moment, she could not breathe. Every rib threatened to crack in half. The man’s large hand pinned her roughly to the saddle; stopped her sliding when the

horse's canter unbalanced her. Wolf loped ahead as if leading the way. Dust plumed behind the galloping horses. She heard shouts of pursuit behind her that soon faded away as the horses fled.

The sparse hills either side declined rapidly. Beyond it, a thick woodland of pines, birches and ash, fused to a solid green wall that rushed past her eyes.

Shenna glanced at the approaching distance and saw smoke of the village rising above the forest.

"No," Shenna squealed, "not to the village. They'll kill us."

"What is she talking about?" a female voice asked.

"I don't know."

*Wolf, you mustn't let the villagers see us.*

*Talk to them, Master. Keep pleading.*

"Sir, please." Shenna tried to turn on her stomach to look at the man. She winced as pain sharpened. Stunned momentarily into silence, Shenna finally managed, "Sir, the villagers will kill me if they see me. You –" More pain. "You can't take me there."

The horse slowed to a fast walk. "But you'll bleed to death, girl. You need your family."

"I'm an orphan. I have a –" She gasped for air. "I have a better chance outside the village. I stole once, and they're looking for me."

The big man turned to his companion. "What should we do? We can't leave the girl. She saved our life."

"Do they know what you look like, girl?" the woman asked.

"They look for a young woman with a wolf."

“Well, you’re now part of three and a wolf.” The woman’s tone was resolute. “Darrus is right. If we leave you, you’ll bleed to death. And we owe you our lives.”

*Wolf?*

*They are honourable, Master. They will not let you die.*

*If the villagers find us, you have to run. You know what to do.*

*Yes, Master, I will avenge him.*

The forest broke suddenly, neatly. Cleared long ago, the forest framed rows of tidy white houses with thick dark timber adornments and shingled roofs.

The village was emptying when the strangers entered its shadows. Several residents stacked arms from woodpiles and hurried indoors. The tang of smoke from stone chimneys lingered. The stilted lamplighter ambled down lanes and touched his blazing torch to lantern wicks, heralding the end of the day.

In the pale light, the village appeared heavily fortified. Windows wore bars of solid iron, and doors sat behind thick grill gates.

“So the rumours are true,” Darrus muttered. “The infamous thieves of Acran do venture into the village now.”

Darrus tugged the horse’s head left, causing the beast to jolt. Pain shot through Shenna’s wounded shoulder. The pressure of the saddle bruised her ribs. She groaned.

She heard Wolf whine. He sensed her pain.

“Not much longer now,” the big stranger whispered down to Shenna. “We’ll dress your wound when we get to the inn.”

A few villagers stopped to watch them pass. Each stared with suspicion at the wounded girl and the wolf. They

whispered amongst themselves, and Shenna felt cold fear grip her. Had they recognised her?

They found a dark, rank inn. The white façade had long ago been damaged and dirtied by late-night revellers. Superfluous timber decorations were rotting away, in need of stripping or repairing. Smoke billowed black from two under-cleaned chimneys. The door sat partially open to a narrow entry, but thick bars of a second security door made it difficult to see inside. A splintery sign held an image of a black kettle.

Darrus swung from his enormous horse and slid Shenna down as though she weighed no more than a cat. “Can you walk, girl?”

Shenna winced, stiffened herself against dizziness but nodded.

“I’ll see to the horses. Take the girl to a room,” Kendra ordered.

With an extraordinary gift of perception, Shenna noted that the burly man nodded towards the raven-haired woman as though above him in rank. Darrus tugged open the door and pushed back the creaky grill gate.

*Keep an eye out, Wolf,* Shenna sent as Darrus gently pushed Shenna through the door.

Shenna saw the inn beyond the door spin slightly, then settle. With no windows, only the low door let in light. Inside, a fire barely warmed a large stone room strewn with diners’ cushions. A surly innkeeper stirred simmering contents of a deep pot wedged into low coals.

“I need a room, hot water and a bottle of rum immediately,” Darrus barked. “My friend was injured by your cursed Acran thieves.”

The innkeeper spun, snagged slightly on Wolf, then waved the pair to follow him.

“We’re well used to such a sight in this town,” the innkeeper said. He led them upstairs and down a narrow hallway. “Our town healer is nearby. I can call for him.” He flung open the door to a simple, clean room.

“I don’t believe in healers’ potions and spells – and I don’t appreciate the money they charge. Just bring me fresh cloths, hot water and the rum. And when a raven-haired black-eyed woman comes in, point her to our room.”

The innkeeper nodded and lit the candle. “Of course, sir.” Wolf entered, and the innkeeper eyed the dog disapprovingly.

Darrus turned a cold eye to the innkeeper. “He stays with us.”

“Of course, sir. But is he . . . We do have other guests, sir.”

“He’s no danger to you or your guests.” Darrus caught Shenna as she swayed. “Now do as I asked.”

The sour innkeeper bowed slightly and headed down the dingy hall. He left them to their room of four straw-stuffed mattresses, a washbasin and a folded stack of extra blankets. Only a tiny vent in the windowless room provided fresh air from an adjoining street.

Darrus helped Shenna to the floor. “I’d better be right about your wolf.”

“Wolf is my protector. He’ll only kill to save my life.”

“Does that include killing to get money so you can eat?”

Shenna chose silence. Their fear of Wolf may have been her only advantage. She no more trusted these strangers than the whispering group of townspeople who pointed as she passed.

Wolf sat beside Shenna and placed a sympathetic paw on her knee. He whined and snuffled, pressed a cold nose to her cheek.

*I'll live from this wound, Wolf, but I won't make it out of the village alive.*

*I know what you mean, Master. We attracted a great deal of attention.*

Kendra entered with a bundle of provisions from the innkeeper.

“About time,” Darrus mumbled. He took the bottle of rum and almost forced it down Shenna’s throat. “This will hurt,” he warned.

Wolf let out a low growl. He paced the floor, spun in a useless circle as though chasing his tail and came back to Shenna. He whimpered again. He looked about to shift forward to press his nose to her again but only rocked a moment, then sat still.

*I'll be all right, Wolf,* Shenna sent. A droplet of sweat fled from her damp brow.

Darrus waited briefly for the rum to course through Shenna’s veins. He gripped the arrow shaft tightly. “Best hold her, Kendra.”

Kendra’s dark eyes narrowed slightly as she pondered the wolf.

“Risk it!” Darrus snapped. “I won’t see another die because of us.”

Briefly disturbed by the curious statement, Shenna raised a brow. The sudden spicy burn of rum through her blood discouraged an audible question. Shenna felt calm despite a heavily pounding heart.

Kendra moved to Shenna and clutched hands around firm shoulders. “She’s ready.”

Darrus’ muscles knotted, but whether from preparation to expend strength or from discomfort, Shenna could not tell. He used one swift thrust to push the arrowhead all the way through the shoulder. The crunch burst into her ears from the inside out.

Shenna felt a scream escape her lips then her body flushed hot, cold, horribly weak. Perspiration beaded across her brow.

In another expert movement, Darrus snapped off the fletching then yanked the splintered remains all the way through. The shoulder squelched as flesh sucked back to flesh.

Shenna screamed into Wolf’s mind; his mind recoiled from the volume. He raised his head and howled as though to the moon. For a moment the screaming and howling were as one. The two strangers blinked at each other. The screaming and howling cut away, leaving astonished silence in its wake. Then Darrus jolted into action.

Blood flowed freely from the wound. Darrus washed it, bound it tightly, then lay Shenna on a mattress to sleep.

Shenna wavered in and out of awareness, yet could not sleep.

“She will live.” Kendra nodded to Darrus.

“For now,” Darrus said.

“Give her more rum, and she’ll sleep well.”

“And probably not forgive us for the headache tomorrow.”

“Do you have to see the dark side of everything, Darrus? Give her more rum.”

Darrus poured more burning liquid into Shenna's mouth. She swallowed as though given mud.

"Sleep now." The woman nodded once to Shenna. "You're safe with us."

*Watch over me, Wolf.* Shenna's mental voice slurred.

*Of course, Master. All night if I have to.*

*And when I wake up, tell me what they say.* With that, Shenna drifted into a fitful sleep and dreamed of pain, of unknown dangers.

Shenna woke many times throughout the night but only once to the sound of voices – one, a strange male voice, deep and strong, the other a bold female voice. Their words, although murmured, sounded loud in the stillness.

"It's happening, Darrus – look."

"Is it early?"

"At least a month early. It means we're running out of time."

"It can't happen here. We don't have –"

"I know."

"How much longer?" the man asked.

"An hour at the most. Long enough to see me far away from the village."

"Then you should go."

Awkward silence descended.

"Where will we meet?" the man asked.

"Get me the map."

Scuffling preceded the distinct sound of crackling parchment.

"I'll probably find it here." The woman tapped the thick paper.

“Mmmm,” the man rumbled, “We found it there last year.”

“Then meet me there.”

“It’s dangerous to go on your own. I can’t let you do that,” the man said.

“You must meet the others. You know that.”

“But I swore to –”

“What you swore has little value if we’re found out. You know that, Darrus.”

“Then go now while it’s dark.”

“Bring the others. If you’re not there in three days time, I won’t wait for you. I can’t.” The woman paused. “Well, goodbye.”

Silence again.

Shenna peeled open heavy eyes to see two people hug each other roughly.

“Look after the girl,” the woman said, “but don’t bring her with you. We can’t risk it.”

“It’s a pity. She was brilliant with the bow, and her wolf would come in handy.”

Kendra dismissed the suggestion. “There are many people who would come in handy but none that we can trust.”

The enormous man gave a rumbling grunt. “You’re starting to sound like me.”

“Not such a bad thing, I suppose.” There was a fondness in the woman’s tone.

There followed another moment of silence, then the tall, toned woman wrapped herself in a heavy cloak, picked up her coarse bag and hurried from the room.

The man watched her go, his huge muscular frame frozen

as though in shock, then he sagged down onto his mat and stared at the ceiling.

Wolf, who had been Shenna's pillow and warmth since she fled her home village ten years earlier, let out a low rumble. Sleep began to pull her down again.

## 2

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The room lay empty when Shenna dragged her heavy head from Wolf's belly. She winced as dull pain coursed through her shoulder. She felt hot, stiff, and her eyes were as puffy as a sprain. Where was she?

Wolf felt her stir and whimpered slightly.

*Are you better, Master?*

*Better? Better from what?*

*From your wound.*

*What wound? Is it my shoulder?*

Wolf sent a picture of the previous day's events, and Shenna jerked upright as memory returned. Her fingers pressed to her temple briefly whilst her head pounded from the excess of rum.

The pounding finally steadied, and she dropped weak fingers to her lap. "The man – has he gone, Wolf?" Shenna's voice spilled out over a thick, dry tongue.

*Only temporarily. The woman left in a hurry late last night.*

*Yes, I remember that. Why did she leave?*

*I did not understand their dialogue. It was all very quick. The woman woke the man abruptly, and they engaged in earnest conversation.*

*It all sounds too strange for me. I can't wait to be rid of these people. They feel like trouble.*

*I have to agree with that, Master, Wolf sent. Speaking of trouble, do you not think it odd that an arrow hit you yesterday evening? The thieves rarely, if ever, use arrows.*

*I've seen them use arrows before, Wolf. But I admit that it's rare.*

*Even rarer that they hit something. It is not a skill they own.*

*Well, they weren't aiming for me, Wolf. They were after the other two.*

Wolf briefly nodded his large, beautiful head.

Shenna eyed Wolf's silver coat. One of the most stunning of his kind, and not easily forgotten, Wolf increased the risk to their lives. The villagers were sure to have noticed him yesterday.

*She frowned slightly. I'll wait until the big man is done with me, and then we can sneak away. I'm hoping for a few free meals first though.*

Darrus entered, his head of dark brown hair neatly brushed, his face recently shaved. Shenna noted him carefully for the first time. At nearly seven-foot, he suited being heavily muscled. Leather trousers creaked slightly as he walked, and brown skin peeped through a thin leather vest. In contradiction to his enormous size and unusual physical fitness for a man who looked in his late forties, his face was ordinary, forgettable.

