

Plague of Allos

The Blood of Ten Chiefs, #3

by Piers Anthony, 1934–

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The great wolf lay as if asleep, so that even when a random leaf tumbled across his nose no whisker twitched. His fur was as brown as blown sand, his paws as gray as weathered stones; when he lay still, as now, he tended to fade into the landscape. Instead it was his elf-friend Prunepit who moved, and rather clumsily too. There seemed to be no chance for a successful ravnit stalk. Yet the elf seemed confident; his sling was poised, a solid pit in the pouch.

His arm moved. The pit flung forward to strike in a thick patch of grass. Sure enough: a fat ravnit leaped out, startled by the near miss.

The elf jumped to the prey's right, herding it toward the still wolf. The ravvit veered left.

Now! the elf cried in thought, sending not so much a word as a target region: a spot in the air not far to the side of the wolf's nose.

The wolf leaped, biting at that spot. Simultaneously the ravvit leaped, coming to that spot just as the wolf's jaws closed.

In a moment it was over; the prey hung from the wolf's mouth, dead. Another hunt had been concluded successfully.

"Let's go home, Halfhowl," Prunepit said, satisfied. "There isn't another suitable animal in the vicinity." He sent another spot location, and leaped at it; the wolf made a swift dive, putting his back just beneath that spot as the elf arrived. Prunepit was mounted so efficiently that it seemed as though they had rehearsed that maneuver many times. Actually they had not; the elf's sending made rehearsal unnecessary.

Prunepit was the son of Rahnee the She-Wolf, but there was no evidence of this in his aspect. He was neither handsome nor large, and his brown hair fell down across his eyes in chronic tangles. His skill with his chosen weapon was mediocre; he normally missed his target, as he had just now. He had to carry a good supply of ammunition because of this. Prune pits were lighter than stones, and their regular shapes made it easier for him, but still it was evident that he lacked the physical coordination ever to be truly effective. Worse, his sending was defective; he could not properly tune into other elves, and consequently was forever getting things garbled. He was not simpleminded, but sometimes seemed so. The other elves of the tribe were of course circumspect about their attitude, but it was true that if any member of the tribe could be said to be held in contempt, that member was Prunepit. Rahnee had never expressed disappointment in him, but surely she had felt it.

Yet it was also true that in this time of the hunting drought, he alone had maintained his ratio of kills. This was because his telepathy was attuned to animals rather than to his own kind. Halfhowl had been the first wolf to recognize this, and had chosen Prunepit to be his elf-friend. Theirs was the closest bond between elf and wolf, and this was part of the reason their hunts were almost inevitably successful. Halfhowl never had to listen for Prunepit's directive, either physical or verbal; he knew it as fast as the elf did. He was always there when the elf wanted him, and there was no subservience in this; it was as though the desire to be there had originated with the wolf. Often that might be true; it did not matter. What mattered was that the two never miskeyed; they always acted with such perfect coordination that the other elves and wolves could only watch with muted envy.

The other part of the reason for success was Prunepit's identification with the prey. He could tell the prey's next move at the same time as the prey did, for animals did not think ahead in the way elves did. From a distance this made no difference; there was no catching the prey anyway. But in close action, the prey's specific dodge became critical. In the hunt just completed, Prunepit had in effect linked the minds of ravvit and wolf, allowing the two bodies to coincide.

The others of the tribe had chosen to believe that Prunepit was mostly lucky; it was hard for them to accept the notion that this elf who could hardly send to his

own kind could be superior with other kinds. Thus Prunepit's status was higher among the wolves than among the elves. It seemed likely that he would in time turn to animal-healing as his life's work.

There was a commotion as they drew near the holt. Something had happened—and Prunepit felt a surge of dread.

Another elf would have known instantly what the problem was, but the vague dread was all that Prunepit could receive. It involved his mother, known as the She-Wolf.

Rahnee had led a party out to explore the nature of the allos, the big saurians who seemed to be swarming into this region. The allos were huge, vicious reptiles, not as efficient predators as the wolves, but their increasing numbers were making them a nuisance. When the horde swept through a region, hardly any other species of creature survived. The allos were normally solitary hunters, and their relative clumsiness enabled them to prey mainly on the old, the infirm, and the unlucky. Now, their numbers increased perhaps a hundredfold, they required no subtlety of approach; they saturated the range, snapping up everything that moved. Migratory prey had all but disappeared, if its migration took it through the infested regions.

It was obvious that blind, ravening hunger would bring the allos to the region of the Wolfriders, for here the hunting had until recently been good. Now it was not—because of the depredations of the allos—and it was likely to get much worse. What would the reptiles hunt, after the last legitimate prey was gone? The answer just might be: elves.

So Rahnee had gone out to assess the menace—and now there was a commotion, and no sign of her wolf, Silvertooth.

Softfoot hurried out to intercept Prunepit. "Your mother—" she cried. "Silvertooth is terribly injured, and—"

Then he knew. Rahnee was dead, and the tribe was without its chief.

