

## Chapter 2

### Friends in the Forest

“C’mon now Annie, up with ya! Ya canna sleep all day, much as ah know ya’d like tae try. Git up!”

Rosie, floating in that pleasant boundary between waking and sleep, could hear the shrill, commanding, and completely unfamiliar voice, but paid it no mind. It was so nice to stay asleep, so warm and comfortable. So peaceful.

Several long moments passed. “All right, ah warned ya!”

In the next moment, Rosie was shocked into complete and utter wakefulness as effectively as if doused with ice water. How could she not have been? Her entire bed was tipping over and she was rapidly rolling out!

Rosie’s eyes snapped open to a nightmare. Her room was gone, replaced by tall trees. Branches and leaves seemed to whirl around her as her bed tilted farther and farther until she felt herself sliding off. Horrified, she realized there wasn’t any floor beneath her, just more leaves and branches and, far below, a very solid looking forest floor. She tried to grab the side of the bed, but found she couldn’t move. It was as if she were suddenly paralyzed.

Rosie tried to scream but found that her voice answered her wishes no better than had her arms. Before she could do anything more, Rosie felt herself hurtle off the bed entirely and into the empty air. Just before tumbling over, she caught a quick glimpse of a monstrous black squirrel

that, impossibly, seemed to be the one tipping her bed.

Down she fell for what seemed like an eternity. The air whistled by her as she braced for the sudden impact that was sure to occur as the ground, by now rushing up to greet her, made fatal contact. The terror made her want to close her eyes, to hide from what was happening, but somehow even this small comfort was withheld. Her own body ignored her requests and her eyes remained wide open. And then, unbelievably, her headlong plunge began to slow.

Rosie sensed rapid motion taking place to either side of her and a whirring noise that filled the air. Still simply an unwilling witness to the unfolding events, Rosie saw the forest floor come closer and closer until, miraculously, she came to a stop just as she reached the leafy surface. At the same moment the blurs on her right and left disappeared and the whirring sound ceased.

“And a fine good mornin’ tae ya,” a voice from on high yelled down, its sound faint but clear in the cool morning air. Rosie’s view rotated upward and she was able to see, high in the tree, a very cross looking squirrel staring down at her, presumably the same squirrel that had just heaved her from the bed. “Ah was beginnin’ tae wonder if ya weren’t gonna fergit flyin’ completely an’ had simply decided tae end it all.”

“That wasn’t very funny Giles! You could have killed me,” a high-pitched voice yelled back at the squirrel. Rosie couldn’t understand how, but the voice seemed to be coming from herself, even though she hadn’t tried to say anything at all. *Odd name for a squirrel too*, Rosie thought. *But then again, what isn’t odd right now?*

“Kill a wee birdie by pushin’ it off’n a tree branch?! Ach, an’ that’s as ridiculous a thing as ah’ve ever heard. Just tryin’ tae wake ya up, ah was.” The squirrel pulled his head back but Rosie could still hear him muttering to himself. “Tryin’ tae kill ’er indeed! After all tha times ah’ve pulled tha half pint oot of troubles of her own makin’ an’ she accuses me of tryin’ tae kill her. Hmmp! Tha’s

gratitude for ya.” The voice grew muffled and then silent as the squirrel entered a hole in the tree’s trunk.

*Owl? Talking squirrels? What’s going on? That squirrel was talking to me but how can a squirrel talk? And why did he think I’m a bird?* Rosie tried again to raise her arms or even just move her eyes, but experienced the same strange disconnection as before. It felt to her as if she were being forced to watch a movie and lacked the ability to look away. Even as she tried to solve these puzzles, striving to fit them into the framework of her familiar world, she continued to see trees and bushes, all seemingly solid and real.

Without her willing it, the view shifted, turning downwards and around. Numb to surprise by all the shocks she’d encountered, she saw at her sides not arms, but wings. The view continued to change, moving across the wings and finally showing the back of a juvenile owl. Each feather was clearly visible, the feathers all a deep chocolate-brown, edged with white. With a slowly dawning realization Rosie came to the reluctant conclusion that the squirrel had been right. She *was* an owl.

