

Coming of Age

The Blood of Ten Chiefs, #2

by Lynn Abbey, 1948-

Published: 1986



The spear flew from her fingers as the great stag rose on its hind feet, ready to leap from the quiet clearing. The sharp stone tip struck deep, but not in heart-flesh where it would have dropped the stag in its tracks. Hidden in the bushes, the silver-haired huntress heaved a bitter sigh and took up the chase again.

Cursing inwardly, she followed the wounded beast deeper into the forest, tracking it by the smell of its fresh-shed blood. She need not keep it in sight nor exhaust herself in matching its early pace; its wound would kill it soon enough—though it was not her way to let her prey die of blood-death and exhaustion.

Burdened by the height and breadth of his antlers, the stag kept to well-cleared trails, not like smaller game which went to ground in briars or swamps and, like as not, became a meal for scavengers rather than hunters. No, the danger now was that the blood would draw other hunters who would reach the dying stag first and who did not need shaped stone to make their kills. She should have called her brothers and sisters to her aid, but they would have seen the poorly placed spear and mocked her skill as a hunter.

She pressed on, beyond the hunt's boundary, head held high and her mind tingling with the scent of blood. There were sounds on her left and a breeze brought wolf-smell mingling with the blood—true-wolves, whose friendship could not be relied upon. Without breaking stride the hunter brushed her hand along her thigh and felt the knife that rested there, slung down from her waist. A metal knife, ancient beyond belief, with an edge sharper than any wolf's tooth or cat's claw, and her most prized possession.

She howled as well—a warble that would tell any wolf or other predator that this prey was claimed. The one running beside her held tongue and kept pace. A loner, then, who answered no pack and would attack her as soon as the stag. Gulping air, she ran faster and shed her pride to send an image of the trail into the minds of her huntmates.

Perhaps the lone one caught her image. It happened that way, sometimes, when the hunt had blood in its nostrils and the true-wolves were close by. Whatever, it dropped back and she ran alone, setting the images in her mind so she could find her way back when it was over.

Her breath was fire, but it was worse for the stag. She heard it crash into the underbrush and found the strength to sprint the last distance. Knife drawn, the huntress threw herself across the fallen, gasping beast and ended its agony. It had begun to cool before her breath came easily again and she levered herself up to her elbows.

And into her father's yellow-blazing stare.

Who are you? he asked with mind alone.

Not that he didn't know, in a general way, that she was one of his. All the hunt was his; what wasn't other, elfin, was his one way or another. The hunt was his children, his grandchildren and beyond—down to those who neither spoke nor sent but were long and sharp of tooth.

"She-wolf," she replied, daring to sit on her haunches as the fire in his eyes ebbed back.

She was not the highest among his children—and the hunt reminded her of it. Names were for the ones who mattered; the ones who had earned them. And of late there had been very few of Timmorn's first-born like herself with names.

The hunt had mated within itself and back to their yellow-eyed ancestors. They'd become peerless killers and regarded the first-born as failures. Strength and success were what counted within the hunt, and it did not matter that their offspring were often misborn and did not survive their milk-days.

The crossbred hunters lived longer than the true-wolves and scorned the others with whom they shared space and food. And the others, the elves, had grown wary, seeming content to take only what the hunt wished to give. But she was

first-born; her mother was one of the others. It showed in her eyes, in her hands and in her teeth, but mostly it showed in her loneliness: neither hunt nor other.

How are you known to your mother?

The silver hair shook and fell over her face, hiding her shame. "Murrel?" she whispered her mother's name and dared to meet those topaz eyes. "I am she-wolf to her as well. They do not love us, father," his she-wolf daughter told him, challenging him as no one in the hunt or elsewhere did. "They need us, but they do not love us. They would rather have the true-wolves for pets than listen to our songs."

Timmorn squatted down beside her, as close as he'd ever been to this particular child of his. She noticed the white hairs of age mingled through the coarse, tawny fur that covered far more than his scalp. So, he felt it too—the pull of the wolf-blood that made the hunt forever from the others who, though they were mortal and often died, did not need to die.

It has gone wrong. His hand closed over hers, making the mind images stronger and filled with sadness. *Timmorn's sacrifice—my mother's sacrifice—is being lost.*

Timmorn. That was a name that could draw the hunt and the others closer together in the moonlight. Or it had, once—not in her short lifetime. There were too many of the hunt now whose thoughts were closed to memory and several of the others who did not care to be reminded. The others said, or more exactly thought, among themselves that there was a bit of Timmorn in her. Not that she'd know. She'd seen herself reflected off still water, but Timmorn, the legend who had saved the others by going to the true-wolves, had never returned to her elfin shape.

She's spoken to me, came her father's thoughts—as if he'd known hers. *I've done what I could do. It's time for me to leave—*

Her eyes widened and she tried to pull away. Timmorn Yellow-Eyes was all that bound the hunt and the others together and secured a small, uncomfortable world for the first-born who did not fit with either group.

—And time for you to find your real name.

He let her pull away and turned his attention to the stag which they would have to haul back to the common camp. She helped him, using her metal knife to make swift, straight cuts through hide and muscle, but kept her frantic thoughts carefully to herself.

Names were important to the hunters; given more often than found, they were what separated the ignored ones, like herself, from the powerful ones like her father, Yellow-Eyes, or Threetoe—who bulked as much as Yellow-Eyes, had never spoken a word in his life, and whose mind images sent her scurrying for the shadows. Names were important to the others, too, but the elves were born with their names and never changed them.

Once, as her milk-days were ending, she'd asked Murrel about her name, but the tall, beautiful woman had only turned aside and closed her eyes. She'd given her the metal knife, but a knife wasn't a name. So she remained a she-wolf, as simple and unremarkable as that. And if she made her lair at the edge of the camp and had little cause to talk or send to anyone else—well, at least she didn't have to deal with challenges from the hunt or the unending weaving and mending that filled the days and nights of the nonhunting elves.

They bled the stag and buried the offal—a waste of delicacies, but there were only the two of them to carry the carcass, slung from her spear, back to the camp. Even Timmorn, for all that he was the most ferocious hunter these forests had seen, did not want to guard their prize through a moonless night.

By sundown, Yellow-Eyes reminded her, though the images contained in the thought were more complex and carried his confidence that the stag, which she had brought down herself, would raise her status in both groups at the camp.

They smelled the lone wolf again, the one that had paced the huntress during the chase. She gathered images to send it away, but Timmorn forbade it. The wolf, his thoughts proclaimed, was their protector as they slowly brought their burden through other beasts' territories. But there were other things hidden in his images; shadows of awe and respect that she could not understand and did not dare to question.

The sun was the color of the leaves of the sugar-bushes when they came to the stream-border of the camp they had used since she was born. Most of the hunt rose to greet them, nostrils flared to read the nuances of their scent. There were no fresh hides stretched between spear-poles to dry; whatever the hunt had brought back was small and already eaten. Threetoe pushed to the front of the hunt, looking uncomfortable as he stretched up to his full height. The look he gave them was not at all friendly.

Murrel and the others were more open with their welcome calls, though perhaps no more sincere. The hunt usually ate first, the unquestioned right of the hunter, and when the kill was sparse the others made do with berries, roots, and gristle. A stag, Timmorn's stag, would see their bellies full for once. They were already starting a fire in the pit when Yellow-Eyes and his daughter splashed out of the stream.

Timmorn struck the antlers loose from the stag's skull and Selnac, lately his favorite among the others, stepped forward to receive the prize. He thrust them instead into his daughter's limp hands and proclaimed, with a sending more triumphant than it should properly have been, that she had brought the stag down with one spear, alone.

She could have proclaimed herself Stagslayer or Lonehunter or something similar in the moments after her father's powerful images. Instead, with the bloody antlers scratching her arms and legs as she ran, she escaped to her tree-branch lair beyond the clearing, beyond the eyes of the hunt and the elves.

Embarrassment and unfamiliarity robbed her of triumph and left her with bitter resentment. If he hadn't been there— If the hunt instead of her father had answered her call she would have simply given the stag to Threetoe. The dark- and shag-haired hunter would have kept the antlers to himself and let everyone know that the kill had been his, but for a while, at least, she'd have eaten a bit better.