It was worse than that. Rahnee's party had included the best hunters of the tribe—and most of them were dead too. There was no obvious prospect for new leadership. Rahnee's lifemate Zarhan was loyal and good, but he had no interest in taking her place. Prunepit, her son, seemed to follow his father's temperament. He had never imagined challenging her for leadership, and would have felt disloyal to try for it now that she was dead. Even had he not felt this way, he would have known that no elf would follow a leader who was defective in sending; how could the tribe coordinate in times of crisis? He did not grieve for Rahnee as a son might, for they had not been really close after he grew up. But her loss was tragic for the tribe, and he wanted to steal no part of her glory. Still, there had to be a leader, for the dread allos were swarming closer, and in a few days would be here.

In the confusion of the horror of the disaster, one voice emerged with clarity. This was Wreath, the loveliest of the younger female elves, the object of much male interest. She was brave, beautiful, and cold; her fair hair framed her face like a lattice of snow. It was said that her heart was formed of extremely pretty ice. She had never, to Prunepit's knowledge, done anything for anyone other than because of calculated self-interest. She was a fine huntress, adept with the bow, but had no pretensions toward leadership; it seemed that that would have been too much work to suit her. When she encountered a male routinely, her inclination was to

inhale, smile, and give her magnificent cloud of hair a careful toss, causing him to catch his breath and lick his lips while his heart accelerated. Her own heart never fluttered, however. In short, she was a flirt, not a leader. She had been looking for some time for a companion, but had wanted to be absolutely sure she had the best match. That meant Recognition—and it hadn't come. Perhaps, Prunepit thought, that was just as well.

"Why don't we choose as chief the one who can stop the menace of the allos?" she inquired brightly. "Because if we don't stop them, soon they will wipe out all the prey in our forest, and then we'll starve."

This made so much sense that the others were amazed. Why hadn't any of them thought of it? There was a murmur of agreement.

"So who knows how to stop the allos?" Wreath inquired.

That was where it went sour. No one had any notion. The allos, according to the description of the survivors of the party who had straggled home, were big, vicious, and numerous. No single Wolfrider could stand against an allo in combat, and indeed, their best hunters had been savaged as a group. The elves were simply outmatched.

"If we don't get a leader," Wreath pointed out, "we shall have to flee our holt."

But no elf stepped forward. If the She-Wolf had been unable to stop the menace, how could any of them?

The tribe spent a glum night. Softfoot stayed up late, talking with Prunepit. "There has to be a way!" she kept saying. She was a warm, understanding person, lovely in her personality rather than her appearance. Her hair was like a fuzzy, dark blanket. Her feet had seemed malformed in her childhood; they had in time grown normally, but she was not swift on them and was a much better rider than runner. She was good with the spear when on her wolf. She alone of the tribe had appreciated Prunepit's strength and had not perceived him as mentally stunted. It had not been hard for him to love her, and he had never regretted their association.

Reluctantly, Prunepit spoke. "I think there might be—but if I'm wrong, it would be even worse than now."

She virtually pounced on him. "A way! What way?"

"You know how I hunt by relating to the prey," he said, "and by putting it in touch with Halfhowl."

"Yes, of course; you have never received proper credit for your skill."

"Well, if I could relate to an allo, then we could hunt allos. That would give us and our wolves suitable prey, and help reduce the numbers of the reptiles, until the normal ratios of animals returned."

Softfoot shook her head. "You couldn't hunt an allo, Prunepit! They say that a single allo killed Rahnee and two other hunters and two wolves, and it wasn't even the largest allo! Those monsters have horny scales that make them almost invulnerable to our weapons, and their teeth are horrendous. We can't even recover Rahnee's body from them."

"They are like snakes," he said doggedly, suppressing the thought of his mother's body; there was indeed nothing the elves could do about that. "That means they are slow to move in the cool morning, and not too smart. They can't

have armor on their eyes. If we knew how to avoid their teeth and claws, we should be able to score on a weak point. And I do know."

She began to be swayed. "You aren't afraid? An allo is no ravvit, you know; it's a predator."

Prunepit's mouth was dry. "I'm terrified. But we have to find a way to fight allos, and I think I can."

"Sleep now," Softfoot decided. "If you still think the same in the morning, we'll talk with someone." This was her way: to consider something, then sleep, and reconsider. It seemed to work well enough. She had done it when they had become lifemates, taking time to be certain. Prunepit was glad to have her doing it now. If she concluded that his notion was viable, in the morning, then perhaps it was. He had spoken forthrightly enough, but the thought of hunting an allo made his body cold.

"I think we should test it," Softfoot announced in the morning. "But not on an allo."

Prunepit hadn't thought of that. He liked the notion. "What can we test it on? There isn't any prey near."

"On mock-prey," she said. "One of the wolves, maybe. If you can catch a bit of leather the wolf holds between his teeth, when he knows you are trying to do it and doesn't want you to—"

Prunepit considered. He had never tried that on a wolf; his effort had always been to cooperate with Halfhowl. Yet Softfoot's reasoning seemed valid: if he could do it with an alert wolf, he could probably do it with an allo. "But what wolf? We need to integrate with our own wolf-friends; that's the key to this. I won't attack an allo alone; I need to coordinate an attack by a hunting party."

"Maybe a volunteer," she suggested.

Prunepit called to Halfhowl with his mind. As always, he did not send coherent instructions; it was more of a single thought, the concept of a wolf agreeing to do something special. In a moment Halfhowl tuned out; he was inquiring among his kind.