With that realization came another. Everything around her looked **big**: the squirrel that had pushed her out of the tree, the grass and flowers, everything in fact. It all seemed huge and out of scale. But if she was really inside a small bird then everything wasn’t really gigantic, it was just that she was now very small. *If this is a nightmare it’s a really weird one*, she thought anxiously to herself. *And if it’s not a nightmare then I’ve REALLY got some problems.*

Before she could carry this train of thought any farther Giles popped his head out of the tree and called down. “Hoy down there, are ye comin’ up fer breakfast or not?” he demanded crossly. “Or are ya thinkin’ ah’ll try tae murder ya now?”

“No, I know you won’t murder me,” Rosie heard her other self answer tartly. “I was just thinking.” For the first time Rosie realized with a shock that there must somehow be two of them inside this owl body – its original owner

and Rosie. The rightful owner seemed to have no idea Rosie was there with her and Rosie had no way of letting her know.

“Thinkin’,” Giles muttered peevishly to himself under his breath. “Tha day tha ninny starts thinkin’ll be tha day ah learn tae fly.”

“Well, when ya’ve finished *thinkin’*,” Giles yelled down, “come on back up. An make it snappy, afore ah decide tae eat both bowls of breakfast maself.” With that he turned around and marched back into the trunk, his tail giving an impatient final swish as he disappeared into the tree.

Without any warning, the owl’s wings burst into a blur of brown and Rosie found herself rocketing upward. An instant later she’d reached and landed on the branch from which Giles had been scolding her.

“So there ya are, at last. Well come on in,” Annie heard Giles say from within an opening in the tree’s trunk. The owl hopped over to the lip of the opening, bending her head forward to look within. What she saw took Rosie’s breath away. The inside of the trunk had been hollowed out and the interior looked for all the world like a rustic cabin in the woods, the sort of thing that Rosie had watched on television countless times.

A small round table stood in the middle of the room, covered with a neat red and white checked tablecloth. In a vase in the center of the table was a bunch of freshly cut yellow, white, and orange wildflowers. Pictures dotted the walls and opposite the entrance there stood an expansive cupboard. Giles was standing to the side of this, a low counter in front of him. From what Rosie could see, the squirrel was heaping something into a pair of bowls.

“There now, tha’s finished,” he said, turning around and walking toward Rosie. Giles was holding onto a bowl with each front paw and made it look like the most natural thing in the world for a squirrel to be walking on its hind legs, carrying bowls and holding a conversation.

“Well, c’mon, c’mon. Take your oatmeal while it’s hot, eh?” Giles commanded. “Come in already.”

Needing no further encouragement, Rosie's host entered the room and hopped over to the table. Giles sat directly down on the floor, his size allowing him easy access to the tabletop from that position. Rosie noticed a small block of wood in front of the table on the opposite side, a convenient perch from which the owl could easily reach the bowl.

The table grew larger in her vision as the owl hopped over. Curls of steam rose above the bowl and the smell of freshly ground oats bathed in sweet honey made her mouth water. It must have had the same effect on the owl, for Rosie could see her beak diving into the bowl as she wolfed down the food and she could taste the sweet mixture as the owl swallowed.

"Here, here, slow doon! Ya'll choke if ya keep on gol-lapin' yer food like that. Try an' eat like a civilized bein' fer once," lectured Giles. He reached down to pick up a spoon and began to ladle the oatmeal into his mouth. "Fome day I'm gonna teach ya fome mammerf," he said indistinctly, speaking around a mouth full of oatmeal. "Yer sadly in need a' some, ya know that. Use yer spoon," he finished, slightly more understandable after having swallowed the food.

Rosie watched as the owl, responding to Giles' lecture, reached out its wing and picked up a spoon. To Rosie's amazement, she saw that the owl had a complete set of workable fingers on the end of its wing.

*Hands together with wings?* thought Rosie in confusion.  
*What's going on?*

"Now that's better Annie," Giles said with approval as the owl proceeded to attack the oatmeal with the spoon.

