

Swift-Spear
by C. J. Cherryh & Mark C. Perry

The wolf Blackmane heard them moving through the woods, but he was not frightened. These new humans were a soft breed; they ran from elf and wolf alike. Besides, he was not done with his meal yet. ...

The men moved closer through the undergrowth, their sweat staining the summer air with the scent of their fear. They knew this was one of the werewolves that the forest demons rode. But their fear was overridden by hot anger. The calf the wolf had stolen was the fifth that these dark ones had killed in the two months since the tribe had come here. They could not afford such loss.

"Are we cowards?" their leader, Kerthan, had cried when the wolf had taken the calf. He had stood in the middle of the village holding his magic spear aloft. "Must we hide in fear whenever the demons' wolves are hungry? How long before they kill full-grown animals? How long before they get a taste for our children's flesh? The gods have promised! The world is ours! We must cast the demons out or lose favor in the gods' eyes forever!"

Kerthan's head resounded with his speech as he inched closer to the great wolf that fed in the clearing. It was he, Kerthan, who had led the people to this territory, he who had made the first stone hut in the plain below the woods and dared to declare the land his own. He grasped the spear tightly. He must kill the wolf, or the people would turn on him and leave. He must kill the wolf. . . .

Blackmane sniffed the air and moved from his prey, growling as he saw one of the men creep from the woods' cool shadows and stand upright, staring at him. Blackmane growled again, warning off the scrawny man-things—it was his kill, and these were none of the pack—but the man did not retreat or advance; he held a spear-fang and pointed it at him, and the acrid, strange smell of the weapon coming faintly against the wind made Blackmane's short hairs bristle. He had never smelled this cold thing before in his short life; it burned with the scent of anger and fear, seared the air about him. . . . The human pack moved on either side of him, to drive him from his prey in his own hunting-range.

He snarled, indecisive, measuring the man with the harsh smell; then backed a step away, misliking the situation, almost ready to run and leave his prey. He had hunted alone. He was apart from his pack. They were in theirs. Danger. Danger in this, and they outnumbered him.

Then the scent wafting on a wind-shift behind him set the hair bristling up again and flattened his ears to his skull. . . . The human pack had closed behind him, surrounding him; and the man-leader held the spear-fang, muscles tensed—that meant—attack!

With a howl he charged straight at the man. . . .

Kerthan's spear flashed in the sun, driving deep into the wolf's thick shoulder. The force of the blow spilled the beast to the ground.

The humans behind him cried with one voice and surrounded the struggling animal. "Kill it," Kerthan cried, and did not cease to jab at the wolf with the keen-edged spear while the hunters with him hit it with clubs and sticks and fell at last to gashing it with knives, wounding each other in their frenzy.

Swift-Spear raced between the trees, his heart light with the freedom of his strength . . . freedom for the moment from the demands of the chieftainship his father Prey-Pacer had bequeathed him. He ran beneath the summer leaves, leaped up the gray rock outcrop that rose on the margin of the stream, and looked back grinning and panting at the elf-woman who ran behind him, at Willowgreen, whose hair flew and whose bare feet skipped lightly enough over the forest mold—but not the match for his speed, or his long stride. Tall herself, with the high ones' blood in her—she had their languor too; she was fair and pale and breathed now with great gasps while she laughed. ... "Show me a sight," she breathed as she climbed after him. "Show me a sight," indeed! What is there to see here?"

He had the answer ready, his mouth opened.

And stumbled to the ground, grabbing his head. There were men and there was the smell of metal. He saw the hunters. He heard a cry inside, first of anger, then of terror and of pain. He felt the tear of flesh.

"Blackmane!" he shouted aloud, even as his mind sought his friend. He felt a brief flicker reach to him, then gray emptiness. Swift-Spear fell to his knees.

"Ayooooo!" he cried in agony. He knew that Blackmane was dead.

In moments the wolf lay battered and chopped beyond recognition. The men laughed and danced, spotted with the wolf's blood, and Kerthan cut off the still warm ears as a trophy.

"They can be killed!" Kerthan said, his voice loud and strong in victory. "No longer must we fear them." He shook his spear, hot drops of blood from it spattering them all. "Kerthan will protect you with his spear! This is our land and no one will take it from us!"

"Swift-Spear!" Willowgreen cried, and shook him with both her hands as he sat crouched atop the rocks. There was no response. The elf sat with his hands clasped between his knees, his brown eyes wide and shocked. She took his face between her hands and peered into those eyes in search of sense, but there was no reaction at all, not in the eyes, not in the mouth, which remained slack; his skin was chilled and he did not shiver; and there was no contact with his mind, none that she dared seek. *Blood*, she got. And, *metal*. And after that she leapt up and went flying down from the rocks, panting as she ran the winding forest trails—

—past the marks the elves knew, past the familiar rocks, and over the fallen log, and through and through the

trees with constantly a shriek in her mind: ****Help, help—****

Wolves cried out in the forest. None were hers. She was too tall, too fair, too strange for them, and they always distrusted her. ****Help,**** she called out to them, and did not know whether they heard her or understood. The pain was sharp in her side, and branches raked her hair. She stumbled and caught herself on the old ash, and ran and ran, all but mindless with the pain and the terror as she skidded down a hillside and through the thicket.

And crashed full into the arms of a presence she had not felt, hands that seized her by her arms, and eyes yellow and terrible as any wolfs, a face narrow and hard and familiar to her.

****Willowgreen,**** the mindtouch came to her, and the grip held her and shook at her till the thoughts came spilling out, the things she had seen, the fact that Swift-Spear was left helpless because she knew nothing of weapons and nothing of what had brought Swift-Spear down, and only ran, ran, ran, for help.

The elf's hands released her, pushing her away. He was less than her height; he was small and slight and his hair was not elf—it was black-tipped and strange, strange as the mind which could stalk so silently and insinuate itself unfelt. "Fool," Gray wolf said. "Helpless fool!"

Which stung worse than the thorns, for he was Swift-Spear's cousin, and had never loved her, never thought her of any worth.

"Go tell the tribe," he said; and said with his mind as he left: ****Quickly!**** with such force and anger that she stopped in her tracks and did not follow him. ****Quickly!****

She fled, in motion before she had decided; she flung up her arms to shield her from the branches, and ran, breathless and aching.

There was still that quiet, that most profound quiet that had held Swift-Spear motionless. No one could hear that silence and move. And yet, he thought in that dim, remote center where he was, yet if he could move, and break that quiet, then none of it would be true, and that silence would not exist, and the world would be whole again.

He tried, desperately. He felt with his mind wider and wider after that essence which eluded him.

He felt a presence finally, and sought after it. It was wolfish and familiar. For a moment he hoped he had found what he sought . . . but it grew and grew until he knew it was something else; it filled the space about him, driving other things away. In that presence were yellow eyes, and a voice in his mind that was like a wolfs, which had the essence of a wolf but an elvish mind all the same.

****No,**** he said with his thoughts, forcing it away. But it was too late, the presence he had wanted was gone, and this one had made it impossible to recover it. "No!" he howled aloud and struggled in a hard-handed grip that closed upon his arms. He flung himself up and struck at the intruder, knowing as he struck who it was, and seeing with the return of his vision the wolf-maned hair, the narrow, elvish face, and yellow eyes. He raged and shoved away, but Graywolf was as quick on the rocks, and prevented him with a grip on his arms and a touch at his mind: ****Blackmane?*****

He had not wanted to think the thought. But the question had its answer. *Dead, dead, dead.* So it became true. So he knew he could not get back to that place where he had been, deep inside, where a motion might disturb the dead. He had admitted that thought and therefore the other thought was beyond recall.

Therefore he slumped down with Gray wolf's small brown hands clenched on his wrists; he sat on the rock and he looked his friend in the eyes. . . . More than Gray wolf had come. There was the wolf-friend, prowling below the rocks, hump-shouldered, ears flat to the skull—Moonfinder was his name. Not Blackmane. Moonfinder, second in the pack—till now. Till Blackmane was dead and Gray wolf's friend came to sudden primacy.

"Where?" Graywolf asked, jolting him. "Where dead? How?"

"Humans," Swift-Spear muttered, and shoved off the grip that hampered him, thrust himself over the side of the rock on which he sat and landed on the next and the next, so that Moonfinder shied away and flattened his ears.

