

Pendulum

The Blood of Ten Chiefs, #1

by Richard Pini, 1950–

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Introduction and Editor's Note

Riding the train from Poughkeepsie to Grand Central Terminal and back is not one of life's Great Events, even if it does pass near co-editor Lynn Abbey's ancestral home of Peekskill. (I particularly dislike the lemminglike change of trains at Croton-Harmon. How those who make that four-hour-total commute five days a week do so absolutely escapes me; I content myself with the knowledge that Tantalus is not alone in hell.) Even the generally amusing reporting antics of the

New York Post wear thin after about fifteen minutes, and then it's stare-out-the-grimy-windows time once again.

However, on Thursday, April 17, 1986 I had a reprieve from the usual Metro North ennui, and what a lovely reprieve it was. I got to read, for the first time all collected in one place, the manuscript for this book, volume one in the series collectively called *The Blood of Ten Chiefs*. And a faster four hours I've never spent.

The Blood of Ten Chiefs owes its genesis to two literary parents: one is the very successful series of graphic stories known en masse as *Elfquest*, created by far-too-talented-for-the-likes-of-me and very patient wife Wendy and myself in 1977; the other is the construct known as the "shared-universe anthology", the creation of which is generally credited to the far-too-talented-etc, team of Robert Asprin and Lynn Abbey with their *Thieves' World* collections, begun in 1978. (So what is my function among all these far-too-talented people? I exploit. It's an ancient and honorable profession.)

About *Elfquest*, more in a bit. About *Thieves' World* and the Asprin-Abbey alliance: We (Wendy and I) have known them (Bob and Lynn) for a bunch of years. We met, more or less, in the bar at a science-fiction convention, which is one of the most open-door inside jokes there is. We got to talking about this and that and books and comics and publishing; I think that it took all of about ten minutes for us to start proposing deals to each other and to come up with ideas for new and progressively more outrageous projects. As it turns out, Bob and I talk the same language. Different accents, but definitely the same language. They were already involved with *Thieves' World*; we were already involved with *Elfquest*.

I won't bore anyone with the strange and convoluted intricacies of how a massive project like *Thieves' World* (and, by extrapolation, all such anthologies) came to be; Bob has written a very entertaining essay on that subject in the first *TW* volume. Find it, buy it, read it, and be enlightened. However, there is at least one major difference between *The Blood of Ten Chiefs* and *Thieves' World*—in fact between *TBOTC* and every other shared-universe anthology I know of. And that difference is that while the various characters who inhabit Sanctuary, the central *TW* city (I must fall back on initials, else I'll go crazy), may roam all over the landscape, they are still rooted solidly in a single time period. One character can stumble across another in an alleyway, for example. But in the world of *Elfquest*, the history of the ten chiefs of the title spans approximately ten thousand years. Since ascendancy to chiefhood is by bloodline succession, chief number one probably doesn't have too much to say to chief number eight. Maybe.

I know. Time out. Just who are these chiefly characters, anyway?

As I mentioned a bit earlier, all of these stories are based on and in the storyworld called *Elfquest*, which takes place on the physical planet which we've named the *World of Two Moons* (which name, I hope, needs no explanation). The first chapter of the original quest saga was written and illustrated in 1977; the tale concluded with the publication of chapter twenty in late 1984. Since then, that original story has seen publication in a variety of incarnations: as comics, as handsome collected volumes, as a novelization. All quite successful. The main character was (and is; we're not finished by a long shot!) named Cutter, *Blood of Ten Chiefs*, and we alluded very briefly in the comics series to the line of Cutter's

forebears that stretched back into misty and half-forgotten history. Readers and fans being who they are, bless them, quickly made it known to us that they wanted to know more about these shadowy characters.

By the way, and in case there is any question, Cutter and his kin and tribe-mates are elves.

About elves. There are those creative people out there who will staunchly maintain that they know all about who elves are and what these creatures are supposed to be and act like. These tale-spinners, for the most part, have written stories about elves and maintain that if it doesn't look and act like the beasties they've chronicled, then it ain't elves. Well, I say it's spinach.

Elfquest elves have exactly two things in common with most of the haute elves populating much of what passes for fantasy these days: their ears, which are pointed. Other than that, the transplanted (for they are not native to this place) denizens of the World of Two Moons adhere to none of the well-known, well-used conventions concerning the little people. No polysyllabic, tongue-twisting names, no effete mannerisms, no thees and thous, no enchanted swords, stones, gems, or other paraphernalia, and no unicorns. Sensuality, yes—of a most real and earthy nature, for the elves of these stories are primal spirits who know how to love the here and now. Magic, yes—but of a natural kind that comes from within, from the mind and heart rather than the supernatural. The naming of names, yes—but names which are won from the land and the struggle to survive in it, names that carry their weight in blood and pride. And lagniappe: our elves are allied with and ride wolves, because wolves are the most magnificent social animals we know, and what better?

