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Uschi Zietsch

The  
WOODZEE  
CHRONICLES

A golden shield with intricate designs and a red sword resting on it, set against a brown background with decorative scrollwork.

Book 1

DEMON BLOOD

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**Uschi Zietsch**

# **The Woodzee Chronicles Trilogy**

**BOOK 1**

## **Demon Blood**

"A great fantasy adventure that is impossible to resist after the first few pages." *Lies-und-lausch*

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## About the author

**Uschi Zietsch** was born in Munich in 1961. She is married and has lived for years as a writer and publisher with her husband and many animals on a small farm.

Her first publication, a fantasy novel, was published in 1986. This was followed by well over twohundred publications in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, children's books, TV series and many more.

# **Imprint**

Cover: Crossvalley Smith  
© of the eBook edition 2012-2015, English Issue 2021 by  
Fabyon Verlag  
© Uschi Zietsch 2006  
ISBN: 978-3-946773-37-5

**FIRST PART**  
**Inniu**

# Chapter 1

## Blood Trail

Rowarn was asleep and did not know yet.

The morning drew up innocently and purely, cautiously the first sunbeam groped over the horizon and announced a radiant day. The stars faded in the dawning light, and a soft pink streak spread along the edge of the world. Soft peeps came from the bushes as the fledglings awoke. Their parents fluffed their feathers and shook themselves before preening extensively and preparing for the arduous search for food. The last night hunter crept wearily into the forest without turning around again. Early morning mist glided over the pale green meadows, and dewy blossoms opened to reveal their sweet-smelling insides to the sun.

Rowarn turned over in the grass, smiling blissfully. *Anini ...*, he sighed in the dream that seemed so real. A dream that had begun yesterday at dawn with the spring celebration.

The praise of the growing grain had been full of exuberance and glee. Rowarn had stayed on the outskirts of the feast all the while, so close and yet distant, keeping



silent and almost making himself invisible. There was only one reason for him to be here, and always he had only looked at her: *Anini, fairest of the city*, she was called, and so Rowarn also whispered her name secretly to himself, tasting each syllable like a sweet drop of honey. While the others ate and drank, while delicious scents caressed his nose, Rowarn felt no desire for succulent roast meat seasoned with the first herbs of spring, for steaming bread from the wood-burning oven and heavy honey beer. Anini was food enough for him, which satiated his eyes, and the stomach had to be silent.

That evening she shone brighter than the moon, with copper-red hair wreathed in flowers and eyes like cornflowers, and red lips either laughing merrily or kissing softly - perhaps a young suitor, now and then a red-cheeked child. Anini could be choosy about whom she danced with, but she chose many during the long evening, under the glow of oil lamps and candles in colorful jars that gave off a magical light.

As darkness fell, the mood visibly changed to drunken merriment, many faces shone, the tips of noses turned red from beer and wine. The new spring had to be celebrated extensively so that there would be a good harvest. And the omens were good: the weather was clear, the air mild and full of the scent of flowers.

As midnight approached, the musicians exhaustedly moved on to slower tunes, and the circle thinned, Anini unexpectedly approached Rowarn, who had not left his place on the bench at the edge of the glow all evening. He could hardly believe that she actually wanted to join him.

Pleased, but also uncertain, he looked toward her. (Was this still a dream? Or already a memory? Or ... reality?)

She stopped in front of him, hands clasped at her sides. "Now, Rowarn," she began in a stern voice. "What are you doing sitting here for hours, staring at me continually? Do I displease you so much?"

He made a startled face and shook his head in dismay. "On the contrary, I, um, think you're w-wonderful," he brought out awkwardly.

"Like this?" Her eyes flashed. "Then why haven't you ever asked me to dance? All evening I've been waiting for this!"

He blinked in surprise. "I would never have dared ..." Yet he loved to dance, he could move very smoothly and expressively in tune with the music, as if it was innate in him.

Then she laughed. "Rowarn, you are a dolt. Were you so afraid I would reject you that you wouldn't even try? You have a lot to learn! You should spend more time in human company, where you belong, and not just with your hooved Muhmes. After all, they raised you like one of their own instead of a human."