He paid no heed to this hostility. He cared nothing that Graywolf and his wolf-friend followed him, or that all the woods were roused, the call going through the forest in wolf-howl and the rising of birds. He had his spear in hand. He ran without sight in the present, searching out of his memory all the detail of the place where Blackmane's mind had stopped.

Trees, growing in such a pattern, of such a type, a broken branch, a thicket. It was like all other places. There was only one such specific place. He ran and he racked his memory of the forest on the borders of men. He listened to the sounds of the wolves and the cries of the birds. He heard his own harsh breathing and heard the steps which coursed like a whisper behind him.

He ran, for all that, alone. His friend, a wolf he knew. None of these were help to him. The pack-leader was dead, Blackmane was dead; humans had intruded into the woods, the humans who had encroached closer and closer to the tribe with their strange stone buildings and their diggings and hewings and making of things. They had brought death with them. But when did they not?

It was the forest edge. That much he knew. He knew the way the light had fallen. Knew the size of the clearing. Knew the prey Blackmane had taken. It was all burned into his mind. He gave these things to Graywolf, as he gave them to the forest, to anything which would listen—he knew that Graywolf and Moonfinder searched with their own understanding; and Graywolf was half a wolf himself, not the shapeshifting kind, but wolf by disposition, wolf by senses and by instincts, elf by mind and by a curious blend of elvish and wolfish cunning.

And it was Moonfinder, or it was Graywolf, who first smelled the blood. He was not sure. It came from both minds at once, and into his own, so that he changed his direction on a pivot of his foot and followed the scent of blood and of men. But both scents were cold.

Memory of trees and reality of the forest began to merge. Birds flew up and screamed warnings; but only selfish ones: the enemy was gone, the chance of revenge was fled, like the warmth in the blood.

****The tribe is coming.**** He caught that thought from Gray wolf's mind. He did not care. He plunged ahead, fought his way through the underbrush, and at the last, having caught the scent of the place (or his companions had, and he knew it) he did not run. He had no wish to find what he had now to find, what, his senses told him, was screened from him by the brush.

Willowgreen came with the hunters. Her skin was torn and her feet were bleeding, and worst of all was the pain in her side; but she followed as best she could. She had no weapon. She had her little magic, which could heal the worst of her cuts if she had had leisure, but she took none and only bit her lips and followed at what speed she could the swift-coursing Wolfriders, limping heavily at the last, after even the wolves were winded.

She came hindmost into the clearing, among Wolfriders who gathered and stared numbly as Swift-Spear cradled the bloody corpse.

They all waited. The silence went on and on.

"Graywolf." Swift-Spear's sudden voice was harsh. Graywolf looked up, a small figure, fey and furtive, by Moonfinder's side. And Swift-Spear rose and turned to the others, his slim form covered with his wolf-friend's blood. "Graywolf goes with me. The rest of you go back to the tribe, move them farther into the woods."

"What will you do?" someone asked.

Swift-Spear turned and looked down at the mutilated corpse. "I go to get his ears back." He looked up again, his eyes dark with emotion. "I go to get myself a new spear." He licked the blood off his hands. "A man-hunting spear."

The hunters lingered a moment in shock. Then they began to move. But Willowgreen limped forward, one pace and two.

"Get back to the tribe!" Swift-Spear snarled at her. And with his thought came resentments that she was what she was, that she had hurt herself and that she was helpless to heal even that. ****Take care of yourself,**** the thought came. ****Or can you do that much?*****

It struck her to the heart. She stood there with her hands held out to offer sympathy, and then she did not know what to do except to let them fall, and turn and walk away after the others, with no strength left—he had said it—even to heal herself.

But Swift-Spear set out with that tireless run that meant distance, and Graywolf ran behind him, afoot, with Moonfinder coursing along the game trails. There was blood on the trail. It was not that hard to follow. And that Swift-Spear had no haste to follow it was indication that he had no haste for his revenge.

Gray wolf marked this. And marked the thoughts that strayed to him from Swift-Spear's mind—wordless thoughts, like pain and rage that did not care what it wounded, like a wolf in its extremity snapping even at a familiar hand. He kept silence himself and did not invade this privacy, which leaked resentments of him, whose Moonfinder had the primacy now. They were very secret thoughts he intercepted—*Follow me because you could be chief, you with your wolf-friend that bowed only to Blackmane—do you want what he wants? Follow because you expect I may fall, and you will come back bringing the dead—to challenge my sister, is that it, cousin?*

Thoughts like that fell like blood, scant and seldom, smothered in anguish and self-reproach: *Graywolf, my friend*—which was the way with wounds, which tried to seal themselves; and Graywolf, whose mind could go silent to his prey, still as deep waters, heard things of private nature. It was his gift, and his curse, to live with too much honesty.

Like now, that he had sense as Willowgreen had not, to put these things away and to remember them for what they were—private fears, the things in-spite-of-which. They made Graywolf wise. Like knowledge of his own—*I hate you, my friend, I hate myself that I hate you, I hate the fair, the bright elves that hate the sight of me, of which you are chief, and kindest, giving me no enemy. Fool, do you think they would ever follow me?*

If we die we will only please our enemies in the tribe, mine and yours, cousin.

But, my fair, my bright, tall friend—temper is your privilege. I have had to master mine, or go mad. So I follow you, and indulge yours.

But all the latter was quiet in that still depth where Graywolf stored things and mulled them over, and where he made his choices.

In this case the choice was already clear.

And in Swift-Spear's another kind of thought that shot like lightning through the moiling anger: a chief's thinking, a cold, clear reason that sought to use the anger for its own ends. *Revenge can serve two purposes. There are always two purposes. The tribe would not approve this. But if I win they will; and after that, they will approve anything.* And he knew he was right, for it was his gift to know such things. He had the magic of the born leader, the empathy for others' dreams and wishes, and the strength to stave off the corruption such power always brought.

It was that kind of thinking that daunted Graywolf, the kind of thoughts anyone had, but that came to Swift-Spear most surely in his hottest rages and his coldest passions. It was that faculty for planning that surpassed any of Graywolf's own capacity that made him doubt, deep in that secret well of opinions, whether he, Graywolf, was not indeed the lesser, born deficient in elf-blood and with too much wolf in him to be capable of such calculation. So he was doomed to be pack-second, deservedly—and perhaps ... in his blackest self-despair, he wondered whether other elves also had some mental attributes he lacked, secret things, like his own inner secretiveness, that let no thoughts out to betray what proceeded there. In that sense he was deaf and helpless, not knowing whether he was

greater or lesser than other elves; but knowing that he was helpless to think Swift-Spear's thoughts, or do other than run behind him, following, because they neither one could be free of the other.

The trail ran to forest edge. It ran onto the downslope, which led out under sunlight and into the valley where humans lived. And the humans in their foolishness and their bravado—or was it knowledge of the wolves?—did not take any pains to hide their trail through the grass, to seek the rocks or the hillsides to throw off pursuit.

Moonfinder was nearby, keeping to the undergrowth as long as he could. ***Come,*** Gray wolf said to him. And the wolf defied instinct and joined them in their course, which was not like the foolish humans—straight to the goal.

They were Wolfriders, stalkers and hunters. They did not trust an easy trail leading to an easy target. No, not that simple to trap such as they. Gray wolf was not surprised at all when Swift-Spear left the track and sought the rocky hillside, where there was vantage and where the prevailing wind brought them information.

The human camp lay spread across a small hill. It was full of straight lines and built-things that confused the two Wolfriders.

"There are so many," Gray wolf hissed between fanged teeth. Swift-Spear did not answer. Even in his pain and rage a clear voice still spoke to him.

Here are things you have never seen before. . . .

The humans all lived close together in their strange stone tents, as no other men ever had, all of them seeming in constant motion, going from one place to another. What did they do? Why did they build such homes? What did they know that he and the other elves did not?

Gray wolf's strong hand grabbed his shoulder and shook him from his wonder.

"Swift-Spear." The elf pointed down at the humans. "That—uh—those trees. They are dead, yet they stand upright. Even wolves could never jump that."

Swift-Spear stared at the high fence for a moment. *Why this? Ah. Of course. These men are smart, very smart. . .*

It is a barricade, he sent to Graywolf, ***to keep enemies out, to keep the world out!*** Behind them Moonfinder whined at the scent that came up from the village.