"Feeling any better?" Darrus asked.

"I have a head that wants to split in two, but thanks to that, my shoulder doesn't hurt at all."

Her jest produced no laughter from Darrus; his face remained in its serious cast. His hand reached down towards

her despite Wolf's faint growl. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"I'm starving." Shenna gripped Darrus' callused hand, and he tugged her to her feet.

"I'm Darrus. My riding companion, Kendra, had to leave on important business."

"I'm Arishenna, but you can call me Shenna. This is Wolf."

"An ordinary name for such an extraordinary animal. He isn't like any other wolf I've seen before."

"Don't say that too loud, sir. He already knows he's handsome and doesn't need to hear it again."

Again the burly man refused to smile. He turned and walked from the room towards the dining hall downstairs. Shenna struggled on unsteady feet a short way behind.

The dining cushions were filling quickly. The room hummed with noise. A scent of fresh bread mixed with wood smoke from the blocked chimney. Old smoke curled about the room like tendrils. Heavy, uneven stone walls and a lack of light made the room bleak.

Darrus stopped when he reached a tidy pile of dull cushions that supported two other people – a woman and man with the same honey-brown hair, pale brown eyes, and tall graceful heights and figures. They were unmistakably kin and disarmingly attractive.

The strangers stood as Darrus and Shenna approached, Wolf in tow.

"These are friends of mine, Arishenna."

"Call me Shenna, please."

"Okay. Shenna, this is Tanalay and her brother

Jeremun.” Darrus lowered his voice. “This is the girl that saved our lives yesterday. And that is Wolf, her pet.”

The tall, handsome man bowed slightly. “I’m honoured to meet you, Shenna.”

“And I’m delighted too, dear,” the stunning woman said, her voice delicate, almost laughing.

Shenna noted their lilting, musical accent. She asked timidly, “You’re from Sheranai, yes?”

“That we are.” Jeremun’s eyes wrinkled into crescents. “You’re a well-learned lass.”

“My father travelled a lot before . . .” This was not the time to bring up stale memories. “I’ve always wanted to meet the Sheranai. I’ve heard many stories about you.”

“All good no doubt.” Jeremun laughed slightly and winked at Tanalay.

“Of course,” Shenna said quickly. She discreetly looked for their pointy ears. “Is it true that the Sheranai live in trees?”

“Most do,” Jeremun said. “There are some who don’t. It depends on which part of Sheranai you’re in. I prefer to have my feet on the ground, but my city is in the trees.”

“And do you live longer than other races?”

“Not much longer. The Avakar live to be *very* old, some as long as three-hundred years. But our average age is only half that – not that remarkable.”

Shenna remembered how her race could choose to live on for centuries, possibly thousands of years, but fear and hatred had killed them off, one by one.

“What race are you, Shenna? You don’t look familiar.” Not even Tanalay’s smile prevented Shenna from flushing hot and cold at the question.

“My father was Sikawan, my mother was Inverellian.”

Tanalay scrutinised Shenna’s features briefly. “Sikawan – that would explain your silver hair. But your features don’t look Inverellian or Sikawan. I’ve never seen silver pupils before. Are you sure there isn’t any other race in you that intermarried somewhere down the track?”

Shenna felt her stomach do a somersault. “I suppose there could have been more intermixing in previous generations. I never knew my mother so I couldn’t say.”

Jeremun raised his brows swiftly. “Your father never told you? What manner of man would not insist on passing down knowledge of your ancestry?”

Wolf growled faintly. *No more answers, Master. It gets harder to lie.*

*I’ll do my best, Wolf.* Shenna affected a pained look. “I suppose my father thought he would live longer than my eleventh birthday – enough time to tell me of my heritage. But he didn’t. Can we talk about something else?”

An awkward silence followed.

“Forgive us, lass,” Jeremun said. “Well, we’d best sit down or we’ll miss breakfast, then Darrus will not be happy with us. He eats enough for ten Sheranai men.”

Tanalay chuckled. “He is certainly an expensive friend.”

Jeremun patted Darrus’ enormous arm. “He has a lot of body to fill. Just look at those biceps.”

“Are you mocking my Nawbian heritage?” Darrus’ cold tone cut the mood.

“Don’t mind Darrus,” Tanalay said to Shenna. “He never smiles. He laughs on the inside.”

“If that.” Jeremun threw a wink at Darrus.

Still the man refused to smile. He grunted slightly and sat down on the old cushions.

The rest followed his cue. Dust puffs and the rank odour of musty cloth briefly clouded the air.

Jeremun stared at the huge beast. “Is your dog friendly, lass?”

“Friendly enough.” Shenna avoided further questions by calling Wolf over.

Tanalay moved a slender hand towards the creature then hesitated. “Can I pat him?”

“He loves being patted. He’s a creature of comfort.” Shenna waved her hand slightly, indicating for Wolf to sit between herself and Tanalay.

Tanalay touched the fur, then ran hands through its thickness. “Such a soft coat. He’s a beautiful wolf. I think wolves are lovely creatures – kings of the animal world.”

Shenna’s lips curled upward into a half-smile. “You probably shouldn’t say that – Wolf is already vain enough.”

“Where did you get him from?” Tanalay asked.

“He was abandoned as a puppy.” The lies spilled easily from Shenna’s tongue. “My father raised him first, then passed him on to me.”

*This is getting awkward, Wolf, don’t you think?*

*Yes. The sooner we are rid of them, the better.*

*Best to act dumb for now, Wolf. You know how this works.*

*That I do. Oh and Master, must you tell them that I am vain?*

*But you are, Wolf.* Her tone teased him.

*But must you tell them?*

*It's a diversion. I mean no harm by it.*

Wolf let out an audible sigh.

*Oh, you're such a pompous creature, but I do love you.*

Shenna reached up her right arm slowly, wincing at the tug of pain in her shoulder, then slung her arm around Wolf's back.

*I do love you, Wolf.*

Wolf settled onto his stomach and waited for food to be brought around. He almost purred like a cat into Shenna's mind as Tanalay stroked his silver fur.

"Darrus told us of your injury, dear." Tanalay reminded Shenna of a mother gazing at a sick child. "I have a wonderful elixir that kills pain. Do you want some?"

"I need it for my head more than my shoulder. Your friend Darrus dosed me up on rum."

"Then let me give you some of my drugs. I'll get the innkeeper to give you some water with your meal to wash down the taste." Tanalay smiled sweetly as she rummaged through her bag, and in the half-light of the inn, Shenna wondered if she had ever seen a more beautiful woman. But then, the Sheranai were a reputedly comely race.

The conversation over breakfast focused largely on light-hearted events of a year the group seemed to have been apart. Shenna listened with poor concentration until Tanalay's drug finally dispelled the overbearing presence of pain.

Strangers in the full inn, mostly Inverellians, seemed more concerned about listening for the call for seconds, than about chatting. When the call for seconds finally came, nearly all hands rose, then conversations swelled to an indecipherable hum. Darrus generously purchased old soup bones from the innkeeper for Wolf. Wolf put the bones

between his paws and turned his head to the side to incisor the scraps of meat and gristle.

After fruit and bread, Darrus unsubtly indicated that the three adults needed to be left alone. Shenna feigned fatigue and stood. "I might have a sleep. Thank you for my meal."

*Will you stay and listen for me, Wolf?*

Wolf looked up from the beef bone he gnawed. He licked his muzzle contentedly. *Of course, Master, Wolf sent back in his low, warm mental voice. I would have been surprised if you had not asked it of me.* He turned back to the bone.

*You and I have spent far too much time together, Old Friend,* Shenna sent lovingly, then addressed the three in front of her. "May I leave my wolf here until he finishes his bones?"

"As long as he is no danger," Tanalay said.

"He'll be fine." Shenna nodded then left, pleased with Tanalay's drug.

Shenna reached the room, closed the door and sent a quick message to Wolf. *Friend through the years; lend me your ears.*

*I am ready, Master,* Wolf sent back and tuned into the conversation.

Shenna left her hearing and moulded to Wolf's, briefly overwhelmed by the clarity of every sound in the room. She could hear the crack and splinter of the beef bones, loud against dull conversations. In the distance she heard the innkeeper drop a metal implement; his swearing punched above his clomping around the kitchen. A door swung on a rusty hinge then rattled hanging copper pots when it snapped

closed. “And stay out,” the innkeeper roared to the fled addressee.

An inn guest dropped a plate, snapping Shenna’s focus into the next room. “Damn it,” the anonymous guest mumbled.

The front door opened, feet dragged heavily across the floor. Wicker creaked and rattled when it thudded onto slate. Someone reached for timber and tossed it onto the slate floor. The clunk onto the slate was soon replaced by timber smacking onto timber as a woodpile grew larger.

Shenna slid down the wall into a squat and absently fingered the solid armband concealed beneath her woollen top. Able to hear every word, every whisper, of every group downstairs, she strove to direct curiosity to the conversation in front of Wolf.

“He’s certainly a fine creature,” Tanalay was saying. “That silver coat is remarkable. Isn’t he the most beautiful wolf you’ve ever seen?”

Jeremun chuckled. “You think every animal is the most beautiful you’ve ever seen. You’re too sweet, Tan.”

“Don’t you agree with me, dear?”

“Actually, this time I do. If he wasn’t clearly so attached to that young woman, I would claim him for myself.”

“So did you find out anything?” Darrus’ tone was brisk, business-like.

“Only a little bit, but it is a little bit more than last year,” Jeremun said.

“We went to see the Monks of Olfas,” Tanalay said. “They were mostly unhelpful, but with a bit of old-fashioned persuasion, one of them managed to point us back to the High Council.”

Anger ripped through Darrus' tone. "I knew it! I knew they were lying to us."

"Ahh, now hang on," Jeremun said. "It's not a definite yet. Just a lead."

"And if the High Council lied, dear, they would have a good reason to," Tanalay said. "This is no fickle governing body we're talking about."

Darrus grunted. "In centuries past, perhaps, but I wonder about the High Council now. They seem to be so caught up in the old ways, they're failing to see what's going on around them."

"Hmm, don't discredit them so quickly, Darrus." Jeremun seemed to choose each word carefully. "I think that there's more going on with the High Council than they've told us. I get the feeling that the High Council knows more than we ever will about what's happening – that their neutrality is a cover for something."

"Speculation, Jeremun," Darrus said, "and I won't see lives risked because you have a gut feeling. I'm sure Kendra feels the same."

Tanalay shifted. "Ahh, no, dear. I seem to recall Kendra saying something about not being sure if they lied or not. She couldn't tell."

"It just means they're better at lying than the rest of us," Darrus said sourly.

A moment of silence passed.

"I heard a rumour that the Elven races are dividing," Darrus said. "Is that true?"

"Well, sort of," Jeremun said. "Since we left, Denlin and Tonella have been leading. The twins seem to be trying to

encourage diversity, but because they're very young, Janulta guides them. And as you know, Janulta has other motives. The Sheranai and Teranai go along with it, and as long as she thinks she has the support –"

"Or at least not the direct opposition of the High Council," Tanalay cut in.

"That too," Jeremun concurred. "As long as she doesn't have trouble from the High Council, she thinks she's separating us. It won't last."

Wolf's sensitive ears relayed the sound of a fist lightly thumping the table.

"So the High Council is neutral in that too?" Darrus' even tone did not mask the underlying rage. "You're only proving my point that the High Council has lost touch with the real issues." He paused, then asked Jeremun, "Do you think Janulta will make the twins do more damage than good?"

"They create their problems, as does any leader, but in the end it only benefits us to have the Sheranai and Teranai appear to be dividing. I'm sure the Imperials are letting down their guard a little. If Jetara can divide the High Council, he's created just the right opening for himself."

"I don't think the Imperials will let down their guard in a hurry," Darrus said. "I'm sure the Imperials have more on their minds right now than whether or not the Sheranai and Teranai are dividing. And I don't think weakening the High Council is the opening Jetara wants."