Prunepit and Softfoot walked out through the forest, waiting to meet with the wolves. The dew was bright on the leaves, and things seemed peaceful. Yet they knew that the ravening horde of allos was moving closer; peace was illusory.

Three wolves cut through the trees toward them. They were Halfhowl, Hardfoot, and Silvertooth. The first two were Prunepit and Softfoot's wolf-friends, both tawny and somewhat shaggy. But the third—

"You are the volunteer, Silvertooth?" Softfoot inquired, astonished. "But your injuries—"

Silvertooth was Rahnee's wolf-friend, and had dragged herself back to help give the warning after the disaster. She was silver in more than the tooth; her fur was like the light of the moons, seeming almost to glow despite her advanced age. She was limping now, and moved slowly, for she had lost blood. She should have been lying in her den, recovering what strength she could.

Prunepit touched her mind, and understood. "She feels she has no better use than this, now," he reported, translating the feeling to human terms. "She could not save her elf-friend, and may die herself, but she can help the rest of us oppose this menace."

"That is very generous of her," Softfoot agreed. "Then we can do it now."

But another wolf approached, this one with a rider. "Do what?" Wreath asked. "Why is Silvertooth out here?" Her wolf, Curlfur, stopped, and she dismounted. She was, as always, a splendid figure of a woman, even bundled as she was for the morning. "I saw the wolves coming here, and so I followed."

"Prunepit has a way to stop the allos," Softfoot said. "We're about to test it."

"Oh? What is it?" Wreath turned to Prunepit, gazing directly into his face for the first time.

As their eyes met, something happened. Prunepit had always known that Wreath was beautiful; now her beauty seemed to intensify like the sunrise, striking through to his heart. He stared at her, almost unblinking. "Aiyse," he said, awed. It was her soulname, a thing she had never told another person.

"No," she whispered, horrified, staring back at him. "Not this!"

"What's the matter?" Softfoot asked, perplexed.

"It's Recognition," Wreath said, never breaking off her gaze into Prunepit's face. "I know your soulname. Owm. I know its meaning. But I never sought this!"

"Neither did I," Prunepit said. She had, indeed, read his soulname: that concept-sound that defined his essence. The thing that distinguished him from all other elves. His ability to relate telepathically to animals was defined by that name. "I love Softfoot."

"It can't be!" Softfoot cried with dismay. "This—we have other business!"

"Not anymore," Wreath said. Then she wrenched her gaze away. "Oh, why did this have to happen now?"

"Maybe we can fight it," Prunepit said without conviction.

Softfoot regrouped. "Fight it? Easier to fight the allos!" she said angrily. "Recognition is absolute." Then she realized what she was saying, and tears stifled her. Her relationship with Prunepit had been based on understanding and acceptance and respect, not Recognition. Recognition was the involuntary mating of particular elves, seeming to be a mechanism of the species to ensure offspring that bred true.

"It must be a mistake," Prunepit said. "I don't love Wreath."

"And I don't love you," Wreath said. "I never had any interest in you! I don't have any interest now!" For the first time, he was seeing her expressing genuine emotion—and of course it was negative.

"Let's be practical," Softfoot said. "Recognition doesn't care whether two people love each other, or even whether they like each other. It's just a mating urge. We all agree we don't want a—a longer relationship. Could we perhaps hide it?"

"From whom?" Prunepit asked. "It's all I can do to keep my hands off her!"

"Try to manage it, though," Wreath said grimly.

"From the others," Softfoot said.

"To what point?" Wreath asked. It was obvious that this was a phenomenal nuisance to her, despite its validity.

"To the point of getting the mating over with the least disruption of our lives," Softfoot said with difficulty. She would have given anything to have been the one to Recognize Prunepit, and now had to accept its manifestation in one who didn't want it or him. "Since Recognition can't be resisted, the only way to make it go away is to complete it."

"Complete it?" Prunepit said with horror.

"I know you love me," Softfoot said. "Why don't you do what you have to do with her, and when it's done, turn your back on it and be with me? I confess it's not my favorite situation, but it does seem the best way through."

Prunepit looked at Wreath. "And never tell the others," he said, finally understanding what Softfoot was offering.

"And never tell the others," Wreath said, brightening. Her cold nature seemed unaffected by the Recognition; she was eager to minimize its inconvenience. "Maybe that would work. Except that when the baby comes—"

"Any elf would be glad to think he made it—with you," Softfoot pointed out. "Who would suspect Prunepit?"

"I have not been with any elf!" Wreath protested.

"They won't believe that," Softfoot said. "They'll assume you have a secret lovmate."

"Meanwhile, we can try to stop the allos," Prunepit said, uncomfortable with this dialogue.

Wreath looked at Softfoot. She was quick enough to recognize the proffered convenience. "When?"

Softfoot shrugged. "Now, if you want."

"I don't want! But if it's medicine I must take, the sooner the better, so I can forget it."

"We were going to run our test," Prunepit said with an edge.

"Let's find a good place for it," Softfoot suggested. Prunepit was unable to read her exact meaning, but evidently Wreath did.