*Annie!* The name exploded in Rosie's consciousness.  
*That was the name of the owl in Dad's story!*

Annie kept eating as Rosie tried to grasp this new revelation. *Am I somehow in the story Dad's writing? He said that the animals in it were different, and a bird with hands is sure different. Or am I dreaming? It sure doesn't feel like a dream. Dreams are always kind of weird and*

*not-real feeling. This sure is weird but it also feels really real. Everthing is so solid.*

Thinking about it, she began to notice all the little details around her, details that never turn up in dreams but always occur in the actual world. Smells, for instance. In addition to the oatmeal, Rosie realized that she could smell the tangy bite of pine needles drifting in from the outside. She could also smell a slightly musty odor and finally decided that it came from Giles, just now finishing his portion. *Maybe he doesn't bathe very often*, she thought, smiling inwardly.

"Well, that's done then," Giles announced, breaking into Rosie's thoughts. "An' outstandin' fine it was as well," he added immodestly. "If there's one thing Giles Treeleaper can do, it's cook. Aye, and that's tha truth. An' it looks like yer appetite woke up fast enough, even if ya didn't yerself."

With a start, Rosie realized this was true; Annie had cleaned her bowl of every last bit. She watched as Giles grabbed both empty bowls and dropped them into a basket on the cupboard. "That'll do 'em for now," he said over his shoulder to Annie. "We've got tae be on our way tae tha meetin', eh? It'll be startin' soon."

Giles bounded out of the room and onto a branch as Annie watched. With a swish he disappeared over the edge, his tail waving in the air for an instant before lowering out of sight.

After a few seconds Rosie heard some scrabbling on the bark and Giles' head poked back in. "Well, c'mon, will ya? By all that's holy in the Wood, Annie, don't be more of a ninny than ya have tae be. Move!" He waved a paw imperiously at Annie and once again started down the trunk.

Thus prodded, Annie hopped over to the entryway and, after a quick ruffling of feathers, launched herself off the tree and fluttered down to the ground.

Annie watched patiently as Giles moved down the trunk. Rather than leaping down the remaining few feet, he carefully continued his climb to the very bottom and then de-

liberately stepped off. Pausing for a moment, he stood up and carefully brushed himself off, ridding his fur of a few tiny pieces of bark. He then twisted his body to bring his tail into view and, satisfied with its condition, gave it a quick shake and then turned back to face Annie.

Rosie noticed that he was a good deal slower and more exacting in his movements than any of the squirrels she remembered seeing leaping from tree to tree in her backyard. Such acrobatics apparently weren't a part of Giles's normal repertoire. *Must be an old squirrel*, she thought to herself. *I wonder why Annie is hanging around with him?*

"Don't stand there gawkin', come along," Giles said tartly, giving Annie a light cuff on the beak. "We've got a ways ahead of us yet tae go." Giles moved off at a deliberate pace, limping just slightly as he went. Annie caught up and then hopped directly in front of Giles, forcing him to come to an abrupt stop.

"I don't remember; where are we going again?" she asked.

Rosie was grateful for the question. She couldn't ask it herself and was dying to know more about what was going on.

Giles shooed Annie out of the way and resumed his march. "Git, git. Ya can ask while we march, ya know. Of all the featherbrains I've ever met, yer the worst, d'ye know that?" Giles demanded. "How many times do I have tae tell ya tae listen tae what's going on around ya? But ya just diddly doodly along, not a care in tha wide world, paying no mind tae anythin'."

Giles continued to grumble quietly to himself for a few moments more and then continued. "All right, I'll tell ya again. An' this time try an' pay attention! We're goin' tae a Called Council. Someone's stolen somethin' from the People of the Trees, somethin' valuable. We're all gonna put our heads tagither an' think of how best tae git it back. They've said it affects everyone in tha forest and they don't call councils without reason. So of course I'm goin'. They'll be needin' my advice."

Rosie smiled inwardly. *I'm sure they'll get an earful of his advice, whether they want it or not.*

“An I’m bringin’ ya along fer yer education,” Giles continued. “Mebbe it’ll help ya realize that the world isn’t a place tae shilly shally through, that ya need tae think fer yerself if ya want tae survive. Anyway, it’ll let me introduce ya around, let folks know who ya are. That’s important, ya know. Any more questions?”

Annie thought for a few moments before answering, “Will we be eating lunch before or after?”