"Ahh, now that sounds interesting," Jeremun said, a smile in his tone. "Just exactly what did you and Kendra find out?"

“Kendra and I seemed to spend more time looking for . . .” His voice trailed off, and Shenna heard the creaking of his stiff leather vest as he leant forward. He lowered his voice. “Looking for *bakasta silast*. We’re clearly running out of time.”

“Oh dear,” Tanalay said.

Uncomfortable silence hovered. Shenna wondered what ‘bakasta silast’ meant. Indeed, the strange accent applied to the word provided its own mystery.

“That’s bad news, my friend,” Jeremun said at last.

“It gets worse,” Darrus replied. “Far worse. But I can’t tell you of that here. If Kendra doesn’t tell you first, I’ll tell you when we meet up with Ben.”

Shenna heard a swish of deer-hide pants as Tanalay either sat up straight or leant forward. “Oh, I almost forgot. We passed Ben in Yusa. He’s recruited Brack. They’ll meet us around the full Hava Moon at Plaidies Point.”

“Brack? How did he manage to do that when Kendra couldn’t?”

Jeremun laughed. “Really, Darrus, must you ask? This is Ben we’re talking about. He could recruit a dark-beast into an army of light.”

Shenna heard Tanalay giggle, but no laugh escaped Darrus’ lips.

Darrus’ voice returned to its usual blandness. “Kendra will be very pleased.”

“I told you Ben’s charisma would come in handy,” Jeremun said.

“Did you have any other successes?” Darrus asked.

Tanalay seemed to shuffle, the sound of her movements

suggesting excitement. “Yes – Kayella and Asta have agreed to help us.”

A significant silence descended followed by a faint scratching sound like a finger moving across a scalp.

“How in the name of the Timeless One did you manage that?” Darrus asked. “Kendra all but begged the Teranai to listen to her.”

“It was more good timing than good diplomacy,” Tanalay responded. “We were there when the trap was set. We stumbled across it and saved them. Of course, Kayella and Asta made their decision on the spot, and the Teranai are none the wiser. Perhaps the Teranai regret their decision; perhaps they haven’t seen the connection yet.”

“My guess is that the Teranai have figured out they made a mistake,” Jeremun said. “Too many coincidences otherwise.”

“Well, we won’t know that for some time so there’s no use guessing.” Darrus seemed less resigned, more frustrated. “How do we make the most of the little time we have? Where to from here?”

Again Shenna heard Tanalay’s deer-hide trousers rustle as she moved to whisper. “Well, to meet with Kendra obviously, then Brack and Ben. Kayella and Asta want to come with us. We’ve arranged a meeting with them too. Then hopefully to the High Council from there.”

“Excuse me? You’d let Kayella and Asta come with us?” Darrus asked. “They’re a little obvious don’t you think?”

An arm moved, perhaps a hand being held up.

“It’ll be okay, Darrus,” Jeremun said quickly. “They’ll take the necessary precautions – they *are* Teranai. And we

didn't promise them anything. We said that you and Kendra would have to decide."

"Why do they want to come anyway?"

Jeremun gave a short laugh. "They're Teranai. They could no more sit and wait than the Nawbians could. Didn't your parents teach you anything about my people?"

Darrus grunted. "We all have to learn to put aside our racial tendencies if we're to succeed. If I had my way, Ben wouldn't be coming with us, but it's not about what I want."

The cracking of beef bones ceased. Wolf let out a low growl, and the conversation stopped. Shenna heard it instantly, the racket of a thousand feet scraping across gravel towards the inn door. The scraping merged into clacking on timber boards that built to the intensity of violent rain. They had entered the inn in force. The hollering of a frenzied crowd stung Shenna's ears.

Someone hurried over to the crowd; Shenna recognised the innkeeper's voice. "Please gentlemen, ladies, what is this for?"

"Hand over the wolf and the girl," someone shouted.

Wolf and the party pitched to their feet.

"Get Shenna," Darrus whispered to someone.

*What's happening, Wolf?* Shenna asked. *Friend through the years, swap eyes for ears.*

Frightening silence descended. Sound was replaced by a crisp view of the angry mob, faces puckered with anger. The mob waved pitchforks, swords, scythes. The towering Village Keeper stood in the middle of them, rope in hand.

*Friend through the years, back to ears.*

*Yes, Master.*

Shenna heard Darrus' voice boom above the rest. "The wolf and the girl are mine. She's not the one you're after."

"Sir, you insult our intelligence," the Village Keeper roared. "We would never forget such a fine creature. He's the wolf that belongs to the thief."

Wolf snarled. Shivers spiked down Shenna's spine.

Startled, Shenna snapped from Wolf's hearing when the door flung open. The connection, withdrawn too quickly from Wolf, seared Shenna's eardrums. Her mouth opened to a soundless cry.

Jeremun entered. "Quick, lass, crowds have come for you. We must get you out of here."

"We have to save Wolf."

"Darrus and Tanalay will save your wolf. Come with me." Jeremun grabbed Shenna's good arm and tugged her roughly to her feet. The shoulder wound ripped open slightly. A stinging burn swallowed up coherent thoughts momentarily.

Shenna finally snapped to the danger. *I'll go with Jeremun, Wolf. Do as Darrus says. Remember, you must live.*

*Darrus has his sword drawn. There will be death before this is over.*

*Just don't kill, Wolf. It's me they want, not you. Once you kill, it's over for you.* Shenna fled from the room with Jeremun. They pounded down the narrow stairs.

*I will find you, Master, Wolf promised.*

*No, Wolf. You'll avenge Father. That's all that matters.*

Jeremun and Shenna tore through the rank, dark hallway, just as the crowds squeezed their way to one end of it.

“There she goes,” one cried out and swiftly felt a sword at his throat.

“Touch her and you die,” Darrus rumbled, his huge frame blocking their entrance to the hallway.

Shenna disappeared around a bend, then found herself stumbling out a back door into the dull grey light of morning. The flimsy door smacked against the closest whitewashed wall. The crack alarmed a stable boy minding a row of tethered horses waiting to be unsaddled. He startled backwards into the shadows of the courtyard’s only tree.

“I can’t run so fast, sir,” Shenna cried as pain gripped her shoulder.

Jeremun spun and flung an arm about Shenna’s waist. The arm dug hard beneath ribs, and a knee pushed into her back to force legs to fling upward over a horse. Jeremun untied the reins from a post’s iron ring, then swung up behind her and wrapped his arm tightly around her waist.

“Hang on, lass.” Jeremun spoke straight into Shenna’s ear. Then he pushed his legs into the horse’s ribs. “Ya!” The horse spurred into action.

*Wolf, what’s happening?*

*Three are dead at Darrus’ hands, two at Tanalay’s. The rest retreat hastily to catch you out the front.*

“They’re waiting for us out the front, Jeremun.”

“Who?”

“The crowd.”

“How do you know that?”

Shenna refrained from response.

“Hang on then.” Jeremun spurred the horse to go faster.

“Ya! Ya!” The hooves rattled like tumbling rocks over a cobbled laneway down the side of the inn.

True to Shenna’s word, the crowds cumulated at the front of the inn. Jeremun felt his horse falter, frightened of the fierce mass with weapons. “If she slows down, they’ll unhorse us.” Jeremun spoke of his horse.

*Friend, don’t slow down or we’ll die. Run boldly. You are stronger than they are.*

The horse promptly regained confidence and bolted through the crowd, trampling any in its path.

Jeremun, dagger in hand, slashed obstructing limbs. “Stand back idiots, or you’ll get hurt.”

Shenna resisted the urge to block ears to filter screams of pain, of rage. Blood from an unknown source splattered her cheek. They broke free from the crowd, and the horse plummeted down the dusty, smelly street like an unstoppable landslide.

Shenna tuned carefully to the sounds behind her. *Wolf, are you back at the inn?* With a sleeve, she sponged the crimson muck from her grimacing face. It beaded on the lanolin of the woollen sleeve then sank into the fibres, one more stain on her putrid clothes.

*Darrus and I hold the crowd whilst Tanalay saddles Darrus’ horse. Ahh, she is ready. We leave.*

*Wolf, what are you still doing with those people? You’ve got to get out of there.*

*You are safe, Master. What good is it for me to roam on my own when you need me?*

*Fine! But you’d better make it out alive. If she lost Wolf too . . . I’ll tell you where we run. Pretend to follow my scent.*

Until thighs groaned for relief, Jeremun and Shenna sped away whilst Shenna sent Wolf images of their progress.

*They follow me, Master. We have nearly caught up with you.*

Shenna and Jeremun pushed into the thick of a lush old oak forest. A convoluted root system formed high ridges across the ground, leaving only a jagged, mossy trail between the trees for the horse to follow. Once the road was lost to sight, Jeremun yanked the horse to a stop. They caught their breath. Jeremun unhooked a water bottle from his saddle and took a deep swig. He offered the bottle to Shenna then replaced it when rejected.

“All my other possessions are back there in the dining hall. I hope Tanalay thought to grab them.” His sigh indicated he doubted the possibility. “I don’t know how we’re going to find the others.”

“Wolf will find me.”

“But you rode. How can he track you?”

“He’s clever. He’ll find –”

Wolf broke through the clearing, baying loudly. Tanalay and Darrus followed, relief evident. The horses snorted, sweaty and fidgety. Tanalay’s horse dragged a gangly packhorse behind it. The gelding’s sides were laden with bags of oats.

“What a handy pet.” Tanalay spoke between puffs of breath. She dismounted and gave her horse a firm pat on its damp neck.

*Indeed*, Shenna sent to Wolf as she swung from the horse, ignoring her pain. She ran and threw her arms protectively around Wolf. “What a loyal wolf you are.”

Wolf licked her face and nuzzled her gently.

“Well, what do we do now, Darrus? The girl certainly can’t go back there.” Tanalay scrutinised her surroundings, hands on hips. “And where are we anyway?”

“Krayer Forest. Not a good place to be.” Shenna’s eyes darted. She noted alien scratch marks on nearby trunks, and one permanent stain of blood that streaked smooth bark as though brushed on by sinister artists. “The dark-beasts love this place when night comes.”

“I don’t intend to stay here.” Darrus threw a quick, uncomfortable glance at Shenna. “And as for what we do with Shenna, I don’t know.”

“Perhaps we could escort Shenna to another town,” Jeremun suggested.

“Don’t worry about Wolf and me. We’ll hide out in the hills where we always have. The villagers don’t dare go into the hills because of the Acran thieves.”

“But your wound, dear.” Tanalay looked sympathetically at Shenna. “It needs dressing or it will become infected. Who will dress it for you? Your wolf is loyal but not that clever.”

“My wound is fine.”

“It may feel fine, dear, but once the drug I gave you wears off, you’ll feel very unwell.”

“Tanalay is right,” Jeremun said. “Your wound still needs tending to, and we don’t have the time to wait near Acran to dress it for you.”

“Do you have any family in any other village we can help you get to?” Tanalay asked.

A dark expression crossed Shenna’s face. “I have no family.”

“How long have you lived in the hills by yourself, dear?”

“I’ve wandered from town to town since I was eleven. So ten years. But I’ve lived in the hills for four years now. It’s the safest place for me. And there is the Dark –”

*Master! Think before you speak.*

Shenna stiffened visibly. What was she doing? She nearly betrayed her promise to never mention the Dark Man. Not once had she been so careless since . . . since her father died from her own indiscreet tongue. She would never trust anyone since that fateful day. No one but the creatures of the light she shared the world with. Yes, the sooner she was rid of these people, the better.

Tanalay spun around to the two men; her long baggy shirt fluttered. “What do you think, Darrus? We can’t leave the girl, and quite clearly she has no family to help her.”

“I must stay near Acran.” Shenna kicked herself mentally for more careless words.

“Why must you stay near Acran, lass?” Jeremun watched Shenna carefully.

*Master, where have your sensibilities gone? How are you going to explain that statement without telling the truth?*

*Don’t scold me, Wolf, Shenna snapped. I think it’s the painkilling drug.*

“Well, lass?”

