

Following Annie's gaze, Rosie was able to see half a dozen individuals sitting quietly in a group. All of them were robed in silver-gray, with hoods pulled over their heads. Consequently, it was impossible to tell what they actually looked like, although Rosie assumed they'd have to be similar to Merrek.

As Rosie was thinking this, a gong rang out. Its deep brassy note resonated in the air for long seconds before slowly fading away, the crowd's chatter dying down with it. After a moment, a small figure rose up in the very center of the field.

"That's Moreenne, tha head man, or goraldyr as they call 'em," Giles whispered hoarsely to Annie. "If'n he's talkin' ya can be sure it's about somethin' important."

"Greetings to you all, my friends," began Moreenne, inclining his head toward the assembled crowd. "You honor my tribe with your presence. As many of you know, I am Moreenne, and it is my privilege to be the voice of all my tribe. This meeting has been called because we have recently suffered a loss, one which affects both you and us together." Moreenne paused for a moment as he surveyed the crowd. "Kerin's Flame has been taken from us."

The uproar that followed this announcement made further speech impossible. Moreenne made a small motion of his hand, and at his signal the gong gave voice once more. Hearing it, the crowd grew quiet.

"Yes, the Flame has been taken," Moreenne continued in a grave voice. "For many years the Flame has been used to help and to heal, both for the elvashé and for all of you as well. Indeed, it has been a symbol of the peace we revere and strive to nurture. Its loss is a heavy blow." He paused, slowly shaking his head.

"Can't we get it back? Find out who took it?" These questions came from a grizzled badger, his fur thinning with age.

"As to that my friend – that is the purpose of this meeting. There is little doubt as to who took the Flame; it would be strange if our suspicions on that score were not

correct. And as for getting it back – well, that is certainly our hope. Let me tell you all that has gone before and then we can decide on our future plans. Some days back we took an arnvash into our care, one who appeared sick and in need. Being an arnvash, and thus closely akin to us, we expected no ill from him. We now fear that in this we were mistaken. For the same day that the Flame disappeared, so also did he. His name was Kur.”

“It seems that much trouble would have been avoided if you’d simply left the wretch alone.” This accusation came from a figure who abruptly stood in front of Morenne. It was Danlin, leader of the arnvashé.

Danlin threw back his hood and Rosie immediately realized that though she’d been right in guessing he’d resemble the elvashé, there truly was only a resemblance and nothing more. Whereas Merrek was lithe and slender, Danlin was heavily built, solid and compact. He was taller by half a head than Morenne and in place of brown hair sported silver-gray. Fur covered his skin to a far greater extent than in the elvashé, a glistening pelt that looked smooth and soft. Rosie wondered what it would feel like to stroke it, but after having seen and heard Danlin just this single time, decided it would be safer to try stroking a wild tiger.

Danlin’s features were sharper and harder than those of the elvashé but what most strongly struck Rosie were his eyes. Unlike the warm brown eyes of the elvashé, Danlin’s were a pale yellow, like those of an eagle. They were the most intense and piercing eyes Rosie had ever beheld.

What a study in contrasts, seeing Morenne and Danlin together. Morenne stood quietly, projecting an air of quiet contemplitude and calm. Danlin, in contrast, radiated a sense of strength and purpose, his body quivering with barely contained energy.

“You had no cause to take him in,” Danlin continued, his expression hard and cold.

“No cause, good cousin?” enquired Morenne quietly. “He was hungry, cold, and alone. Surely that was cause enough.”

“Pah. He was a weakling and a coward. A thief,” spat Danlin. “He dishonored the arnvash tribe with all his actions while he still dwelt amongst us. It was his behavior that finally forced us to take action. We cast him out as a last opportunity for him.”

“An opportunity Danlin?” asked Morenne. “What kind of opportunity can there be in isolation from one’s own tribe?”

“A chance to grow strong, that is what kind. Or die in the trying. That has ever been our way with such as he.” Danlin’s voice had risen during the interchange and now was close to a shout.

“An interesting approach to be sure,” replied Morenne calmly. “I wonder how many have profited from the exercise? But no matter – this is neither the time nor the place to argue philosophies,” he continued, cutting off Danlin’s reply. “Your tribe and mine view life differently, that we both know. Our common goal now is to recover the Flame, regardless of who is to blame for its loss.”

“That’s tellin’ ’im, eh?” Giles asked rhetorically of Annie. “Never did take tae them arnvashé. They’re fine warriors, make no mistake, and we’ve needed ’em more’n a few times fer that. But they’re prickly as a porcupine an’ cold as a glacier.”

“Shhh,” Annie said, successfully shushing Giles. “They’re talking again.”

“We asked you and your comrades here, good Danlin, along with everyone else, to help effect the Flame’s return,” continued Morenne. “We need all of you to spread the news of the Flame’s theft and to let us know of anything that might speed its recovery. It is hard to be entirely secret about anything in these woods. If someone catches sight of it, or hears of it, or sees Kur, then we need to know.”