(At this point I would be remiss if I didn't suggest to those folk curious about the original Elfquest saga that they find Books One through Four at fine bookstores everywhere and give them a perusal. The rich story and accompanying background isn't absolutely necessary to the enjoyment of these tales, but what's mashed potatoes without gravy?)

So one day, about two years ago, Wendy and I were wondering how we might fulfill the readers' wishes for more information on the ten chiefs, and we came up with the idea of a storybook: ten stories, ten vignettes from each life. We'd write the stories ourselves, and perhaps even publish the book ourselves. We mentioned this to Bob and Lynn, who grinned impishly, and suggested, "Why not do it as a continuing anthology, like Thieves' World, just to pick an example from thin air. We'll even help with the authors and the editing."

I said, "That's a great idea!" Heavyweight writers, I exulted. A major publisher. Respectability.

Stomach butterflies the size of adult pteranodon.

Back to the train ride. I'll be the first to admit, as the fledgling co-editor in the group, that I had my concerns as deadline time drew near. Would the various authors understand characters and a world which had already been created? (This is another difference between Ten Chiefs and Thieves' World. The construction of Sanctuary was a joint project from the word go; Hotel Two Moons was by that time up and running—and furnished!) Would the background information Wendy and I'd provided be sufficient? Would the manuscripts come in on time? Would the book be out on time?

Somewhere between Beacon and New Hamburg my fears melted away. For not only did I have a pile of wonderful, exciting, varied, individual stories in my lap, but I could see that a certain synergy, peculiar to shared-universe anthologies, was starting to evolve. That synergy is what happens when one author takes a look at another author's story, says, "Hmmm," and works a tie-in into his or her own piece. It is what takes a bunch of snippets and turns them into a thread. Ten thousand years be damned—we have continuity! And I hear that some of the stories in this volume are actually planned to bridge into the next. What a tangled web. I love it.

To wrap this up, I need to take a cue from a bit of advice that appeared, again, in *Thieves' World*. (The relationship between Asprin, Abbey, Pini, and Pini truly is not as incestuous as it appears from this introduction—at least, I'll never admit to it.) This sage advice has to do with internal consistency.

The perceptive reader—and particularly that reader who may already be a fan of *Elfquest*—may come across this or that bit of information (dialogue, exposition, characterization) that seems inconsistent or even at odds with something else read somewhere else. This may produce a certain sensation of cognitive discomfort unless the reader remembers two important rules:

- 1) There are no inconsistencies.
- 2) If an inconsistency is discovered, refer to Rule 1.

Seriously, any bending or stretching of what heretofore (or hereafter) might have been considered "reality" is no doubt due to one or more of the following:

First, each writer in this collection has his or her own style, his or her own fascination, his or her own approach, his or her own prejudices, and so on. As long as a writer stays within the (deliberately) flexible boundaries of this world, *vivent les differences!*

Second, the characters in here, major and minor, have their own motivations, memories, needs, and desires no less so than the aforementioned writers. Probably more so. They (the characters) act as they are driven, and while I in my biased way tend to imbue all of them with a certain nobility, in no way should they be considered to be namby-pamby. They act as we might.

Finally, because these characters tend to live a long while (by human standards), and because they tend to think in the present rather than dwell on the past, memories of things get hazy. Lessons learned by one chief may or may not survive the test of time. Cause and effect may become jumbled in the retelling of an event. Apparently, the oral application of dreamberries aids memory, but the potent intoxication that follows may wipe out any benefit thus derived!

(By the way, we do welcome letters of comment; just write to us in care of the publisher.)

The World of Two Moons is a new, fresh, raw place, with many gray areas on the map, and that map will be a long time in the filling. The history of the ten chiefs who lead up to Cutter is likewise peppered with gaps and forgotten tales waiting to be told. And I must say that I look forward with wolfish anticipation to that process of mutual discovery.

They had given Whiteclaw back to the forest and the pack that morning. The old wolf had spent his last days in the soft grass beside his elf-friend's den. It had

been midnight, or later, when Briar realized the time for mercy had finally arrived and had summoned the healer, Rain, from his root-nest den.

Although the bond between elf-friend and wolf-friend was a special, private thing, the ties between the Wolfriders and the wolf-pack were almost as close. The wolves began their howl before Rain had lifted his hands from Whiteclaw's neck. Those elves who were at the Father Tree made their way to Briar's den to share his sorrow and say farewell to a friend.