They mounted and rode their wolves to a sparse section of the forest, well clear of the elves' usual haunts. They drew up at a large thicket of brush through which animal paths threaded. "There," Softfoot said brusquely. "I will scout about with the wolves."

"Now, wait—" Prunepit protested as she rode off. But Wreath took him by the hand. "The faster we get this over with, the better," she said. "If we're lucky, one time will do it. I assure you this is no fun for me."

"Oh." He followed her into the brush. He never would have believed that he could anticipate such an act with such a lovely creature with so little enthusiasm. Wreath had no concern at all for his feelings, or for Softfoot's. If she could have gotten bred without being physically present, she certainly would have done it.

But when she opened her leather tunic and smiled at him, he found it impossible not to react despite his awareness of the calculated nature of her actions. Her bosom did not look as if it contained ice; indeed, she was warm all over. Perhaps the Recognition changed her nature, for this one occasion. All the elfin conjectures about the loveliness of her body when naked were emphatically confirmed.

"Turn your face away," she said, reminding him abruptly of reality.

He did so, trying to imagine that it was Softfoot he held, but it was no good. He knew it was Wreath, and that she was facilitating this chore so that it would take the very minimum time. Such was the compulsion of the Recognition that it made no difference.

Softfoot rode Hardfoot, circling around the thicket. The wolf had been named for his thick claws and heavily callused pads. His tough feet were exactly what she needed, and she had always appreciated this. Perhaps that was why Hardfoot had come to her, to be her wolf-friend. The terrain was ragged, but no more so than her thoughts. She knew she had done something foolish: she had made a decision that could affect the rest of her life, and had not slept on it. If it turned out wrong, it would be because of that carelessness.

Yet how could it turn out wrong? Recognition could not be opposed. She was no strong telepath, but she had picked up enough to know that what had passed between Prunepit and Wreath was valid. She also believed them both when they said they had neither sought nor wanted it. Recognition did not require its chosen to seek it; it chose on its own basis, trampling under any other concerns. If she had fought it, encouraging her lifemate to flee it, he would have sickened, and his love for her would have suffered. From the moment the Recognition occurred, Prunepit and Wreath were destined to mate. There was nothing else Softfoot could do except accept it.

Then where was her error? As she mulled it over, she knew what it was. She had ignored Wreath's motives. Oh, of course Wreath had no more choice than did Prunepit; Recognition accepted no motive but its own, as it went single-mindedly after the best combinations for the breed. But Wreath had always wanted to better her status, in whatever manner status existed among the elves. If she could have fascinated a chief, so as to be the lifemate of the most influential member of the tribe, she would have. But there had been no male chief of her generation.

Now, however, Prunepit might become chief, if his idea for hunting allos worked. If he became chief, he would be suitable material for Wreath's interest. Her interest, once aroused, was apt to be devastating. She would, quite simply, take him for her lifemate. Prunepit had settled for Softfoot partly because it had never occurred to him that a woman like Wreath would be interested in him. Indeed, she had not been, and would never have been, but for the Recognition. But what was planned as a strictly temporary tryst was in danger of becoming more than that, and Softfoot could do nothing to prevent it. Wreath's beauty, and her total self-interest, and the Recognition, made that clear.

Yet what could Softfoot have done? She was sure she had made a mistake, but she could not see how she could have avoided it. Maybe if she had slept on it she would have found a way. Now she was stuck; she loved Prunepit, and would always love him, but perhaps would lose him.

She laid her head against Hardfoot's furry shoulder and let the tears flow. The wolf ran on, completing the scouting without her direct guidance. He was aware of her misery, but did not fathom its source, so he let it be.

Prunepit and Wreath emerged and mounted their wolves. Physically, they seemed unaffected; it was as if nothing had happened. But mentally everything had changed; the compelling hunger of the Recognition had abated.

Another woman had made love to Softfoot's lifemate, and had done it better than Softfoot had ever been capable of. Cold as Wreath was, she was always good at what she put her mind to, and Recognition made it easy. No, there was no way Softfoot could compete—if Wreath decided on more than mere mating.

Prunepit joined Silvertooth, setting his hand on the great wolf's head for the strongest contact, explaining the role required of her. The wolf understood: she would run and dodge and feint, never truly attacking, and her actions would be scored as attacks. She was weak, but this she could do. She accepted a piece of leather; this she would protect with her mock-life.

Now Prunepit conferred with the others. "You must not try to guide your wolves," he told the two women. "You must use your weapons only as the opportunity arises; it will seem like chance, for you will not know how your wolves will move."

"I don't like that," Wreath said. "It will be like riding a strange wolf."

"I know. But my plan is to link the minds of the wolves to the mind of the prey, so that they can maneuver as fast as it thinks. No wolf—and no rider—will be in danger as long as that is the case. Then the riders will be able to strike at will."

"If they don't fall off their mounts!" Wreath exclaimed. "I'm glad this isn't a real allo!" She could readily have added that she would have been even happier if she hadn't had to undertake a real mating.

Now they started the test. The three riders on their wolves surrounded the mock-allo, who growled and snapped convincingly, but never let go of the banner. But when Silvertooth lunged, the wolf before her dodged away, while the two others moved in closer. She snapped to the side, but again the target was moving at the same time she did, avoiding her without effort.