“Gathering information can be useful, but we need direct action as well,” Danlin said firmly. “The sooner he is sought after, the sooner he’ll be found.”

Morenne gazed at the speaker. “Danlin Goraldyr, your

thoughts echo my own. Not because Kur was of your tribe, however, but because nobody knows these woods better than the arnvashé. Most here, the elvashé among them, are content to stay close to home, to become familiar with our own corners of the woods. Unlike us, the arnvashé travel wide, and know well the shape of the lands in the Great Wood and beyond. We had hoped you would be willing to take on the search.”

“We shall do so,” said Danlin. “That Kur has done this deed casts dishonor upon us, dishonor I shall strive to remove. You shall have the best tracker of my tribe – myself.” Danlin said this with no self-consciousness or false modesty. It was to him a simple statement of fact. And, as Morenne well knew, it was also quite true. “But the Great Wood is both wide and deep,” continued Danlin. “How even to know where to start? Kur may be a weakling but he’s still an arnvash. He’ll know how to travel lightly, leaving but little imprint upon the land. Finding him will be no easy task, even for me.”

“That is why I shall be coming as well.” The female elvash who now rose to her feet spoke these words with a quiet certainty.

“You, Merilei?” exclaimed Danlin, his brows drawing together in a deep frown. “A Grand Healer? And a female! You’re more suited to a library, I think. We arnvashé travel fast and hard. You’ll be of no use,” he concluded, shaking his head dismissively.

“Allow me to disagree,” rejoined Merilei calmly. “I am the Flame’s keeper and will be party to its return. And, useless though you may think me, I have an ability you do not. I can sense the Flame when it is close at hand or is being used. Can you?”

Danlin’s frown merely deepened in response.

“What she says is quite true Danlin,” said Morenne, lending his weight to her case. “I originally questioned her decision as well. But once she has decided on her path, you’ll find it is difficult to deflect her from it. Especially when she’s right.” Morenne glanced at Merilei, his expres-

sion a rueful mix of affection and concern.

Looking back toward Danlin, Morenne continued. “Her link with the Flame can aid you when you come near it. And the elvashé must be a part of the search as well. Surely you can understand that?”

Danlin stared at them with narrowed eyes, weighing what he’d just heard. Finally, he made his decision.

“Very well Morenne,” answered Danlin, disapproval clearly apparent in his voice. “She may come. I shall not ask any of my companions to watch over her; the responsibility is too great. She shall travel with me. Whether she regrets so doing or not shall be seen.”

Merilei inclined her head toward Danlin in acknowledgment of his decision.

“Good,” said Morenne with satisfaction, happy to have gained Danlin’s agreement. “It would seem that we’re settled then. Everyone else can best serve by passing to us any news you might learn that concerns the Flame. It will not pass without notice, and anything you hear can help us better direct our search.”

“Wait a minute,” a high-pitched voice cried. The speaker, a small and youthful looking arnvash, had only just reached the center of the gathering, having spent the last few minutes shouldering his way to the front rows. He very much resembled a smaller, slighter version of Danlin. The most obvious difference, other than size, was that his pelt didn’t display the pure silver-gray of Danlin’s, but rather was covered all over with small sooty-gray spots. “I want to help also.”

Danlin’s brows drew together in a deep frown. “Cedrik, you were told to remain behind. Domsten shall be disciplined for letting you go.”

“Don’t take it out on her,” Cedrik replied earnestly. “She probably still thinks I’m in the tent. But how could I stay? Kur’s my tent-mate! If he’s done wrong I need to do something to help. Please.” The young arnvash looked beseechingly at Danlin.

“He’s your foster tent-mate only – nothing by birth,”

Danlin retorted. "You are under no blood obligation and I have already made it clear that you are too young. Do not try and pursue this further; my decision stands. I will determine an appropriate punishment for your disobedience at a later time. For now, you will return to the tribe and wait." Danlin dismissed him with a sharp wave of his hand. Turning his back on Cedrik, Danlin began to converse in a low voice with his companions.

Cedrik's eyes flared at Danlin's rebuke. For a moment it seemed as if he would pursue the argument further. Then his shoulders slumped and he turned, starting slowly back the way he had come.

"Why didn't Morenne stand up for him?" Annie asked Giles, having easily heard the entire interchange from the sidelines.

"Why should he?" retorted Giles. "Danlin's tha goralstyr of their tribe so what he says goes. He wouldn't take kindly tae havin' Morenne meddlin' in arnvash affairs. An' Morenne knows it. He's no dummy, that one. Besides, seems tae me that Danlin's got tha right of it. That lad's but a half pint. A trek like they're plannin' is nae place fer him. Now hush an' lemme get back tae tha meetin'." So saying, Giles turned back toward the main group and began to harangue a nearby group of elvashé.

Rather than paying attention to Giles' argument, Rosie noticed with surprise that Annie's attention was fixed on the retreating figure of Cedrik. After a moment of observation Annie turned once more toward Giles and, assured that his attention was still focused elsewhere, started to edge quietly away.

*What's she doing?*, Rosie wondered as Annie made her way to the edge of the clearing.