The hunt understood. Status should be changed slowly; too much attention brought challenges or worse.

Daughter who calls herself she-wolf!

Timmorn's thoughts burned upward from the base of her tree. He did not climb and did not have to. His images carried a commanding power that would have brought even Threetoe belly-crawling through the leaves.

"Yes, father?"

The hunter must attend her feast.

She followed him, then, to the fire pit, sat atop the fur-draped stone seat of honor, and felt utterly miserable with the eyes of the hunt glaring at her. The others smiled; she was first-born, after all, and more like them than many in the hunt. Perhaps they thought the first-born, having half their blood from their elfin mothers, should be the better hunters. They had never seen Threetoe hurl his spear.

Threetoe threw so hard that bones and flint shattered more often than not. The others feared him—and so did the hunt.

The feast drew to a close as the fire died back to embers. Samael, an elf, brought forth a deep wooden bowl filled with sun-wizened berries. Everyone, hunt and other, took a handful. The dreamberries still held their fragile group together, though whether the young, silent members of the hunt actually shared images and memories with the ancient elves was a question no one ventured to answer.

When the bowl returned to Samael, that green-eyed elf arose and prepared himself for the night's story. But flickering, outstretched arms of shadow fell across his face: Timmorn would have their attention. Samael sat down, plucking another handful of berries from the bowl as he did.

I have led you all for many twists of moons and seasons. Many, elf and hunt alike, do not recall the times before when Timmain made her sacrifice and went to dwell among the true-wolves. She went to save her people, to bring the strength and cunning of the true-wolves to those whose memories held only gentleness.

She could do nothing for those already born; she meant her sacrifice to benefit their children. She sent me, her child, to teach her people to hunt, to move them safely from the land of long winters, and to insure that her sacrifice was given to the children.

The gathering around the fire pit grew edgy. With the dreamberries in their bellies they heard and felt Timmorn's thoughts in painful intensity. But they felt Timmain too, even the sharp-toothed silent ones and especially the anxious firstborn who'd wrapped herself in the honor-seat furs.

I have failed, Yellow-Eyes howled, filled with his mother's despair. Her people do not hunt and do not have children. My children see only each other and chafe to be free of their weaker, elfin kin—and I grow old. I can no longer hold my family together, so I shall let it fall asunder and pass my spear to the strongest of my first-born.

No one had marked the spear beside him until he flung it across the fire pit into the ground at his silver-haired daughter's feet. They all gasped, but none more loudly than she did herself, recoiling from the stout wood as if it were a venom-snake looming over her in the night.

Find your name, kitling, he sent to her alone.

She didn't, though she did take up the spear and hold it firmly through Threetoe's menacing glower. The dark hunter looked away. He sent no thoughts or images to her. He didn't need to; his posture said everything: how long can you hold it, first-born—if Yellow-Eyes truly leaves.

They watched her, her father most of all. She felt the stirring of leadership deep within her but it could not rise far enough to reach her thoughts and actions. Shivers of anxiety radiated out from her spine. The wolf-song told her to surrender

Timmorn's spear to Threetoe and become his favorite, but, as little as she was prepared to succeed her father, she was even less inclined to turn her neck to Threetoe. There were murmurings, sent and spoken, as she marched out of the firelight, but no one stood to challenge her.

Timmorn's speech had shocked them but not as much as their realization, shortly after dawn the next morning, that he had made good his promise. The hunt, led by Threetoe, spread into the forest, searching for Timmorn's scent. They returned at high-sun. He had vanished without a trace. His trail entered the stream at the edge of the camp and had not emerged either at the rocks which marked its source or the downstream waterfall.

The hunt had been equally ineffective at flushing up any game. None of them were hungry, but the knowledge that they had nothing to eat—except for the gleanings of the timid others—weighed heavily in everyone's mind.

Timmorn's nameless daughter had followed the hunt after sunrise, fully aware that they'd find no trace of her father. He had come to her in the dead of the night, scaring her half out of her wits, and demanded her assistance. She had carried him around the waterfall and taken him to a glade where, he promised, he'd remain until the two moons were both above the treetops. He was not gentle with her as he told her what he expected her to do.

In the frosty time before dawn, as she scurried back to her lair, she'd almost decided on a name. One of the fancy words that the others used when they didn't want the hunt to understand: Starcrossed. It fit her mood.

And there was no doubt that she needed a name now. Eyes followed her every move—or the movement of Timmorn's spear, which she kept at her side. Timmorn's Daughter, Spearbearer, Firstchosen—those were the more complimentary names she heard whispered from mind to ear. The hunt had other names, names that would remain with her if she lost the spear.

The tense air exploded after sundown when the hunt, which scorned the others' glean-foods as always, used their own failure as an excuse to make a challenge.

We'll starve with you as our leader, Threetoe snarled from the darkness on the opposite side of the cold fire pit. *We're starving already.*

Her fingers grew cold and clammy on the smooth wood of the spear. "Food was set before you—to share equally with the others." Her heart pounded but it sent no strength to her trembling legs or to her frantic mind. Timmorn had said she'd find leadership within her; at the moment she didn't think she could find her way back to her lair.

"Roots and leaves," another voice—Rustruff, Threetoe's lairmate and the dominant female of the hunt. "What are we? Forest pigs? The blood of true-wolves, not pigs, moves within us—or have you forgotten?"

"The blood of the high ones moves within us as well—or have you forgotten?" Timmorn's daughter replied, knowing she was losing the contest for dominance with each word she uttered.

Threetoe strode to the edge of the pit. Starlight caught his eyes and turned them feral silver. *Timmain gave herself to the true-wolves and never came back. Wolf-blood is strongest. Wolf-ways are best—the right of the strongest to lead—*

It was blasphemy to turn Timmain's sacrifice around like that. The elves drew a collective breath of shock and the first-born, including Timmorn's daughter, felt their hearts go cold.

"The true-wolves are animals," an unfamiliar elfin voice proclaimed. "Animals no different from the forest pigs. Timmain chose true-wolves because she could touch their minds and take their shapes. The forest pigs had migrated from the land of snows already; she could not use them."

Zarhan, whom the hunt called Fastfire because of his hair, which was the color of the setting sun, and his magic, which made flames come to the fire pit, edged in front of the other elves. Like Timmorn's daughter he was just leaving his adolescence, but unlike her it had taken him several hundred full turns of the seasons to reach that age and in the eyes of the hunt he was as ancient as the rest of the others. He was no hunter, but, because of the fire pit, he held the hunt's respect.

Momentarily nonplussed, Threetoe faltered. His shoulders fell, his back slumped, and he lost his edge of dominance even within the hunt. It took Rustruff, whose position of privilege absolutely depended on Threetoe's continuing stature, to set him on the track again.

"The pack is not led by nameless she-wolves!"

A snarl of assent passed through the hunt. They took up the refrain with their minds, assaulting Timmorn's daughter with the taunt of ****she-wolf, she-wolf,**** reminding her of her lowly, nameless status. They would have succeeded had their target been a true-wolf or if she had not already felt so alienated from the more atavistic of Yellow-Eye's children. Instead, by driving her from them, Rustruff and the hunt pushed her further into her mother's heritage. She found the strength her father had seen from the beginning.

"As Timmain became a she-wolf to save her people," she both said and sent. "So I am the She-Wolf and I will make her people whole again!"

She took her father's spear, spun it under her wrist, and slammed its flint head into the ground. The butt, which some elf long ago had carved into the likeness of a growling wolf, bared its teeth across the fire pit. Then, so fast and subtle that the just-named She-Wolf had no time to flinch in surprise, the carved head began to glow. The eyes and teeth showed a seething red that spread to include the entire ominous wooden skull before the whole butt burst into flames.

The She-Wolf pulled her hand back; she trusted fire no more than Threetoe. But she kept her advantage.

"Take it if you dare," she screamed at him and watched in triumph as he broke away from her stare.

The hunt drifted away from the fire pit, their thoughts as quiet as their tongues. Most of the elves retreated too; displays of such sheer dominance were alien to them. ****Like father, like daughter**** their thoughts echoed as they accepted her leadership. The first-born, a group of no more than a half-dozen, lingered longer. Their thoughts were confused—wondering if any of them could have done what she had done, or could have done it better, or sooner. The She-Wolf outwaited them.