Giles turned to glare at Annie who, to amuse herself while waiting for Giles’ answer, was now trying to keep pace while hopping on just one foot. “It’s gonna be a long walk,” he sighed under his breath.

“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.”

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 Morenne, 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 Morenne, inclining his head toward the assembled crowd. "You honor my tribe with your presence. As many of you know, I am Morenne, 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." Morenne 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. Morenne 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," Morenne 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.

Annie worked her way to the outside edge of the crowd and plunged into the forest, brushing past the small bushes that ringed the open field. She'd entered the woods about a quarter of the way around the clearing from where Cedrik had exited and knew she'd have to hurry if she was to have any hope of catching him. Thus it was with a start of surprise that she beheld Cedrik just a few yards away from her, moving off to the north with a determined step.

Cedrik stopped short as he noticed Annie and then put his head down and kept walking. Annie immediately fell into step behind him and in a few seconds Cedrik spun around, coming to a halt in front of her.

"Yes?" Cedrik whispered, impatience clear in his voice.

"Umm, yes what?" Annie responded cheerfully.

Cedrik gestured frantically for Annie to keep silent. "Sshhh," he hissed, quickly drawing closer to her. "Try to be quiet, will you? I don't want any attention!"

"Oh. Sorry," Annie whispered back, lowering her voice to match Cedrik's.

"Well?" Cedrik asked after a moment, almost vibrating now in his impatience to be on his way. "What do you want?"

"I dunno," Annie answered after a moment. "I guess I just wanted to talk to you."

"Talk to me?" questioned Cedrik puzzledly. "Why? I don't even know you."

"Well, I was listening in there to you and the others, you know? And that Danlin guy didn't seem to give you much of a chance to talk. Giles is always shutting me up too, so I know what that's like. I guess I just wanted to hear more about you and Kur. Besides, it didn't seem fair for them to send you back to your home like your opinions aren't worth anything. And now that I think about it," Annie continued, looking puzzled, "isn't arnvash country over there?" She motioned with her wing, pointing to the south.

Looking annoyed, Cedrik hesitated for a moment before speaking. "Come with me further away from the gather-

ing,” he said, not immediately answering Annie’s question. They moved well off into the woods before Cedrik spoke again.

“Listen, as you noticed, I’m not heading home,” he admitted reluctantly. “Not now anyway. I know Danlin will be furious, but I can’t just sit by and do nothing. He just doesn’t understand,” Cedrik burst out. “He’s our goraldyr so he thinks he knows everything! He thinks just because I’m small that I can’t keep up or look after myself. Same as he thinks Kur is guilty before he’s even talked with him.”

“Do you think he isn’t guilty, that he didn’t take the Flame?” Annie asked innocently.

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess he might have,” Cedrik admitted, looking pained. “Even if he did, I’m sure he’s got a reason. But if Danlin catches up with him he won’t bother with reasons. He’ll probably just kill him then and there.”

“You think Danlin would really do that?” Annie asked, her eyes opening wide in amazement. “I can’t believe it.”

“Oh no? You’ve never seen him when he gets really angry,” Cedrik replied. “He goes crazy.”

Cedrik paused and looked thoughtful. “Well, I guess he wouldn’t actually kill him,” he admitted. “I really don’t know what he’d do. All I know is that it wouldn’t be nice. He’s always hated Kur. I don’t know why; I never saw Kur do anything to him. He probably just resents him because Kur’s an arnvash, he’s one of us, and Danlin can’t stand to admit someone like Kur could be related to him.”

“I’ve never seen or met Kur,” Annie responded. “What’s so bad about him?”

“It’s a long story,” replied Cedrik curtly. “The point is that I’ve got to get to him first. I have to find the Flame and find Kur. Then I can convince him to give it back. He was my tent-mate and I can’t just forget about him. So, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.” Cedrik started forward once more.

“Hold on a second,” Annie exclaimed, bringing Cedrik to an abrupt halt by hopping directly in front of him. “It’ll

be awful hard to find him on your own, you know. You could use some help.”

“Yes, well, I don’t have any, so I guess I’ll just have to manage on my own,” Cedrik replied with some asperity, trying to push around Annie.