"I'm - I'm sorry," he stammered. "I didn't know if I was welcome after all the terrible things that have happened lately ..."

"Sh-sh." Anini put a finger to his mouth. "Let the others talk, they're just jealous. And they're afraid of what they don't know. But I know you have a good heart. I can see it in your eyes." She held out her hand to him. "Then come, let's not miss any more of this wonderful night."

He took her hand and stood up. "But ... where?" he murmured distraught, and she laughed cooing.

"Don't tell me you've never been out alone at night with a girl?"

"Oh ..." He realized, a little late, but still. No, it was not the first time. There had been Rubin, the charcoal burner's daughter. And ... Malani, the fisherman's daughter. That was not unusual; he had grown up with them, so to speak, for their parents, like Rowarn's Muhmes, lived on lonely farms away from Madin. One day, when they discovered they were no longer children, they had exchanged innocent and shy kisses, and perhaps a little more as they grew older and added.

Rowarn, however, would never have dared to hope that a city girl, Anini at that, would ever be interested in him. Cautiously, he looked around, but no one paid any attention to them. Anini's father had dropped his heavy head on the tabletop and was snoring so terribly that the trees were shivering and curling their leaves. At the beginning of the feast, one or another of the councilors had gazed at Rowarn with narrowed eyes as he had inconspicuously ventured to the edge. But when he had just sat quietly on the bench the whole time, they had eventually forgotten about him.

The two young people left the feast and stepped out, hand in hand, into the nighttime countryside, illuminated by the moon. Off the beaten path, Anini walked over the hills, Rowarn always in tow. Barefoot, she floated across the damp, young grass, elated and giggling softly. Finally, already close to the forest, the girl stopped and grabbed Rowarn by both hands. For a long moment Anini looked at

him silently, out of shining eyes. "If only you could see yourself ..." she whispered almost devoutly.

Rubin and Malani had also said that to him, independently of each other and on nights like this. And from then on, they had preferred to meet him outside during the full moon.

Rowarn's eyes, clear blue like an old, very pure glacier in the sun, shone dully in the darkness like a distant star. His hair was blond as an ear of corn in the snow, and so fair that he could not sneak up on anyone unseen in the night. And his skin, as smooth and pale as marble, shimmered in the moonlight like mother-of-pearl ...

"You're exaggerating," Rowarn interrupted sheepishly.

"Not a bit," Anini objected, purring. "That's exactly why I'm here with you." She dropped to the grass, pulling Rowarn with her. And then she kissed him ...

Still caught up in the dream, Rowarn turned again and groped beside him where he felt warmth, the closeness of his beloved ...

No. This was no longer a dream filled with blissful delights.

*Cold* it was, icy rigidity he felt creeping up his fingers, spreading furiously through his body, waking Rowarn.

With a strangled sound he pulled himself up, while the last dream image in him dissipated. Still drunk with sleep, he looked at his hands, which were full of blood, and his clothes, and then he knew.

*Do not scream. Don't scream!* Rowarn bit his knuckles to push back what wanted to come out of him, this abysmal

horror, collected in a single word, because there was none else for what he saw.

*No ...*

Anini was dead. Her once sparkling eyes stared milk-blue into the brightening sky. The bodice was in tatters, her chest ripped open, her ribs cracked, her heart stolen. And blood everywhere ...

This was what Rowarn saw, what he understood but could not ... explain.

Rowarn's eyes burned, the pounding heartbeat nearly bursting his chest. A suppressed whimper escaped from his tight throat. Then he jumped up and ran sobbing across the meadow into the forest.

Rowarn loved the forest ever since he could walk. The play of light and shadow, the dignity of the old trees, the scurrying, chirping and buzzing life, secret and rarely seen. The air here was cooler and rich with scents, of moss and damp stone, earth and mushrooms, honey and flowers. Whenever he had sorrow, he went to the forest and was comforted. He knew the paths of many forest animals, and they appreciated that he behaved like one of them - quiet and unobtrusive.

