

HIGH DRUID OF  
**SHANNARA**  

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# NORTHLAND







# ONE

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She sat alone in her chambers, draped in twilight's shadows and evening's solitude, her thoughts darker than the night descending and heavier than the weight of all Paranor. She retired early these days, ostensibly to work but mostly to think, to ponder on the disappointment of today's failures and the bleakness of tomorrow's prospects. It was silent in the high tower, and the silence gave her a momentary respite from the struggle between herself and those she would lead. It lasted briefly, only so long as she remained secluded, but without its small daily comfort she sometimes thought she would have gone mad with despair.

She was no longer a girl, no longer even young, though she retained her youthful looks, her pale translucent skin still unblemished and unlined, her startling blue eyes clear, and her movements steady and certain. When she looked in the mirror, which she did infrequently now as then, she saw the girl she had been twenty years earlier, as if aging had been miraculously stayed. But while her body stayed young, her spirit grew old. Responsibility aged her more quickly than time. Only the Druid Sleep, should she avail herself of it, would stay the wearing of her heart, and she would not choose that remedy anytime soon. She could not. She was the Ard Rhys of the Third Druid Council, the High Druid of Paranor, and while she remained in that office, sleep of any kind was in short supply.

Her gaze drifted to the windows of her chamber, looking west to where the sun was already gone behind the horizon, and the light it cast skyward in the wake of its descent a dim glow beginning to fail. She thought her own star was setting, as well, its light fading, its time passing, its chances slipping away. She would change that if she could, but she no longer believed she knew the way.

She heard Tagwen before she saw him, his footfalls light and cautious in the hallway beyond her open door, his concern for her evident in the softness of his approach.

"Come, Tagwen," she called as he neared.

He came through the door and stopped just inside, not presuming to venture farther, respecting this place that was hers and hers alone. He was growing old, as well, nearly twenty years of service behind him, the only assistant she had ever had, his time at Paranor a mirror of her own. His stocky, gnarled body was still strong, but his movements were slowing and she could see the way he winced when his joints tightened and cramped after too much use. There was kindness in his eyes, and it had drawn her to him from the first, an indication of the nature of the man inside. Tagwen served because he respected what she was doing, what she meant to the Four Lands, and he never judged her by her successes or failures, even when there were so many more of the latter than the former.

"Mistress," he said in his rough, gravel-laced voice, his seamed, bearded face dipping momentarily into shadow as he bowed. It was an odd, stiff gesture he had affected from the beginning. He leaned forward as if to share a confidence that others might try to overhear. "Kermadec is here."

She rose at once. "He will not come inside," she said, making it a statement of fact.

Tagwen shook his head. "He waits at the north gate and asks if you will speak with him." The Dwarf's lips tightened in somber reflection. "He says it is urgent."



She reached for her cloak and threw it about her shoulders. She went by him, touching his shoulder reassuringly as she passed. She went out the door and down the hallway to begin her descent. Within the stairwell, beyond the sound of her own soft footfalls, she heard voices rise up from below, the sounds of conversations adrift on the air. She tried to make out what they said, but could not. They would be speaking of her; they did so almost incessantly. They would be asking why she continued as their leader, why she presumed that she could achieve anything after so many failures, why she could not recognize that her time was past and another should take her place. Some would be whispering that she ought to be forced out, one way or another. Some would be advocating stronger action.

Druid intrigues. The halls of Paranor were rife with them, and she could not put a stop to it. At Walker's command, she had formed this Third Council on her return to the Four Lands from Parkasia. She had accepted her role as leader, her destiny as guide to those she had recruited, her responsibility for rebuilding the legacy of the Druids as knowledge givers to the Races. She had formed the heart of this new order with those few sent under duress by the Elven King Kylen Elessedil at his brother Ahren's insistence. Others had come from other lands and other Races, drawn by the prospect of exploring magic's uses. That had been twenty years ago, when there was fresh hope and everything seemed possible. Time and an inability to effect any measurable change in the thinking and attitudes of the governing bodies of those lands and Races had leached most of that away. What remained was a desperate insistence on clinging to her belief that she was not meant to give up.

But that alone was not enough. It would never be enough. Not for someone who had come out of darkness so complete that any chance at redemption had seemed hopeless. Not for

Grianne Ohmsford, who had once been the Ilse Witch and had made herself Ard Rhys to atone for it.

She reached the lower levels of the Keep, the great halls that connected the meeting rooms with the living quarters of those she had brought to Paranor. A handful of these Druids came into view, shadows sliding along the walls like spilled oil in the light of the flameless lamps that lit the corridors. Some nodded to her; one or two spoke. Most simply cast hurried glances and passed on. They feared and mistrusted her, these Druids she had accepted into her order. They could not seem to help themselves, and she could not find the heart to blame them.

Terek Molt walked out of a room and grunted his unfriendly greeting, outwardly bold and challenging. But she could sense his real feelings, and she knew he feared her. Hated her more than feared her, though. It was the same with Traunt Rowan and Iridia Eleri and one or two more. Shadea a'Ru was beyond even that, her venomous glances so openly hostile that there was no longer any communication between them, a situation that it seemed nothing could help.