“I know the hills well. They’re my protection. If you remove me from them, you place me in danger.”

“Girl, if we send you back to them, we place you in danger.” Darrus’ features were grim. “You’ll die from your wound if you’re not careful. And what will you eat? You lost your bow to the thieves yesterday.”

“So what’s it to be, lass?” Jeremun asked.

“Can I sit for a while and think?” Shenna’s eyes rested on the three adults in turn.

“Don’t take too long, girl.” Darrus’ tone was devoid of compassion. Tanalay placed a hand on Darrus’ arm and sent him a glance that seemed to speak volumes. Darrus nodded towards Tanalay, then said to Shenna, “You may take half a turn but no more.”

Shenna went and sat in the shade of a tree, careful to lean her good shoulder against the rough bark. She straightened her short skirt and ran hands along thick woollen stockings to smooth legs from the ache of unfamiliar riding.

A slight breeze stirred, tainted by the faint odour of recent kills. The dark-beasts of Krayer Forest, not prejudiced, killed all life for little gain other than the thrill of it.

She watched the party tend to the horses that fidgeted in the wake of the acrid breeze. The strangers would need to leave soon or come nightfall, they would still be within the forest’s boundaries. Her break endangered them, but she felt little compulsion for a speedy decision over such a significant matter.

*What do you think, Wolf? Shenna asked. If I leave with them, then we’ll lose the help of the Dark Man. If I don’t go, I might get feverish from this wound. And the Dark Man isn’t helpful enough to dress my wound for me. I’m feeling quite well, but Tanalay is right – it’s just the drug.*

Wolf moved over to Shenna and sat beside her. *Perhaps we can use these people for a while, Master. We could let them dress your wound for a few days, then we can sneak away in the night and return home. I think it is never too late*

*to turn back. And a few days will not break the pact with the Dark Man. Go with them awhile, and we will see what comes of it.*

*Hmmm. All right, Wolf.* Shenna nodded inwardly then called out her answer to the three strangers.

“Good for you, lass.” Jeremun grinned, then strode towards her. He helped her to her feet.

Noting Shenna’s wince, Tanalay asked, “Is the painkilling drug wearing off, dear?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll get you some more, and then we should go. Who knows how desperate those villagers are to find us.”

“I agree,” Darrus said, his grim face even grimmer.

Tanalay rummaged through her bag. “That reminds me, I have your bag here, Jeremun. You left it in the dining hall.”

“Good for you, Tan. I was beginning to think I would never see it again.”

“That’s hardly the first time, dear. You’re always leaving your bag somewhere.”

“You don’t think a hundred angry villagers threatening to kill me is a good excuse?”

“If it was a once off, then I might accept it.” Tanalay smiled slyly at her brother, then handed a tiny bottle to Shenna.

Shenna sighed, relieved, as the drug passed her lips. Not even the intense bitter taste detracted from the peculiar warmth of it spreading through her. The forest spun slightly. She handed the vial back to Tanalay who corked it and tossed it into her bag.

“Ready, lass?”

Shenna nodded and allowed Jeremun's arms about her as he lifted her to the horse. The horse shuffled as Jeremun mounted behind.

Despite Wolf's assurance that they could turn back when they wanted to, Shenna somehow felt that life would never be the same again. Unable to explain it, it was as real as though she had reached the end of her life, looked back and remembered it.

*Do you feel it, Wolf? Do you feel as though life is about to completely change? As though there is no way to go back to the way things were?*

*I do, Master, and it scares me.*

Shenna's skin prickled. Wolf had never been afraid of anything in his life.

# 3

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Shenna poked a stick into the blazing fire, the hub of their small camp. They had stopped for the night by a thin creek that cut through a sparse forest, far from any roads. Tanalay and Jeremun lay sleeping on mats uncurled across a bed of autumn leaves and pine needles. Darrus prowled the perimeter, his bulk obvious amidst thin trunks. Clouds obscured the moon, leaving the forest on the other side of the creek shadowy and bleak.

Shenna stirred the fire to anger with her thin stick and wondered for the third time in two days what she was doing with these people. The Sheranai kin, Jeremun and Tanalay, were the friendliest people she had known since her father, and broody Darrus she could cope with. Yet Shenna was unused to company. Born and raised as though an ordinary human, Shenna hid her Lorshan heritage by saying little and living as a hermit with her father.

Dependant on a nearby village only for fortnightly market days, Shenna had found it easy to not slip up about her bloodline. It would have remained that way if not for Jorn, the hunter.

Shenna turned to watch Wolf sleeping contentedly in the darkness, his belly full from a successful evening hunt. He was indeed a fine creature, both in appearance and personality. Although fiercely loyal to Shenna due to a pact

between the Wolven and Lorshan, Wolf had been more of a danger than Shenna and her father anticipated. Still, Shenna would not part with Wolf for all the gold in the Lightlands.

Shenna picked up the new bow Jeremun still crafted for her each evening. She turned it in her hand, trying to become better acquainted with it. Although rough, when complete it would prove good enough to fire the arrows Jeremun and Tanalay carried. Sheranai were brilliant with bows, yet Shenna felt she could be a match for them.

She fought off a visible scowl. If her bow had been with her the day Jorn betrayed her, she would have pierced him through the heart and fled with her father. Then he would be alive.

Jorn coveted Wolf. He could get a thousand tenaries for Wolf's coat – enough money to ensure he never had to hunt again. But Teshian law prohibited the killing. Following the Dawn Time, the Wolven were killed for their coats, and hence a bond formed between the Wolven and Lorshan – one would protect the other. Only the Lorshan and Wolven knew of the bond – until Shenna became careless.

Jorn had to kill Wolf without being caught, and Wolf never parted from Shenna's father. People feared the wrath of the Imperials more than they loved tenaries – even the Teshians. If caught, Jorn would be reported, and the Imperials, frequenting Tesh in unusual numbers, would be called in to exact punishment.

Jorn feigned friendship with Shenna, becoming the brother she never had. She trusted him and one day told of her Lorshan heritage. She spoke of her father's position as

leader of a dying race; of her father's bond with Wolf; and of the pact with the Wolven.

The villagers stormed to their house that day.

"Witches!" they screeched to the hermits despised since the day the two migrated. "Burn the Lorshan witches. Burn them!"

Shenna's father pushed her away from the door and opened the cellar hatch. "Whatever you hear me say, keep running." *Wolf, go with her. I command you to keep her safe, because she is more important to me than life itself.*

Something cold, hard, pressed from her father's hand into her own. Shenna stared wide-eyed at the armband of leadership. "Father – no. You will live."

"Go, Shenna, and don't come back."

She lowered herself through the opening. Wolf jumped in after her. She peeled back shelves and moved through a disguised doorway that sealed a tunnel winding to a nearby wood.

She heard her father open the front door. "What have you done with my daughter? Where is she?"

"Burn the witch!" the frenzied villagers shouted, then her father cried out in pain.

Shenna returned to the village that night to see her father's charred body still nailed through hands and feet to a blackened post. He had been burned alive.

Shenna mourned without tears, for her whole world smouldered on that post. Her isolation, her fear, intensified, for she knew she was the very last of the Lorshan. She wandered, lonely, bitterness swelling like a broken limb inside. Then the Dark Man came.

The Dark Man, a dark-skinned Gypsy wanderer, roamed the hills near Acran. He stumbled across Shenna's camp one night and entreated her for food. Shenna shared the little she had, and the two struck up a difficult friendship.

The Dark Man told Shenna stories of the majestic race of Lorshan who had once roamed the earth. Shenna asked more than her fair share of questions. It was her curiosity that seemed to stir an idea within the Dark Man. He suspected she wanted to see the Lorshan, although why, he did not seem to know. He told her that a few of the Lorshan may still live. And there they struck a bargain. For as long as Shenna brought the Dark Man pilfered jewels and items, he bought Shenna food and gave her a small share of coins the items were sold for. Once Shenna had provided the Dark Man with enough tenaries, he would take her on the journey to the place the few remaining Lorshan were last seen. On the way, she would have her revenge on the village.

Shenna neither trusted nor respected the Dark Man, and had been careful to hide her need for revenge and the motive for meeting with the mysterious race. She had seen to it that her stash of coins ensured she could escape the Dark Man and travel by herself if forced to. But she needed the location he craftily refused to give, and the Dark Man's unfair division of the plunder left her locked in a bargain for too long. Tallying up nearly a year of dependence on the mysterious underhanded stranger meant more probability of discovery. Such thoughts often left her in a cold sweat during the early hours of the morning.

Shenna felt Tanalay stir beside her. Shenna turned to

watch the beautiful woman and envied the depth of Tanalay's sleep. Shenna could not remember the last time she slept well.

Shenna saw Darrus pace the perimeter and again felt wary of the big man. He may have been kind despite his unsmiling face, but he was still enormous and powerful. Such a man was not to be tampered with.

Blessed with Lorshan perception, she knew, even before overhearing the conversation in the inn, that this group was not on its way to visit relatives or look for work opportunities. There seemed a certain urgency, a sense of great importance about their mission. All of Shenna's questioning and manipulation turned up nothing. It left her with one option. She would go for a walk one evening and leave Wolf behind to listen. If intuition served her correctly, the group would grab the chance to talk.

Patchy silver-rimmed clouds slithered from the moon. Nearby autumn birches turned from black to cold grey. Shenna stared up at the moon caught by a bared tree like deformed hands clutching a pearl. It would be a Kekara Moon in just a few months – not good. She would at least have to be away from these people by then. Out of twelve full moons of the year, she feared two. The Kekara Moon put the Lorshan at risk, whilst the Pegu Moon, the night of the banshees, promised danger to every race. The Timeless One help anyone caught in the open when the banshees roamed. Not even the inns, gleaning huge sums of money from desperate travellers, found anything positive to say about the Pegu Moon.

A dull aching in her shoulder reminded Shenna that she

was not yet free to leave these people. One more day of nursing and medication, then she and Wolf could escape, head back to the Acran hills. The Dark Man would be curious by now, yet might not question. Shenna rarely asked after the Dark Man; he reciprocated.

A twig snapped in the distance. Darrus tensed. He slowly, cautiously, drew his sword and peered into the darkness.

More twigs snapped. Wolf stirred, lifted his head from paws. His ears pricked forward to the sounds. He growled.

*What is it, Wolf?*

*Human, Master. I cannot see, but I can smell it.*

The hair on Wolf's back straightened. He launched to his paws.

Shenna swiftly kicked Jeremun in the shins. He jerked upright from his mat into a sit.

“What was that for?” he asked, squinting sleepy eyes.

“Shh!” Shenna hissed. “Someone's coming.”

Jeremun glanced at Darrus, noted Darrus' body language, then leapt like a cat to his feet, bow ready.

A chill breeze tugged at the fire and pushed smoke into Shenna's eyes. She squeezed them shut, biding her time against the sting. *Can you see yet, Wolf?*

*Almost.*

A distant owl hooted, eerie above the faint wind.

Darrus attempted a careful step forward. Jeremun trod lightly around the fire and crouched. Only Tanalay slept through.

“What is it, Darrus?” Jeremun whispered into the darkness beyond the fire.

“I don’t know, but it’s definitely coming this way.”

*Anything yet, Wolf?*

*No. Oh, yes, it is a woman. It is . . . the raven-haired woman, Kendra.*

Shenna saw Jeremun pull his bowstring back tightly. Darrus slipped behind a thick tree, sword ready to swiftly split open a skull. The horses, sensing trouble, fussed.

Shenna waited with strained patience and counted to prevent poor timing. At last she said, “It’s your friend, the raven-haired woman – Kendra.”

Darrus glared at her, clearly angry at the volume of her voice. He sent a questioning glance to Jeremun who shrugged, confused. “I can’t see yet. I don’t know how –”

Shenna cut in, “Trust me – it’s your friend.”

A few more moments of tense silence, Darrus and Jeremun clearly not sure what to do, then Jeremun relaxed. “It’s Kendra. I can see her now.”

Darrus stepped from behind the tree and made Kendra jump. She swore then sheathed her sword, slamming it down into the scabbard. “You do that to me every time.”