But not today, on this day of blood. Like a thoughtless city dweller, he tramped and stomped along the cart path without looking left or right. Finally, he blindly struck the bushes, scaring up all sorts of creatures that had to give way, clamoring and snarling. He disturbed the wedding song of the birds, tripped over roots under which ants and

beetles lived, and made such a racket that the whole forest was in an uproar and the jays shrilly whistled an alarm.

*Blood! Blood!* Rowarn heard them shouting, and they chased him down the path, crisscrossing the forest. *What happened?*

"I don't know!" he sobbed in a hoarse voice. "I was asleep ..."

*And the blood? And the blood? Arms, clothes, face and hair ...*

Rowarn pressed his hands to his ears. "No! No! No! O gods, stand by me! It wasn't me ... Anini, Anini ... what happened to you ..."

Finally, he could go no further. Rowarn stopped, his eyes blinded by tears, his breath whistling. His body was covered with sweat, and there was blood all over him, mixed with churned-up earth: just like that, he remembered distraught, Hegen the murderer had once looked when he came running out of the forest, sick in spirit, stammering confusedly, telling what he had done to his wife.

Rowarn, for all his disgust, had felt pity at the time for the man who could not give the reason for his crime and died broken a little later, before the councilors could sit in judgment on him.

And now he looked the same himself, unable to explain what had happened, desperately hoping that he was innocent. But who would, who *could* believe him? What should he do? Where should he go?

In any case, he could not go home. Even from afar, his parents would smell it: the vile stench of blood and guilt, of cowardice and escape.

He had done everything wrong. He should have returned to town right away to tell Anini's father that his daughter lay dead in the meadow, cruelly murdered. Then she would have been taken, anointed and laid out with dignity, and she would not be lying lonely out there in the wet grass on this sunny morning.

"They wouldn't have believed I was innocent ...," Rowarn defended to himself. "They would have caught me, tied me up and probably beaten to death or hanged me even before my parents found out about it ..."

The best thing for him to do was to make a run for it, right now and forever. Of course, his Muhmes would be full of grief and perhaps doubt him. But at least he could no longer harm them or bring them into disrepute or even danger. Someday all this would be forgotten and they could go on living as before.

Rowarn flinched as he tried to change direction and suddenly looked into a pair of big brown eyes. It was a young Elenki, a slender buck still, shy and timid. He was just beginning to form the first, delicate antler buds, the bright spots in his juvenile coat barely visible.

Rowarn swallowed. "You'd better go, so you'll never know the horrors I've already experienced," he whispered.

The buck tilted his head slightly without taking his eyes off the young man. His big ears, covered with fluffy fur, went back and forth.

"What are you doing here?" asked Rowarn desperately. "Didn't you hear that the jays have already found me guilty?"

The small Elenki just reached Rowarn's waist. He could not look over the shoulder of a full-grown deer. The young animal tried in vain to pull up its right hind leg. It had become tangled in the brush and was unable to free itself under its own power.

"Why are you so clumsy?" groaned Rowarn. "Haven't you been paying attention to what your parents taught you? There, catch my scent, I reek of violence and death! Understand what puts you in danger, what you must always avoid! If you ever want to grow up, you can't make a mistake!"

The Elenki stretched his neck and nudged Rowarn lightly. The twitching brown nose was moist, the eyes large and gentle. This young creature believed in his innocence. It trusted Rowarn to help it.

He took a step toward the buck, bent down, and carefully touched its creeper-bound barrel. "Hold still a minute," he whispered. "You've done a really neat job there ... Easy prey for any predator or the hunter ..."

The young deer paused while Rowarn struggled to free the barrel from the tangle. Finally, it pulled the dainty split hoof up with a jerk and was free.

Rowarn winced as he heard a deep roar at that moment, and then the mighty, antler-bearing head of a full-grown Elenki pushed through the brush. Its sweeping shovels with dagger-like tips measured more than twice man's length. Beside him appeared the slender figure of a hind, leading a calf only a few days old at her side.

The young man froze. Elenki, especially the deer, were among the most dangerous creatures of the forest. They



were aggressive, fast and deadly. Only an experienced, very hungry panther would ever dare to approach a capital bull.