"So many. Which one killed Blackmane?" Graywolf's harsh voice hurt the chief's ears, hurt him with its reminder of why he was here, what he had come to do. Swift-Spear searched the details of the distant figures below them. Many of the elves claimed they could not tell one human from another, but Swift-Spear had taught himself on his lone spying missions to see the differences. He looked for the tall, bearded one. The black eyes and scarred body he had seen last through the dying eyes of his wolf-friend.

Swift-Spear's vision blurred and his breath stung him, coming in short gasps. He dug callused palms into his eyes. The memory was too fresh! Red blood, wolf-friend's blood, sound of flesh ripping, scents of fear, of death. Eyes going dim . . . pain, pain! Cold numbness as strong heart stops, lungs collapse . . .

Graywolf shuddered at his friend's thoughts. Swift-Spear was reliving Blackmane's death as if it happened now—again. *He* was the wolf, *he* was dying. . . . There was something wrong and Graywolf could not understand it. A moment ago his chief had forgotten his anguish, losing it in those bright, strange thoughts that Graywolf knew he could never understand. Lost in that *why?* that always tore the two of them apart.

Moonfinder, belly to the ground, bumped his head into Gray wolf's side, seeking comfort. The elf hugged his wolf-brother to him, biting the wolf's nose to calm him. The thoughts leaking from Swift-Spear affected them both, and Graywolf struggled to find his elf-blood and not to join the wolf in his animal whine of confusion.

"Silence," Swift-Spear said aloud. The two bowed their heads and stared back with yellow eyes. "That one." The chief pointed to one human striding through the village surrounded by other men. "He is their chief." The sun reflected off the man's spearhead. "He will give me Blackmane's ears. He will give me his spear. And"—the Wolfrider stood up—"I will *take* his life!"

"How?"

"Chief to chief, as it has always been. The challenge. One against one, but this time the loser dies!"

Gray wolf said nothing. It was right, even if the tribe was not here, Neither of them had any conception of warfare. This was their only choice. This was their path to vengeance.

Swift-Spear strode boldly down the hillside, leaving the other two to wait. The stink of the human camp was bitter. Why would they live with their own waste? Even the wolves would not soil their own dens. He could see now that outside the great barrier there were plants in straight rows growing at the same pace. Among them women worked, pulling up the bitter weeds, digging up more ground. Like Willowgreen's herb garden, but he knew enough about humans to know that they grew these not for healing, but for food. And now that he understood the barricade, he knew why. This way they would not have to leave, this way they would not have to follow the trails of the beasts. They could stay and build their things, could do things in their days that elves never had time or thought to do. Not even the high ones. . . .

Kerthan heard cries and reached the front gate as the women streamed through it, all pointing behind them and shouting inarticulately. He and five of the hunters went out to find what the uproar was all about.

Outside the walls he saw, walking across the fields, one of the forest demons. It was taller than most he had seen, and well-muscled. Its hair was light brown and dangled in two side braids. It wore some pelt about its loins and carried a stone-tipped spear. Twenty paces away from Kerthan it stopped.

"Chief," it said in the people's tongue. It shook its spear at him and pointed to the wolf's ears pinned to the

top of the outward-opening gate. "My!" It hit its chest. "My!" It pointed at him again. "Chief!" And shook its spear once more.

Kerthan felt the people crowding behind the gate, knew their fear of the demon. He watched the creature for a moment, trying to decipher its strange actions. He looked up at the wolf ears, the flies buzzing about them now, then looked back at the demon, staring at its sharp-pointed ears. "My," it said; it must mean "mine." *Those are his ears? No. His wolf.* Everyone knew that the demons paired unnaturally with the werewolves. So it was his wolf and he wanted the ears back.

And looking into those strange eyes at this range, Kerthan knew the demon came for more than the trophy. It came for him.

"Leave us, demon!" he cried aloud. "Leave us or die as your cursed monster died—by this!" He lifted up the magic spear he had found so many years before.

The demon's eyes narrowed at the sight of the weapon, its head lowered between hunched, broad shoulders. "Chief, chief!" it cried, making stabbing motions with its spear.

Then Kerthan knew. It meant to fight him, to take blood vengeance for the death of the werewolf. He looked it over. He had killed the wolf . . . but a demon! That was different, even with the magic spear.

"Kill it!" he yelled at the others behind him. "Kill it! It means to curse us with its black magic!"

The men turned to one another, some still spotted with the dead wolf's blood. Finally Creth, Kerthan's youngest cousin, took a hesitant step toward the demon. The creature ignored him, staring at Kerthan with hot eyes. Creth took another step, and, lifting his spear, threw it at the monster.

It was badly cast and Swift-Spear saw it coming and dodged easily aside. He cursed himself for not learning more of the human language, but he knew that their chief understood him, knew that the man knew why he had come here. Why did the human not fight?

Another man threw a club at him, nearly hitting him. Swift-Spear danced away. Why were the others attacking him? *What madness is this?*

"Chief! Chief!" he cried as more of the humans moved toward him. Their leader was yelling incomprehensible words at them as he stepped back into the line of the crowd. Now ten human hunters faced Swift-Spear and a thrown club hit him in the chest, knocking him down. As he fell, the humans stopped for a moment and a sigh went through their ranks. Then with a great cry they charged him.

Swift-Spear rolled to his feet and braced himself—earned his name again as he dodged amongst his enemy, every thrust of his stone weapon drawing blood. But he was unused to this kind of fighting, and the humans surrounded and outnumbered him. Even as he killed, he, like Blackmane before him, was being killed.

Graywolf could not understand the men's actions any better than his chief, but now, too late, he recalled the tales of the high ones, about their long-ago first meeting with the humans. He leapt on Moonfinder and the two raced toward the battle. ***I am coming, brother,*** he sent ahead.

But no answer came back.

"Ayoooooo!" Graywolf and Moonfinder cried together as they charged into the enemy. They flashed through the men, spear and fang taking a dreadful toll. Graywolf leaned down to grasp Swift-Spear, pulling him up and atop the wolf's shoulders as it sped on toward the waiting forest. Swift-Spear was covered with blood, hanging as a heavy weight in Graywolf's arms, his mind for once closed to his cousin as the pain of his wounds wiped clean any coherent thought.

Swift-Spear spoke in the human language over and over. "Chief. . . chief . . ."

The ride was a nightmare for Graywolf. He struggled with all his imagination, trying to decipher exactly what had happened. Had the humans misunderstood Swift-Spear's challenge? Or had they in their guile simply pretended ignorance in order to trap the elf and make sure of a kill?

He urged Moonfinder to greater speed, Swift-Spear's blood hot and wet across his chest.

He sent ahead to the tribe, but his thoughts were so chaotic all they could understand was that in some way their chief was hurt. Graywolf followed their thought-patterns deeper into the woods. His mind and heart were in turmoil, which was worse, the gaping wounds in his friend, a friend and cousin he now realized was more precious to him than any one or anything; or the lack of direction, the void of comprehension that now haunted him. He *needed* his curse/gift, needed to feel Swift-Spear's pain-thoughts, needed to hear his chief's inner voice—or how else was he supposed to understand anything? How was he supposed to feel, with Swift-Spear lying in his arms, bleeding, bleeding to death? And why did his own warm tears join the cooling blood of his friend?

They waited for him in a shadowy glade far from the old holt. The elves moved out of Moonfinder's way as he rushed through them and toward the center of the camp where a huge fire burned, where Willowgreen waited for her lover.

Graywolf slid off the wolf with his chief in his arms, and laid the bloodied form in a bower already prepared. And with tears in her eyes Willowgreen the healer started to tend the sorely wounded elf.

Two high ones approached: Talen and Rellah. Graywolf rose and gave them a look of undisguised loathing.

"Humans did this," Graywolf hissed. Aloud. He never mind-sent to the high ones.

"Yes. Humans." Rellah's voice was hard. "Your message was garbled, wolf-boy, but we were able to untangle it enough to understand." She towered over the Wolfrider, her golden hair reaching to the ground. "He was a fool to

go there. What do you expect from humans?" Her eyes were filled with scorn. "You wild ones will be the death of all the tribe. Have you learned nothing from our wisdom?"