Darrus did not smile. He only stared.

Tanalay woke from sleep, sat up quickly, confused. She blinked a few times, then focused a squint on Kendra.

“And I’m pleased to see you too,” Kendra said with light sarcasm.

“Forgive me, Kendra.” Darrus finally relaxed. “I didn’t expect you to be here.”

“I saw your fire from my camp in the hills. I suspected it was you, but I thought it best to check.”

“Are you . . . are you all right?” Darrus asked.

Kendra softened, and a faint smile formed. “Yes, I’m fine.” She peered around, then snagged on Shenna. “What is she doing here? I gave you specific instructions, Darrus. I expected you to obey them.”

Only a faint rise of Shenna’s brow indicated any feelings. So it was true – the woman, Kendra, was in charge. But why? And in charge of what?

“We didn’t have a lot of choice,” Tanalay said to Kendra. Were they afraid of the woman? “She was attacked by the villagers. We all were. We managed to escape, then offered to dress her wound until she was better. It’s not too late for her to turn back.”

Kendra studied Shenna with dark exotic eyes framed by bland features, almost glaring at the girl. Nothing was said, then Kendra turned to Darrus. “You trust her?”

Darrus shrugged. “No – but I don’t distrust her either. She seems uncomplicated.”

Kendra was clearly thinking. Again, a terrible silence, then she walked towards the fire and stretched hands over the warmth. “It’s late, and I’m too cold to think. We can talk in the morning. My campsite is about a mile from here up that slope.” She gestured her head behind her. “It’s a safer place to rest than this grove. I suggest we move to the cave and sleep there.”

Darrus nodded obediently. “Gather your things.”

“You’ll need to walk the horses,” Kendra said. “It gets rough and steep.”

No one said a word on the way to the campsite. The icy wind bit into clothes, and frost settled, chilling through boots. Only Wolf seemed sure of his footing on the bleak night.

Kendra led them up a steep leaf-strewn hill where the forest rose to a rocky, barren ridge. Near the ridge, she skirted around a boulder until she stood at the mouth of a large cave, its depth invisible in the darkness.

Darrus stepped inside and ran his large hands along the wall. “This cave looks very man-made, Kendra. Are you sure it’s safe?”

Kendra wandered in and waved for them to follow. “It’s fine. It’s a goblin cave, but they moved on a long time ago. They’ve blocked off the entrance at the back that leads to their tunnel complex.”

“A sure sign it’s unused,” Shenna agreed. She often slept in a goblin cave near Acran, deserted by its creators since thieves moved to the mountains. Goblins, although fierce in large numbers, avoided trouble, preferring privacy – a rare trait amongst creatures of darkness. Shenna sighed. *A pity.*

Within half an hour, a large fire illuminated the primitive architecture. Disused goblin caves, although rare, were sought after by travellers. The large boulder at the entrance blocked off firelight from the enemy, sealed the warm cave from winds, and allowed smoke to pass. Only the hard rock floor and her curse of light sleeping would stop Shenna getting a solid rest.

They settled the horses near Kendra’s at the back of the cave with oats from the packhorse’s supplies. Out of the wind and campfire smoke, the horses found their new stone stables soothing.

Once seated around the warm fire on thin mats, and wrapped in blankets whilst toast cooked on sticks in the

lowest flames, Kendra turned to Shenna. “So tell me about yourself, girl. How did you end up wandering around the hills of Acran with no company but your wolf, and stealing for a living?”

Shenna squirmed under the steady gaze of Kendra’s exotic eyes. “I’m an orphan, what more can I say?”

“Plenty.” Kendra’s tone was resolute.

Wolf stirred slightly, yawning to feign disinterest. *Be careful of this one, Master. She seems to have a lot of power amongst these people.*

*Yes, I noticed that too.*

A thin scraping sliced the silence as Shenna shuffled heavy knee-length boots awkwardly.

“Perhaps you can tell me how your parents died,” Kendra said. It was not a request.

“My mother died when I was two – a sudden illness.” Shenna affected a calm look. Hunters had killed her mother. Close to death from a long-standing illness, her mother chose the Immortality and had swiftly been killed by greedy men. “My father died in a hunting accident ten years ago.”

Kendra stared coldly. Seconds passed. “Why are you lying to me?”

Tanalay gasped; her head whirled towards Kendra. Jeremun dropped the chunky bread he toasted over the fire. The silence sharpened the clop of horses’ hooves on stone at the back of the cave as they sought spilled oats.

“Kendra! What are you doing?” Darrus asked.

“It’s all right, Darrus.” Kendra set black eyes on the burly man. “Do you think I’m careless? You know me better than that.”

*What's happening here, Wolf?* The tension was almost tangible.

*I sense the dark-haired woman just gave something away that she should not have. Or perhaps they question her hasty judgement of you.*

*No, Wolf. The others know that I'm no threat to them. I don't think they're concerned that Kendra may have endangered them by angering me.*

There was a thoughtful pause. *Do you think she is just guessing at your lies?*

*Of course she's guessing. What a silly question, Wolf.*

*Is it, Master?*

A chill gushed down Shenna's spine at the pointed question.

Darrus and Kendra seemed to exchange something before Kendra shoed the tension away with a flick of her hand. She smiled warmly at Tanalay and Jeremun. "I have not said a decent hello to you both. How have you been?"

"We're okay." Tanalay returned the smile. "Perhaps weary from months of travel but well. Yourself?"

Kendra sighed and settled back against the wall of the cave. "I'm weary too. And frustrated. Life doesn't run smoothly does it?"

Tanalay smiled sympathetically, her attractive features soft in the firelight. "No, dear, not smoothly at all. But we carry on."

Kendra nodded wearily. "I'm pleased that you carry on with us. We'll all rest one day soon, I'm sure of it."

*They are reserved, Master. They dance around something. You stifle free speech.*

*Yes, I sense that too. Perhaps I should disappear tomorrow. Let them talk and leave you behind.*

Kendra turned back to Shenna. Kendra's black eyes seemed to see more than Shenna cared for. "Are you a good thief, Shenna?"

Shenna clutched at her hidden armband as though for comfort. "Yes." The word felt awkward to her tongue. Lorshan seldom gave credit to themselves.

"But you were caught by the villagers. You can't be that good."

"I was sick. I knew that I was clumsy that night, but I was desperate. If I didn't eat before my fever got worse, I probably would have died."

Kendra nodded slowly. "I can see the wisdom in that decision."

*Why did she ask that, Wolf?*

Wolf stirred to reply but stopped when Shenna leapt ahead of his response. "You don't need to worry, ma'am. I won't take your possessions. I owe your friends my life and wouldn't think of repaying them with thieving."

*I do not think that is what she meant by her question, Master.*

Kendra's eyes narrowed on Shenna, then she nodded. "I believe you. Now perhaps we should get some sleep, yes?"

"Now that is a good suggestion." Jeremun barely resisted a yawn. "I'll keep first watch. Tanalay can do the second. She's better in the early hours of the morning than I am."

"I'm better than you at all hours of the night." Tanalay gently nudged her brother in the ribs. "You fall asleep too easily."

“Who was the one who slept through Kendra turning up this evening?”

“You had a swift kick in the shins to wake you up,” Shenna said.

Tanalay laughed sweetly. “That is not evidence in your favour, is it, dear?”

“Great – now I have two women against me.” Jeremun grinned widely.

“Little has changed I see,” Kendra said.

Jeremun noted the tone. “I won’t fall asleep on my watch, Kendra. I’ve learned my lesson in that regard.”

“It’s true,” Tanalay insisted to Kendra. “Jeremun is far more reliable now.”

“I’m sure he is,” Kendra said.

Difficult silence lingered until Jeremun stood and raised lean arms above his head. He arched gracefully as he stretched. “I’ll be just out the front if anyone wants me.” He stifled a second yawn and left the cave.

*Do you think they’re afraid of her, Wolf?*

*No, I think they aim to please her, but not because of fear.*

*I hope you’re right, because if they’re afraid of her, then we should be too.*

Kendra shifted her tightly fitted trousers as she said, “I didn’t mean to offend him.”

“You can’t offend Jeremun, dear. You know that. He’s far too light-hearted to let a comment like that bother him.”

Kendra’s raven curls bobbed as she nodded. “Yes – I guess I do know that.”

Unravelling bulky arms from around his knees, Darrus

stretched far less gracefully than Jeremun. “Well, I don’t know about anyone else, but I need sleep. It’s very late.”

Kendra watched Darrus. Shenna almost thought she saw a hint of sadness in Kendra’s features. A faint smile played on Kendra’s lips. It was met by Darrus’ bland expression.

Kendra looked away suddenly as though hurt. “Good night, friends. We’ll talk in the morning.” She wrapped her long coat around herself and lay down on her mat.

Later, when the fire shimmered low in its bed and Jeremun lay where Tanalay had been, Shenna lifted her head from Wolf’s soft belly and shook him gently.

*Are you awake, friend?*

*I am now, Master.*

*I’m sorry to disturb you, but we need to talk.*

*Yes, we do.*

*My shoulder’s better now, and this situation is too uncomfortable. The woman, Kendra, disturbs me. Her questions are really pointed, and she seems very influential. I think we should head back to Acran before it’s too late, and I think Kendra would prefer it if we were gone.*

*Do you plan a farewell, Master, or just hope to disappear?*

*Probably just disappear. I don’t owe these people a goodbye. They may have saved my life, but it doesn’t mean we’re good friends.*

Wolf remained cryptically quiet.

*Perhaps I do owe them a goodbye, but do you think it’s wise, Wolf? What if they convince me to stay?*

Again Wolf said nothing.

*Why aren’t you answering me?*

*I am waiting for your true feelings on the matter, Master.*

*Oh all right, I confess. I'll miss them. I do get lonely sometimes, Wolf, and they've been so good to me. A goodbye would just be too awkward.*

*I expected as much.*

Shenna sent a soft mental smile. *You know me too well, Old Friend.*

*That I do.*

She chewed her lip thoughtfully. *Do you think the Dark Man will be angry, Wolf? We missed our last meeting.*

*Probably.*

*Maybe he thinks we're dead. He'd better not have found my money stash. He'll come to regret it if he's taken it.*

*I would not tamper with that man if I were you, Master. The Dark Man troubles me more than this woman, Kendra. It was a bargain we probably should not have made.*

*Don't lecture me, Wolf. He's a means to an end. And I'll get revenge for my father and my people, whatever it takes.*

Wolf tactfully remained silent.

*Wolf?* Shenna sent after some time.

*Yes, Master?*

*Do you think there'll be trouble tomorrow? With us leaving?*

Shenna felt power rush through Wolf's mind. *I sense that there will be, but I do not think it will come from these people. Something out there is brewing; something that will involve us, but beyond that I cannot see.*

*I wish your gift was more specific. And less temperamental. Why is it the Wolven can only see vague things, and only every now and then?*

*We have had this discussion before. You know I do not have the answers.*

*And why does it always seem to predict trouble?*

*Clouds of sadness darkened Wolf's mind. When does anything other than trouble ever find us, Master?*

A chill wind blew through Shenna's insides, and she tucked herself up in a tight ball until it went away. Uncurling and snuggling close to Wolf, Shenna longed for sleep that would not come.

# 4

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“Everybody up!” Tanalay’s sharp cry punctured the tranquil dawn.

With uncanny speed, Darrus stood, sword drawn. “What’s the danger?”

The rest struggled to their feet and peered through the pale dawn light of the cave.

“Orcs. A large band of them, and they’ve smelled us.”

“Grab your things,” Kendra said. “Forget the fire. Get the horses. Shenna, go with Tanalay. When we exit the cave, turn right.”

“How far away are they?” Jeremun asked Tanalay.

“Five, six minutes at the most. They’re nearing the base of the hills.”

Lunging for her bow, Shenna felt Wolf’s questioning eyes upon her. *She takes us further from Acran, Master.*

*I’m not going to run straight from these people into a group of orcs. We’ll just have to wait.*

Working calmly but swiftly as though used to far greater dangers, they packed and saddled in minutes with what seemed practised precision.