Only Zarhan remained, watching the flaming spear-butt rather than her.

You? she asked in a narrow thought for his mind alone.

He smiled and shrugged and faded into the darkness.

She stayed by the spear throughout the night, falling asleep in the endless time before dawn when the spear had been reduced to glowing ashes. She dreamt of her father, which did not surprise her, and of her grandmother, which did.

Timmorn, in her dream, towered protectively over the members of the hunt. They were born of his wolf-spirit, he told her. Their elfin nature was deeply buried but no more lost than her own leadership skills had been. They needed time to understand themselves just as the elves and the first-born needed time. She should forgive them, Timmorn asked, and wait for them.

She-Wolf nodded. Yellow-Eyes gathered his children in his arms and disappeared into the brilliance at the edge of her dream.

She recognized Timmain and saw the truth behind the whispers. Timmain had been a high one—an elf from the place beyond the sky; there was no real resemblance between them but the She-Wolf felt that they were true kin to each other.

Care for my children, the unspeakably beautiful vision told her. Love them. Make them part of yourself.

It was the same command Timmain had left in her son's mind, but it opened different doors in the She-Wolf's memory. The high one smiled and vanished through one of the open doors.

The spear was gone when the dawnlight awoke her; the ashes scattered on a sharp-edged wind. The hunt was gone as well, every last one of them save the other first-born. The elves, misreading the signs, thought they had gone searching for game worthy of a great celebration and began, in their naive way, to anticipate the feast. Zarhan knew better—She-Wolf saw that in his eyes—and the first-born, who'd seen at once that the hunt had taken its few treasures as well as its weapons.

"How will you tell them?" the first-born who now called himself Treewalker asked. "They're expecting a feast."

She-Wolf looked up from the fire-scarred spearhead she fondled in her hands. The elves—should she start thinking of them as the true-elves just as the four-footed wolves had been true-wolves?—were busy with their berries and bits of leather and fur. Gift-making—the offerings they gave the hunt after special meals; the clothing that would keep them warm through the bitter winter she could smell on the wind.

Words formed in her mind—and the anxious, fearful reactions they would provoke. She could not tell the elves that the hunt had abandoned them. Besides, everyone deserved a feast. No one had eaten well the previous day, and if the ascendance of a new chief did not call for a feast, then nothing ever would again.

"They'll get a feast," she said to Treewalker. "We'll get it for them. Gather the first-born by the stream."

"We're not hunters—not like you."

"You're exactly like me." She grabbed his shoulder, shaking him hard for emphasis. "And don't you ever forget it!"

Treewalker staggered back, stunned that she had done what neither Yellow-Eyes or Threetoe would have dared: laid hands upon him. She-Wolf knew it too, though touching and discipline were common enough between a mother and her

children. But then, she thought of them as her children—even though she'd never had children of her own before. Breaking away from her stare, Treewalker shook himself straight and went off to find the remaining first-born.

They gathered at the upstream drinking pool, proclaiming the names they had chosen for themselves since dawn: Treewalker; Mosshunter—the smallest among them and the most daring jokester; Laststar—the She-Wolf's older, full sister; Glowstone—who wore his name from a thong around his neck; Frost—who carried a javelin and shed her fear like a snake sheds its skin; Sharpears—whose talent the hunt had recognized if not named and, to everyone's surprise, Zarhan Fastfire.

"Elves hunted once—before the sacrifice," he explained a bit self-consciously.

They had hunted, but they had not hunted well, the She-Wolf thought to herself, or Timmain's sacrifice would not have been necessary. This blending of elf-blood and wolf-blood, which left the first-born in constant doubt of who or what they were, would never have occurred if the elves had been able to take care of themselves in this world. She might feel better when the hunt had receded into the morass Timmorn's mixed heritage made of deep memory for his children—but perhaps the hunt, by giving into the wolf-blood completely, had the right of it. Perhaps she was the one leading the failures and outcasts, not Threetoe.

Or perhaps it was Zarhan himself. Threetoe she had understood and her fear of him went through every layer of her mind unchallenged. Not Zarhan. His eyes filled her with the smell of lightning as if she, like Yellow-Eye's spear, might burst into flames.

She should have sent him back. She was chief now and Timmorn wasn't around to see that she kept her promises. The first-born would stand with her. They were eager to hunt together and almost as discomfited by the true-elf's presence as she was. But the promise weighed too heavily in her mind, and she could only hope that he would discourage himself.

"Come on then."

In any other season Zarhan's unnaturally brilliant cloud of hair would have been a liability. Come winter, when the forest was reduced to a world of grays, browns and deepest evergreen, it would definitely need to be concealed from any color-sensitive prey, but now, in autumn, he was no more conspicuous than any of the sugar-bushes.

And about as useful, although the She-Wolf knew it was unfair to blame all their missed opportunities on their least experienced hunter. Twice Frost threw her javelin too soon, panicking their quarry and sending it to cover. Treewalker and Sharpears almost came to blows over the former's tendency to sing while he stalked. Even the She-Wolf was finding her mind too filled with other thoughts to fling her weapon accurately. Zarhan, who used his spear like a walking stick but kept his mouth shut, was about the least of their problems.

At last, well after midday, they came upon a flock of wattle-necks intently devouring a small glade of wild spelt. The fair-sized, slow-flying birds took no notice of the hunters as they fanned out around the glade.

All together... now! the She-Wolf sent as she sprang into the glade, spear high and ready for the kill.

The birds squawked, flapped their wings in the dust, and defended themselves with beaks and wickedly sharp claws. Still, when the commotion settled, they had

killed five and could fairly taste the juicy meat in their mouths. Seven hunters, five wattle-necks; they had a long way to go and much to learn but they weren't going to starve just yet.

No... wait. Only six hunters. Zarhan was missing.

The She-Wolf gathered her energy to send his name in every direction before she heard thrashing in brush beyond the glade.

Zarhan! She let the energy loose, knowing full well that at such a short distance it would echo between his ears.

The brush froze, then emitted a wattle-neck and a sending-staggered elf. He'd trapped the bird, but he couldn't bring himself to strike it. The spear went wide each time he thrust, then it would swing in a swift arc and bat the bird back to the ground. The She-Wolf raised her own spear to end the spectacle.

Another hand fell gently over hers. *It's his—if he can. If not—it lives.* Sharpears reminded her of the hunt laws by which she, herself, had lived.

She relaxed and let the frantic duo return to the glade. The true-elf's face was nearly as red as his hair when, as much by accident as design, his spear struck home.

"I killed it," he muttered, sinking down beside the still-twitching body. "I killed a living creature..."

Laughter stuck in the throats of the first-born. Fastfire had no wolf-blood singing in his heart to tell him that hunting and killing were the ways of the predator, but he had elf-blood that let him share his stunned emotions with all those who could feel. There was little that passed for consciousness in the wattle-neck's brain, but it had known terror and it had felt death.

Never in jest or the lust of the hunt, the She-Wolf told them, making her first laws. *Never with cruelty or meanness. And never a mother with young if there's another choice to be made.*

They voiced their accord as the hunt had always voiced it—with heads thrown back and a wolf-howl wrapped around their tongues. Zarhan Fastfire tried, choked and fell over backward. The suppressed laughter made its escape.

Zarhan looked around, his mind that dark swirl of hidden thought which told all of Timmorn's children when their elders were angry, disappointed, or worse. With equal parts of distaste and determination he got the bird through the carry-noose of his borrowed spear and put his back to them.

The true-elves were inexperienced and disinclined, but they weren't incompetent. Zarhan strode out of the glade in the proper direction; the first-born hurriedly gathered their own kills and raced to catch up with him.

"Talk to him," Laststar advised as they jogged through leaves the same color as Zarhan's hair.

"Why," her silver-haired sister replied.

"They are the elves—Timmorn's blood. Their anger hurts."

"They are as arrogant as Threetoe and even more dangerous."

The She-Wolf glowered at Laststar until the other female looked away.