“You do now,” Annie answered, hopping to the side and blocking Cedrik once more. “You’ve got me.”

At this Cedrik stopped of his own volition and stared at Annie. “You! Why should you want to help me? I don’t even know you.”

*Yeah, why should you Annie?* Rosie wondered, surprised by the little owl’s behavior. *I don’t think I’d go running off on the spur of the moment with someone I’d never met before.*

“I’m Annie,” Annie answered brightly, completely unaware of Rosie’s thoughts. “There, now you know me. And I want to help because, because ... well just because.” In fact, Annie wasn’t quite sure why she wanted to get involved. Maybe it was because her whole life Giles had never let her have any adventures, large or small. Giles loved her, Annie knew that, but he was so protective that Annie felt smothered most of the time. It hadn’t been too bad when Annie had been a fledgling, but now she was older and was bursting to see the world. A mother owl would have known when the time had come to leave the nest, but Giles had no such instincts.

Or maybe she wanted to come along because she was moved by how much Cedrik obviously cared for Kur. Although she hadn’t sneaked off to meet Cedrik with the intention of joining him on any journey, suddenly it seemed like the most logical thing in the world to do. Whatever the reason, Annie knew she wanted to go along with Cedrik. She must have unconsciously known it when she noticed him slip away from the gathering, and now she knew it for sure.

“What do you say?” asked Annie, looking expectantly toward Cedrik.

Cedrik’s brows furrowed. “Well,” he began slowly. “None of the grownups back there wanted me to help. They all figured I’d be useless. And, to tell you the truth, that’s what I was just thinking you’d be, if you’ll pardon my saying so. I know they were wrong about me so perhaps I’m wrong about you too. Besides, you can’t be much worse at this than me. I’m not really much of an arnvash myself,” he admitted sheepishly. Annie didn’t understand quite what he meant but figured she could ask more about it later.

Cedrik regarded Annie thoughtfully for several moments. “All right Annie,” he finally announced firmly. “If you really want to come along, then you’re welcome to. We’ll find Kur together. But don’t blame me if the trip turns out to be more than you bargained for.”

“Great!” Annie exclaimed. “You won’t regret it, I promise. What do we do first?”

“First, we keep walking,” answered Cedrik. “If they find out you’re missing and come looking for us, our search will be over before it even begins.” And so saying, Cedrik again began walking through the woods, Annie hopping along beside him.

Some time later, Cedrik stood at the base of Annie’s tree, shading his eyes as he peered up through the dark green foliage.

“Here you go!” Annie’s cheery voice floated down from high above. “Watch your head!” An instant later a small knapsack came whizzing down through the branches and landed with a muffled whump a few paces from Cedrik, followed closely by a second. A few moments later Annie fluttered gracefully to the ground in front of Cedrik.

“There’s enough in these to last us for at least a few days,” Annie said, nodding toward the packs. “I left a note up in the tree for Giles so he won’t worry about me. I didn’t tell him anything about you,” she added, seeing Cedrik look up sharply. “I just said I was going off to explore on my own for a couple of days and not to worry. I’ve been pestering him for weeks to let me go off by myself a little so I don’t think this’ll be that big a surprise. He won’t miss the food either; we’ve got a lot stored up there.”

“Maybe it really was a good thing that you joined me,” Cedrik grudgingly admitted as he pulled the larger knapsack over his shoulders. “I hadn’t thought about food or supplies when I left home. I just rushed out to get to the gathering. Like I said before, I’m not much of an arnvash.”

“Hey, c’mon, don’t be like that,” Annie replied encouragingly, wondering why Cedrik’s self-respect was so low. “It’s not a big deal. And anyway, now we’re set. It’s lucky my tree wasn’t too far away. But we’d better move out

before Giles gets back. This is the first place he'll check once he realizes I'm not at the gathering anymore."

"Right," Cedrik agreed readily. And with that, the two new friends pushed off into the woods once more. They hiked for a few minutes in silence, enjoying the quiet amongst the trees and watching the golden shafts of sunlight that pierced through the shadows around them.

*Where the heck are they going?*, Rosie wondered to herself. Perhaps by coincidence, Annie turned at the same moment to Cedrik.