"Enough, Rellah." Talen's male voice was sharp. "Leave the boy alone!"

Graywolf only snarled. He wished to stay by Swift-Spear's side, but Rellah's contempt, hurled with a high one's force, was too much for him to bear. He walked away from the crowd watching the healing, his mind trying desperately to shut out all the stray thoughts that battered him.

****He will die.****

****He never should have gone.****

****The humans will pay!****

****They are evil. . . .****

****What will happen to us?*****

****The high ones are right. That fool halfling will get us all killed one day.**** This last thought from Swift-Spear's sister Skyfire. Graywolf pushed his way through the crowd, Moonfinder padding behind. It was too much, too much. . . .

****Forgive me for leaving your side, my brother, but if I stay I will kill one of these tame dogs who have no time for your pain. And surely it would be your own sister my fangs would seek first!****

Swift-Spear struggled to wake up, his mind treading strange paths of nightmare that neither Talen nor Willowgreen could follow or understand. Even as the elf-woman's power knitted the terrible wounds together, she looked for something else, something not found in flesh alone. She searched for his name, his secret name, the one he held from all others.

****Concentrate on the healing, girl,**** Talen sent to her, breaking off her futile search. Even now, near death, Swift-Spear kept his true self from her.

Tears of exhaustion blinded her. She was so tired, she only wanted to sleep, to curl up somewhere in soft warmth, she had not strength enough—

Rellah bent and touched her shoulder, only that, and it was like a wash of wind and rain, cold and clear. Strength went through her and a mind went through her mind, sorted through the thoughts, discarded the doubts with a disregard of her weaknesses so thorough that she felt dismissed and insignificant.

But Swift-Spear himself did not accept the high one. It was Willowgreen he reached for with his mind, it was her he would not let go. His powerful spirit, trying to help her heal his battered body, moved within her magic, wild and passionate, like the rolling of thunder before a terrible storm. He was strong, the strongest of all the elves. She shuddered at an unbidden memory of those powerful arms about her. He would not die, but he would—as he seemed destined constantly to do—change; and with him, change all of them.

And he rejected the high one, a rejection so strong it was Talen who retreated; it was Rellah who gave back, frowning, and left Willowgreen clasping Swift-Spear's hand to herself with all her strength.

"It is done," Talen said to the crowd of waiting elves. Willowgreen could feel their relief, a warm current riding the sweet summer air; and Rellah's anger like a cold wind. And another: Skyfire pushed her way to the fore and Willowgreen, still wrapped in her healing magic, perceived her lover's sister as a thick cloud of dank and foul smoke.

"We must go! The humans will come after *us* now!" Skyfire brandished the spear she always carried even though she was not yet one of the hunters.

****Peace,**** Talen sent. Aloud, he continued: "The humans will not dare to come so deep into the forest, not for a while, anyway. And your chief must rest."

"When he is better, we must leave, go far away," Skyfire insisted.

"That is for the chief to decide." Willowgreen, still holding Swift-Spear's hand, looked up at the young elf, struggling with exhaustion and with anger. "He has lost his wolf-friend. What have you lost?"

"And what would you know of wolf-friends, healer?" Skyfire shot back.

"I know he loved Blackmane as he loved nothing else." Willowgreen rose to tower over the elf-woman. "And I know if it was you who had been hurt he would be more concerned with your pain than with any fear of the humans."

Skyfire said nothing to that. She just turned her back and walked away.

"She is hot for her womanhood." Talen touched Willowgreen with a pale, thin hand. "She is jealous of your stature in the tribe, that is all. She will come around."

"She is hot for the chieftainship," Willowgreen muttered. "She disagrees with everything Swift-Spear does. It is a pretext, an excuse."

"Perhaps this time," said Talen, "it would have been right to disagree. It was so foolish of him to think the humans would fight him fair."

Willowgreen said nothing as she stared at Skyfire's retreating back. She reached up and wiped the tears from her eyes. And from Rellah there was only cold comfort.

****Go,**** Talen's thought came, soothing and quiet. ****Go, my child. There is nothing more you can do here.****

Willowgreen looked down at the sleeping form of Swift-Spear, watching silently as Talen knelt down to take up a gourd of water, a handful of moss, to wash away the dried blood from the Wolfrider's chest. She knelt down too and took Swift-Spear's head in her lap.

"My place is here," she said, "with him." ****And I, I will protect him from anything that dares try to hurt him, human or elf. . .**

Graywolf slid down from Moonfinder's shoulders and kept a firm grip on the brindled fur—tugged at it slightly to focus the wolf's attention on the place below them in the twilight.

Now was the wolf-time. Moonfinder lowered his head and turned and nosed Graywolf's arm, quick, anxious gesture. ' And in the way of wolves another of the pack came ghosting through the brush, a loner who disdained the elves; No-name was all he answered to, and he was grudging and suspicious, living on the fringes and showing up unpredictably. Moonfinder bristled up when he came up onto the rocks and slunk into shadow, high-shouldered, flat-eared silhouette in the fading light above the human camp.

No-name was scarred with battles, more than a little crazy. He was a disease in the pack, one that Blackmane had not tolerated—but he would not leave them alone, refusing to leave the pack, refusing to accept the pack's allegiance to unwolves. No-name was a wilder thing, and more than once taunted Blackmane himself, knowing that the pack-leader, being elf-ensorcelled, would not execute him. Too much peace. Too much soft living, perhaps. Graywolf knew this one, read his attitude in that surly slink into the fading light as he caught the ghostly, wordless thoughts of a hostile wolfish mind. Joy that Blackmane was dead. Satisfaction. And Moonfinder, second-leader, supporting the dead pack-leader with a tenuous hold on the pack as yet unchallenged, felt a fear that no human ever put into him; he bristled, and bared teeth, and growled his uncertain displeasure, so that No-name slunk a little less and let his tongue loll.

He infected the air itself with unreason; and Graywolf licked at his own not-quite-elvish teeth, and the hairs lifted at his nape and his smooth hand knotted on Moonfinder's fur to prevent him from violence. **No.** Now was not the time for challenges, least of all challenge when his own chief lay wounded and diminished in his authority. They were alike, he and Moonfinder, two pack-seconds equally desperate in their attempt on a situation that had defeated their chiefs; and this came, this hateful killer, radiating satisfaction in the prospect of bloodshed. That was what brought the loner: a project to No-name's liking—No-name was eager to help, would take pack-second's orders; that was in the wolf-thoughts.

Moonfinder growled and snapped at No-name's closest approach; and the loner skittered aside and slunk back again, bristled all down his lank shoulders; but when Moonfinder started to go farther, Graywolf clamped his hand down on the wolf's muzzle, hard, dodged teeth and held him a second time till Moonfinder gave him the throat, a little twisting of his head to be free: *Peace*, that meant, *my leader*. But not too much humility; and not too much of standing still; that was against the wolf-nature. And the twilight was coming down in which wolves and a halfling elf saw very well indeed.

Come, Graywolf said, and slid down among the rocks, hardly more conspicuous in taking that line of half-lit shadow than the two wolves which skirted the rocks, one on a side. He did not ride, now. He would not tire his wolf-friend for a retreat which might well be in desperate haste. Now it was stealth he wanted; and he had as lief be without No-name, but no thrown rock would shake that shadow, Graywolf knew that from experience; not even Moonfinder's teeth might drive him farther than around the hill and a few moments back—he knew No-name's tactics. So he tolerated the loner himself, who trotted along the hillside like a trick of the eye for any human watching from that place below.

Beside him, Moonfinder glided—not easy at all to spot a wolf in deep dusk, in the scattered scrub and rock of the slope that led down to the stone camp. Less easy to spot an elf with a wolf's instincts and a mind that thought in past and future.

Wolf-boy, the high one had called him, and driven him away with a force of mind that he could not put a name to nor describe nor even remember. That was the way of high ones: subtleties so tissue-thin that one could never catch them on the wind or smell or taste them, or accuse them in words. They just *were*, and that was the trouble with them, they *were*, all in the past and the power that they never used, on enemies—

—only on their own kind, a force that had made the hair stand up at his nape; and the animal had risen up in him and shamed him and driven him from his friend and from the council.