"It will get worse, She-Wolf," the elder sister said, and there was an image under her words that had nothing to do with hunting.

It did get worse, though not in ways any of the first-born had anticipated. Their entire group had shrunk to less than a third of its summer size. They needed less

meat, but in actuality there were fewer hunters to provide it. The firstborn, with Zarhan, Talen, and others of the younger, hardier elves, braved the snow-covered forest every day. On more than one bitter occasion they returned to the camp with little more than sacks of fist-sized rodents, which even the first-born preferred cooked and disguised within the elders' root stews.

Nature itself seemed against the She-Wolf and her inexperienced hunters. The snows had come early, before the last leaves had fallen, and they'd come heavy. Small game was around in some quantity. They could smell and they could hear it scampering through tunnels beneath the snow. The true-wolves were thriving and the more atavistic of the hunt could have followed the ravnits and mask-eyes back to their teeming dens. But not the first-born.

The cold, dry winds came early, too, putting a thick crust on the snow that held their weight—sometimes. The deer were starving, and the hunting was better for a while—though they'd pay the price, eventually, for each weakened doe whose misery they ended. Then the deer staggered south. The first-born hunted vermin again and listened while the elders clicked their tongues over the stewpots.

"Timmain's sacrifice! Timmorn's cunning! That's all I ever hear any more!" the She-Wolf muttered as she struck the flint with her chipper-stone. Too hard. Too deep. The would-be arrowhead shattered, and black splinters shot into her fingers.

Glowstone sniffed the air and set his own stones aside. "If Timmorn were here they'd howl a different song," he added darkly.

"No they wouldn't," Talen told them, not looking up from his lopsided spearpoint. "They do this every winter."

"That's not true," Zarhan injected.

"Yes it is—well, maybe it's a bit worse this year. But the hunt never heard any of it. They laired together outside, and we stayed here in the cave. We didn't exchange hardly a word or thought with them until the spring thaw."

Zarhan grunted noncommittally and went back to whatever mystery he was perpetrating with the ribs of one of their last big kills. The She-Wolf stopped sucking on her bleeding finger and tried to remember the previous winters. Had the hunt laired together—apart from the others? Apart from the first-born as well, she guessed; she couldn't remember being with either group. Alone. Yes, alone; by herself almost the whole time and, yes, eating rodents. That was how she'd known where to find them.

Memory played tricks on the first-born. There were things you remembered in your nose and eyes as if they'd just happened. Then there were the gaps. The She-Wolf shivered involuntarily. Whole years were gone—more than years, she suspected—vanished into the wolf-blood and the wolf-song. It had been worse for the hunt; they never knew the time was gone except through the dreamberries.

The berries had held them together. They had shared things on the nights when Samael brought out his bowl. They saw Timmain through the elders' eyes and images older than that: a marvelous mountain rising out of the forest, full of light and music. It was more than sharing, though; they became individuals, too, with their whole past opened up and the wolf-song reduced to a faint throbbing.

Sometimes it was better when the berries had worn off and the emptiness had gone back to its hiding place.

"Well, I wish they'd do some work, too," Treewalker exclaimed, putting a welcome end to the She-Wolf's unseen wanderings.

Zarhan Fastfire examined the bent, delicate, sharp-pointed thing he'd made from the bone a moment before speaking. "Everyone does what they can, Treewalker," he explained.

Hooks—that's what he called his little pointed things. He said they were far better at catching fish than a spear though none of the first-born could imagine how he was going to throw it or how it was supposed to kill the fish. Certainly he was the only one who could make them, and he was worse with the chipper-stones than Talen so no one complained.

He put the hook with the others, then turned back to Treewalker. "Who made your boots? Who made the double-hat that keeps your ears warm?"

Treewalker looked away. "Murrel," he admitted after a long pause.

The elders made all their clothes. They knew how to scrape the bloody hides, then wash and stretch them, then work strange-smelling magic on them that sometimes made the hair fall out and always made them soft and supple. The first-born didn't know how; they'd have been naked or stinking if the process had been left to them.

If the elders weren't busy it was because there was nothing for them to do: no fresh pelts to scrape and freeze; no more reeds to be worked into baskets; no more leather to be turned into clothing. All they had were piles of flint and Zarhan's pile of bones. The She-Wolf stole a guilty glance at her mother, who was napping beneath a mound of furs, then took up another piece of flint.

"They're always cold. They're always hungry. Timmain's sacrifice didn't help them at all. They can't get smaller or learn to hunt."

It seemed to be Fastfire's day to contradict and lecture. "I don't think that's what the sacrifice was for," he mused aloud, setting his bone-carving implements aside. Unlike everything else he'd said so far, his thoughts about Timmain were ideas he'd never put into words before and he had the first-born's undivided attention.

"If it had been just that the high ones were too big and ate too much, or because they weren't good hunters, she wouldn't have needed to make the sacrifice. Look at me—sure I'm taller than all of you, but I'm shorter than everybody else. Everybody's been smaller than their parents. Everybody—Talen, Rellah, me, Chanfur, even Feslin would have been shorter if she'd lived. Timmorn Yellow-Eyes towered over me like an oak tree. I remember Murrel's father; he was taller than Timmain!

"And we're hardier; that started almost from the first, too. Smaller, stronger, more resistant to the cold. But way before the sacrifice the high ones were the hunters, not their children. They hunted in their own ways—with magic—and the oldest were the best."

The first-born, except for the She-Wolf, shook their heads. Samael—tall, stately, and ancient—would not even touch a weapon and would only eat meat that had been boiled beyond recognition. It was impossible to imagine him, or anyone like him, beating the bushes for game. Only the She-Wolf had been listening closely enough to suspect that the elders hadn't used spears, bows, or rocks to make their kills.

"What kind of magic?" she asked slowly, her dreams about Timmorn and his mother bubbling to the forefront of her mind.

Zarhan smiled—she was the one he'd really been talking to, the only one whose understanding and acceptance he craved. "Many kinds. Some of them could paralyze prey with their sendings. My grandfather could make anything burn—anything—even things that shouldn't burn like water and rocks. They would drive a herd of black-neck deer with his fire until the whole herd collapsed with exhaustion or stampeded into a rock chasm—"

"A whole herd of black-necks?" Glowstone shuddered with a different sort of amazement. "Didn't they know that was wrong? The weakest, the slowest—a few at a time—but never the whole herd. No wonder their magic stopped working for them. I'm just as glad we have wolf-ways instead of magic."

"You're right!" Zarhan danced over the flint-pile to give a surprised Glowstone a hearty embrace. "The key to the sacrifice. The old ones didn't belong here! They used the magic they had from the sky-mountain to survive here, but the world here rejected them. Their magic got smaller along with everything else. I can only make fire where it could properly be; my father's magic was somewhere in between.

"Timmorn's sacrifice: she gave her magic to this world to create Timmorn. You, Timmorn's children, are truly a part of this world. It won't reject you or your magic."

Sharpears tightened his lips, exposing teeth that weren't lupine but did have the strength and edge to tear through raw meat. "We have no magic," he declared, locking eyes with the elf.

It was challenge as practiced and perfected by the hunt. The flame-haired youth felt a savagery rip through him that threatened to leave him numb and senseless. He'd seen this in the hunt; seen the weaker hunter turn his head and offer his neck in submission. He fought to keep the cords of his neck from twisting around. "Are you wolves or elves?" he croaked.

Sharpears was trembling as well. Challenge seldom lasted more than a few heartbeats. That was its virtue—it established order without harming either side. He had had the strength. Fastfire knew he was beaten, but the ignorant elf hadn't known how to quit, and now Sharpears was himself strained past his limit.

"We're both," the She-Wolf snapped, placing herself between them.

Zarhan thumped to the floor behind her.

"Challenge right!" Sharpears gasped. "My right! Submit or dominate—you had no right to interfere."

"Challenge me instead."

Sharpears simply looked away. His heart and mind would burst if he met her icy eyes. The She-Wolf kept him twisted before her while she contemplated the audacity of her gesture. Yellow-Eyes had never interfered in the challenge squabbles within the hunt; Threetoe didn't even notice them unless he was, himself, involved; but she had leaped in to stop one from reaching its ordained climax.