The young buck emitted a high-pitched mewling sound, then jumped to his parents. Without paying any further attention to Rowarn, the family disappeared into the bushes.

Rowarn expelled the breath he had been holding and wiped his face, smearing sweat, blood and dirt. This distraction had brought him to his senses, and he was grateful for it. Running away was not the answer. He had to find out what had happened and prove to his parents as well as the townspeople that he was not a murderer. "Yeah, I should go home," he muttered. "Before that ... I have to at least clean myself up ..."

A voice inside him kept urging him to run the other way instead, as fast and as far as he could, until no one could catch up with him and he could start a new life elsewhere. But Rowarn still saw the young Elenki's brown eyes before him, which seemed to speak courage to him, warning him not to do anything foolish, final. *Family never let you down.*

If anyone was sympathetic to him, it was Rowarn's foster parents. They would do anything for him, even though - or precisely because - he was not their biological son. They would know what to do.

Surely they had long been worried because he was not yet home. Perhaps they had already learned of Anini's death ...

Rowarn jumped up and made his way to the lake, which was not far from his home. There he could clean himself. He was drawn there hurriedly, now that he had made his

decision. The forest always comforted him in his sorrow, but the water offered protection. He had always felt that way.

In the lake rested a purity and clarity such as Rowarn never experienced on land. The limitations of being able to move only with difficulty on the ground were lifted. Everything that lived down there was much more familiar with each other, and even closer, if not united, in a unique way.

Even as a child, Rowarn had spent a lot of time in the lake. He could swim like an otter and endure underwater longer than any other land dweller. But he had never felt the desire to stay there forever, as Malani had jokingly remarked one spring morning when, frozen blue, she sought the warmth of the sun while Rowarn splashed on tirelessly.

As comfortable as he felt in the water, he did not belong there. It was a strange sensation that he could not explain and that always made him go only up to a certain limit, never beyond.

Now, however, he longed to dive in and wash away all the dirt and guilt from himself, in order to be able to step under the eyes of his foster parents, cleansed, perhaps purified.

Rowarn sighed when he finally reached the lake. The sun was now fully up, casting a silver glow over the glistening surface. Without pausing, Rowarn jumped into the water and dove in. After a brief agitation, the surface became still and smooth again.

The water turned black.

All the honorables of the city, first of all Anini's father, a gray-haired, four-bearded man named Daru, had themselves brought by horse-drawn wagons to Weideling, the home of the two Velerii. For a long time Rowarn's foster parents had lived in Inniu, far from their people, as Guardians of Weideling. A dusty path, just wide enough for a wagon, branched off from the well-fortified cart path that led to the most important trade routes of Valia.

Even from a distance, the troop was visible through the swirling cloud of dust that puffed up and enveloped it.

Next to Daru sat the weeping Hallim, Anini's mother, her face hidden in a large shawl. Daru looked grimly ahead; not a word was spoken during the entire ride. Hidden, he coughed when the dust irritated his throat too much, and occasionally wiped his eyes.

Weideling's front door opened as the karts came to a halt at the end of the track. Daru and Hallim got down from the carriage, the numerous companions still remained seated.

Shadowrunner stepped into the bright light of the morning. His dark, striking face expressed friendliness, and he raised his hand. "I greet you, Daru the Strong, on this bright spring day, after what I hope will be a great feast." It was the way of the Velerii to speak so formally and floridly at the same time. They had an epithet for each person.

Now Shadowrunner noticed Hallim's face, swollen with sorrow and tears, as he turned to her, and stared. His broad brow furrowed in concern. "I think I was too hasty with my greeting. I beg your pardon, Hallim the Wise. What has happened?"

"Anini was murdered!" Daru snapped, and now he too lost his composure and burst into tears. "Our son Rayem found her this morning in the meadow, cruelly disfigured! Her heart was torn out of her chest while she was still alive, can you imagine? Only an animal could do such a horrible thing!"

Shadowrunner's pitch-black mane flowed down his human back to the withers of the horse's body as he let his gaze wander and looked into reproachful, if not accusing, eyes. His long tail whipped once around his shining blue-black flanks. He stroked his beard and set a hoof forward. "Well, I'm not an animal," he said quietly in a low voice. There was sadness in his large dark eyes now.

