

# Bloodline

Book One: Alliance

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*For Naomi, my first and truest fan.*



# In the Beginning

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

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

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

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

Peace reigned.

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

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

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

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

The Lightlands grieved heavily for their lost Apparye. In the absence of a ruling authority, the races split and bickered. The Lorshan shrank back into obscurity. But the Sheranai of the Elvenkind watched, waited, and hoped for salvation, as they had foreseen in a distant future, a dark time unlike any that had gone before.

# Part One

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

# 1

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*A*re they worth it, Master?

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

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

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

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

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

Wolf let out a low rumble.

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

*Shall we go, Master?* Wolf asked.

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

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

*Imperials in disguise?*

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

*What about the man?*

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

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

*Maybe they're hired help, Wolf.*

*You could be right.*

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

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

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

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

*At once, Master.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Is there anyone after them?*

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

*I am tired of scraps, Master.*

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

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

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

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

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

*Yes.*

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

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

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

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

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

"Show yourself coward," the man roared.

The woman whisked out her weapon. "Thieves?"

"Probably." The man scowled heavily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know."

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

*Talk to them, Master. Keep pleading.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Wolf?*

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

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

*Yes, Master, I will avenge him.*

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

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

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

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

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

She heard Wolf whine. He sensed her pain.

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

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

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

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

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

Shenna winced, stiffened herself against dizziness but nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kendra entered with a bundle of provisions from the innkeeper.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She will live.” Kendra nodded to Darrus.

“For now,” Darrus said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's happening, Darrus – look."

"Is it early?"

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

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

"I know."

"How much longer?" the man asked.

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

"Then you should go."

Awkward silence descended.

"Where will we meet?" the man asked.

"Get me the map."

Scuffling preceded the distinct sound of crackling parchment.

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

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

“Then meet me there.”

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

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

“But I swore to –”

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

“Then go now while it’s dark.”

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

Silence again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man watched her go, his huge muscular frame frozen

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

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