Shenna heard the steady rumble of heavy rain beyond the cave entrance. She slung her bow over her shoulder and turned quickly to Kendra. “It’s raining. We can try and shake off our scent. It’s too late to outrun them.”

Tanalay swung onto her horse with a slight grunt. “Orcs can smell through rain.”

“Through rain, yes, but they can’t smell a wet human for long.”

“What do you suggest, Shenna?” Kendra lingered beside her horse.

“No weatherproof coats, no leather. Only light clothes. We must get wet very quickly.” Shenna started stripping off her knee-high boots. “And it *all* has to be wet. Feet, thighs, chest – everything.”

“How do you know this?” Kendra watched the girl closely.

“My father was a woodsman. He taught me how to outrun them.”

“Do as she says.” Kendra hastily began to pull off her thick coat and leather boots. “That includes sword belts.” She began unlacing leather pants.

Shenna stripped thick woollen stockings from beneath a thigh-length skirt. She slung clothes over the horse’s back, then delayed mounting until Tanalay removed deer-hide pants.

Shenna felt her cheeks burn as the men stripped trousers, a vest, boots and a sword belt. Shenna caught a flash of a stunning tattoo on Darrus’ chest before he bent over to take off shoes. Shenna wondered briefly what the elaborate sword meant, then Wolf interrupted her thoughts.

*Your armband, Master.*

*Thanks, I almost forgot.* Shenna stepped from direct view into shadows. She pushed up her woollen sleeve and touched the solid silver armband that circled her toned upper arm. It vibrated softly, then uncoiled onto her palm. Briefly it lay as a

metal rod, then the circle reformed. She thumbed familiar spirals that mocked her, signifying leadership of a dead race. Suppressing bitterness, she threw the ornate label into Tanalay's saddlebag.

"Let's go." Kendra kicked her horse into action.

"They'll smell the horses," Darrus said as they spilled out into the rain.

Shenna sucked in her breath at the bitterly cold rain and wind on bare skin, then shook her head sharply. "Just don't ride hard, and keep your horses calm. It's the horses' sweat that they pick up keenly, no matter what the weather is."

"Head for the ridge," Kendra called above the downpour. "Ride along it, then down the other side when I give the word."

Resisting the urge to signal a gallop, Kendra led the group up the rocky hillside onto a thin, slippery ridge. Rain already washed mud and debris down the sparse sides of the cliff.

Shenna slid back from Tanalay to allow rain to wash down her own stomach and drench Tanalay's back. No hint of human scent should remain.

*Are they close, Wolf?*

*They struggle up the mountainside, but they are too close for my liking.*

Shenna felt the horse's feet slide. The creature's bones pushed her inner thighs as she strained to hold on.

*Are you all right, friend?* Shenna asked the horse.

*I'm afraid, friend.* The horse's mind quivered. *This terrain is too rugged. And I smell something foul behind me. Something evil follows.*

*No, friend. If something evil followed, we wouldn't be*

*moving so slowly.* If she confirmed pursuit, the flighty horse would panic. An inch too close to the ridge's lethal edge, and they would tumble to inevitable death.

*I smell death, friend,* the horse said. *Death is behind us.*

*Friend, death isn't behind us, it's either side of us if you don't keep your footing. You must concentrate.*

A horse screamed. Shenna saw Darrus' mount slide down the slope. He yelled for Kendra to go on, but she stopped, ready to leap from her horse.

*Steady, friend!* Shenna sent hastily to the struggling horse. *Don't panic. There's a rock where you can place your foot, just above you. See, there it is.* Shenna sent a mental picture.

The horse positioned a foot on the rock and hauled itself and its enormous human load up the unstable slope.

"Everybody down," Kendra shouted above the rain. "Walk your horse."

Shenna noted instantaneous obedience.

They walked for an eternity, sharp rocks and icy mud squeezing into bare feet. The skies ripped open with lightning and distant thunder followed.

The rain lulled. Shenna noted foamy sweat at the edges of her horse's saddle. The horses were nervous. "Keep washing the sweat from your horse." Shenna ran her palm across the horse's body then shook droplets of water and foam to the soggy earth. "This rain is easing up at the wrong time."

Shenna heard a deep roar that preceded a rumble clearly not thunder.

Tanalay glanced back, then flinched. "The orcs – they're right behind us."

Shenna turned to see hideous tusked faces, skin like

puckered leather. Bigger than Darrus, they sported muscled humanoid figures that warned of dangerous strength. Speed-hindering bulk and lack of tactics were their only exploitable weaknesses.

So many of them. This was more than a hunting party, Shenna realised in a blink. The thirty orcs were not chasing food or cleansing their territory of intruders. With no time to voice concerns, Shenna urged the horses one at a time to stay alert to the raven-haired woman. *Follow her lead instantly. Don't wait for your rider to guide you.*

“We go down here,” Kendra called over her shoulder. She swiftly turned right, down a tight track that twisted to a dense, dark forest.

Framed by slippery rocks, the path inclined steeply. Sludge holes, deep, deceptive, snagged their aching feet. Only Wolf seemed not to strain; he loped along calmly.

“They’re close,” Jeremun warned.

“Just a little further,” Kendra said. “Stay calm just a little longer, then we’ll try to shake them.”

The orcs, forest creatures, lurched awkwardly. Their determination to reach the party, despite unfamiliar terrain, confirmed the assault went beyond territorial.

“Get ready to mount,” Kendra said.

They stumbled past a bend. A large defoliated circle, clearly man-made, pushed back into the rock incline.

Kendra stopped without warning and swung onto her horse. “We go right, down the slope. Mount and hold on tight.” With a flick of heels, her horse sprung into action. Kendra started to slide down the precipice. She barely held on with naked legs.

Jeremun plunged down next. Darrus followed last, sword ready, his face in a deep scowl.

Kendra glanced behind. "Follow me exactly."

They reached the base of the hill, turned to a distinct sharp angle right and surged into the trees.

Shenna sensed Kendra's horse yearned to run. Fear rose inside her; it was too soon to break. "Don't run."

Kendra tugged the horse's head left, waited until it steadied, then turned. "I don't intend to run. I want to swing sharply left."

The party followed, unknowingly aided by Shenna's commands to the horses. They maintained a steady pace through the trees, until the forest grew thicker, darker. It closed behind as though moving to shield them. The forest floor squelched, but the rain drifted, a fine mist.

*Do you hear pursuit, Wolf?*

*No, Master. I believe the orcs are heading in the other direction.*

*Kendra is clever. She made sure the orcs watched us enter the forest on a distinct angle then went the other way.*

*If we do not head out into the rain again soon, Master, the orcs will pick up our scent and realise their error.*

Kendra's concentration poured into her surroundings. "Now left." Kendra turned at right angles again.

They pushed through thick scrub until they broke out at the base of rocky hills. Without the canopy of leaves, the rain fell heavily once more, and Shenna felt momentarily thankful for Kendra's tactical abilities.

With relief, Shenna turned her head skyward and let cold rain cleanse fear's sweat that clung to her scalp.

“We’ll head up over the ridge and down the other side.” Kendra did not see their surprised faces. An unrelenting kick forced her horse up the perilous slope.

“It’s too dangerous, Kendra,” Darrus called from the rear.

“No more than facing a large band of orcs.”

They pushed hard up the slope until forced to dismount when the horses struggled. Shenna soothed the beasts whilst Wolf kept Shenna calm with his loyalty, never straying more than an arm’s length from her side.

They struggled to the ridge, then fought to stop the horses sliding down the other side.

The crushing rain, bruising bare skin, and turbulent thunder confused their senses. Flood-rain converted the ridge to a mudslide that scooped up everything in its path.

Darkness and bitter cold clung to Shenna. Her skin had numbed long before. Chafed bare feet stiffened. Silver hair hung limp, heavy, over the thick woollen top constricted against her chest.

*Are they behind us, Wolf?*

*No. We have deceived the orcs. They are nowhere within my sensory range.*

*We are safe then?*

*For now, Master.*

Fighting back rapid fatigue, Shenna followed Kendra down a gentle track and into unfamiliar forest, then nodded numbly when Kendra asked if it was safe to run.

The horses were exhausted when the party finally stopped far from the cave in which they had spent the night, and even further from Acran. They chose a pleasant grove of widely spaced autumn-bare elms. Wispy, pale green grass formed a

damp carpet dotted by the occasional rabbit hole. A clear stream, gurgling over fern-sheltered mossy rocks, replaced the sound of heavy rain that now drifted as mist.

Kendra swung from her horse. “Darrus, a fire, quickly. Tanalay, get some water on to boil. Jeremun, lunch. Shenna, help me pitch some tents and look after the horses. We won’t be going any further today. The sooner we get out of this rain and into warm clothes, the better.”

Half-naked and exhausted, the group worked hastily to set up camp. Darrus gathered up small rocks to edge the fire, then using his strength and a small axe, skinned back thick logs to the dry centre. Kendra showed Shenna how to put up tiny tents. The tents assembled so quickly, Shenna doubted their stability.

Tanalay pulled a small ebony pot from a saddlebag. She filled it with water from the stream and hung it above the fire from a metal frame. Then she turned to help Shenna with the tents. Silently Shenna passed Tanalay the folded fire shelter that would shield them and the flames from rain, then turned back to her task.

Wolf moved off to hunt for rabbits in the thicker woods.

Jeremun returned, a small animal in one hand, a snapped arrow in the other. To honour tradition, Shenna briefly closed eyes and silently offered thanks for the friend that had given its life for food.

*Your death, my life; my life, your honour.*

It took little more than twenty minutes to set up camp, change, and stand in front of a hot fire. Each silently bore the sting as fingers, toes and faces defrosted.

Wolf sat close to Shenna, lending the warmth of his thick

coat whilst she squatted, staring into the flames. He gnawed contentedly on rabbit bones, his tongue working over the fresh meat. *You are quiet, Master.*

*I'm cold, tired, hungry, my hands sting, we're further away from Acran, and if I was disturbed about these people this morning, I'm deeply, deeply troubled now.*

Without waiting for Wolf's response, Shenna looked up at Kendra who massaged purple fingers. "That was no territorial dispute," Shenna said, watching Kendra's expression intently.

Kendra peered down at Shenna briefly then kept rubbing fingers. "What was?"

"The attack by the orcs. It wasn't territorial, and it wasn't about food."

Kendra sighed wearily. She leant back against a tree trunk and slid to her bottom. "How do you know?"

*She's uncomfortable, Wolf.*

*I agree.*

"Orcs never send more than five out on a raiding party. And when they hunt for food, if you see more than three, it's unusual."

"Well, there were certainly more than five out there today." Darrus still paced the perimeter as though out for revenge. "Damned creatures – I can't stand them."

Kendra threw Darrus a strange look, but the big man already had his back to her.

"And that big black one," Shenna continued, "that big one was a leader I'm willing to bet. Did you see the big chain that he wore?"

"I was too busy hanging on." Shenna found Kendra inappropriately casual. "What about the chain?"

“Don’t you think it’s odd that an orc was wearing a chain? A *gold* chain?”

Kendra’s brows crossed from uneasy thought. “I guess it was odd. What do you make of it?”

Shenna blinked. Did she really have to spell it out? “That orc has made a deal with a human. A gold chain is a good will token, meaning payment in full when someone has the human or creature they’re after, or worse, a head as proof of death. Orcs are dark-creatures, but they’re easily bought. I can’t believe you don’t know that.”

Kendra said nothing. She just stared into the fire as though she had not heard a word.

Tanalay settled back into the shelter and shivered slightly.

Only Jeremun met Shenna’s questioning glance. “What you say is true, lass. It was a hired group. But perhaps they weren’t after us.”

Darrus turned, faced them. “We were probably in the way. We did lose them easily.”