Then Prunepit reached forward just as Silvertooth hesitated, and caught away the banner. It had been almost too easy; it seemed like sheer chance. Had the prey reacted differently—

"Let me be the allo," Wreath said, dismounting. "Anything I tag is dead." She took the banner from his hand and held it aloft.

"No, we could not take it from you, without suffering losses," Prunepit said. "I cannot relate well enough to elfin minds, only to animals. But the allos are animals."

Wreath nodded. "I think it will work," she said. "We must try it with the rest of the tribe."

Prunepit grimaced. "They will resist the notion. No one likes to have any other person between him and his wolf."

"Not if six of the finest young elves show how well it works," she said confidently. "Then the women will believe, too."

"Six young men?"

"I will ask them," she said. "They will not refuse."

They did not refuse. No male elf refused anything Wreath truly wanted, however crazy it might seem. Not even this. The elves were openly skeptical, but the demonstration worked.

"Now we must go and tackle an allo," Prunepit said. "Only when we have proven that we can kill allos without taking losses, will we know that we can handle this crisis." For the numbers of the elves were not great, and had been depleted by the recent disaster; they could not spare any more lives without throwing the viability of the tribe into question.

They rode out the next day, a party of their best remaining hunters. They did not have far to go, for the allos had forged steadily toward the holt. All too soon they encountered the first one.

It was a giant of a reptile. Its hide was knobby rather than scaly, but tougher than any ordinary leather. Its color was faintly reddish, as if heated by the sun. But this was morning; the sun's full heat had not yet come, and the trees shaded the ground. The creature moved somewhat lethargically. Even so, its huge claws and teeth made it formidable. It outmassed the elfin party, and it had no fear.

Prunepit stared at the monster, daunted. The thing was so big, so ugly, so sure of itself! It did not flee them; instead it came purposefully toward them, taking them to be prey. It did not move as fast as the wolves, but no elf afoot would be safe.

Would his system of mind-linkage work on such a monster? Prunepit quelled his doubt. It had to work!

"Remember," he called. "Let the wolves guide themselves."

The elves nodded. They had seen it work in the rehearsal; they did not feel easy with it, but they knew what to do.

The group of them spread out to surround the allo. Prunepit reached for the reptile's mind—and was appalled. The thing was a nest of sting-tails, concerned with nothing but hatred and hunger. Hatred for all other creatures, and hunger for their flesh. This was simply an attack entity, with no concern for danger, indeed hardly any awareness of it. Charge, bite, tear, swallow—that was its desire.

The allo leaped for a wolf—but the wolf was already moving out of the way, while three on the other side moved in close, their riders lifting their weapons. A spear plunged toward the monster's ear region, and an arrow winged toward its eye.

The spear slid off; the ear was armored, and the point was unable to penetrate. The arrow seemed about to make a perfect strike—but the monster's heavily ridged brow squinted, and the arrow bounced off and was lost.

The head whipped back to snap at the three attackers. As before, the three were moving before the head did, retreating, so that the great teeth closed on air. Simultaneously, the wolves on the far side moved in close, and their riders attacked.

A spear sought the monster's nose. But this too was armored, and the teeth caught the spear and crunched it to splinters. The allo bit at anything it could reach, whether flesh or wood. If it ever caught any part of a wolf or elf, that would be the end of that creature.

The allo lurched this way and that, thinking to snap up its tormentors, but they were impossibly elusive. Prunepit had linked the minds of the wolves to the mind of the reptile, and the wolves had better minds. They reacted more swiftly to the allo's thoughts than it did itself, so that any action it tried was useless. The system was working!

Or was it? The attacks and counters continued, but the allo was taking no significant injuries, and the longer the action proceeded, the more alert the reptile was becoming. It was really a standoff, with neither side able to harm the other. Prunepit had assumed that once they nullified the reptile's attack, it would be only a matter of time before they killed it. Now he saw that this was not the case.

What good was it to harass the allo if they couldn't hurt it?

There was a growl from the side. A second allo was coming!

"Withdraw!" Prunepit cried.

The elves resumed contact with their wolves. The group fled from the allos, outdistancing them. But the field of battle belonged to the reptiles.

They drew up in a glade. The wolves were panting; they had been working hard. The elves were in good order, but they had lost a number of spears and arrows.

Prunepit was dejected. "The thing is too tough," he said. "Our weapons won't dent it!"

"But it couldn't touch us!" Softfoot exclaimed. "We were like ghosts to it!"

"Ghosts can't hurt real folk," he reminded her. As a general rule, elves did not believe in ghosts; a dead elf was dead, with no apologies. But the five-fingers believed, and so the concept was known, if not respected.

"We just have to find its weak spot," Softfoot said. "If we strike there, then we'll have it!"

The discussion lapsed. There had been no evidence of any weak spot. The allo was protected at every point.

There was a crashing in the brush. Another allo was coming! Hastily the elves mounted, and the wolves fled the glade. If there had been any doubt who controlled the terrain, this removed it. It was becoming increasingly evident why the allos had defeated Rahnee; the elves had never before encountered so tough an enemy.