"Where's Rowarn?" shouted Anini's brother Rayem from the wagon.

A light seemed to blossom as Snow Moon stepped up to Shadowrunner's side at that moment. Her fur shimmered almost silvery in the sunshine, her silky mane ruffling slightly in the gentle breeze. Snow Moon's amber eyes flashed. She was by no means as gentle as her consort. "Rowarn is not an animal either," she spoke in a voice as bright as a bell, but with a threatening echo.

"How do we know for sure?" someone shouted, and several townspeople loudly agreed with the objection.

The city elder, Larkim the Austere, climbed stiff-legged from the wagon and, leaning on a stick, stalked toward the Velerii. However, like Daru, he kept a respectful distance. For all their anger, the humans never forgot who they were dealing with. Snow Moon and Shadowrunner's withers reached most people's foreheads; with their human torsos

and heads, they towered over everyone present by half a man's length.

"It may be," spoke the old man in a surprisingly powerful, carrying voice, "that Rowarn looks like us and is capable of a pleasing language. But you seem to forget how unrestrained he is, how quickly he goes into blind frenzy! Or is it not true, Ondur?"

The boy called out jumped from the wagon and showed the Velerii the ugly white scar on the right side of his neck. One by one, young men, all about Rowarn's age, were asked to show scars that Shadowrunner's foster son had inflicted on them.

Hallim, who never wished anyone harm, not even in this terrible hour, however, interjected tremulously, "We know that Rowarn does not do this willingly. Something else takes possession of him at such moments, for he is remorseful and contrite every time afterwards, and he takes great pains to prevent such outbursts from occurring. But how will you prove to us that he did not do it? He was seen tonight leaving the feast together with Anini. He was the last one to see my daughter ..." She sobbed and could not continue speaking for a few moments. No one dared to utter a word, all waited in silence and in bewilderment, their eyes fixed on the ground. Finally she had composed herself enough to continue, "He was the last one with her. That is proven."

Daru clenched his hand into a fist. "He probably tried to ravish her, and she fought back, so he went into a rabid frenzy and ..."

"You said Anini's heart was ripped out," Snow Moon interrupted in an icy voice. Her bright, loving face had frozen into a white mask. "In the same way as the three other girls we found in the last few weeks. Are you suggesting that this, too, was Rowarn's doing?"

"Yes!" shouted Rayem, and a few others agreed, incited. The atmosphere heated up visibly, and one or the other suddenly held a knife in his hand.

Shadowrunner's face darkened at this sight. His tail thrashed excitedly, and he stamped his hoof once.

Snow Moon stared first at Daru, then down at Hallim. "Is that really what you all think?"

The two mourning humans avoided her gaze and remained silent. Stunned, Snow Moon raised her head. "Do you know what you are saying?" she cried. All anger was gone; pain and sorrow distorted her delicate features. "Rowarn grew up among you. He has received our teachings, and above all, respect for every being under the sun and moon. He is barely grown and well on his way to proving himself in life! How can you suppose that he would be able to commit such cruel deeds and at the same time go on living as if nothing had happened?"

Her glowing gaze swept over the young men. "Yes, he has done you harm, and yes, he has an unbridled temper that sometimes leads him to violent outbursts! But he has never harmed anyone in a life-threatening way, and often enough he had reasons to stand up to you, didn't he? And another thing: How often was he there for you? Helped you out of a jam? Took a beating for your actions so you could get off scot-free and he could win your respect?"

She raised her arms. "Certainly, we warned Rowarn not to bother too much with humans. However, not to protect you from him, but the other way around!"

Shadowrunner added, "We know well that we are only tolerated as long as we are useful in your eyes. You gladly use our services for healing and protection, but behind closed doors you speak other words that are far from friendly. And since we took Rowarn in, your wild speculations have never ended, and you have never welcomed him into your midst as one of your own! For this very reason, and no other, we do not attend your feasts, and we stay away from you! But how will Rowarn ever understand this, a young man who looks just like you?"