There were few among the elves who had not said goodbye to a wolf-friend at least once. One was the chief's young son who had not, as it happened, witnessed such a leave-taking with open, comprehending eyes. He knew their wolves, though long-lived for forest animals, could not hope to live as long as a Wolfrider, but he had not felt it before. His tongue went as stiff and lifeless as old leather; his fingers refused to touch the somehow-different fur.

With no thoughts except his own despair, Cutter shook off his mother's gentle mindtouch and plunged into the forest at a blind run. He called to Nightrunner, his own wolf-friend. The young wolf, confronted with a choice between his pack and his elf-friend, hesitated only a moment before coming to Cutter's side. He, too, loved the hunt but felt no peace in the presence of death.

They were still together late in the day when Longreach, prompted by a grief he had witnessed many times before, found them. The old elf said nothing at first, just sat where they could see him and feel his compassion. Finally, when the sun began to set, the storyteller spoke.

"The pack and Briar have both chosen, and a fine choice indeed. A yearling so full of wild-water he can only call him Mischief and hope that his den, his clothes and his arrows survive—"

**How?*

The youth's thought rode a wave of emptiness into the old elf's mind. For Cutter, deep in the Now of the wolf-song, there could only be Nightrunner; beyond Nightrunner was an emptiness that made midnight bright by comparison.

"It is part of the Way," Longreach said, laying a hand on both wolf and elf. "It is part of what it means to be a Wolfrider: to dive so deeply into life and love that you lose all sense of yourself and the turning of the seasons; to wake up one morning and find yourself a new person, sometimes full of joy and sometimes pain; and then to dive back in again.

"It has been like this since the beginning. I'll show you—"

Pendulum

This time, and for the first time, death bothered Timmorn.

That in itself was very strange, for this twilight hunt seemed little different from any of the others that mingled in the half-elf's memory. Memory itself was mostly an elusive thing for Timmorn, images of recent yesterdays swirling and clouding like muddied water with sensations of long ago— which might be an eight-of-days or many turns of the seasons. But something in this evening, something twisting

in his mind as a light snow began to dust the woods, something nibbled at him, something...

Certainly it was not, could not be the killing of the prey, the death of the black-neck. That had been a good kill, though Timmorn had participated only little in it. The wolves, the wolves who were his—brothers—no. Yes? His friends, yes, that too. The killing of the prey, the chase, the fluidity of his brother-friends as they ran and harried, the tearing of the throat, the shock and final, reflexive shudder—these were not the source of the irritating itch that Timmorn felt at the back of his mind. All this had happened before.

He paced, restless, tasting his memories of this hunt, sorting by scent and touch this one from the others, seeking a clue. It worried at him, as a burr that he could not reach might. He pulled into clearer focus pleasure at the tang of the hot blood as the buck gave up its life into the ground and to the tongues of the wolf-pack. Pleasure, yes, even though he had not done much to bring down the prey, though he was not really of the pack. Pleasure because blood was strong in the air and on Timmorn's face. Without thinking, he ran his tongue over the sharp teeth that had, after the high wolves had taken their due, helped to break the joints and pull the red muscle from the bones. Yes, it had been a good kill, and promised to be...

A promise. The tribe! The fine buck could fill the bellies of the wolves, but Timmorn caught another shred of memory: there would be enough for himself and the ones he had left behind, at the camp. There would be meat for the elves left behind who did not hunt. But the promise was broken, and his stomach was still empty and growled at the blood-taste which promised nothing. There would be no meat. The mad longtooth had seen to that.

Was that it? Timmorn held in his pacing and cocked his head as if to listen more closely to the question in his head. Flakes of snow gathered on his wild hair and pointed ears, and his eyes, his yellow eyes, seemed to glow in the lowering light. Was that it? The pack had only begun to feed when the attack came. Snouts slick and clotted with sweet blood, the wolves did not sense the raging, silvery mass of the rogue longtooth until it was among them, yowling and scattering the smaller beasts in its frenzy. The wolves closest to the carcass had gotten the worst of it, but they had all—all?—escaped the longtooth's fury and tusks. Timmorn held onto the picture in his head: the creature, eyes wild; the wound, ugly and half-healed, that ran along the thing's flank; he remembered the stink of infection. The beast had not come out of its dark place to attack the wolf-pack. No, it had come to feed, to take what the others had brought down, what it no longer could bring down because of its wound and its madness. But that still meant that the pack went hungry now, and that the tribe would go hungry. There would be disappointment, keenly felt, and Timmorn knew even as he thought it that that disappointment would be turned toward him. The longtooth had taken the carcass, and neither Timmorn nor the wolves would follow into the deep forest.

The tall elf, neither wolf nor high one like the ones left behind, glanced back at the spot where the buck had been, where the blanket of pine needles had been thrashed about, where the snow was beginning to cover the blood-soaked earth. The meat was gone, taken. And he saw again, as he had forgotten before, that one wolf was dead.