*They are hiding something, Master. They want you to stop the questions. Perhaps you should oblige them.*

Shenna barely kept anger from darkening her pale complexion. *I came within an inch of being captured by a group of orcs today. These people have attracted someone’s attention for some reason, and I want to know what that is.*

Shenna kept a tight hold of her emotions as she said to Darrus, “I would not have called today’s escape an easy one. If it hadn’t been raining, we probably wouldn’t have been so lucky.” Shenna paused until certain her voice would remain calm. “And how can you say that they weren’t after us? There were easier ways over that mountain. Why take the path we did if they weren’t following us?”

Again Kendra said nothing. She picked up a damp stick and listened to the hiss as it hit flames. Shenna caught Darrus looking over at the raven-haired woman, searching for something. Was he after Kendra's help? Reassurance?

"Lass, what you have said has disturbed us." Jeremun reached out to turn the prong that held the meat above the fire. "We don't know why anyone would be after us. Maybe they wanted our gold."

"Someone paying gold so that an orc raiding party could bring him our gold? That's using your brain."

Jeremun opened his mouth to speak, but Kendra cut him off. "Enough!" She caught Darrus' curious expression before turning away from him. She fixed Shenna with a penetrating stare. Slowly with deliberate emphasis, she said, "It takes trust before you earn trust."

Wolf stirred and growled, baring his fangs at Kendra. Kendra gave Wolf no more than a curious glance before levelling her gaze at Shenna again. "I think you know what I mean."

Shenna's heart pounded fiercely. Wolf growled again, hair bristling. He padded forward a little as if about to spring at Kendra, one paw curled upward to his chest.

*Steady*, Shenna commanded, but her mental voice shook, and hands clutched tightly to themselves.

"I'm afraid I don't." Deep down, Shenna did. Even Wolf did. Kendra had somehow sensed lies to hide something important. If Shenna could not trust them, how could she expect them to trust her?

Kendra went back to staring into the fire as though nothing at all had happened. Wolf finally settled onto his

bottom and licked at his food-stained muzzle, appearing disinterested. Only Shenna knew Wolf still watched the raven-haired woman.

*So they do hide something, Shenna sent. They worked too calmly in the cave this morning. They acted as though they weren't surprised at all that orcs were coming.*

*It is getting very dangerous here, Master, and we are getting very far from Acran. If we do not leave tomorrow, I fear it will be too late.*

Shenna said nothing. She felt as though something she had struggled to hide for so long was being exposed every minute she spent with these people. How could this woman, Kendra, possibly have known she was lying? Yet she did – with such certainty that she had subtly offered to trade hidden truth for hidden truth. Well, these people were not going to get the upper hand. She would not expose herself just to know the truth about them.

Noting the rain had finally stopped, Shenna stood quickly. Wolf followed her lead. “I’m going for a walk,” she snapped, then added for the benefit of the ruse, “Stay here, Wolf.” *Listen for me. I won't be long.*

Wolf watched her leave as though forced to a difficult decision, then turned back to the fire and his rabbit bones and settled in.

“It’s not safe.” Darrus moved to stop her.

“Let her go,” Kendra said.

Darrus stood indecisively for a moment, looking from Shenna to Kendra, then shrugged and went back to his watch.

Shenna grabbed a spare coat and marched into the cold forest, fighting the urge to stomp off childishly. She quickly

discovered an autumn leaf-strewn animal trail that wound steeply upward. The leather creaked as she tucked the long coat tightly around herself, a shield against the sharp wind. She requested the use of Wolf's ears and found that only the crackling fire, the spit of fat, and squeal of the wind had filled the gaps since she left. A twig snapped in the distance; Darrus still paced. A bird far away, squawked once, then returned to silence. Shenna could hear the scurrying of forest creatures inaudible to everyone in the party but Wolf. Wolf crunched through the last of the bones, then licked his muzzle clean.

Finding a quiet dry place far from the camp, Shenna sat down on a rough boulder and swung legs over the edge of a sheer cliff. She stared out at the magnificent view that brought no joy.

The sky, grey, oppressive, loomed over the almost black tops of trees that stretched all the way to thick mists in the north. The wind whooshed up the steep descent and flung silver hair behind her; her lips caught stray strands.

Annoyed at the silence that shrouded the campsite since she left, Shenna sent, *They'd better say something soon, Wolf. I'm freezing out here.*

*I am sure you are, Master,* Wolf sent wryly. *Even I can feel the breeze through my coat.*

*Breeze? It's a gale. Oh what I wouldn't give for your beautiful fur on a day like this.*

Wolf laughed, then said nothing more as conversation stirred around the fire.

"This is ready," Jeremun said. The metal stick was removed from the fire, then the spitting of the meat fat stopped. "Darrus, do you want me to put some on a plate for you?"

“Yes, please,” Darrus called from the perimeter.

Jeremun unstacked timber plates. “I should save some for Shenna. I hope she won’t be away too long.”

“Not in this weather,” Kendra said. “She’ll be back soon enough.”

“So what was all that about earlier, dear?” Tanalay asked.

Kendra shuffled. “I simply told her that I knew she was hiding something, and until I knew what it was, I wasn’t going to tell her what we hide.”

“Why are you doing that, Kendra?” Darrus briefly came closer to Wolf. “You walk a dangerous line. You must know that she’s planning to leave us. Do you want her to take our secrets with her?” A wooden plate changed hands, then Darrus’ footsteps headed away from the fire.

“Tell who, Darrus? The villagers that want to hang her from the nearest street-lamp?”

Darrus’ grunt indicated point taken.

“Look, I know we have to be careful,” Kendra said, “but let’s not be cautious to our own detriment.” The conversation ceased briefly. “Do you remember that really obscure thing Eladon said to us before we left Sheranai? He said, ‘Two silvers lead to gold.’”

“What of it?” Jeremun asked.

“I’m not sure why,” Kendra said after a thoughtful pause, “but when I first saw Shenna and this wolf, that saying flashed into my head. I haven’t been able to let it go. I rode away to find *bakasta silast* . . .”

*There’s that name again, Wolf.*

“ . . . and I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d done the wrong thing by instructing Darrus to leave the girl behind. It

was almost relief and a sense of destiny when I saw her standing by the fire last night.”

A long silence followed. Shenna could hear the sounds of eating and the pop of the fire over wet wood.

“I feel the girl is important,” Kendra said at last, “but I don’t know why. It’s a feeling I can’t shake, and the Timeless One doesn’t give me these feelings for no reason. When I questioned her, I felt the lies keenly. In order to give over such a powerful vibe of a lie, a person has to have kept a lie for a very long time, and I sense that she has very good reasons to keep it. I also know that if she were to trade her secrets for ours, then we have sealed a bargain with her that she won’t break. She wouldn’t betray us for fear that we’d betray her.”

Darrus gave a light grunt. “I should’ve known better than to question you. Do you forgive me, Kendra?”

“Do you even need to ask?” There was an unmistakable tenderness to Kendra’s tone.

*So the woman is human after all,* Shenna sent sourly.

“Anyway, enough on the girl,” Kendra said. “I’ve been impatient to have a chat with you. But first I need to rectify something that has been amiss.” There was a shuffling sound, then footsteps came closer to Wolf before going straight past him. Arms moved. “Stand up, friends. I owe you two a big hug.”

Jeremun and Tanalay stood. There was a hug, pats on the back, then Kendra said, “I missed you two dearly. How have you been? Come here, Jeremun.” Another hug and sigh that mixed affection with relief as the two patted each other on the back.

“We’ve had our moments,” Tanalay said as the three sat

down near each other. “We had a near miss with the Pegu Moon, and Jeremun sprained his ankle last autumn.”

Kendra gasped then laughed. “How did the graceful, agile Jeremun manage to sprain his ankle? I find that hard to believe.”

Jeremun chuckled. “It’s true. I did sprain my ankle. We were running away from some Imperials, and I leapt from a building. It was night time and –”

Kendra’s loud laughter interrupted Jeremun. “Night time? That’s even worse, Jeremun. The Sheranai see better at night than in the day. You’re admitting more than I would.”

“Now hang on a minute,” Jeremun said, a smile in his voice. “I haven’t finished my story. As I was saying, the Imperials pointed a lantern at my face. Sheranai night vision takes a moment to adjust. I was stunned, and lost my footing.”

Kendra laughed louder.

“It’s not that funny,” Jeremun said.

“Oh, but it is, Jeremun. I thought you were invincible until now. I’ve seen you leap from heights that would kill ordinary men. I’ve watched you move so quickly, you avoided a moving arrow aimed straight for your heart. I’ve even seen you avoid attacks as though you were dancing.” More laughter. “I just find it so hard to imagine you spraining your ankle leaping from a building.”

“And to think that the Sheranai would call Jeremun and me awkward,” Tanalay said with a giggle. “You would love to see my people in battle, Kendra. We’re beautiful to watch.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Kendra’s laughter subsided. “I don’t doubt that I’ll see it soon too.”

“That doesn’t sound good, dear.”

Kendra seemed to turn her head away from the group. “Darrus – stop your wasteful pacing, and come and join the conversation. Please, Darrus. Let the wolf here tell us when there’s trouble. Right now we need to talk.”

Darrus’ consistent pacing stopped.

“It’s not a request, Darrus. Now come, before Shenna gets back.”

The burly man walked towards the others. Shenna heard his awkward movements as he shifted his bulk to the ground.

“Stop scowling.” Shenna noted Kendra’s gentleness. “It’ll be all right. The orcs are long gone.”

“Those ones are,” Darrus growled. “Who knows how many there are out there.”

Kendra laughed softly. “You are so protective.”

“I’m just doing my job.” Darrus’ voice was tainted with discomfort, a tone that Shenna would not have picked up without Wolf’s exceptional hearing.

No one seemed to say anything for a while. Shenna thought she heard Kendra shuffle uncomfortably.

Jeremun broke the silence. “So what’s the news? Darrus indicated that there was something big going on.”

“There is,” Kendra said. “Firstly, did he tell you about our problems with *bakasta silast*?”

“Yes,” Jeremun responded. “How much time do you think we have?”

“Well, judging by the length of the intervals, maybe three months, six if the Timeless One intervenes.”

Tanalay gasped. “That’s not good, dear. We’ve only added Brack, Kayella and Asta to our list.”

There was a moment of significant silence. “You got Brack, Kayella and Asta?”

Tanalay chuckled. “Well, Ben managed to talk Brack into it. Kayella and Asta were just plain good timing and nothing more.”

“Ben is coming in handy,” Kendra said. “I thought him to be too light-hearted, too – how shall I put it? Frivolous? Yes, frivolous, to help us, but it seems others like that boyish charm.”

*I wonder what race he is, Wolf.*

*Boyish and charismatic? He sounds Teshian.*

Shenna hissed slowly. *The Timeless One help him if he is. All Teshians deserve to die for their crimes against my people.*

*Against your father, Master, Wolf corrected carefully. It may have been a Teshian village that killed your father, but your people and my people were slaughtered all over the Lightlands.*

*You’re being pedantic, Wolf.*

Wolf’s mental image gave a troubled frown. *You cannot hate all Teshians for what one village did. Remember that.*

*How can you be so casual? The Teshians killed more of your Woven than anyone else. Their lust for profit is greater than any other race.*

Wolf went to respond, but Shenna cut him off sharply. *Enough, Wolf. I need to listen now.*

“Anyway,” Kendra was saying, “did Ben remember not to send Brack to Nawbia?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered if Ben had forgotten,” Jeremun said. “Apparently Brack insisted on coming with us, no doubt to make sure things are done his way. Kayella and Asta insisted too.”

“That’s too dangerous,” Kendra said. “Why didn’t you force them to go to Nawbia, Jeremun?”

“Do you really need to ask that?” Jeremun responded. “They’re Teranai. Could you honestly imagine them pleased to sit and wait in Nawbia?”

“No, I guess not, but they endanger us. Surely they know that.”

“They promise to take the necessary precautions. Again, these are the Teranai that we’re talking about. They’re more than able to handle the situation.”

“That should be interesting to see,” Darrus said gruffly.

“So where are they meeting us?” Kendra asked someone.

“We meet Brack and Ben at Plaidies Point,” Jeremun answered. “And Kayella and Asta at Fallay’s barn. Why the frown, Kendra?”