There was a deep silence for quite a while. Some now looked clearly unsettled, others continued to look angry, even belligerent. Hallim wept softly and whispered the name of her daughter, bound in a prayer.

More calmly, Snow Moon raised her hands once again, now in a peaceful gesture: "We are upset because now the fourth girl has been murdered in such a terrible way. We do not know why, and who could commit such an unimaginable act. But we must not let that cloud our vision as we search for the killer - *together*."

Daru groaned, "It all began the day the White Hawk did not come. It was a bad omen, and we didn't heed it! We should never have hosted this festival, and I should never have let Anini ..." The rest of his words were lost in sobs.

"A bad omen? Certainly, it may be," Shadowrunner said calmly. "For the White Hawk came for Rowarn alone. Daru, you are old enough, you know that he first appeared when

our foster son was in his first year of life. You have pretended that this tradition has always existed, but it is false. You have adopted something that is meaningful only to us."

Anini's father became paler, if that was even possible.

"Words, just words! It's time something was done!" one of the councilors shouted. "It should never have come to this! Let Rowarn prove that he did not do it. Then we will depart and deliberate among ourselves how to protect our daughters and confront the murderer!"

"If he's innocent, why isn't he here?", Rayem attackingly struck the same note.

"I'm here," Rowarn's voice rang out at that moment, and he stepped boldly in front of his parents.

For a moment there was a surprised, partly embarrassed silence.

Larkim the Austere measured him from narrowed eyes. "How much did you hear?" he snarled.

"Enough," Rowarn replied.

Hallim couldn't take it anymore. Crying, she ran to the wagon and Daru helped her up. He sat down next to her and held her helplessly in his arms.

Rayem reared up threateningly in front of Rowarn. "What have you done to my sister?"

"I didn't do anything to her," Rowarn explained. "I was on my way home, and she really wanted to walk with me for a bit. That's all."

"You're lying," Rayem hissed with clenched hands.

"As long as I was awake and had my eyes open, she lived," Rowarn replied. "I don't know what happened."



When Rayem tried to go after Rowarn, Larkim hit him in the chest with his stick and stopped him. "Get a hold of yourself!" he snapped at the young man. "Has this day not begun bloody enough? Do you want the Velerii to be right in their accusation that we are too hasty with our judgment and are just taking advantage of them? Do you want to humiliate us?"

"It is better that you go," Snow Moon said slowly and clearly. "You have heard Rowarn, and there is no reason to doubt his words. And remember one thing well: it may have been *anyone* who cannot prove where he has been tonight. So beware of further accusations. We will help you if you are serious about finding the murderer. But now you should first pay your last respects to Anini and remember her as she deserves."

The humans hesitated. Larkim, after a brief eye duel with the Velerii, turned and raised his cane. "Let's go! The honorable Snow Moon is right. Another day of retribution and atonement will come. Now we must remember and help the living who are full of grief, and honor the dead."

No one dared to contradict. The aggressiveness was lost under Larkim's authority. Silently, without giving the Velerii and Rowarn another glance, the people turned around and went back to their city.

"Come into the house," Snow Moon urged her foster son, and Rowarn hurriedly obeyed. Uncertainly, he stopped in the middle of the room, not daring to look up at his mother.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked down at him, twinkling. "What happened last night?"

Rowarn swallowed dryly. "What I said."

Immediately he found himself on the floor holding his burning cheek. For a moment he felt only pain and did not understand what had happened. Horrified, he looked up at Snow Moon. For the first time in his life, she had hit him. Never before had she even raised her hand. But he saw that this had not happened out of anger alone. Fear and worry were painted on her finely chiseled features.

"I didn't raise you to lie!" she harangued him. "How dare you bring me such disgrace?"

Rowarn's eyes filled with tears. "Because the truth only causes pain," he whispered.

He hastily scrambled to safety on all fours from her lunging hooves. "We raised you, Rowarn!" she cried shrilly. "Will you give the lie to everything we ever taught you? Do you distrust us so much, *disregard* us?"

He shook his head silently and slowly rose. Surrendered, he stood there with his head bowed and awaited further punishment.