Prunepit found himself riding next to Wreath. She beckoned him closer. Did she want another mating? This was hardly the time, even if the Recognition was developing its imperative again.

But she had another matter on her mind for the moment. "I think the allo must be soft inside," she said as Prunepit's ear came close.

He laughed bitterly. "I do not care to go inside it!"

"But if we could attack it from inside—"

"How? Without first encountering its teeth?"

"By getting something inside it," she said. "I notice that it bites at anything it reaches. Suppose it bit a burning ball of tar?"

Prunepit's mouth dropped open. "The tar pit's not far from here!"

"Yes. Why don't you tell the others?"

"But it's your idea!" he protested. "You should have the credit for it!"

"I want you to have the credit."

"Why?"

"Because if it works, you will be chief."

"Yes! So you could be—"

"I am no leader," she said. "You know that. But you could be."

Prunepit was not at all certain that she lacked qualities of leadership. Wreath had fought well and kept her poise throughout, and now she had an idea that well might turn the tide of battle.

She was also infernally beautiful, and his Recognized.

Her wolf veered away. The dialogue was over.

Prunepit shrugged. Of course Wreath did not want to be seen with him. They had agreed that no one would know of their Recognition. Still, she could have given her notion to another hunter. Why had she wanted him to have the best

chance to be chief? He was sure that she had a selfish reason, and it bothered him to be the beneficiary of a gift whose motive he did not understand. Still, Wreath was Dreamkeeper's grandchild and she remembered things even Zarhan had forgotten.

Softfoot rode close. She did not speak; she just glanced at him. He knew she had observed his dialogue with Wreath. Surely she misunderstood its nature!

He beckoned her. "She has a notion!" he called as she came closer.

Softfoot made a moue.

"Not that one!" he exclaimed. "She—"

But Softfoot's wolf diverged, and he could not finish. He had hurt her, without meaning to. If only he could send to his own kind as well as he could to animals!

Well, perhaps his action would clarify it. "To the tar pit!" he cried, gesturing in its direction.

At the tar pit they drew up again. There were no allos here, yet.

"If we gather tarballs, and light them, and feed them to the allos, that should kill them," Prunepit said.

The elves considered. "How can we feed the monster a tarball?" Dampstar asked. He had come by his name when traveling at night, seeing a star reflected in the river.

"With an arrow," Prunepit said. He picked up a stick, dipped it in the thick tar, and got a blob on the end. "We must have the tar-arrows ready, and light them when we approach the allos, then shoot them in when the time is right."

"But only the wolves know when the time is right," Softfoot pointed out. "We cannot connect to the mind of the reptile."

"I might do it, if Curlfur warns me," Wreath said. She was an excellent shot with her bow. "But I will need some help in setting up my arrows."

Several male elves volunteered immediately to help. Prunepit was left alone for a moment with Softfoot.

"It was a good notion," she said. "I'm sorry for what I thought."

"But I don't understand why she gave it to me," he said. "She said it was because she could not be chief, but I could. Does that make sense?"

"She wants her child to be the offspring of a chief," Softfoot said, biting her lip.

"But if no one knows the father—"

"The blood knows."

He looked at her. "You know I could not resist the Recognition. But my feeling for you—"

She turned away.

"It's your child I want to have!" he cried.

"I cannot give you what she can."

"How do we know that? Breeding is not limited to Recognition! Maybe—"

She faced him. "I have not denied you," she said. "I would have your child if I could. But it may not be possible. That may be why the Recognition struck. It knows."

"If only—" he began. But then the elves returned with Wreath's arrows, each dipped in tar.

"We must have a firepot, too," Wreath said.

They filled a container with the tar, and the elf who had the fire-talent struck flame, lighting it. The tar burned with guttering vigor, throwing up thick smoke. The wolves shied away from it, apprehensive about the fire, but Prunepit touched their minds and showed how this fire was their friend. Curlfur even consented to carry the firepot, smoking in its harness, so that Wreath could have it ready without delay.

It was now midday. Prunepit hesitated. Was it wise to tackle the allos again now, when they would be most vigorous? Yet if they waited another day, the reptiles could be almost at their lodge. It would be better to do it here, where there was still room to retreat.

They rode slowly back to intercept the allos. It did not take long; the horde was in full motion, on its search for what little prey remained.

"We must strike quickly, and retreat," Prunepit warned them. "We don't know how long it will take the tar to do the job. It doesn't have to be fast, just sure. Now turn over your wolves to me."

The elves did so with better grace than before; though they had not succeeded in killing the allo, they had appreciated the perfect coordination of the wolves, and had understood its necessity.

They rode up to meet the first allo. This one was larger than the one they had tackled in the morning, and faster, because of the heat of day. It screamed and charged them with appalling ferocity, its jaws gaping.

Wreath stood her ground. Calmly she touched an arrow to the firepot, waiting for its gooey tip to blaze up. Then she fitted it to her bow and took aim.

Prunepit saw that Wreath was going to be overrun, but he couldn't even yell; he had to keep the wolves connected.

Wreath fired her arrow. The aim was perfect; the missile shot right into the throat of the monster.

Then Curlfur moved, almost slowly, for Wreath was not holding on. He carried her just that minimum required to avoid the charge of the reptile, while wolves to either side crowded close, harassing the creature.