Timmorn gazed at the torn and ruined body of the wolf. He had known it—it was a young male—as much as he could know any member of the pack that did not know what to do with him. His eyes, so like wolves' eyes, truly luminous now in the glow of the rising moons, narrowed as he tried to catch a thought. It was the wolf that bothered him; why did the wolf's death gnaw at him? he wondered. Then: why did he think on it at all? Then: why...? He growled, soft and deep in his throat, a sound of frustration and confusion. He was losing the wolf in him, not quite gaining the elf.

Timmorn was unique, and sometimes he knew it, though neither with pride nor self-conscience. His mother, he knew, had been Timmain, one of the firstcomers to the world of two moons, many turns of the seasons ago. Timmain, the high one who had made the sacrifice for the sake of all the firstcomers who still lived, and for all who might come after—through Timmorn. She had been the most powerful of those first, the high ones so ill-suited to this world; she alone had retained the ability to change her own form into the one that would give her people a chance at survival. Timmain, mother, wolf as real as smoke. And as she must, and knew it, she mated and birthed Timmorn. Timmorn of the yellow eyes. To the elves, not an elf. To the wolves, not a wolf.

He did not know how old he was. He did not know what old was, or what it felt like, but his muscles were firm and tight, and his blood sang in him when his mind was not clouded, and he himself had sired young ones, cubs. The wolf part of him cared little for time and its passing, although his elfin mind understood the shifting of the seasons and the changes that he saw in the world. The wolf did not much care for thinking either, for thinking went into the past and, with trouble, into the future, and the wolf was now.

Timmorn did not remember his mother very well, for she had whelped and weaned him a long time ago and then disappeared. He thought that she must be dead, for she had been a wolf, and wolves did not live as long as the elves of the tribe, or as long as he. He thought of the wolf-pack, and knew the individuals in his mind as well as he could, and he realized that even though there were certain wolves that lived longer than the others, they all seemed to die eventually. Wolves died.

Timmorn had seen many wolves die. He had seen elves die too, for some of his—mother's?—people had succumbed to the harshness of this world. The high ones were frail and needed protection, and not all of them had even tried to put on animal skins and take up crude spears to survive. So some died. And wolves died. But those deaths had been natural, if unfortunate. Because Timmorn ran with the wolves as often as he mingled with the elves, he had seen it when a wolf, old and grizzled and failing, low in the pack, had been set upon by the others and killed. It was the way. It had not bothered him then.

But now, in this night's dark, this wolf's death would not let him go. When the longtooth's attack had come he had scampered back; he knew he was no match for the maddened predator. The wolves had scattered as well, circling, some limping, but staying out of reach of the larger beast. All had fled—all but one. One wolf, a young male, had gotten caught somehow, had not escaped the deadly rush, had been gored and frightened with pain and caught between the longtooth and its food, and Timmorn and all the wolves had watched, just watched, and the young

wolf had growled and snapped its teeth and twisted its body and fought and tried and failed, and the longtooth had torn it and thrown it aside and dragged the black-neck buck into the deep forest. And only after a while did the pack go up and nuzzle the dead wolf. That is the way of it, sensed the half-elf, half-wolf, falling back into the timeless now of wolf thought.

Except that this time, and for the first time, death bothered Timmorn.

At the encampment, those who were left behind cared as little for time as did Timmorn or the wolf. They did not think of themselves as the "high ones"; that was a name that the others—the wolf-changed ones like Timmorn and his offspring—were starting to call them. If they were anything in their own minds, they were the firstcomers, the exiles. They felt not at all like a tribe. Loss was their kin.

In their minds the accident was still fresh, the betrayal that had thrown them broken and confused to this world, even though it had happened many cycles ago. Because they had learned in their own world, before the tragedy, to do without time, to live outside of time if they wished, memories lived within them eternally. And they tried in this new, harsh place to recreate the gentle timelessness they remembered.

They were doomed, many of them. The world was relentless, and time crowded in upon them, ate at them, made them aware of its uncaring flow. Their bellies complained with hunger, for the physical molds in which they had cast their bodies needed to eat. They shivered and cramped with cold, for their slender and pale forms were suited for a milder, kinder life. As much as they wished it not to be so, life was no longer timeless, but was lived from meal to meal, from fire to windblown fire. Mind and thought could no longer easily exist in that carefree slice of experience that centered between moments-ago and moments-hence. Talking between minds became sluggish and difficult here, and so the firstcomers must string one spoken word after another. Knowledge of other souls became murky; the exiles gave each other and took sounds that were names.