Why? she asked herself, blinking and letting the other first-born come erect again. Because it was one thing to have a leader but something less to have everyone arrayed in rigidly descending order. Because her father had told her to

bring the halves together again. Because she wasn't sure which of them was right and didn't think hunt-challenge was the way to learn.

Grabbing her spear from the stack at the cave entrance she stomped out into the bright, cold sunlight. She marched past her old, solitary lair, past the faint boundary of the camp and into the forest. A straight track that stumbled over fallen logs and flinched as branches snagged and snapped.

Zarhan.

He destroyed her peace; twisted her leadership without ever challenging it. Worse, he put ideas in her mind that the wolf-song could not swallow. They were both wolf and elf, she and her brothers and sisters, not some part elf and the other part wolf but two complete, ever-shifting natures. Natures that were, for the moment, at war within her.

Though the hunt had its order of dominance it had never so completely emulated the true-wolves that only the supreme male, Threetoe, and his mate, Rustruff, had offspring. Each year had seen the pack grow slightly in size as more were born and survived than died. Laststar's children had departed with Threetoe, but the She-Wolf had no such emptiness in her heart.

Everything had changed since the cold had driven them all into the elves' cave. The wolf-song trilled a burning chorus and so did her elfin self. Sharpears had emerged as their best hunter. His tracking and stalking skills were superb; he was almost always the first to make his kill, and the She-Wolf's dreams were filled with musky thoughts of him. She had only to nod and smile in a certain way to bring them together— then he would become the leader, not she. But that was the way of wolf-song.

She understood the wolf-song, accepted it and knew how to resist it. The storm that pushed her toward Zarhan Fastfire was less easily grasped. He had magic and he did not hear the wolf-song. He had wisdom and courage but he was no leader. He was clever with his fishhooks and traps and he learned things in a quicker, subtler way than any of the first-born could. His name echoed through her thoughts.

"I do not want either of them!" she shouted to the uncaring trees as tears froze on her cheeks.

What she wanted, the images of Zarhan and Sharpears said together, had nothing to do with it. She slumped down against a tree trunk and buried her face in her hands.

Yellow-Eyes! Timmorn! Father! Set me free!

He could have heard her if he'd been within a day's journeying, but she knew he wouldn't come. Choices never bothered Yellow-Eyes; he never made them. He embraced whatever his dominant self—wolf or elf—had pointed him toward. He'd left the consequences to his daughter.

I don't want to bring the halves together!

She was deep in self-pity when the nearby juniper rustled and startled her back to awareness. With her spear half-ready she rose to a crouch and waited. A wolfish head thrust through the evergreen: full-grown but small, probably a lone female. She lowered the spear slightly.

It isn't just me, is it? she sent to the wolf—not that she actually expected an answer. *The first-born always stayed apart from everyone, even each other. Now we're together and with the elves as well. The whole cave is crowded and edgy.*

The wolf whined and took a hesitant half step toward her. The first-born female brought her spear back up. Timmorn could communicate with the true-wolves as could some members of the hunt. Her own abilities were limited, unreliable, and particularly confused by this wolf. She lowered her spear only after the wolf squatted down.

We have no children. There were always children in the winter and everyone fussed over them—even the wolfings that wouldn't live until spring. We'll have to have our own children now. The wolf-song leads me to Sharpears. How do the elves know?

Something startled the wolf. It rose and, staring at her, emitted a plaintive song. Timmorn's daughter sniffed empty air, but the wolf would sense danger long before she did. She'd been gone long enough. The cold had seeped past the layers of fur and straw lining her boots. If danger was coming, she'd best get back to the cave.

Nothing dangerous appeared on that day or on any of the next days—only more of winter's harshness. They were gaunt and had scoured the nearby forest of game when the snowpack finally began to melt. Even then the winds stayed cool, moist, and out of the north; the ground remained boggy and the deer, upon which their survival depended, did not return from their southern ranges.

Samael and the dreamberries reminded them of the years-without-a-summer, which had precipitated Timmain's sacrifice. The stream at the edge of their camp flooded beyond its banks. The icy waters did not recede. Their camp became a bit smaller, though, without the hunt, no one really noticed.

And no one talked about the slivers of odd-colored ice which rode through the torrent.

Fish thrived in the flesh-numbing water. Zarhan tied lengths of flexible gut to his bone hooks and showed everyone how to make them dance in the currents. Fish chowder became the taste and aroma of springtime and everyone got thinner beneath the winter furs they still wore.

"Where are the deer?" Sharpears said to the sky and the forest as he stood beside the She-Wolf above one of the empty grass valleys.

"South. Where the ice has left the air."

"Do we go south after them?" His asking was a sending as well, filled with the dreamberry memories of the treks Timmorn Yellow-Eyes had led.

The She-Wolf sent rather than replied—a flash of long-dead memory: the high ones sprawled in their own blood. *You know what we'll find*, the memory chided.

A shiver that owed nothing to the raw wind passed between Sharpears' shoulders. The memories were powerful for all that they were short-focus and unconnected: Those had killed Timmain's people; Those had sent the high ones into the clutch of the long winters; Those were fear, fright, nightmare and death. Wolf-song taught each of them to distrust the tall, five-fingered hunters more than any other beast in the forest, and the dreamberry memories from the high ones told them why.

"It is better to be hungry," Frost agreed, having felt the sending as she joined them.

But that was a lie. The She-Wolf knew it even if the other first-born and the elves did not. They would have to go south to the edge of the five-fingers' range because it would be better to fight with outsiders than with each other.

The chieftess had actually made up her mind the last time the moons had crossed above the treetops. The changeable crescents were catching up to each other again but she had yet to tell anyone else. Each day that she delayed their departure was another day of slowly ebbing strength; the knowledge that she was weakening the tribe rasped painfully within her. Each day she contrived to steal into the forest alone to send a plea to her father, whose death she had not felt, and the hunt, which surely must have survived the winter. There was never any answer.

She could not leave so long as Timmorn lingered in her perceptions of the wolf-song and they needed the hunt as they had never needed them before.

Selnac's time had come. Swollen and irritable, Timmorn's last favorite among the elves was ready to deliver herself of his cub. The young She-Wolf ached with inadequacy: Timmorn had always judged his cubs. He'd taken each newborn into his arms and known its nature. He knew if it was hunt or first-born—or if it could survive at all. It was a judgment the She-Wolf knew she could not make. Her forest sendings approached the intensity of a prayer and the desperation of a curse.

The moment came on a day when the She-Wolf could not escape the cave. The rain had gone cold and hard, covering everything with a treacherous glaze of ice. Trees rattled with the wind and painfully shed their branches while, as deep in the cave as possible, Selnac whimpered and called Timmorn's name.

Hidden within dreamberry languor or the recollections of the eldest, who had known Timmain before she became a wolf, lay the knowledge that she had been something else before the high ones had been stranded on this magic-desert world. Something that never worried about strength, stamina, death or the agonies of giving birth for the beautiful shape they had chosen—and were forced to pass along to their unexpected children—was poorly adapted to the rigors of ordinary life.

The She-Wolf felt the newborn's first gasp, as did everyone in the cave. They were so few in number, so bound by blood that they could not help but be aware of each other. Holding her breath, the She-Wolf approached the fur-mound on legs that seemed no longer her own.

How would she know? What should she look for? What if the cub was hunt—now that the hunt was gone?

They cleared a path for their chieftess, letting her watch as Murrel gently wrapped the newborn in a patch of the softest suede the elves' art could create. Its hair was a soft nut brown and was already drying into a lavish halo around its face—but, then, it was Timmorn's child and that, at least, was always his legacy. The child twisted its dark pink face into a burping little cry and thrust a tiny fist beyond the suede. Life—and time—stood still as the fingers uncurled, one by one.

Four or five? Elf or Wolf? Life or death? One, two, three... four—and the last stuck out at an arrogant angle to the rest.

The She-Wolf went dizzy with relief as pent-up air and anxiety escaped her. Something—her father, or maybe the part in her that might yet become a mother—suggested she take the infant in her hands and raise it high over her head for all to see, as Timmorn had done; but she fought that impulse and watched in silence as Selnac was propped up with fragrant pillows.