"So, just where are we heading?" she asked.

Cedrik kept silent for a few steps more. "Umm, I don't really know," he finally confessed.

"Don't know!," Annie exclaimed, coming to a halt. "What do you mean you don't know? How were you planning on finding Kur?"

Cedrik looked embarrassed. "Well, er, I'm not really sure, to tell you the truth. Ask around, I suppose. Maybe we'll find someone who's seen him," he offered hopefully, not sounding like even he really believed it.

"Okay, time out," Annie replied with authority. "This is crazy. We can't just walk around aimlessly. I thought you were an arnvash. You guys know about this hunting and tracking stuff, don't you?"

"I've already told you!" exclaimed Cedrik loudly. "I'm a rotten arnvash. I can't track, I can't hunt, and I can't fight. That's why Danlin wouldn't let me come along in the first place. I try, but it doesn't help. I'm just no good at anything at all."

Annie didn't know what to say. Granted, Cedrik had already said he wasn't up to par by arnvash standards. But still! Who ever heard of an arnvash that wasn't at home in the forest? As far as Annie knew, that was what defined the arnvash. To think that Cedrik wasn't at least somewhat skilled in woodcraft was shocking to her, like meeting a bird that couldn't fly or a squirrel that couldn't climb.

"Well," Annie began slowly, choosing her words care-

fully. "I'm sure you're not as bad as you say. And even if you are, there's got to be something you're good at," she continued. "And I'll help you figure out what it is."

"You think so?" asked Cedrik hopefully.

"Sure," Annie replied brightly. "Giles always tells me that everybody is good at something. The trick is to figure out what. But before we do that, we've gotta get this search more organized. So let's think. We can assume that Kur has the Flame, right? So is there anything he can do with it?"

*Maybe he'll try to sell it,* Rosie thought as she followed the conversation. *If the thing is so valuable then he'll probably try to sell it to someone. That's what people usually do when they steal something.*

"Actually, no, I don't think so," Cedrik said, responding to Annie's question. "Nobody but the elvashé can use it; it won't work for anyone else. That's why the elvashé keep it."

"Well, that doesn't really make sense," Annie countered. "I mean, there's not a whole lot of difference between an elvash and an arnvash that I can see. I'll bet an arnvash could use it. But, even if you're right, one person couldn't use it on themselves, could they?"

"No. The Flame is used for healing and the process takes energy from the person doing the healing. It wouldn't work if the healer and the patient were the same person."

"Okay. So then Kur can't use it," Annie reiterated. "So what's he going to do with it? It'd be kind of stupid just to keep it. It'd be too dangerous – someone would find out eventually. I bet he'll try to sell it."

Rosie's mental ears perked up. *Hey, that's the second time Annie's said what I was thinking.*

"Who would he sell it to?" Cedrik asked doubtfully. "Now that the elvashé have spread the word, everyone will be on the lookout for the Flame."

"I know," Annie agreed, nodding her head. "So that means he'd have to go to someone who wouldn't care about whether the elvashé want it back or not."

“Someone like Baron Stoor maybe?” Cedrik asked, impressed with Annie’s line of reasoning.

“Sure! Him and his ferrets don’t like the elvashé at all. You wouldn’t believe some of the stories Giles has told me about him. If anyone would buy it, it’d be him. He’d probably do it just because he knew the elvashé valued it, just to spite them.”

“You could be right,” Cedrik said, nodding his head. “It’s a long way to his holdings though. Do you really think it’s worth going that far when we’re not really sure?”

“Well, we might as well go there instead of just wandering aimlessly, right?” Annie responded. “We can ask around on the way too. If we find something that looks more likely we can always change our plan.”

“What direction is it from here?” Cedrik wondered aloud.

Annie orienting herself for a moment and then pointed with her wing. “That way.”

Cedrik faced the direction Annie indicated, closed his eyes and seemed to be concentrating on something. After a moment he opened his eyes. “All right then Annie. Baron Stoor’s it is. I don’t know if Stoor’s got it or not but I’ve got a feeling we’ll be going in the right direction if we aim that way. With any luck we’ll find Kur before he gets into any more trouble.”