"Seilein?" The voice was soft, by nature and from tiredness. "Seilein, the fire is going."

The speaker was very tall, very slender. He was a firstcomer, and he wore about him a skin that ill-concealed the tattering remnants of otherworldly clothing. His name was Renn; he had so far survived this primitive world, and if he did not die of starvation, disease, violence, cold, heat or other fatal discomfort, he might live forever. But now the fire was guttering inside his windbreak-shelter and he did not know how—he did not want to know how—to keep it alight. He watched dully as the fire keeper brought dried twigs and stirred the wood to bring forth a bit more heat.

"Renn," Seilein said with gentle disapproval, "it's not all that difficult." As she spoke, she removed the fur-lined cap she'd been wearing out in the flurrying snow; she also took off her laboriously stitched gloves and extended her hands toward the fire. The air around her hands shimmered and the flames bloomed for a moment before settling back.

"All you need to do," she went on, "is to place new wood on the coals now and then. I still have a little of the power to start fires, but it's not always necessary." She knew as she spoke that her words were near to useless. Some of the elves, like

herself, had managed over time to shake off the lethargy they all had felt in the beginning. She and those who were like her did not simply want barren survival; they wanted to go forward—in any direction. But the others, the ones like Renn—there was a part of them that had not landed on this world, that was trapped somewhere in a gray place. The others, Seilein suspected, would never learn to tend fires, or to be even a little comfortable in the few skins that were able to be magically cured, or learn the stirring of pleasure to be found in the touching of bodies, or to eat the food brought by the barely-skilled hunters and the strange wolf allies...

Food. Even Seilein, who among the firstcomers was most determined to fit herself to this world and its time flow, still must catch herself up out of the timeless thought she was so used to. Food. It was dark, and Timmorn, grudgingly, had told the camp that he would bring back food before it was dark.

Seilein knew things about Timmorn that few if any of the others knew, for she had made up her mind to study him. She found him intriguing, and there were the stirrings of other feelings. She knew that he ran with the wolves but did not seem totally at ease with them—or perhaps it was the wolves who had not quite accepted him. She knew that although the wolves chose the dark for their hunts, the elves preferred to move about during the day. Getting Timmorn to appreciate the difference, and then his getting the wolf-pack to compromise its habits, had been the work of many cycles—no, she corrected herself, time here is measured by the turning of the seasons. And that too was new, for the world she'd come from had not seen seasons in eons.

She heard voices muttering in the gloom that was the encampment, musical voices saying harsh, sad things. By now everyone knew that something was not right, that Timmorn, and more importantly the food, was late. Pulling her gloves and cap back on, Seilein went out of the shelter to check the campfires and to overhear and perhaps partake of the conversations she knew she'd find.

"He's forgotten us again. He's too much his mother's shape, not enough of her mind. We can do as well as he can." That would be Valloa, Seilein thought to herself with a faint smile. One who fancied herself a huntress, with her crude spear. To be fair, Valloa was no worse than any of those who tried to supplement the irregular supply of fresh-killed meat brought by Timmorn; by skill or by luck, she had speared her share of small game. And Seilein knew that as many elves as could must learn to hunt, for even when the wolves brought down a big buck or boar, they did not always let Timmorn take a portion back to the camp. But still, she was amused at Valloa's intolerance.

A male voice answered; it was Marrek, who had turned his skills to the making of useful things from the earth and clay of this place. "I still wonder what it was that Timmain thought when she changed. She said that it was for us, for our survival—I even remember the question she asked before she shifted. *Might it not be better to be wolf?* I still wonder what she meant, but I can't imagine how she intended her son to aid us when he seems out of place with us and with the beasts he follows."

"We just don't know him well enough," Seilein said, joining the small group. "There's reason there; there must be. Even though Timmain's gone, her plan must live on in her son."

"You know it's not easy talking to him," said Valloa, "shy and nervous as he is."

Seilein lowered her eyes and spoke softly. "I'll know him. Somehow."

Valloa humphed, and at that moment a commotion erupted in the farther shelters as Timmorn, snarling and biting at the air, loped into the camp. He paced to and fro, his agitation loud, before coming to a kind of rest by one of the fires. Almost immediately tall figures flowed from tents and weatherbreaks.

"What has he brought?"

"He's late."

"I don't see anything."

"It's been too long. The hunger..." And the voice trailed off into a low, sad song of times gone.

"He's failed. Why do we harbor him?"

"Because he's still our best hope," Seilein snapped, surprised at her own reaction to the stream of complaints. She knew that there was disappointment, keenly felt, and she knew that Timmorn bore the brunt of it. She could not really blame them for that, but she did resent that they had stopped trying to live. "Besides," she went on, "there's something different—not right—here."