But the allo had abruptly lost interest in the wolves. Smoke was issuing from its nostrils, making it look like a beast from a sky-mountain nightmare. It swallowed—then screamed, as the burning material coursed down its throat.

The agony hit Prunepit like a savage storm. The allo was burning inside! Quickly he broke his mind free—and suddenly the wolves were on their own, the connection broken.

But the job had been done. The allo whipped about, trying to free itself of the pain. It rolled on the ground, its tail thrashing wildly.

The commotion alerted another allo. It charged in, intent on the first. Without hesitation it bit, needing no inducement other than helplessness. The elves watched, horrified yet fascinated by the savagery.

"Kill one, distract one," Softfoot murmured.

"But we have no meat for our wolves," an elf pointed out. "We need a kill we can butcher."

"We'll get it," Prunepit said. "Now we know how to kill the allos."

They closed on the feeding reptile. It growled, warning them off, but did not stop feeding. Wreath readied another arrow.

Prunepit linked the minds of the wolves with that of the second allo. They circled close. The allo growled again and made a feint, opening its mouth wide—and Wreath dipped her arrow and fired it.

She scored on the inside of the mouth. Now the allo roared, trying to spit out the fiery barb but only burned its tongue. The tar was stuck in its mouth, blazing.

Unfortunately, this new commotion attracted several other allos. They came in a monstrous wave, big ones and small ones, smelling the blood. The elves had to flee.

"There are so many!" Softfoot exclaimed. "Every time we kill one, more come!"

Prunepit nodded. This problem was so much more complicated than he had supposed it could be! He had thought that when they killed one allo, that would be the turning point. Instead, the problem had grown with each success.

Wreath rode close again. "You know why you're having so much trouble?" she asked. "It's because you're not thinking like a chief."

"I'm not a chief!" he replied.

"You showed how to deal with the allos," she reminded him. "That makes you chief. But it will never work unless you believe it yourself."

"But I can't just declare myself chief!" he protested.

"Why not?"

"They would laugh!"

"If you don't, they will die, as the allos overrun our holt."

He was very much afraid she was right. He had taken on this mission because of the need; he had not thought beyond it. Now he appreciated the greater need: for a continuing leadership that could handle problems as they came, whatever they might be.

Still, he did not feel competent because he couldn't solve the problem of the numbers of allos. What good was it to slay one, or two, or three, or eight, if more always came?

He mulled that over as they rode, outdistancing the reptiles. He felt ashamed because so much of his thinking had been done for him by the woman who didn't want to share his life, Wreath. A chief didn't let others do his thinking! For that matter, what chief had a name like Prunepit?

Then he suffered a major realization.

Stop at the next good resting place, he thought to the wolves. That was the elfin version; the actual message was simply a vision of a nice spot, with wolves relaxing.

When they stopped, Prunepit called out to them to gather around. "We agreed that whoever solved the problem of the allos would be chief," he said. "I have shown how to solve it, so I am declaring myself chief. I admit that the problem is not over yet, but I will dedicate myself to dealing with it. I am the only one who can unify the minds of the wolves with the mind of the prey, and that is what we need to do this job."

He paused, but there was no reaction. They were waiting to hear him out before drawing their conclusions.

"To signify this determination, I am taking a new name," he said. "I enable the wolves to link with the prey, to pace it, moving before it can move. Therefore I will call myself Prey-Pacer, and that will be my name as long as I am chief."

Still they did not speak. He hoped he was not making himself ludicrous. The key element of his assumption was coming up.

"But I do not know all the answers to all the problems. I never expected to be chief, before my mother died, and have had no practice in it. I know I will make mistakes if I try to decide everything myself. So my decision is—to make no significant decision without first getting the best advice I can. For example, I don't know how to stop the allos from taking the meat of whichever ones we kill. Does anyone here know?"

They considered. "Why don't we kill one and butcher it quickly and haul it up into a tree where they can't reach it?" Dampstar asked.

"That sounds good to me," Prey-Pacer said. "Does anyone have an objection?"

"Yes," Wreath said. "Those beasts track by the smell of blood as much as anything else. They could collect under that tree and never leave."

"But then we have a way to stop them!" Softfoot pointed out. "We can hang flesh in several trees, and the whole horde will stop right there."

The elves pursed their lips, thinking about that.

"Well, either they'll stay by the tree, or they won't," Prey-Pacer said. "If they stay, they won't bother us elsewhere. If not, we have a cache we can return to. I think it's an excellent suggestion, and I'll do it if a better one doesn't come along. Thank you, Dampstar."

Dampstar grinned with pride, just as if a real chief had complimented him.

Wreath nodded, gazing at Prey-Pacer with new appraisal. He was making it work.

But Softfoot was looking at Wreath. What was passing through her mind? She must be suspicious that Wreath was reconsidering about keeping the secret, and might decide after all to be the lifemate of a chief. Prey-Pacer was suspicious of that too—and knew that as much as he loved Softfoot, he would not be able to deny Wreath if she decided to take him. That single mating with her—already he felt the yearning returning. Perhaps it was only the Recognition, asserting its hunger to generate the baby it had chosen. But perhaps it was his own fickle male nature, vulnerable to beauty no matter what his mind said.

