

“Well, here we are then,” Giles announced.

*Hmmm. Must just be a matter of getting used to it,* Rosie concluded, thinking that this section of forest looked almost exactly like any of the other areas they’d gone through. *If you lived here long enough I suppose it’d get easier.* Still, Rosie was glad that she had Giles there to guide her. Or she **would** have been glad if she’d been in her own body, she ruefully corrected herself. Locked in Annie’s body the way she was, it didn’t seem to matter much whether she was confused or not. What mattered was if Annie knew where she was going.

Thinking about Annie, Rosie was again forced to acknowledge the strangeness of her situation. Even though she’d tried and failed a number of times already, once more Rosie strained to grasp any sense of Annie’s mind. *If only I could communicate with her, let her know I’m here.* Rosie didn’t really know what good that might do but it seemed better than simply being carried along like a piece of useless luggage.

“We’ve come fer tha council,” Giles yelled out, startling Rosie back to the present. Annie glanced around but nothing showed itself beyond the trees surrounding them. Rosie had just about decided that Giles was seriously confused when the bushes to his left rustled softly, indicating that something had joined them.

As Annie swung her head towards the bushes, Rosie got a clear look. What she saw was human-like in form, but there could be no confusing the two races. He was not a great deal taller than Giles and was clad in a close-fitting shirt and pants woven from what looked to be whitish linen. His arms and legs were long and slender, almost to the point of fragility. Somehow though, Rosie felt sure there was nothing fragile about him. Long brown hair, sweeping back from his high forehead, was gathered together into a thick braid that fell to his shoulders.

The pale skin of his face was suffused with a pink glow of health and vitality. Dominating his thinly angular face were his eyes, large and expressive brown eyes that re-

garded Annie and Giles with endless humor and goodwill.

“Welcome, Giles my friend,” he said warmly, coming forward to take Giles’s paw in his hands. Rosie noted as he did so that his hands and wrists were covered with a light fur. The newcomer’s voice was lilting and musical, very much a match to his appearance. “It’s been too long since you’ve graced us with your company. Glad I am for it now, though the cause of our meeting be an ill one.”

“Well met yerself Merrek. Yer lookin’ the same as ever, hale an’ hearty,” answered Giles.

“As are you, my friend. And greetings to you also, young owl,” Merrek continued, turning to regard Annie. “You are new to our councils.”

Annie opened her mouth to speak but was cut off by Giles before she could utter even a single word.

“That’s my young ward Annie. Been with me since she was but a fledgling, her parents bein’ killt in an accident an’ all. I’m raisin’ her tae be a fine citizen an’ ah thought she might learn a bit at tha council.”

“Surely,” Merrek answered, smiling at the sight of the frown Annie directed toward Giles. *Sometimes foster parents are the most protective kind of all*, he reflected.

“Well then, let us go,” Merrek continued, speaking over his shoulder as he turned and moved toward the trees. “The council has already begun but you’ve only missed the opening courtesies and introductions. We’re holding the meeting over at the Longflower Glen to make sure there is room for everyone.”

A few minutes walk brought them to a modest clearing in the trees. For some time Rosie had been aware of a soft murmuring that had grown steadily louder as they moved forward. Now the reason for the sound became plain. Dozens of lifelings crowded the small space, some standing, others sitting, and still others perched on the branches of the trees that surrounded the area. It seemed that all were talking at the same time, greeting old friends or being introduced to new ones. It didn’t seem to Rosie like any kind of organized meeting she’d ever attended,

rather it reminded her more of lunchtime at her school.

“I shall leave you here and go back to look for any other latecomers,” Merrek said, motioning Giles and Annie over to a small corner off to their right. “They should be starting soon.”

“Merrek’s a good ’un Annie,” Giles said after Merrek had disappeared back into the woods. “The elvashé are all a bit peculiar, if ya know what I’m sayin’, but Merrek’s more like reg’lar folks than most of ’em. Ye’ll be seein’ that fer yerself in a bit. An’ wait’ll ya see tha arnvashé when they start tae spout off. Hoo, they’re somethin’ else, I’m tellin’ ya.”

“They’re the fighters, aren’t they?” Annie asked as she hopped up and down, trying to see over the heads of those crowded around her.

“Aye, that they are, among other things,” Giles agreed. “Ah dinna know why they’re here, tae tell ya tha truth. They doon’t have much truck with tha elvashé normal-like. Don’t have much tae do with anybody, really. But I heard they’d be here and it’s sure they are. Look over there, ya can see ’em sittin’ near tha center of tha field.”