At this, a few of the elves made expressions of surprise or curiosity; the others muttered and turned away, saddened or disgusted, back to the shelters. Seilein moved closer to Timmorn and felt a thrill of—something like excitement as she touched his shoulder. "Tell us," she urged.

Timmorn stared at her for a long moment, his yellow eyes, disturbing and deep, locked with hers. She wondered how he could not feel what she felt. Again, she floated on a ripple, rode a stirring inside her as Timmorn began to relate the events of the hunt, the kill, the maddened snow beast. So lost was she in the new sensation she experienced, which mingled like a strange, dark herb with the guttural sound of Timmorn's voice, that she nearly missed the rise in his tension as he told of the death of the wolf.

"Wrong!" he snarled. "It's wrong!" But he could not say why, and would say no more. Shortly, the remaining elves drifted back to their own shelters and fires, and Timmorn was alone. The camp was quiet again, except for the occasional distant cry of some great creature, deep in the forest.

Days passed, and Timmorn did not hunt again with the wolf-pack, for each night he heard the yowling cry of the wounded longtooth, and he refused to go into the woods. Seilein and the others observed that he still ran with the wolves during the day, but when darkness fell, Timmorn was to be found skulking around the camp, worried and irritated. And even though he did not hunt for them, the elves were not much worse off, for those who could still captured what game they could. Still, tempers began to rise, especially in the firstcomers who would not adapt, and who were the most uncomfortable.

Then one night the forest was quiet again with the stillness of snow and cold. The following day was sharp and bright, and Seilein sought out Timmorn as he drank from an ice-crustured stream a little way from the camp. She approached the shaggy half-elf with a mix of feelings: attraction, timidity, resolve. Timmorn greeted her with no more than a throaty rumble, a wolfish grunt.

"We—we've waited to see what you'll do," she ventured. "The ones who can hunt and I are doing what we can, but..." There was no need for her to finish the thought; all knew that the catches had been poor, that the small game was thinning out or getting more clever. Just as all knew that there was a growing resentment against Timmorn.

Seilein took a deep breath before going on. The tightness in her chest, the excitement she felt in her stomach made talking difficult, for the hunt for food was only partly on her mind. She was not just mind now. but body as well, and the voice of her body was loud in her ears. She had set a course of action for herself, and she would see it through.

"There are some of us," she said, "who have been waiting for a long time. Since Timmain. She was as close to being the one who leads as we've ever known." As she spoke she moved next to Timmorn and heel-sat next to him, close enough to touch. "Many of us—of them—looked to you to be the one to lead when Timmain disappeared. They trusted her choice, and thought that you and the wolves would provide."

Suddenly she made her own decision and reached out to touch him, gently kneading the back of his neck. Again, as she had before, she felt the thrill of contact, of attraction. Timmorn flinched only a little, only once at first touch, and then relaxed, eyes closed, head lolling as her fingers worked, Seilein wondered if he would touch her, for there were places on her body she enjoyed touching, and she let her imagination wrap itself around Timmorn's fingers.

For several moments, neither spoke. Timmorn, thoroughly enjoying the stroking, suddenly rolled wolflike over onto his back, exposing his belly and groin as if to say, "More." Seilein, lost in her own sensual reverie, was startled, but felt a pleasant warmth in her face. She recalled in a rushing mix the feelings of her sleeping furs against her body; and the time she had tried to touch one of the elf males. He'd been shocked and discomfited, unable to comprehend her innocent experiment. Seilein wondered what Timmorn's furry body might feel like against hers...

Still, though, there was unfinished business, and she shook herself back into the present. "There must be another hunt," she said, her voice low. "Some might die if there's not. The ones who can best hunt will go. I'll go..."

Timmorn sat bolt upright; the reaction shocked them both. "No!" he rasped. "No. The longtooth. There's danger—you will be in danger." He leaned toward her, his face almost touching hers. "You must not be in danger. It is wrong." His eyes widened as if he were seeing something beyond her. He almost smiled. "Wrong!"

Seilein collected herself and wondered what had affected Timmorn so. Suddenly he was acting... possessive? Protective? Both concepts were nearly alien to her, to all the elves. And yet, in the flush of sensation she was enjoying, neither repelled her. Quite the opposite.

She took his hand in hers. "The beast you spoke of did not cry out last night. You said it was badly wounded; it surely has died. We must go out. Lead us, you and your wolves. You must go to show us the way; we must go to learn from you. It's the only way."

Timmorn sat for a long while, not moving. Within him the wolf and the elf whirled, pulling close, scampering away. An ancient feeling tugged at him, one

that the firstcomers had long ago forgotten in their timeless immortality. Timmorn tasted the feeling. It tasted of the wolf, and the cub. "Tonight," he said.