Selnac radiated more fear than love as she took her child in her arms for the first time. She offered it to her breast and curled around it, her midnight black hair hiding her own face and the child from view. When she uncurled there were tears in her eyes.

"She has no name," the mother said in a strangled voice. "Empty. Empty. Empty!"

Murrel fell to her knees, embracing them both, absorbing whatever other words and despair Selnac needed to share. The other elves, even Zarhan, pressed tight together, closing out the first-born and emanating a sense of pure mourning.

What? Treewalker asked the rest of Timmorn's children.

No name, the She-Wolf repeated. *We aren't born with our names—they are.*

It was just as well they were sending not talking. She couldn't breathe through the pounding of her heart, and her tongue was as dry and useless as old leather. She had known all along that elves always had names, while Timmorn's children only had names if they had the brazen courage to take them, but she had never thought about it. The gulf between her and her mother, like the one between Selnac and the newborn child, was wider and deeper than anything which separated true-wolves from first-born for all that the differences could not be so easily seen.

Her feet were taking her backward, out of the cave. Her hands took up her spear because they always did when she left. But her eyes did not truly see and her mind echoed with screams and howls. Her feet went out from under her not two steps beyond the cave entrance; she careened down the wet, icy slope toward the stream.

Survival instincts that were well-rooted in all parts of the She-Wolf's nature struggled to protect her. She flung the spear far to one side and contrived to make a tucked-in hedgehog of herself. Her efforts came too late. She met the boulders at the stream's edge with an extended arm that twisted and shot numbing pain straight to the back of her neck. In shock and suddenly unable to move either arms or legs, the She-Wolf came to a stop with her face only a hands-breadth from the water.

She heard them calling from the cave—asking if she was all right. It was in her thoughts to tell them that she was; that she could not have so thoroughly disgraced and embarrassed herself by falling from the cave all the way to the stream. But, though nothing hurt, nothing would move. She could not even send her thoughts.

Zarhan reached her first, having found outlet for his fire-magic through the soles of his feet. His hands were strong and gentle as they sought her injuries and gathered her out of the slick mud. They trembled, too, but not from the cold. His sendings struck her like lightning but they carried no images nor even words; they were empty—as empty as Selnac's child.

She found the strength to turn away from him and to ward her eyes from his with her hand, but movement banished the numbness. The She-Wolf, unwilling and occasionally unwitting chieftess of elves and first-born, knew nothing of the care with which Zarhan carried her back up that slope. She roused a moment when they laid her on a fur-mound and removed the sleeve-laces from her tunic.

"Selnac cannot help her," someone said—probably an elf, probably Samael.

"Her arm is broken—see how the wrist is turned back. Selnac's got to help her." That from one of the first-born, no doubt.

"She will have to wait, or heal herself." An elf again.

The She-Wolf sighed. If she had been a wolf it would have been easier. She would have crawled to her lair, lain down, and packed dirt around the injury and then waited. If the bone healed before she starved, then she would walk and hunt again. If it healed wrong, then she would, in turn, be hunted. It was all the same to the true-wolves: no questions, no doubts, no worry about right or wrong—just do what you did and, maybe, survive.

She threw herself into the wolf-song but not far enough. The cave was dark and sleeping when the top-fur was drawn back. The She-Wolf felt warm fingers work their way along the bone toward the fracture.

Zarhan? The thought flashed and faded, unspoken and unspoken. She knew those hands, though she had not felt them for many long years.

"Murrel?" she whispered.

"I am not Selnac," the elf-woman apologized. "The healing gift does not run strong in me; does not run at all. But memory does, and I cannot let you lie here. I cannot heal you, chieftess, but I can make the bones meet straight so you can heal yourself."

Eight fingers went rigid. Even through the sheet of pain the She-Wolf had a thought to marvel that an elf could be so strong. Then the pain passed, replaced by a vague throbbing, the fingers relaxed and began to pull away.

"Mother? Don't go."

It was dark in the cave: charcoal silhouettes against black stone. The She-Wolf couldn't see the expression in her mother's eyes, but she felt the same defeat she had seen in Selnac's eyes make Murrel's hands rest heavy on her arm.

What do the names mean? the younger woman sent.

Murrel sighed. "First there is the name—always the name. Your own name, your lover's name, your child's name. When our people—Timmmain's first people, the ones who came from high in the stars—were where they belonged, they knew each other by their names because their shapes changed with their moods. Names passed instantly from one mind to another and when the names joined, sometimes, a new name was created. I don't understand how—Timmmain couldn't ever explain—but it wasn't like this.

"I think that all we have left from the high ones is our names."

The emphasis was not lost on the She-Wolf. "And we do not?"

"I do not understand, daughter. Timmorn had his. He was born with it even though Timmmain had lost hers somewhere in your wolf-song. I heard his name more than once, filling my mind day and night until the world was shaped for the two of us alone. And there would be a child; and my heart would ask its name—and it could not tell me. Not you nor any of your brothers and sisters.

"And we never hear you, not the way we hear each other or heard Timmorn. I know what he told you, before he left, and it can never be unless we hear your names."

A drop of warm liquid splashed against the She-Wolf's arm, then disappeared into the fur. She reached for her mother's hand. There was movement in her fingers, but no strength and Murrel began to pull away.

"Zarhan, mother."

The pulling away stopped.

"I hear his name, and Sharpears' name. Sharpears I understand, but not Zarhan Fastfire."

Despite the darkness the She-Wolf saw the smile spread across her mother's face. The elf-woman quickly wrapped her daughter's arm in stiff leather and tucked it beneath the top fur. "There's hope then," she whispered more than once. "If anyone can find a name it will be Enlet's son."

The She-Wolf's arm healed more slowly than she would have liked—more slowly than it would have had Selnac not needed all her healing energies for herself and her child—but it did give every indication of healing properly. The nameless child, the last of the first-born, clung to life with a tenacity that kept much of the cave awake at night and grumbling in the morning. But neither the child nor her mother could be said to be thriving and, though the ice had melted, the cold deerless spring was giving every sign of becoming a cool and equally deerless summer.

The She-Wolf learned one of leadership's hidden lessons: the leader is the one in front when the pack starts moving. Mosshunter, the most atavistic of the first-born, challenged her while her arm was still bound in stiff leather and the stench of boiled, smoked or stewed fish had penetrated the very walls of their cave.

"We need meat," the diminutive hunter snarled, hurling his half-empty bowl into the stream. "Meat with red blood in it! We follow the deer the way the wolves do!" His eyes and thoughts locked onto hers.

He hadn't meant to challenge; he was only the most outspoken, not the strongest. She turned him aside with little more than the focus of her thoughts against his, but his outburst sparked others less easily controlled.

"You haven't hunted since you fell," Sharpears stated, his stance suggesting that he was more than ready to take over her duties.

"We can't make leather from fish scales," Samael added.

Treewalker set his bowl aside and joined Sharpears by the wall where the spears were kept. "The forests around here are empty. There's nothing to hunt worth eating. It's time we moved on."

The She-Wolf glanced toward Zarhan, almost without thinking about it, and then immediately regretted it. The flame-haired elf looked away from her—not because he would not challenge her, but because he would not help her. She pushed herself to her feet, studying the firm-set faces as if she had not seen them for a long time.

Healing had pushed her deep within the wolf-song and she had not, in fact, taken note of the growing discontent. Nor, more importantly, had she noticed the shifting alliances among the first-born. Sharpears wasn't waiting for her anymore; Laststar stood close beside him. Likewise Treewalker and Frost had paired.

The birth of Selnac's daughter had forced a resolution to the mating tensions that had been slowly building since the hunt's departure. The first-born had made their choices and the elves—if Talen and Selnac's closeness meant anything, or Samael and Chanfur, standing hand-in-hand. The patterns her father had left to break were being perpetuated, and she had missed it all, lost in the timelessness of the wolf-song.

"All right, we'll move, then." She shook her arm free of the sling that held it motionless above her waist. "We'll go south, where the deer are—and the five-fingered hunters who killed so many of the high ones." She turned to Samael, giving him a hard, commanding look. *It's time to remember*, she sent.