Therefore he went to redeem himself—and Swift-Spear. It had been no fool's act to challenge the humans. It had only, given the humans too much credit. And wolf-blood and wolf-instinct hated that mewling retreat of the tribe, that, milling in confusion once the chief was down. Wolf-bloods understood it very well; and knew what to do about it—

But there were the high ones, whose power sapped the will; out of the tribe, and left only the confusion apt to their kind of guidance, which was chaos, and leaderless.

To which Skyfire and her little band ascribed—only Skyfire had her own motives, like No-name, the loner on the fringes. It was power for which Skyfire had her appetite, and if it took her brother, if it took the tribe, if it demanded ducking the head and mewling soft answers to the high ones when might disavow her brother in her favor—to all these things she was apt.

Gray wolf chose his own allies. He aimed to prove the humans vulnerable, as Swift-Spear had said. And most of all; he meant to do what wanted most doing, so that Swift-Spear would not have to do it—because he knew his cousin, that he could not rest or forget or delay for his healing. What had broken in him was too profound and too close to the spirit, and lying defeated and within the high ones' nebulous disapproval—no, Swift-Spear would not bear that. He would go against the humans again. And Swift-Spear, having less wolf and more of high blood in him, would dwell too much on immaterial things like pride and honor. Graywolf's intentions were simple and direct: do the deed and nip the flanks of the intruders and tell them they were fools to stay near the woods and greater fools to enter another's hunting range, greatest fools of all to make their tents under the sun, of stone that could not be moved.

Then a cold doubt came not to wolf-mind, but to the elf in Graywolf. *Could not be moved*. Wolf-fights were

skirmishes, ending in retreat for one, territory for the other; elves fought sharply and keenly, and retreated when it was time for retreat, carrying all they had, in this age when elves, like wolves, had no possession which could not be moved.

But this, Graywolf thought, frightened, halted for a heart-beat where the gardens began, before the tall wooden walls, over which the tops of stone huts showed; and human stink wafted on the wind, mingled with the smell of grease and smoke and water. *They cannot carry away the stone, can they? Or their food-gardens. They expect to win all their fights. They do not think of moving.*

Dim light and the whisper of trees. Swift-Spear blinked, unable to reconcile this with the dirt and the flash of weapons and the ring of human faces where he had, he thought, died. ****Blackmane,**** he sent hopefully, in the thought that if that were not true, then perhaps the other were not—it was that hard to give up his friend.

But when he moved in the next moment and felt the twinge of healing wounds, and when he turned his head and saw Willowgreen bending down to kneel with a cup in her hand, when he saw how wan and worn she was and felt the pain everywhere, then he knew that the time was after and not before the fight at the wooden wall; and that somehow he had lived—

Graywolf, he thought. He had not come alone to the human camp. He had only gone alone to the challenge.

"Graywolf is alive," Willowgreen said, having caught that fear spilling from his mind; and lifting his head into her lap she gave him the cup to drink and showed him in that quick way of a weary and powerful mind how Graywolf had come riding in with him, how she had healed him.

There were other impressions, quickly snatched away, but not quickly enough: the memory of Skyfire with her spear. The two high ones, Rellah and Talen, his own face through Willowgreen's eyes, bloody and pale and senseless as he lay in her lap, her hands pouring strength into him, the great fear— And anger then, indignation, as the high ones dealt with Graywolf, as Graywolf walked away, head bowed, shoulders tense with anger—

****I tried to tell them—**** she began.

****Tried. Tried.**** His heart ached. There was pain behind his eyes and in his throat. ****Tell him I want to see him.****

But the figure in Willowgreen's eyes only walked away into the woods, began to run, and he knew that direction, he knew the dread in Willowgreen's heart, though no one else would have seen and no one had noticed or turned his head: it was Graywolf's talent, such a silence—only he could not trick the eyes.

"He has gone back," Swift-Spear murmured, and sought to get his arm under him. He thrust himself up to sit, and flung off Willowgreen's protesting hand. "Ah!" The pain surprised him.

"Lie down, be still!" ****Do not think of going after him; he is no fool, he will not—****

Unfortunate word. *I ache; could she do no more? Do not think of going after him? Fool. Maybe she is right and I am that; but better a fool in courage than wise in cowardice.* But she had tried to hide her fear for him: that and her fierce protectiveness warmed his heart—nor could he forget the power in her healing. In her own way, he realized, she had strength like his; and she would never betray him.

He gained his feet. She stared at him in shock, thinking first that he was her chief and then that he was her lover and that she never mattered to him half what he mattered to her.

That she separated herself from the high ones and their tutelage, that she tried to be Wolfrider and was not—did he never understand, had he nothing better than resentments, was there for her nowhere to call hers? And because he was who and what he was, he did not see her turmoil—and even if he had seen, being who he was, he would not say the things she needed most to hear.

But Swift-Spear went on his two feet, grabbed up his spear where it leaned against the woven wood of the bower, and used it as he went, to keep his steps straight. The pain he smothered. She felt it keenly, and knew if she followed her heart and followed him he would rail on her and tell her she was no help at all.

The only service she could do him was silence, and she clenched her hands in her lap and kept that silence; she wove it all about him, with an effort that beaded her brow with sweat and left her trembling and unable to rise from where she sat.

By then he had vanished into the woods, no elf having seen him pass, and there was no more that she could do. She did not see the gentle smile he gave in answer to her gift.

The stench of smoke and human was very strong now on the wind, and Graywolf moved carefully, keeping his hand on Moonfinder's shoulders, his own black-tipped hair bristled up like a crest and his elvish ears atwilt. He wanted to sneeze. Surely so small a sound would not be heard in the evening noises of the camp. He smothered it, and Moonfinder jumped and ducked his head.

****Faugh, yes, Here.**** There was the blood-smell, wolf- blood and corruption amid the filth, there was death and a human smell thick as wolf-smell in a den, and every instinct warned Gray wolf that it was foolhardy as venturing a cave, out of which such smells came. The sky overhead was a lie; this open place was not safety but a trap; and the cruelty that made humans mutilate as well as kill, that made them fight in packs and respect a leader they had to defend from challenge— all these things advised Graywolf what he could look for if he made the least error.

But he wrapped his thoughts about himself very tightly, went into that silence in which he could move unfelt, and laid hands on the dead trees that made up the wall, that part of the wall that had moved and shut him out. He pushed at it and it did not move; he was wary, for it might be human magic which had made it stay, and he worked delicately, not to disturb anything which might alarm the magic-worker, if there were such.

He peered through the cracks, seeing stone tents and one fat human waddling along with a gourd in hand. He heard voices; he saw the stain of fire on walls; and of a sudden a drum began a slow pulse, a drum of a strange, high tenor. Even their music was strange; and alien voices rose in weird, harsh laughter that sent shivers down his back.

No, the wall would not give to any effort. But he was elf, and the dead trees, their branches roughly lopped, their trunks bound together with twists of fiber, left irregular crevices between, which were no difficult matter for elvish hands and feet. He laid a cautioning hand on Moonfinder, who sniffed at the binding ropes and insinuated his nose between the cracks.

Then he set his knife between his teeth and stepped up onto those ropes, his small, four-fingered hands finding a grip here, a crevice in which a clenched fist became an anchor while he pressed himself close to the wall and one foot sought through empty air—up, and up, and up, till he had an arm over the gate.

Over the sharpened logs, then, carefully, silently, arms taking the strain as he let the other leg over, his ribs between the two sharp points while he hung there and glanced down past his arm and the inside of his knee to see the place where the human monsters had fastened Blackmane's ears. Death stink was thick here. He sweated and drew air carefully past teeth clenched on the blade as he spidered his way over the wall one log at a time. His limbs were trembling now. Sweat was stinging his eyes.

Now, now, he had reached the place. He held with one hand and seized the blood-stiffened, stinking remnant of a friend, and pulled with all his strength. It came free; he stuffed it in his belt while his clenched fist, wedged tight in a crevice between logs, grew numb and his legs shook with the unnatural angle.

Then he swung his body flat against the wall and began to climb again.

"Hey!" a shout rang out, shocking him to greater effort. Tumult broke behind him, below him. He sought handhold after handhold, and a weapon hit the logs beside his face, another on the other side below his waist. He flung an arm over the top of the wall, between the sharpened logs, as a third and a fourth weapon hit about him and a fifth scored his side. That last was goad enough to launch him over, reckless of the scoring the points of the logs gave his leg and his ribs, or the height of the drop below him. ****Moonfinder!**** he cried out with his mind, and hung and dropped and hit the ground with a force greater than he had planned, which buckled his legs and sprawled him flat and stunned as his head hit the earth.