There were five of them, aside from Timmorn and the wolf-pack. Seilein was there, and Valloa, and three males who also showed skill with the spear. The wolves were even less easy than they were when only Timmorn accompanied them, but somehow this night the halfling exerted a will that caused even the high-ranking male wolf to accept the small elfin band.

They hunted, going farther and farther from the camp, deeper and deeper into woods where none of the elves had ever gone. Here they felt more vulnerable, more fragile than they had ever before. Much as they spoke among themselves in the softest voices of the need for a successful hunt, they wondered in minds suddenly made insignificant if they belonged here in this deep darkness, with giant unseen, unknown life all around. They wondered if they would ever belong here.

Seilein watched Timmorn, when she could see him. Though the night was clear and crisp, only one moon shone in partial phase, and its light barely penetrated the needled branches that wove overhead. And Timmorn was like the wolves, a running shadow, a ripple of gray in the deeper gray. The elves followed as they could; they were not without grace themselves, but their own animal beginnings were far in the past. Still, they ran and tried to sniff the night air as Timmorn did, to read the knowledge in a broken twig or tuft of pine needles. Seilein tried to determine in her mind if Timmorn was disturbed this night, or if it was only a reflection of her own subtle fears. Every so often, it seemed, he stopped and cocked his head, as if listening for something just beyond hearing.

One of the male elves had just made the dispirited remark that it seemed that even this hunt was for nothing when there was a yip and the sound of hooves pounding and wolf paws running and a grunting squeal and more yipping and the boar burst from somewhere and ran straight at the elves, who stood there stupidly as if they weren't there, and it was Valloa who acted without thinking and who spun and struck with her spear and the boar screeched and even though it was a clumsy strike it was a lucky one and the boar went down and took Valloa with it and the two rolled across the forest floor and the boar died and covered the elf with its blood.

For long moments, nothing and no one moved. Then Timmorn arrived, followed by several wolves. He took in the scene; his expression of surprise gave way to a toothy grin and low chuckle. The wolves did not quite know what to make of it all; they had not made the kill, so they could not feed in pack order. This had never happened before. They were confused, and Timmorn was enjoying it. Seilein and the other elves joined in with smiles, and good-natured fun poked at Valloa, who sat up and looked herself over and rolled her eyes, and the pleasant anticipation of more meat for a while.

From the deep shadows, the longtooth attacked.

It was thinner, its wound was worse; clearly it was further gone into pain and madness than it had been before. It had tried to hunt and failed; it was close to death. And the elves and the wolves had come back into its dark place and spilled blood for it and there was meat to be had. The dead meat lying on the ground or the live meat next to it covered with gore. The longtooth didn't care.

It charged. Though it showed the ravages of its starvation, it still bulked greater than an elf or a wolf. It bowled into Valloa, its claws raking her leg as its momentum carried it past. The elf screamed; she did not know what pain was and she scrabbled wildly at the air, at her torn leg, at her spear still buried in the boar. Her mind raged blindly.

In an instant there was panic. The wolves scattered; they could do no different. The elves scattered; unassailable fear took them, for they did not know creatures like this, or death like this. Timmorn started to run, wolflike, but in the same instant he stopped and turned to take in the sight of the longtooth turning to charge again, to finish its grisly work on the wounded elf. Memory pounded upon memory, collided with instinct, fought with feelings only recently stirred. He growled, "Wrong!" and hurled himself.

He hit the longtooth just as the beast reached Valloa. The impact sent the longtooth careening to one side and sent Timmorn thudding to the ground. He knew the creature was heavier than he, and stronger; even as he snarled and shrieked at the longtooth in defiance he glanced about quickly for something to aid him. He spied Valloa's spear and wrenched it free of the boar's carcass; the elf would not need it now.

The longtooth charged again, the fire in its brain driving it. It leaped at Timmorn, at the meat, at the pain, and flew past as Timmorn caught it in the shoulder joint with the spear tip. It hardly felt the new pain, and spun to attack yet again. It screamed, and leapt, and this time took the spear point squarely in its chest, deep into its heart. The body thumped heavily to the ground and lay there.

Slowly the wolves came back, but Timmorn was already bending over Valloa, gingerly touching at the cruel gashes in her thigh, wincing at the moans that escaped her lips. He could smell her blood over that of the boar and the longtooth—there was something... A shock, a tingle, something he'd felt only recently; though not as strongly. Very gently, he touched his tongue to one of the open wounds. Something in the blood.

For just a moment, Valloa seemed to become calmer, despite the pain that beat at her. She opened her eyes. Timmorn bent his shaggy head over her and said gruffly, "In the blood. Who are you?"