Tension snapped and re-formed itself. Mention of the savage five-fingered hunters brought the first-born out of wolfsong. They did not want to remember what had happened at the sky-mountain; the elves dreaded reliving it. But Samael found his trove of winter-dried fruits and counted them carefully into a basket. He glanced at the She-Wolf, hoping she'd reconsider her command, but her eyes remained hard and he took the first three berries.

They remembered the slaughter, the terror, and the years of panicked running that had taken them far from the sky-mountain and cast them adrift in this world with only Timmain's now-lost wisdom to guide them. To be sure, Timmorn had led them back to the forest from the frozen flatlands farther north, but he had stopped among the trees that remained ever green and refused to go closer to the five-fingers' territories.

Then, when the remembering was over but the power of the berries yet remained, the She-Wolf challenged her tribe. She thrust the dangers of their journey deep into the wolfsong itself. Here in the ever green forest they were the most canny hunters, but there, where the deer had gone, they would live in five-fingered shadows.

The elves would have abandoned the idea; they would have accepted starvation or an eternity of fish-and-vermin chowder. The first-born writhed inwardly with their refreshed memories but the wolf-song did demand red meat and did not cower away from danger.

"We will leave," the She-Wolf told them all, "when we have smoked enough fish to last us eight days' walking." Then, her arm throbbing, she returned to her fur-mound and went to sleep.

They left after four smoke-filled days of preparation. The She-Wolf spent much of that time sending her thoughts deep into the forest. It was a futile quest and the wolf-song, she knew, would absorb any guilt or ill-feelings she might have over leaving Timmorn and the hunt behind, but so long as the deliberate activity of breaking up the camp kept the wolfsong submerged she had to keep trying.

She should have told them to prepare a month's worth of food—or none at all. Their supposed eight-day supply was gone when the cave was only four days behind them. No one, not even the She-Wolf herself, had imagined how hungry they would be after a day of walking weighted down with furs, baskets, bowls, and weapons. They shed their belongings each night and left a few behind each dawn when they started up again. In Timmorn's day their migrations had been undertaken with the help of the hunt's strong shoulders. None of the elves could carry their fair share of the burden and soon, not more than eight days' wandering

from the cave, even the first-born were carrying little more than their best weapons and furs.

The forest changed slowly, a few more of the spreading, leaf-dropping trees mixed in with the evergreens for each day they marched south. But the hunting remained hard. The tall paths, which in other seasons had guided the deer from meadows to streams, were encroached by berry-vines and the stream-banks were marked only with the restless tracks of predators like themselves. When, as often happened now, the She-Wolf called a halt that lasted several days, the unfamiliar terrain proved as empty as hunted-out forest around the cave.

The elves were too tired to complain; the first-born sought refuge in the wolf-song which lowered horizons and made deprivation bearable. Hunt, sleep, walk—a daily cycle broken by eating only if the hunting had been good. The She-Wolf did not notice when Selnac gave her daughter, whom they had taken to calling Journey, to Laststar; the wolf-song saw and sang the changes into timelessness until it took conscious effort to recall that anything had ever been different.

Nor could she ever reconstruct the moment when Murrel started calling herself New-Wolf and used Glowstone's second-best spear as a walking stick. That it had happened was somehow important and she fought to the edge of the wolf-song to ask the elf about it. But the smiling answer: *We found his name beyond your wolf-song* made no sense and was swiftly forgotten.

Only one discord sounded within her wolf-song: Zarhan Fastfire. He lurked at the edge of her vision and the edge of her thoughts. Like all the elves he had withered during the journey. His eyes were hollow and ringed with smoke that would not wash away. He staggered more than walked and his name crept into her dreams like a wounded animal. His agonies became her agonies; she drove his name away but kept the pain and brought it with her deep inside the wolf-song.

The elves knew how many days it had been—and could have told the first-born, had Timmorn's children been able to ask the question. The tall, slightly-built elders sent prayers to their ancestors begging that the journey might end soon, but they dared not fall behind the relentless She-Wolf who pulled them farther south.

Their silver-haired leader, grown more distant and wolflike with each passing day, rejected each likely lair with a toothy snarl and a sending that contained few, if any, elfin words. Deer—the image was burned into her narrowly-focused mind—if her tribe wanted deer, then she would lead them until the deer were plentiful again.

The end came at dawn—the seventy-second dawn, Talen was heard to remark—at the shore of a broad, shallow lake.

Countless split hooves had churned the soft dirt into mud, and out amid the reeds was the largest deerlike creature elves or first-born had ever seen. Mosshunter could have curled up comfortably between the tips of the beast's spreading antlers. Samael, the tallest of the elves, could not have seen over its shoulder.

A collective sigh of awe rose from elves and first-born alike as they considered the bounty nature had at last set before them. A second sigh rose from the first-born: would their flint-tipped spears bring the beast down?

Fire, Zarhan advised them, with images of his grandfather's methods.

Relays, TreeWalker replied. None of the first-born would carry fire in their hands as Zarhan's images suggested.

Their first hunt was futile, though Frost stumbled, literally, into a den of rmask-eyes, and Glowstone said that he'd noticed a rocky ledge that might serve as a base camp. Their second, a few days later, was worse. They brought the beast to bay before it was truly exhausted. It charged, swinging its murderous antlers, and flung Mosshunter head-over-heels into the brush before making its escape.

No good, the She-Wolf seethed as they bore Moss-hunter's broken, barely breathing body back to the rock ledge. *No good. We leave.*

She told them to retie their bundles, and Selnac challenged her.

He can't be moved, the elfin healer sent white-hot words into the She-Wolf's mind. *Go yourself. We remain.*

The She-Wolf learned there was another way to break a challenge—and more about the qualities of leadership. She admitted she was wrong without bending her neck but insisted, successfully, that they not hunt the branch-horned beast with spears again. She thought time and temptation denied would bring them around to her opinions, but she hadn't noticed the changes that had settled around the elves.

Rest and an abundance of small game had lifted the weariness from those narrow shoulders but their limbs remained lank and sinewy. Chanfur called herself Changefur; Samael named himself Dreamkeeper and so on until only a few of the elves kept their birth names exclusively. They still couldn't hunt, but those agile fingers that turned reeds into baskets were busy turning vines into huge creations that Zarhan said were nets.

Their audacity enraged the She-Wolf. These beasts weren't deer—and they had said they wanted deer. She turned on Fastfire when he brought her his new ideas for hunting the branch-horn by driving the beast under a tree from which waiting elves would drop the net, which would keep it from charging. If he had challenged, she would have broken him utterly; but he was Zarhan. He slipped through her anger with a smile.

She remained behind with the frailest of the elves, Selnac, Mosshunter, and little Journey, who giggled as she toddled after the pacing chieftess. It went against the blood to wish them ill, but she could not wish them well either, and she slipped into the darkest parts of the wolf-song when an exultant sending proclaimed to the whole forest that the hunt had been successful.

Zarhan led the procession that brought the prize back to the rock ledge, holding one end of the three spears they needed to carry it. His excitement and satisfaction transcended words or sendings—and the She-Wolf met it with a look that was pure ice.

Challenge me, damn you.

Her sending should have rocked him. Narrowed focus as it was, it had the power to turn the other elves and first-born with him pale. But if he showed any reaction at all it was nothing more than a slight slump to his shoulders and a darkening of his eyes.

No, he replied, and he looked away—ignoring her rather than submitting.

She stormed away from the ledge, noticing but not caring that she left Journey crying behind her. The wolf-song was a dark rage within her; she understood

Threetoe at his worst now. Stripping the bark off a luckless sapling, the She-Wolf gave way to immutable, primitive rhythms of the wolf-song: a distrust of invention and cleverness; the hatred of change; and the fear of it. She was a she-wolf again, nameless and feral, when Zarhan Fastfire dared to place his hands on her shoulders and sent an empty brilliance into her mind.

Timmain's lost magic rose within her. The snarling creature who whirled around to face her tormentor glowed with the power to become a wolf forever. Had she succeeded in her lunge for his throat she would have been a wolf the moment his blood passed through her lips, but he met shifting with fire and forced her into a challenge.

Now—if it's the only way.