****Moonfinder!****

He was still moving. He was blind with the blow to his head. He had lost his knife in the shock when he landed; he could not tell which was the way to the wall and which the way of escape as he reeled to his feet and braced his legs, but the sounds of pursuit told him, a howling of many voices that were elflike enough to be terrible, not so deep as trolls, but something halfway— *Kill him*, they would say, *catch him*, *take his ears*—

He did not know what more they would do. He heard the thump of wood behind the wall as a heavy, wolfish body shouldered him—as Moonfinder's scent came about him and his vision cleared in spots and patches of twilight and chaos. He felt after the prize he had come for, that was in his belt, and in dazed habit he wondered where his knife had gotten to, scanning with his eyes even as he realized his balance was deserting him and the world had gone unclear and sounds echoing—he was falling, and the wall was opening, and he made one frantic snatch at Moonfinder's fur, deathgrip hard as the wolf lurched into a run in the mistaken trust his rider was with him. Gray wolf heard a wild growl and snarling and human shrieks—felt No-name's presence, and clung with all his strength to that one grip as Moonfinder dragged him on, scraping him along the ground and bruising him with rocks, then cutting him with the leaves of the row-plants as they took out through the garden.

His grip was sliding. He felt it go and sprawled in a tangle of limbs, got to his knees and staggered to his feet and tried to run, reeling from this to that as the din of human voices pursued him through the tall row-plants.

****Moonfinder!**** he cried. Shrieks broke out behind him; and wolfish snarling. ****Moonfinder!****

Moonfinder came back for him. He grasped the shoulder- fur and slung himself onto his belly on Moonfinder's back as a sharp yelp and a shout reported No-name's location. The row-plants crashed and tore as human shapes began to come through the wall of foliage and stalks, and he had no need to tell Moonfinder to run—the wolf gathered himself and hurtled down rows of leaves that cut like knives.

It was rout then. Until No-name, crafty in his crazed way, circled round to the flank, and darted within the stone camp and savaged the first humans he came to before hurled stones and weapons drove him elsewhere. But he came to a flock of sheep and took his escape right through the fold, crippling and killing as he went, so that some died under his fangs and some smothered as they attempted to climb each other's backs against the wooden wall.

No-name doubled and stretched in an all-out run then, a gray streak in the night through the open gate, past terrified humans, with missiles pelting after him. His tongue lolled as he ran. There was the taste of blood in his mind, and wolfish laughter at which Graywolf shivered, where pursuit had turned in confusion and he and Moonfinder, at forest limits, drew breath and waited for the crazy one.

But more than that was coming. There was hate. There was desperation and fear down in that valley; and if humans had retreated for the moment, if No-name passed small and scattered bands of humans that fell back in terror of him, it was because it was night and because it was the wolves' time.

"Fall back, fall back!" Kerthan cried, waving a torch. "Do not follow them now!" Of which Graywolf, hearing, understood not a word, but he understood the terrible thought that came to him, of humans in numbers invading the woods, of noise and hammerings and shouts, and fire leaping up in piles of brush. Thoughts not of burning the forest, but of scouring it and taming it to use. Of a terrible enmity between the stone-place and growing things.

He shivered, and seized on Moonfinder's fur with sweating hands. ****Come, come,**** he urged the wolf, and flung him- self onto Moonfinder's back as all the world spun crazily with a stink of blood and fire—but that was

No-name, trotting along by them, his coat singed and reeking of sheep and human blood and heat.

He had done something of which he could not see the end, that was what Graywolf knew. He felt after the scrap stiffened wolf-hide which still rode safe within his belt and felt a dim, dazed sense of things far beyond his control; of things for which his chief might blame him, and even kill him, and Swift-Spear would be right—he was too much wolf, and his thoughts did not run far until it was too late; then the elf in him could see the consequences, terrible, irremediable consequences; he wished that he had died there at the wooden wall—but that, too, Swift-Spear would have avenged, and nothing would be different.

And then Swift-Spear was there, staring down at the battered Wolfrider. Swift-Spear's too-pale flesh glowed in the night, his eyes burned a hard silver. Unconsciously Graywolf slid down and bowed his head, went to his knees and sent to his chief—sent him the passion and pain of his acts; and waited for payment. . . .

Swift-Spear made no answer, only held out his hand, and there Graywolf placed the grisly trophy of a wolf-friend. Swift-Spear felt the stiffness of the skin in his palm, but this time he fought off the memories, if not the emotions. Looking down at Graywolf and Moonfinder, he felt something change, something twist and turn till it broke. This was not his way. He was more than this, his people would be more than this—more than wolf, more than elf, more than man.

"Stand up," he said, his voice gentle. "Stand up, my brave elf." Reaching down, he grasped Graywolf's shoulders, gripping them hard. "None shall bow, no elf shall bow head to another, not even to a chief, not even to me."

With that he turned, knowing that Graywolf and Moonfinder would follow—even the renegade No-name; and knowing that Graywolf would not take it kindly if he should notice Graywolf's wounds; and knowing that things between them had changed. . . .

Graywolf followed, the pain of his hurts forgotten, the bizarre bloodlust of No-name thrust to the back of his mind, the same as he ignored Moonfinder's confusion. What was this, what were these new thoughts leaking from his chief's mind? He felt sure of Swift-Spear's care for him; and under that the boiling anger that Graywolf thought a match for any human evil. And there was this new thought—this blood thought, this word *war*.

They waited for him, the whole tribe, Wolfriders, high ones, and those trapped between. They stood in the clearing, watching. Even No-name could not resist Swift-Spear's call. As the chief walked into the midst of the gathering, Graywolf stood back: he, too, waited.

Swift-Spear measured them all with his newfound vision, his hard eyes. The eyes of a chief.

"You all know what has happened!" He spoke aloud. He would not send; he, too, knew the high ones' tricks, and this day his strength would not be blunted. "You know of Blackmane's death, of my challenge to the humans, and you know the humans' answer."

Rellah stood forward. "We know of this one's answer," she said, pointing at Graywolf. "Stupidity! Now the humans will come for us!"

"Yes, they will." Swift-Spear smiled. "They will come."

"We must flee!" Skyfire pushed her way to the front of the crowd. "We must flee this disaster you—you! —have put on us!"

Others nodded, but Swift-Spear blocked out all sendings. "We will not flee," he said; and the elves all looked at one another. Before anyone else could voice dissent, Swift-Spear moved to stand in front of Skyfire. He looked down at her hand, which clutched a hunting spear. *This I must take care of first*, he thought; and aloud: "Put the spear away, sister."

She went pale and took a step back.

"You have not earned it," he said. "You have no right. Put the spear away."

Skyfire turned to search out the faces of her followers, but they melted backward in the crowd; they were young, and Swift-Spear was chief.

"Or would you challenge me?" Swift-Spear put out his hand, watching her, watching her stance, her muscles. Would she dare? "Give me the spear, little one, your time will come." His voice was gentle, but his clenched teeth made his jaw muscles stand out in high relief.

And she handed the weapon to him as she must. This was not the time or place and he could defeat her easily, perhaps then banish her from the tribe.

He turned his back on her, the spear in his hand, and she moved away, her pride hot. This day she would not forget.

"What—?" Rellah began.

"Enough." Swift-Spear dared meet those blue eyes, dared for the first time to meet the high one's wrath, and he felt it heatless compared to the fire burning in him. "I will speak," he said; and the whole tribe watched as the high one stepped back, her face taut. But she said no words, sent no thoughts.

Graywolf understood all this. He smiled, squatting down to hug Moonfinder, who watched it all. He took it in, learning from this chief, this pack-leader who ruled them all.

"The humans will come, as they have always done." Swift-Spear hefted the spear, not thinking, not questioning the words that rose in him. He trusted them. He trusted his heart and mind to work as one, and to do and say the right thing. "But this time we will not run away. —Rockarm—" He looked suddenly at an older, scarred Wolfrider. "What would you do—if humans caught your pretty Sunflame?"

The elf looked down at his daughter, his mouth hard. "I would go and get her back." Rockarm's dark eyes glittered in the starlight.