For just a moment a look of puzzlement clouded her face. "You know me—I am Valloa. I'm..." Then something deeper passed through and over her, and she said, "But there's another name inside me. I don't know why it is, but I want to say it to you. I am Murrel."

Even more slowly the elves returned to the place where two beasts lay dead and Timmorn cradled the wounded huntress. Seilein, still pale with shock but boldest of the little group, went to touch Timmorn, remembering the earlier day's comfort. He turned to her and snarled, showing his teeth, and she drew back in surprise. "Mine," he said, locking eyes with her again, and in that moment Seilein understood what Timmorn meant. She raised an eyebrow as if to say, "We'll see. This may turn out to be most interesting," but what she did say was, "We'll take her back to camp. There are healers there." Then she walked away.

Timmorn turned back to her whom everyone else called Valloa.

Later, Timmorn ran through the darkest part of the night, through the deep woods. His eyes, yellow as twin moons, saw the world swirl mistily by him in the

starlight as he ran, his breath and blood singing, the wolf high within him. Somewhere, behind the trees in the deepest shadows, he knew the wolf-pack was with him, though they still ran their own path, black and fluid in the night. Not true elf, not true wolf, Timmorn was both now, instead of neither. That knowledge lived, secure, in his blood.

Back in the camp, the one who had been Valloa slept, her wounds attended by the healer. Among the others, there was some little confusion, for they did not understand why she went by another name now. No matter. The new name, the Murrel name whispered in his mind with a voice no one else could hear or share, and it called to him. The two had not joined this night as the voice had gently urged, for she was still weak, but Timmorn knew that matings—and cubs—would come. There was a something, a bond, a feeling he had not experienced before. It was a feeling both fresh and new, and incredibly ancient. It warmed within him.

(And as he ran and turned the new thing over and over in his mind, tasting it, Timmorn also thought of the other one, Seilein. He grinned, wolflike, lips tight over sharp teeth; there would be joinings there too, if he had sensed her own mind and scent correctly...)

It is life, he realized, slowing to a gentle lope. He went in his mind to the place that had been so troubled, to the empty hole that had been gouged there by the death of the wolf days before. The new thoughts filled the hole and soothed it, and they were the shape and color and smell and feel of life.

Timmorn had seen death before, and he knew he would see it again. The world was full of death. But now he could fight it and not scamper aside from its fangs and claws like a frightened wolf who only knew self, and not others.

He did not yet know if the new feeling meant much or little to the others, the ones who slept and tried and succeeded or failed, but at that moment, in the now that filled him up, it meant all.

The young elf-woman's face showed the effects of an eight-of-days spent eating poorly and sleeping worse. Dark bruises clouded her green-and-gold eyes, and her gestures, as she slid down the tree trunk to sit amid its roots, were weariness personified. Even her hair, normally full of sunlight and curls, fell limp around her face.

I don't know what to do, she sent to the elf hidden in the branches above her. Could it be Recognition?

The leaves rustled and Longreach leaped to the ground, agile for all that Bearclaw was his fifth chief. "If you have to ask, it isn't Recognition," he said with a sly smile.

"Then what is it? Finding my soulname was nothing compared to this. No matter what I do there's an ache somewhere inside. I wake up from a sound sleep knowing that I've dreamt something awful but not being able to remember it. Sometimes I just go to the tall grasses and run until I collapse. Not even my wolf-friend can help me."

Longreach loosened the laces of his tunic and produced a small, lumpy pouch from which he removed a handful of wrinkled berries. He offered them to Nightfall, then poured them into her hand when she refused to take them.

"A story? I don't see how a story can help me."

"There are many stories you've never heard, little one." The storyteller leaned against the tree as a farseeing look came over his face. Longreach no longer needed the berries to find the treasure trove of Wolfrider memories. "Some stories, I think, wait for generations until the right pair of ears is born to hear it."

"I don't want to hear how Darkwater quested for two turns of the season before she found the secret of setting the feathers in an arrow's tail," the adolescent warned. "I want my answer now."

Longreach frowned in feigned offense. "I wasn't even thinking of that one. And anyway, she was looking for something while you've been found by it."

Nightfall relaxed. They all came to the storyteller, sooner or later, when there was no one else who would understand. And his wisdom was already soothing her thoughts; she'd been thinking something was missing instead of noticing something had been added.

"The high ones' blood runs strong in you, child. Your mother's mother had almost no wolf-blood in her. But Timmorn's blood runs strong too; you get that from your father who would have been chief if Mantricker had died before Bearclaw found his name. You mustn't be surprised when the bloods rest uneasily against each other. It's a hand of generations or more for the rest of us, but for you it is as it was near the beginning of the Wolfriders.

"I'll tell you about Rahnee the She-Wolf, and why she'd understand how you feel."