Grianne closed her eyes against what she was feeling and wondered what she was going to do about these vipers—what she could do that would not have repercussions beyond anything she was prepared to accept.

Young Trefen Morys passed her with a wave and a smile, his face guileless and welcoming, his enthusiasm evident. He was a bright light in an otherwise darkened firmament, and she was grateful for his presence. Some within the order still believed in her. She had never expected friendship or even compassion from those who came to her, but she had hoped for loyalty and a sense of responsibility toward the office she held. She had been foolish to think that way, and she no longer did so. Perhaps it was not inaccurate to say that now she merely hoped that reason might prevail.

"Mistress," Gerand Cera greeted in his soft voice as he

bowed her past him, his tall form lean and sinuous, his angular features sleepy and dangerous.

There were too many of them. She could not watch out for all of them adequately. She put herself at risk every time she walked these halls—here in the one place she should be safe, in the order she had founded. It was insane.

She cleared the front hall and went out into the night, passed through a series of interconnected courtyards to the north gates, and ordered the guard to let her through. The Trolls on watch, impassive and silent, did as they were told. She did not know their names, only that they were there at Kermadec's behest, which was enough to keep her reassured of their loyalty. Whatever else happened in this steadily eroding company of the once faithful, the Trolls would stand with her.

Would that prove necessary? She would not have thought so a month ago. That she asked the question now demonstrated how uncertain matters had become.

She walked to the edge of the bluff, to the wall of trees that marked the beginning of the forest beyond, and stopped. An owl glided through the darkness, a silent hunter. She felt a sudden connection with him so strong that she could almost envision flying away as he did, leaving everything behind, returning to the darkness and its solitude.

She brushed the thought aside, an indulgence she could not afford, and whistled softly. Moments later, a figure detached itself from the darkness almost in front of her and came forward.

"Mistress," the Maturen greeted, dropping to one knee and bowing deeply.

"Kermadec, you great bear," she replied, stepping forward to put her arms around him. "How good it is to see you."

Of the few friends she possessed, Kermadec was perhaps the best. She had known him since the founding of the order, when she had gone into the Northland to ask for the support of the Troll tribes. No one had ever thought to do that, and her

request was cause enough for a convening of a council of the nations. She did not waste the opportunity she had been given. She told them of her mission, of her role as Ard Rhys of a new Druid Council, the third since Galaphile's time. She declared that this new order would accept members from all nations, the Trolls included. No prejudices would be allowed; the past would play no part in the present. The Druids were beginning anew, and for the order to succeed, all the Races must participate.

Kermadec had stepped forward almost at once, offering the support of his sizeable nation, of its people and resources. Prompted by her gesture and his understanding of its importance to the Races, his decision was made even before the council of nations had met. His Rock Trolls were not imbued with a strong belief in magic, but it would be their honor to serve as her personal guard. Give them an opportunity to demonstrate their reliability and skill, and she would not regret it.

Nor had she ever done so. Kermadec had stayed five years, and in that time became her close friend. More than once, he had solved a problem that might otherwise have troubled her. Even after he had left for home again, his service complete, he had remained in charge of choosing the Trolls that followed in his footsteps. Some had doubted the wisdom of allowing Trolls inside the walls at all, let alone as personal guards to the Ard Rhys. But she had walked in darker places than these and had allied herself with creatures far more dangerous. She did not think of any Race as predisposed toward either good or evil; she saw them all only as being composed of creatures that might be persuaded to choose one over the other.

Just as she saw the members of her Druid order, she thought, though she might wish it otherwise.

"Kermadec," she said again, the relief in her voice clearly evident.

"You should let me rid you of them all," he said softly, one great hand coming to rest on her slim shoulder. "You should wash them away like yesterday's sweat and start anew."

She nodded. "If it were that easy, I should call on you to help me. But I can't start over. It would be perceived as weakness by the governments of the nations I court. There can be no weakness in an Ard Rhys in these times." She patted his hand. "Rise and walk with me."

They left the bluff and moved back into the trees, perfectly comfortable with each other and the night. The sights and sounds of Paranor disappeared, and the silence of the forest wrapped them close. The air was cool and gentle, the wind a soft whisper in the new spring leaves, bearing the scent of woods and water. It would be summer before long, and the smells would change again.

"What brings you here?" she asked him finally, knowing he would wait for her to ask before speaking of it.

He shook his head. "Something troubling. Something you may understand better than I do."

Even for a Rock Troll, Kermadec was huge, towering over her at close to seven feet, his powerful body sheathed in a barklike skin. He was all muscle and bone, strong enough to rip small trees out at the roots. She had never known a Troll to possess the strength and quickness of Kermadec. But there was much more to him. A Maturen of thirty years, he was the sort of person others turned to instinctively in times of trouble. Solid and capable, he had served his nation with a distinction and compassion that belied the ferocious history of his Race. In the not so distant past, the Trolls had marched against Men and Elves and Dwarves with the single-minded intent of smashing them back into the earth. During the Wars of the Races, ruled by their feral and warlike nature, they had allied themselves with the darker forces in the world. But that was the past, and in the present, where it mattered most, they

were no longer so easily bent to service in a cause that reason would never embrace.