"And—" Swift-Spear moved within inches of Rockarm, feeling the elder elf's hot breath on his skin. "—What would you do if, as you were about to free her, the humans thrust her through"—he jabbed with Skyfire's weapon—"with a spear, and killed her?"

Rockarm looked about him, unsure. But his chief's eyes demanded truth.

"I would kill them," Rockarm said, his voice harsh.

"If they catch her, if we run now and they do catch her, they will kill her, Rockarm, as they will kill us all." Swift-Spear turned away, paced the circle, catching each elf's eyes. "It has ever been the way of humans." He spun about suddenly. "Is that not right, Talen?"

The others moved away from the high one as Talen tried to answer the chief. "Well, they have, I—"

"They have killed, Talen. Did they not kill our people when first we came to this world?"

"Yes, they did, we all know that, I mean ..." Talen could not grasp Swift-Spear's mind, could not find his thoughts. The chief was closed to his probing: his mind, if not his emotions, was closed about in metal.

"And have they not killed us ever since; have they not always killed?"

Talen just nodded. Swift-Spear felt the power, the aching power of his words.

"I will tell you something," Swift-Spear spoke quietly, once again pacing the circuit of the crowd. "I thought that we could learn from the men. We had become too much wolf." No one reacted to this. "I thought—*this is their world, they were here first, they will know how to live, how to build the right way.*" He stopped and planted the spear in front of him. "Since Timmorn's day, we have learned from our wolf-brothers. They have taught us to survive. But I want more than that, much more!" He pointed at the stars. "We came from there, did we not, Rellah?"

She just shook her head once, slowly, her mind confused and lost. She could not see his path.

"Did any of you—" Swift-Spear gritted his teeth. "Did any of you ever think of going back?"

"Of course. But it's impossible. We don't know the way. The sky-mountain is lost, destroyed," Rellah answered him absently, her mind still trying to decipher the puzzle that was Swift-Spear.

"Destroyed." Swift-Spear shook his head. "What do the humans do if one of their stone tents is destroyed?" He did not wait for an answer. "They rebuild!"

"Swift-Spear," Talen interrupted him. "We cannot rebuild the sky-mountain, boy, it was not something that was built as the humans build with stone."

"Now!" the chief shouted at him, "now, no, we can't rebuild, but we *could*, if we quit running, if we built instead of hiding."

"That is not the way!" Skyfire could keep quiet no longer. "We hunt, we dance, we love, each day we move, like—"

"—like *wolves*," Gray wolf added. His yellow eyes gleamed in the moonlight. *O Swift-Spear, my cousin, oh, you dream such dreams.*

"We are not wolves, we are not men, and—" Swift-Spear withdrew the spear from the earth, gazing at it, rolling the head in his hands. "We are not elves, not, at least, what elves once were. We are more—or less—depending on what choice we make."

"What sort of choice?" someone shouted out.

"Not to run. To build—if we wish. Perhaps we will not build with stones and clay as men do, but perhaps with mind and magic as once the elves did." He looked up. "I, we, we have learned nothing. We have learned to fight, we have learned that we *must* fight, for food, or warmth—fight other animals, fight the weather, fight the land itself. And now we must finally learn how to fight men!" He crouched over, ignoring his newly-healed wounds, bunching his muscles to feel the thrill of their strength. He walked in a circle, stalking like a hunter.

"I will fight," he chanted in a monotone. "I will fight the men as they choose to fight, not chief to chief, but tribe to tribe. I will wait for them when they come to the forest. I will wait with wolf cunning and wolf strength, and I will trap them with elf mind and elf magic. I will kill them, drive them from the forest. I will burn their stone tents as they would bum our woods!" He stood up and turned to Gray wolf, smiling at his cousin. "I will get a new spear, a man-hunting spear." With that, he cast Skyfire's weapon into the night air. It flew straight and true, seeming to pierce the stars themselves. "Then, one day, I will follow that spear!" He stood, waiting.

"I will fight with you, my chief." Graywolf strode out, and he, too, turned to stare at the high ones.

"And I," said Rockarm.

"And I, and I . . ." other voices added.

Swift-Spear smiled. It was change, hard change, but life was hard.

He turned to the eager faces. "We must plan," he said, and walked away.

The high ones stood together, undecided, unsure what this meant, or what to do about it. Skyfire watched as one by one her followers walked after Swift-Spear. She turned on her heel. This was not right, this was not the way.

And Willowgreen watched them all, with stinging, silent tears falling on the ground at her feet.

The men came. They moved into the woods as silently as they knew how, their eyes wary and their weapons sharp.

The forest waited for them, cool in the shadows, a breeze making the limbs sway, arms waving them on, deeper, deeper into its waiting grasp, and into the hands of its children.

The men were hunters now, but they could not match the Wolfriders, who had not only intelligence and cunning, but animal senses. And so, unwillingly, their chief led them, along the false trail the elves had laid to show the men their path to death.

Kerthan grasped his spear tighter. It was darker here amongst the trees than he had thought it would be. The forest had long been man's enemy, and he knew that somewhere in it the demons waited. But the fight at the village had proved that, fierce and savage though the devils were, they could be killed; and though he remembered well the strength of the demon chiefs arms, he was sure that his own men, so much larger than the demons, were more than a match for their enemy. Besides, it was daytime. *Man's time.*

He waved two young hunters to the front. The trail was well hidden, but his men could follow it. The demons were overconfident, trusting in the forest to protect them. *Huh*, he thought, *we will find their camp, we will burn them out, we will slay every one of them, and their werewolves! Then the forest will be ours!*

He looked over at the shaman. The old man was walking quietly as any of the hunters, his thin lips moving silently, his withered hands clutching the human-skin drums with whitening knuckles.

I must keep my eyes on that one, Kerthan thought. Ever and again the old man had quarreled with Kerthan's plans, but the clan's need for vengeance burned hotter than any senile warnings. The demons had left two families sonless, and one fatherless. Vengeance and blood-call lent strength to men's arms, Kerthan knew that—lent a strength that would overwhelm any of the demons' black magic.

He grinned, showing white teeth. His mind was full of plans and satisfaction as he led his men down the path prepared for them.

A bird call trilled above the humans' heads, and Swift-Spear smiled to hear that sound. The humans were walking right into his trap, open-eyed and smug in their arrogance. He shifted in the mud in which he knelt. It had taken all Nightdancer's power to call enough moisture from the air, mixed with what water the others could bring, to turn this spot into a mudhole. That, combined with the fact that here the trees grew so close together that the men would be separated one from the other, made this a perfect battleground—for the heavy men would find this muddy footing much more treacherous than would his nimble Wolfriders. It would have been easier, much easier, if the high ones had lent their magic to the fighting, but maybe it was better this way. Now everyone in the tribe would have to admit that it was he and the Wolfriders who had done what no others had done before: fight the humans, and win.

Two young humans broke through the foliage in front of Swift-Spear, but he let them go. He wanted no alarm to warn the enemy. Besides, they would be taken care of, another stone's-throw down the trail. He waited, breathing slowly and evenly. He could feel the presence of his elves and wolves all about him, their thoughts and emotions tightly leashed, waiting to explode and drive through the humans as the human weapons had driven through Blackmane's sleek hide.

He bit his lip at that thought and that name. Blackmane, who should be here by him, his soft fur and warm breath present to comfort him, here to wait with him as he had waited so many times before.

Swift-Spear shook off those memories. Now was not the time. He needed no thoughts of his dead wolf-friend to kindle his anger, or his hate.

Kerthan slipped in a patch of mud, swearing under his breath. He looked about him. His men had had to separate from one another to pass here. This was no good. If the demons attacked them now . . .

"Hoy!" he shouted. "We must—"

But a cry cut through his words. To his left a man stared unseeing, unmoving, then dropped his weapons and covered his eyes with a piercing shriek of agony. Kerthan added his cry as the afflicted man fell to his knees and tried to tear out his own eyes, to blind himself to whatever vision assailed him.

"To me, to me!" Kerthan yelled as behind him the shaman's drums began a mad beating. A wolf's howl shook the air about the chief, and in seconds all the men within his sight were fighting for their lives as wolf and demon appeared from nowhere to attack.