There was a roar. Another allo had come across them, and was charging in.

The elves leaped for their wolves. But Wreath reached for an arrow first, dipping it to the firepot. She took aim at the monster bearing down on her.

Prey-Pacer, astride Halfhowl, looked back, abruptly realizing that Wreath had not mounted. He had never witnessed an act of greater courage! But it was foolish courage, because she had no way to escape the reptile in time. Already the allo's huge head was orienting on her, sweeping down as the terrible jaws opened. Curlfur remained close to her, but could not make her mount before she was ready.

Wreath fired into that open mouth. The flaming arrow went right into the throat. The allo choked, but its momentum was such that even as it stumbled, it was coming down to crush the elf-woman. It was far too late for Prey-Pacer to do anything, even if he had been able to act.

Then a shape shot by, passing almost under the falling monster. It was a wolf and rider, leaping to intercept Wreath. The rider launched from the wolf, pushing

off to tackle Wreath and shove her out of the way as the allo's head and neck whomped down at her.

The monster struck the ground. Wreath stumbled clear, safe by the narrowest margin. But her rescuer had not made it; her legs were pinned under the fallen allo.

Then Prey-Pacer realized who it was. Softfoot lay there, unconscious.

Prey-Pacer was the first to reach them. "Why did she do it?" he gasped, horrified.

Wreath swallowed. She was not so cold as to overlook the narrowness of her escape. "Because she loves you," she said, awed.

"But you are her rival!"

"And she was protecting your child—whoever carried it," Wreath added. "I think I could not have done that."

Softfoot groaned. "She's alive!" Prey-Pacer exclaimed.

"But will be lame, I fear," Wreath said. "She never was apt on her feet, and now will be worse. She will need a lot of attention." She gazed down at Softfoot, and a tear rolled down her cheek. It seemed that her cold heart had at last been touched. Then, as the other Wolfriders arrived, she raised her voice. "Get sticks! Lever this monster off the chief's lifemate! She saved my life!"

Then Prey-Pacer knew that no matter who bore his child, no one would try to separate him from Softfoot. One woman had acted with measureless courage and brought down an allo single-handed. The other had acted with similar courage, and with measureless generosity, and won the respect and gratitude of two who would not forget.

Prey-Pacer was indeed chief, and was known as the most superlative of elfin hunters despite his seeming inadequacies of weapon and of sending. It took time, but he succeeded in abating the menace of the allos, and they retreated to their former obscurity. He sired several children. Among them was Wreath's daughter, to be named Skyfire, inheriting the beauty and nerve of her mother. Another was Softfoot's son, to be named Swift-Spear, trained in his mother's weapon. But for a long time, only Softfoot's cubs were known as Prey-Pacer's offspring, until the secret no longer mattered.

It had happened again as it had happened so many times before. A hunting human and a hunting Wolfrider had unwittingly crossed paths not a good run's distance from the Father Tree itself. And, of course, the Wolfrider would have to have been Moonshade. Not that the black-haired elf had been harmed; by all the retellings Longreach had heard, elf and human had both panicked and run in opposite directions, but Moonshade was Strongbow's lifemate and Strongbow rarely needed encouragement to inflame his hatred of the five-fingered hunters.

Bearclaw himself was little better. He'd just come back from one of his hand-of-days wanderings and was in no mood for Strongbow's challenges. Longreach was one of the few who knew where Bearclaw wandered and, though he'd never say it aloud and certainly not at a tense howl like this, he suspected the red-eyed chief of drinking a bit more of his dreamberry wine than was wise.

Piss-pot cowards, all of you, Strongbow's sending roared into all of their minds. They're coming closer all the time. Will you wait until they burn the Father Tree around us?

"Piss-pot yourself. They've been there and we've been here a long time. It's just that we know where 'there' is and they wouldn't know 'here' if they were standing where I'm standing right now."

Fog-brained idiot. You'll wait until they are here before you do anything.

"I've done something. We're watching; we're being careful—a lot more careful than you'd be, thundering up to their stink-breath caves."

If it had just been the two males posturing and snarling as they so often did, Longreach would have simply headed back to his own den. But Moonshade's encounter had been closer to the holt than any similar event in recent memory. And if it was one thing the Wolfriders had learned as the seasons turned it was that humankind was the most dangerous, unpredictable hunter in the forest.

Worse, the other Wolfriders were starting to take sides as bitterness took root in honest fear. There had always been those who wanted to run as far as possible, to live where you never saw the mark of a five-fingered hand; and there were always those who wanted to carry the hunt to humanity as if it were possible to purge the world of two moons of their presence.

At the moment, though, neither Strongbow nor Bearclaw had the least notion of the effect their loud, private quarrel was having. Longreach sighed and, completely unnoticed, got to his feet. It was going to be necessary to sober them both.

"Enough!" he said in a voice that had carried through more howls than these two had seen between them. "You're thinking with your mouths. The worst that can happen to a Wolfrider isn't meeting a human—it's becoming so lost in his anger, his hatred, and his fear that he loses the Way. Without the Way it doesn't matter what you do, or why you do it—you've already lost yourself.

"And it can happen to the best of us—"