"You have come a long way to see me, Kermadec," she said. "It must be something important."

"That remains for you to decide," he said softly. "I myself haven't seen what I am about to reveal, so it is hard for me to judge. I think it will be equally hard for you."

"Tell me."

He slowed to a stop in the darkness and turned to face her. "There is strange activity in the ruins of the Skull Kingdom, mistress. The reports come not from Rock Trolls, who will not go into that forbidden place, but from other creatures, ones who will, ones who make a living in part by telling of what they see. What they see now is reminiscent of other, darker times."

"The Warlock Lord's domain, once," she observed. "A bad place still, all broken walls and scattered bones. Traces of evil linger in the smells and taste of the land. What do these creatures tell you they see?"

"Smoke and mirrors, of a sort. Fires lit in darkness and turned cold by daylight's arrival. Small explosions of light that suggest something besides wood might be burning. Acrid smells that have no other source than the fires. Black smudges on flat stones that have the look of altars. Markings on those stones that might be symbols. Such events were sporadic at first, but now occur almost nightly. Strange things that of themselves alone do not trouble me, but taken all together do."

He breathed in and exhaled. "One thing more. Some among those who come to us say there are wraiths visible at the edges of the mist and smoke, things not of substance and not yet entirely formed, but recognizable as something more than the imagination. They flutter like caged birds seeking to be free."

Grianne went cold, aware of the possibilities that the sight-

ings suggested. Something was being conjured up by use of magic, something that wasn't natural to this world and that was being summoned to serve an unknown purpose.

"How reliable are these stories?"

He shrugged. "They come from Gnomes for the most part, the only ones who go into that part of the world. They do so because they are drawn to what they perceive in their superstitions as sacred. They perform their rituals in those places because they feel it will lend them power. How reliable are they?" He paused. "I think there is weight to what they say they see."

She thought a moment. Another strangeness to add to an already overcrowded agenda of strangenesses. She did not like the sound of this one, because if magic was at work, whatever its reason, its source might lie uncomfortably close to home. Druids had the use of magic and were the most likely suspects, but their use of it in places beyond Paranor was forbidden. There were other possibilities, but this was the one she could not afford to ignore.

"Is there a pattern to these happenings?" she asked. "A timing to the fires and their leavings?"

He shook his head. "None that anyone has discerned. We could ask the Gnomes to watch for it, to mark the intervals."

"Which will take time," she pointed out. "Time best spent looking into it myself." She pursed her lips. "That is what you came to ask me to do, isn't it? Take a look for myself?"

He nodded. "Yes, mistress. But I will go with you. Not alone into that country—ever—would I go. But with you beside me, I would brave the netherworld and its shades."

*Be careful of what you boast of doing, Kermadec,* she thought. *Boasts have a way of coming back to haunt you.*

She thought of what she had committed herself to do in the days ahead. Meetings with various Druids to rework studies that members of the order would undertake. Those could wait. Overseeing the repairs to the library that concealed the

Druid Histories—that one could not happen without her presence, but could wait, as well. A delegation from the Federation was due to arrive in three days; the Prime Minister of the Coalition was reputed to lead it. But she could be back in time for that if she left at once.

She must go, she knew. She could not afford to leave the matter unattended to. It was the sort of thing that could mushroom into trouble on a much larger scale. Even by her appearance, she might dissuade those involved from pursuing their conjuring. Once they knew that she was aware of them, they might go to ground again.

It was the best she could hope for. Besides, it gave her an opportunity to escape Paranor and its madness for a few days. In the interval, perhaps a way to contend with the intrigues might occur to her. Time and distance often triggered fresh insights; perhaps that would happen here.

“Let me tell Tagwen,” she said to Kermadec, “and we’ll be off.”



## TWO

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They departed Paranor at midnight, flying north out of the Druid forestlands with a full moon to light their way, riding the edge of their expectations just ahead of their doubts and fears. They chose to use Grianne's War Shrike, Chaser, to make the journey, rather than a Druid airship, thinking that the Shrike would draw less attention and be less cumbersome. An airship required a crew, and a crew required explanations. Grianne preferred to keep secret what she was investigating until she better understood what it meant.

Tagwen accepted the news of her sudden and mysterious departure stoically, but she read disapproval and concern in his eyes. He was desperate for her to tell him something more, a hint of what she was about so that if the need arose, he might be able to help. But she thought it best he know only that she would be gone for a few days and he must see to her affairs as best he could. There would be questions, demands perhaps, but he couldn't reveal what he didn't know. She braced his shoulders firmly with her hands, smiled her approval and reassurance, and slipped away.

It went without saying that Tagwen would make no mention of Kermadec unless she failed to return; a visit from the Rock Troll was always to be kept secret. There were too many who disapproved of the relationship, and the Dwarf understood the importance of not throwing fuel on a fire already dangerously hot. Grianne could depend on Tagwen to use