"Kill them!" Swift-Spear cried. He burst from his cover looking for an enemy to slay. A man fell to the ground in front of him, wrapped in a net his elves had cast from the trees. Swift-Spear drove his spear deep into the helpless man's chest. "Ayooh, brothers!" he howled in bloodlust. *And today*, he finished in his mind, *we have vengeance for the first meeting of man and elf.*

Gray wolf plunged into the battle, Moonfinder at his side, both of them eager to find their prey. The first man they came to was smashing through the brush with his club, his mouth open in an unvoiced cry. Graywolf's spear went through the human's neck, the blood geysering to cover the elf and his wolf-friend.

Graywolf twisted the spear once, watching as the man collapsed, probably completely unaware of his own death. Almost, the young Wolfrider felt pity. He kicked the corpse as he turned to find new prey. "Ayooh!" he cried. *Almost*, he thought.

The humans were caught in a deathtrap, and they all knew it. Though the elfin magic was small and could delude only a handful of men at one time, one by one those enspelled were butchered by the Wolfriders. The humans had nothing to offset the magic, and on the slippery and boggy ground they were proving no match for the elves and their wolves.

Kerthan smashed his fist into an elf's face. Quickly he shifted his spear to a two-handed grip and skewered the bleeding demon. But there was no exhilaration in this kill. He could see only a handful of his men still standing, and the shaman's magic was doing no good. Had the gods deserted him? Were they punishing him for his pride? He bit through his lip. There was no chance. Even the bark of the trees was wet. The cleansing flame he had depended on would do him no good.

"Back," he cried. "Back to the village!"

But if any of his men heard him above the battle, they were too busy fighting to heed him.

Suddenly the drums stopped and Kerthan turned to see a wolf ripping open the shaman's throat. His men began to break, and those who could threw down their weapons and ran for their lives; but behind each raced a wolf or an elf in hot pursuit. Kerthan started to run, but the wolf who had killed the shaman leapt up to block his way. The chief held his spear tightly, trying to meet the crazed eyes of this monster.

****No-name,**** Swift-Spear sent, ****this one is mine!****

The wolf stared up at the elf who was covered in man's blood. For a moment he thought of disobeying, but there was something in this elf, something which burned behind those strange eyes. And for the first time in his life, the mad wolf bowed to another's will, presenting a bared throat. He went to his belly and waited, his limited mind struggling with what this new submissiveness betokened, and where it came from.

Swift-Spear ignored the sound and the smell of the fight around him. No humans would leave this grove alive, especially not this human! He glared up at his tall enemy and raised his stone-tipped spear.

"Chief," he hissed at the human. The human nodded understanding. This time he would not run, for they both knew that there was nowhere for him to go.

Kerthan noted the bruises on his enemy's body, but he knew it would be no advantage to him this day. He had seen the terrible damage his people had done to this demon, and he knew by all rights it should be dead and not fighting. Kerthan's eyes strayed to the point of his metal spear and he felt strength and hope in that sight. Here was the magic spear, the first weapon ever to kill a werewolf! Its magic would be powerful enough to kill this demon that refused to die! And with this monster's death, the other demons would flee from his wrath! He, Kerthan, Chief of the People, would prove once and for all that this was man's world; and men would do as they pleased, with no one to say them nay.

The bright spear darted out, and barely in time the elf dodged its deadly edge. He countered with a vicious slash that forced the man to jump back. The human skidded. Quickly Swift-Spear was on him, and the two antagonists crashed into each other with a roar of outrage.

Kerthan fell to his back, the shock of the fall knocking the air from his lungs. He kneed at the demon, but the monster caught the blow on his thigh and retaliated with an elbow slammed to the ribs.

Kerthan grunted, shifting his weight to throw his enemy off, but the demon hung on. The two rolled in the mud, howling their mutual hatred to the indifferent sky.

The man bit Swift-Spear's hand, and the pain made the elf let go of his own spear. Quickly the elf chief grasped the terrible weapon with both his hands, and the two wrestled for it with all their great strength.

But for all the man's power, the elf chief knew that this day, this fate was in his hands; and though the human was strong—was not Swift-Spear the strongest of all the tribe? And this was the day he would prove strongest of all, both men and elves. ...

With a sharp twist he ripped the metal spear from his enemy's grasp and sprang back. As the man tried to rise, Swift-Spear cracked the butt of the weapon under Kerthan's chin. Quick as thought, the elf chief reversed the spear and thrust it through his enemy's heart.

Swift-Spear retreated then from the corpse that lay pinned in the mud by the spear. The man's blood was hot on his skin. That was it? It was over so soon? The man had been a good fighter: Swift-Spear knew few others of the human tribe would have had a chance against him in fair fight, but still ... so quick? So easy to kill your nightmares? One thrust and the fear that haunted the elfin-kind for so long is ended? He sighed as he withdrew the spear. *Not so quick, really*, he thought. *Not so easy*.

There would be the tribe's own dead and wounded. And though he had avenged Blackmane, it didn't really seem to matter all that much.

The elves came to the village at midday, Swift-Spear leading them, the mad No-name pacing quietly by his side. The humans closed the gates against them, but they knew it would do no good. Kerthan had taken all the hunters with him. There were only old men and boys to defend the village now. The elves stood outside the front gate, and the humans looked over the barrier, staring in* fear at their demonic conquerors.

Then a tall one, tall as a man, walked out from the fierce band.

"Humans of this village," Talen said—for he alone of the elves knew the human tongue. "Your men are dead."

A few sobs answered this, but none were really shocked. After all, many of them had expected this outcome. The bravest just wanted to die with some dignity.

"Our chief"—Talen waved a hand at Swift-Spear—"has decreed that your village is an evil place, and it must be destroyed." Now crying could be heard from inside the walls. "However," Talen continued, "you will be allowed to leave in peace."

The people within the walls stood shocked, a few whispering among themselves. Could this be? Was this a trap? They moved closer to the wall to hear the tall demon's words.

"On one condition," Talen concluded.

So here it comes. Many of the villagers nodded their heads in perverse satisfaction.

"He does not know if you have honor, but some things must be sacred to you. He says if you will pledge by these things never to come here again, and to make no more war upon his people, you may go free, with whatever you can carry. Or," Talen added in a harsh voice, "you can die. I suggest you waste no time making your decision."

The humans marched off into the west in a long line, shocking the elves with how many things they wished to take with them. One old male talked quietly with Talen and Swift-Spear beside the front gate as the people of the village filed past, sneaking last looks at their lost homes.

The man bowed once to Talen, then to Swift-Spear. His mouth was tight and his eyes were hard.

"We will keep our pledge. The tribe will never come to these lands again." He drew himself to his full height. "I am glad you have explained this to me. I am glad you have given us our lives. But do not expect me to love you for it." Talen translated this for Swift-Spear, who responded quietly in the faintly musical language of the elves.

"My chief says," Talen answered the human, "we do not want your love, nor do we want your hate. What is important to you is not important to us. You have painted your destiny in blood, and you have paid the price. Remember that always. Go in peace."

The man bowed, but he heard the words that Talen murmured under his breath:

"I would that we could have been friends."

The old human just nodded his shaggy head once and followed his people into exile.

The night was lit by the burning village. Wavering fires made Swift-Spear's shadow dance at his feet as he stood to face the tribe.

"We have done as we had to do. We fought and won, not for love of fighting, but for justice. No longer will we hide from any threat, but we will face it boldly, and in this world to which we have always been strangers, we shall make a true home, and a new life." He raised his left hand which held his stone-tipped spear. "I shall carry this spear in the hunt, I shall carry it to remember what *has* been." He held out his right hand, which grasped the metal spear of Kerthan. "And I shall carry this spear, to remind me of what *can* be, what *will* be if we have the courage to find it!"

He stood tall and bold, the homes of his enemy burning behind him. He felt the warmth of the flames playing across the muscles of his back. *Alive! I am alive!*

And he knew his people rejoiced with him.

"No longer shall I be called Swift-Spear." He shook his weapons at the tribe. "But Two-Spear!"

"Two-Spear!" they shouted back, and even the high ones joined that cry.

"Two-Spear." He met their eyes and gloried in what he saw there. "I shall weld the old and the new ways together, and I shall lead you down a path that no elves before us have dared to dream of!"

And with that he cast both spears into the air, one and the other, as if he really believed that they could pierce the stars.

End