Shadowrunner suddenly stepped in between and grabbed Snow Moon's shoulders. "Calm yourself, dearest," he said gently. "Grief overwhelms you, and you no longer know what you speak." He turned to Rowarn. "Wait here until we come back, boy. After that, we'll talk. Promise me?"

Rowarn nodded. "I promise," he whispered in a failing voice.

Shadowrunner smiled briefly at him. Then he pushed Snow Moon out of the house without any apparent effort.

Shortly after, they dashed off across the meadow, galloped up the hill, and raced along the ridge.

It was not the first time Rowarn had seen them like this, and in a strange way it comforted him. Never in his young life had he seen more beautiful, more perfect figures than these two. Their hooves seemed to barely touch the ground, their horses' bodies gleaming silver and blue-black. Snow Moon's blouse, shimmering different colors in the sunlight, fluttered in the wind; underneath she wore a cross-banded surplice the same color as her mane.

Shadowrunner, on the other hand, wore a black shirt with a black leather vest over it that reached down to the horse's chest. The clothes were also tied in the back, like Snow Moon's, to allow the mane to swing freely.

Like light and shadow, in harmonious grace they chased across the meadows. It was hard to tell which of the two would be faster. Shadowrunner was heavy and muscular, Snow Moon more delicate, but perhaps more persistent.

Thus, their kind gave vent to great excitement, for the blood of the horse people was hot, and they were unpredictable, dangerous despite their gentleness. No wonder the people were called Velerii, *fast-as-the-wind*, and they were also almost as old as the first wind that had swept across the expanses of the just-born world eons ago, one of the first peoples of Woodzee, long-lived, wise and full of mysterious powers.

Just as Rowarn was occasionally strange and uncanny to people, his foster parents had always remained incomprehensible to him, despite the self-sacrificing love and openness they showed him. He felt great respect,

sometimes even awe. He would never have dared to contradict them.

    Patiently, without moving, the young man waited until his Muhmes had finished their wild run and returned to him with sweaty flanks, clearly more composed.

## Chapter 2

# The White Hawk

The Velerii huddled on the half couches with their characteristic elegance: The horse's body rested on a soft, flaring velvet cushion, the human torso resting against the comfortably high, finely curved and likewise upholstered backrest. And so they slept, head to head; Snow Moon on the left, Shadowrunner on the right.

Rowarn cowered in the low, large armchair covered with the same fabric. On the table in front of him was a bowl of dried fruits and nuts, but he touched nothing. The day was long advanced; he had not eaten since yesterday afternoon, but he felt no hunger. His stomach was like a stone, hard and cramped.

"Tell us what happened," his foster father urged him.

Rowarn had expected reproaches. He had been forbidden to go to the feast, and even more so to stay out all night. Often enough, the Muhmes had warned him not to go into town; especially since the first murder. "You are not one of their own," Snow Moon had said. "A culprit is quickly found then."

No one had expressed any suspicion against him until today, but Rowarn had definitely felt that he had been looked at with different eyes for some time. Therefore, he would normally have obeyed the foster parents, but ... he really wanted to see Anini ...

He closed his eyes and heard the call of the jays shrill in his mind. *Blood! Blood!*

He knew his parents could still smell the dampness of the lake on him; despite the strong spring sun and the quick run home, his clothes were not completely dry.

"Tell us," Snow Moon also added promptly, as if she had read his mind, "why you had to jump into the lake with your clothes on and clean yourself before you ventured home and under our eyes."

Rowarn rubbed his face. "The water turned black, and I almost suffocated," he whispered. "For a moment I thought I was drowning, until finally the blood was washed away. Maybe it was me after all. Because I don't know what happened ..."

"One at a time," Shadowrunner interrupted. "Tell us everything you know, son. We'll listen to you."

Rowarn sighed and took a deep breath in and out. Then he recounted what he remembered without omitting anything, even though it was difficult for him and it made his head turn red. But it was clear to him anyway that his parents had long since seen through what he and Anini had done that night.

"I don't remember anything after that," he finally came closer to the horrible moment. "I remember dreaming ... And then I woke up, and ... and ..." As Rowarn conjured up