His fire faded; he could not bring himself to hurt her. He fell backward, borne down by her weight and ferocity. His physical strength was simply not enough to protect him. He closed his eyes and put all his effort into one last, radiant sending.

Rahnee!

The sound thundered and echoed in her mind. She hesitated just long enough for him to throw her to one side.

Rahnee!

It stunned her; left her gasping in her own saliva. She gagged, coughed, and fell limp as the latent magic ebbed away.

"Rahnee," Zarhan whispered, lifting her head into his lap and wondering if he had lost her after all.

He was asleep with his arms still around her, his spine propped against a tree trunk, when the nightmare ended and she opened her eyes. Her lip was swollen and lifeless where she'd bitten through it; there wasn't a muscle in her body that felt strong enough to move. It was just as well. Had she been able to slip away from him in shame, she might never have returned. Instead, trapped there in the moonlight, she had the time to make peace between the wolf-song and the newly-illuminated corners of her elfin-self. It would never be easy to have two complete natures; at least now they both had names.

No, only one name: Rahnee the She-Wolf, just as he was Zarhan Fastfire.

How long did you know? she wondered, believing he was still asleep.

I heard your name long before you were born. I did not know, for certain, it was you until just now.

Love did not grow quickly between them, but then, Recognition cared nothing for the parents—only for the children. They were luckier than some of the others. Samael never came to terms with the passion that drove him to Frost and, for her part, Frost would never reveal the name she found on the other side of the wolf-song. Rellah would bear Sharpears' child—and her dislike of him grew faster than her belly.

Like a songbird caught in a storm, Selnac fluttered from one first-born male to another. Recognition drove her to a frenzy and her healer's soul, which knew Journey had been her last child, could do nothing to alleviate the pain. They found her one early winter morning, floating facedown by the lake shore. Their relief that her suffering had ended was as real as their mourning that she was gone.

By spring a new generation was appearing. Rahnee and Zarhan called their first son Brighteyes, knowing that in time he'd claim one of the many names they

heard between them. He was one of a double-hand of imps who ran circles around their elders and taxed the ingenuity of the hunters to provide enough food for them all.

The tribe rarely had more than six able hunters at a time. One of the giant deer fed them for three days, but they dared not bring down more than one of the beasts between cycles of the moons. Fish chowder made an unheralded return to their diet, and Rahnee began to dread the coming of cold weather.

She was the unquestioned leader—unchallenged since she had found her elfin name. Zarhan was the clever one who turned their ledge into a hide-roofed lodge and showed them how to turn the sticky clay by the lake shore into watertight pots and bowls. He hunted regularly and successfully, but he had no magic solution to their looming problem.

"Bring back Threetoe," he whispered in jest one late autumn night when Rahnee's anxiety kept her awake in his arms.

She froze and shook free of him. The wolf-song still stood between them, pulling shadows across her memories. Their interests never matched perfectly; their jokes often fell on thorny ground. She had forgotten Threetoe, the hunt, and her father. The dreamberries could bring back the memories without pain, but Zarhan's casual recollections were the root of many of their quarrels.

"I didn't mean it," he said softly, not yet daring to touch her again.

Rahnee reached back in the darkness and held his hands tightly. *I've got to leave*, and shared with him the dream-image of Timmorn and the hunt. *I forgot. He's waiting for me.*

Privately Zarhan Fastfire judged it unlikely that Timmorn or the hunt remembered much of anything after almost two years of utterly feral existence, but he knew better than to say anything about it. He even accepted the burden of leadership in her absence, knowing that he'd share it with Sharpears. The first-born were calmer now, but the wolf-song ran deep and passed beyond an elf's understanding. A part of his life went with her when she headed back north, but she didn't notice it.

The snow was deep when she returned to the cave. Their home of many dimly remembered years had been taken over by a bear who chased her back into the forest. The scent of elves and wolves was long vanished; the wolf-song that had guided the She-Wolf came to an abrupt end.

Muttering curses as she went, Rahnee blundered from one half-remembered glade to the next. Late in the afternoon she caught the tang of the true-wolves but nothing of her father or the hunt. All the maturity and wisdom she had pieced together with Zarhan evaporated as she hurled her spear at a tree and watched, dumbfounded, as the spearhead shattered into eights of pieces.

Father! Timmorn! Yellow-Eyes!

She howled until the sun had slipped below the trees and her throat was raw from the unaccustomed exercise. Chewing on the tip of an uncured pelt she wore draped over one shoulder, Rahnee climbed into the tree that had broken her spear.

She-Wolf.

The summons startled her out of a dreamless sleep. Rahnee grabbed at the nearest branch and barely saved herself from falling; she wasn't used to sleeping in trees anymore.

Daughter.

She scrambled down the trunk, falling the last eight feet and not minding at all. Timmorn was there, majestic, glowing a soft warm gold and a little bit frightening in the moonlight. She'd forgotten what he really looked like, how much he was a wolf who walked on two legs. Or perhaps he'd changed. His sendings were different than anything she could remember: raw, as if it hurt him to send as it had once hurt him to talk.

She-Wolf?

Nodding, Rahnee took a cautious step toward him. "Father, I've come to find the hunt. To bring them home."

They burst out of the shadows. Eights of them—not the hunt and yet not true-wolves either, though she was not certain how she knew that since they were true-wolves in every way her eyes could see. They leaped at her, and she saw death waiting for her even after she'd begun to understand. She locked her fingers behind the ears of the nearest animal and stared deep into the silver-ice eyes.

Not elf, not hunt, yet not quite wolf, it stared back offering its strength, loyalty, and timeless love. All it wanted was a name.

Silver-Ice. You're Silver-Ice.

It whined and pressed against her with an exuberance that reached deep into the wolf-song. The rest of its pack milled about, impatiently waiting their turns.

Only one, she told them, not knowing if or how they would understand her.

Silver-Ice retreated enough to let her stand up and shake the snow off her clothes. He thrust his nose against her bare wrist: *Go* and *Now* filtered through the wolf-song—the only way Silver-Ice could communicate with her.

"Timmorn? Father?" She peered beyond the glade-edge and tried to push the wolf away.

Gone. Go. Now.

The wolves felt her sadness without understanding it and shared its burden with her. They howled and dried her tears with their fur and, in the morning, followed her south.

The cord of finely-woven gut snapped taut with a splash. Longreach was on his feet almost as fast, keeping the cord tight and hoping the now-bowed fishing-pole wouldn't snap from the strain. He'd found the notion of fish-hooks in an old story back when Bearclaw was a cub. Now he felt, and with no small amount of pride as he gave the pole a quick jerk and brought the rainbow fish onto the bank beside him, that not even Zarhan Fastfire knew as much about the art of catching and cooking fish as he did.

To a man, woman, and cub, the Wolfriders had yet to develop a taste for cooked fish, though, as in the past, they were grateful enough for it when the hunting got lean. They indulged him because he was the oldest of the Wolfriders, dutifully sharing his meals, pretending the taste didn't make their noses wrinkle. In many ways they were all like cubs to him these days.

Of course there had been a time when he'd firmly believed there was only one way to hunt and that was full speed with the scent of blood in your nose and a

spear held steady beside your ear. Most of them still did. It took age or crisis to make the Wolfriders change their ways—and even then it didn't always last.

Longreach paused in his thoughts and took a knife to the fish. After expertly wrapping the fish in moist leaves he set it with several others in a little pit and opened the kindle-box Rain had helped him make.

Fire was one of the main things that came and went for the Wolfriders. Bearclaw's crop, now they liked a gentle light in their bowers but no flames dancing before their eyes. Longreach had to smolder his fish, and Rain, who made the tallow for their lamps, only lit his rendering fires once or twice in a turning of the seasons. It hadn't always been that way.

The elves—the full-blooded ones who had none of Timmorn's blood—they liked fire, liked it about as much as the five-fingered humans did. Maybe more, because some of them could make fire with their minds alone. But then the high ones were always a bit like humans. Perhaps that was why Two-Spear—

Longreach shrugged his shoulders and cleared that story from his head. It was too fine a day for such a dark tale. No, if he was going to let his thoughts wander while his fish smoldered, let them wander through a tale when fire saved the Wolfriders—