“We don’t have a lot of time. Detours are a dangerous luxury at this stage. Did you find out anything last year?”

“Yes – we went to see the Monks of Olfas,” Tanalay said. “They told us to go back to the High Council.”

“Hmmm, it’s nothing I didn’t plan on doing anyway,” Kendra said. “There’s an oddity that has bothered me – *really* bothered me – since we were there last. The last time I was there, I didn’t get the impression they were lying, but I didn’t think they told the truth either.”

“Neither did I.” Darrus’ angry words preceded the faint grind of his teeth.

“If they lied, they would have had their reasons, Kendra,” Jeremun said.

“I’m sure that they did, but the time for their games has passed. We must move, and we must move quickly. Have any

of you noticed that the Imperials' so-called good deeds have increased?"

"Yes, Jeremun and I noticed," Tanalay said. "They're everywhere doing just about anything. It's not just discipline and punishment now. It's genuine acts of good will."

"Genuine is not the word I would use," Darrus cut in gruffly.

Tanalay added, "We even saw some of them lending a hand in a hospital."

"Do you think it's working?" Kendra asked.

Tanalay seemed to be waving her hands about. "Absolutely. Even those who have held a hatred of the Korzekans for centuries like the Imperials. Well, not 'like' exactly. Maybe 'respect' is the word."

"It's amazing how quickly people can be blinded," Darrus said. "The Korzekans have been a bloodthirsty, manipulative, self-centred race for thousands of years. I mean, this is the race that feed deformed and imperfect children to wild dogs for racial cleansing. Why does no one question that the Imperials are Korzekan and must have ulterior motives for what they do?"

"Because for thousands of years," Kendra said, "no one has seen any race do anything decent for any other, other than to stand up for them in border disputes and petty wars when it suits their purpose. The illusion of kindness that the Imperials are giving is so unheard of, that no one can see that the rose is barbed with thorns. They are just dazzled by its beauty."

"That was very poetic, Kendra," Jeremun teased. "It sounded rather Teshian."

Kendra laughed sweetly. "That's a great compliment."

Jeremun and Tanalay returned the laughter, whilst Darrus spoke into it. “You had best tell them about Jetara’s bargain, Kendra.”

Kendra ceased laughing immediately. “Yes, there is bad news, my friends – very bad indeed. We knew that Jetara wanted to use his Imperials to win hearts and rule the nation, killing off his enemies in subtle ways, but we were wrong in thinking Jetara was going for the slow approach.”

“What now?” Tanalay asked angrily. “Isn’t it enough that he kills behind the cover of his good works, to become king?”

“Do you remember the piece of the puzzle that was missing?” Kendra asked. “We knew that Jetara killed anyone who would eventually oppose his ascent to the throne. We also knew that he prevented a revolt by doing good works and winning hearts. But we couldn’t work out how he was going to establish Korzek as the central ruling country. You don’t just send out a letter for these things and expect that everyone will comply, no matter how many good deeds you’ve done.”

“Well, we know how the bastard plans to do it now,” Darrus said. “Don’t look at me like that, Kendra. I could have chosen a harsher name.”

“I’m sure you could have. You Nawbians have a very colourful language when angry. Anyway, your choice of words is hardly important right now. As I was saying, we now have the missing piece of the puzzle. Jetara has made a bargain with the Demon Prince.”

*Good Timeless One, Wolf. Did you hear that? How could anyone make a pact with Demons?*

Tanalay inhaled sharply. “Are you sure, dear?”

“Quite sure. Jetara pretends to be working for the Demon

Prince. He's promised the Demon Prince that if he kills the people on Jetara's list –"

"Who kills?" Jeremun asked. "The Demon Prince or Jetara?"

"If the *Demon Prince* kills the people on Jetara's list, then the country will be weakened."

"That's what Jetara's promised?" Tanalay clarified.

"Right," Kendra said. "And if the country is weakened, it'll be easy for the Demon Prince to claim the lands he's craved for a thousand years. In exchange for Jetara helping the Demon Prince, Jetara has asked to be set up as king under the Demon Prince, ruling the lands in his stead."

"Meanwhile he goes around winning hearts," Darrus added.

"Ahhh, I see it clearly now," Jeremun said. "What a clever plan. The Demon Prince thinks Jetara is working for him, but Jetara is just using the Demon Prince's dark-beasts to kill off his enemies, making it look like accidents. Meanwhile, he wins hearts so that when the Demon Prince thinks it's safe to attack, the whole country will unite under Jetara and his Imperials to fight the Demon Prince. Jetara knows that if he can get all races to unite, we may beat the Demon Prince. The Demon Prince dies or retreats, and Jetara has set himself up as king."

Tanalay hissed, "That scoundrel. He kills off all who stand in his way of being king, he finally gives the races a reason to unite and a strong leader to unite under, and in the process, destroys the Demon Prince. Is there no end to the man's ambition?"

"So when is the Demon Prince coming to claim what he thinks is his prize?" Jeremun asked Kendra.

“From the amount of false good works that the Imperials are doing lately, I would say it’s coming soon. There have also been lots of bands of dark-beasts moving across the borders of the Darklands into the Lightlands. Someone is getting ready for war.”

*This is scary, Wolf. If we go to war against the Demons and dark-beasts, and he wins . . . it doesn’t bear thinking about.*

*If the Demon Prince comes, we will surely go to war. We have struggled to keep the Lightlands from the Demons since the Dark Time. Not one race will sit by and let him take over.*

“We have to let the High Council know.” Urgency tightened Jeremun’s voice. “And soon.”

“That’s where we’re going next – after we meet Ben and the others,” Kendra said. “Are you all right, Tanalay? You’re shaking.”

“I guess I’m just disturbed. How are we going to stop this one? The *bakasta silast* is letting us down; the Monks of Olfas turned up nothing; the High Council has been hiding the one thing we need to know; we have only got half the countries and states on our list; and the rest of the country is about to unite for the first time since the Dark Time under the wrong man.”

“It will be all right, Tan.” Jeremun’s arm moved. “Come here.” Tanalay shuffled. “You really *are* shaking.”

“Perhaps I’m just cold.”

Jeremun’s voice soothed. “We can still win this, Tanalay.”

“But we’re running out of time, dear.”

“But we are not *out* of time. Don’t forget that.”

“What do we do with the girl?” Darrus asked.

There was a thoughtful silence. “You’re not going to be satisfied with this answer,” Kendra said, “but I feel that something bigger than us, bigger than the High Council, probably from the Timeless One Himself, is in charge of what happens to that girl. I think we should wait and see what happens. I believe it will sort itself out.”

*No one decides my destiny, Wolf, Shenna sent. They’re wrong.*

*Perhaps, Master,* was all Wolf said.

Shenna felt the hairs on the back of her neck stir as a rush of power filled Wolf’s mind. *Is it your future perception gift, Wolf?*

*Yes. I sense a choice. I do not know what that choice is, but I see the results. One is terrible darkness and despair. The other is hope.*

*Sometimes I wonder about your gift, Wolf. I don’t think it’s helped us once. While ever we can’t interpret it, it’s useless.*

“Does anyone want more meat?” Shenna heard Jeremun ask.

“I do.” Darrus moved towards the fire.

Jeremun laughed. “Of course. I meant anyone other than you, Darrus. I was already cutting you some more.”

“Save some for Shenna,” Kendra said.

Shenna stared out at miles of Inverellian woodlands. Smoke started to rise in the north-east until it billowed into large puffs. She scanned the dark-green horizon. Another cloud of smoke rose south of a pale green knoll that spanned half the scenery. She watched curiously, then a third column of

smoke rose, equidistant from its kin. The smoke, lighter yet distinctly more grey than the rain clouds, swelled into dark cotton puffs.

The Inverellians, simple labourers and farmers, knew the art of burning to protect their forests from fierce summer fires. If only they would encourage the fires further north to scorch some of the Teshians' lands and crops. Not that that would do much. Teshians weren't particularly skilled at farming and preferred to scam other nations into supplying produce at cruelly low prices.

It seemed one of life's terrible ironies that fires ravaged the lands of the hard-working Inverellians and rarely touched the fields and forests of Tesh. Still, it left the Inverellians with an invaluable gift for controlling fires, and many a nation in the past had called upon Inverellians to do just that.

*Is the meeting over, Wolf?*

*It seems to be.*

*Then I'll come back.* Shenna climbed back up the rock and started down the narrow path. Earth-coloured leaves slipped slightly under her feet, and she placed a hand on a gritty, grey boulder to steady herself.

"What I wouldn't give to have the Lorshan raised from the dead," Tanalay said suddenly.

Shenna froze. The hand on the boulder gripped tightly until the rock surface chafed her clammy hand like sand. Her heart accelerated; pounded in her ears. *What did she say, Wolf?*

*That she wished the Lorshan had not died, Master.*

Kendra shifted, perhaps to get a better look at the Sheranai woman. "What do you mean by that, Tanalay?"

"Oh nothing, really. Just something that I read whilst

Jeremun was threatening to torture one of the Monks of Olfas.”

“You threatened to torture a monk?” Kendra asked.

“Well, yes. It’s a stupid religion anyway. How can they claim to be any closer to the Timeless One just because they hide away to study the Timeless Way, wear robes and refuse to marry?”

“I forgot that the Sheranai have no love for monks.” Kendra seemed faintly amused. “I should’ve known better than to send you to Olfas.”

Darrus spoke with his mouth full. “Without the monks, knowledge would not have been preserved. You should remember that before you dismiss them.”

“Look, I don’t have a problem with them preserving knowledge,” Tanalay said. “That’s a good thing. But why call it more religious than the Sheranai preserving the beautiful forests as the Timeless One commanded us to. Or the Avakar mining the world’s jewels and gold so that the poor could eat, as the Timeless One commanded. And how can they say that preserving knowledge is more important than the Nawbians and Sikawan protecting our borders from the Demon Prince? Or than the tiny Manlets making sure the healing herbs bloom every spring?”

Kendra laughed. “Your race is just bitter because the monks choose your beautiful forests to have their hideaways.”

“My race is bitter, dear, because the monks try to tell us that what we do is not religious enough because we don’t spend hours a day pouring over the Timeless One’s commands.”

“Anyway, that’s not the point of this conversation,” Kendra said. “Tell me about what you read.”

“Well – I was reading about some of the old battles, like the time of the first interracial war before the Dark Time.”

Darrus swallowed. “You mean before the Sheranai created the crown?”

“Yes – that war. It was the Lorshan who tipped the scales in that battle. The book didn’t say why, but it did say that there was something about them that was different to everyone else – something that won the war and saved the Apparye. Whatever it was, we could use it now. And the interesting thing is, it won the war the second time too.”

“The second time?” Kendra asked.

“The Dark Time, dear, when the Apparye were killed.”

“Oh, yes, the Lorshan repelled the Demon Prince. I remember being taught that when I was a little girl.”

“Not that it does us much good now,” Darrus said with another mouthful of food. “The Lorshan died out centuries ago. I wish we knew what killed them, but I guess we’ll never know.”

Shenna tried to control fear and rage. *I know. You foolish races, in your corruption and petty fighting, destroyed the one thing that could have saved you.*

Wolf sent soothing words to Shenna, but it did little to steady her emotions.

“That’s what troubles me,” Tanalay said. “Two times in history all races were at war – once with each other, and once with the Demons. Both times it was the Lorshan who decided the battle. Now, here we are, possibly about to face another full-scale war, and the Lorshan have been dead for tens, possibly hundreds of years. And we don’t even know what was so special about them.”

“I know that too!” Shenna shouted to the wind. “You destroyed our Immortality until our secrets were so lost they became superstition. Then in our mortal forms you burnt us as witches. And you took our Woven, the other half of our souls, for their coats – for their damned coats.”

*Master, do you need me to come to you?*

*Yes.* Shenna collapsed to soggy ground, tucked her arms tightly about herself. Rocking herself back and forward, she shook uncontrollably as tears that had refused to flow for ten years finally rushed down her face.