

Chapter 4

Thief in the Night

Kur stood near the forest's edge, peering through overhanging branches toward the large clearing ahead. In the center of the clearing stood a large stone building, its aspect dark and forbidding. A stronghold for many generations of Baron Stoor's family, only for the last two years had it been under Stoor's direct control, having passed into his hands upon the death of his father.

Kur glanced down again at the small bundle he carried under one arm and smiled at the thought that he would finally be rid of it. It seemed a long time that he had carried the burden, but in fact it had only been a few days since he had first seen it in the hands of the elvashé.

Although Annie had first seen the elvashé gathered together on the forest floor, this was not their usual place. They made their homes high in the towering cyrelyn trees, spending much of their day far above the forest floor. A scattered remnant of far more extensive forests, the cyrelyn's grew most densely near the coast, within sight of the Western Sea, where the cooling fogs and mists encouraged the trees to flourish. A typical specimen possessed an immensely wide trunk, covered with thick, auburn bark and tapered but slightly as it soared skyward.

On the trees' strong spreading limbs the elvashé built solid platforms to support an interconnecting network of rooms. Not only building outward, they would also build

in, hollowing the huge central trunk in carefully chosen locations. Called hatêbah, these rooms formed their most important spaces, areas in which they would hold their councils and gather to meditate.

Kur hadn't planned on being a guest of the elvashé; pure chance had brought him to them. He had collapsed at the edge of their domain, suffering from starvation and fatigue.

A passing sentry had found him and brought him back into the heart of their dwellings. Though drawn and haggard in appearance, it was immediately obvious to the elvashé that Kur was an arnvash, a close cousin of the theirs and thus welcome in their home.

Quick to recover under the elvashé's care, Kur chose to leave sooner rather than later. In the cool evening he rose from his sleeping platform, intent on taking his leave unnoticed. Small and wiry, Kur slipped silently from branch to branch, melting into the shadows as he went.

The first few minutes had been of little interest to Kur, who only saw individual elvashé settling down for the night. But then, from the corner of his eye, he caught a flicker of light, a strange pulsating glow that drew him closer. It came from ahead of him, from a window that had been cut into the tree's central trunk.

A few moments later he reached the window, and as luck would have it, the window's shutter was but partly drawn, allowing him a restricted view of the room within. Cautiously peeking in, he saw two elvashé. One was standing at the foot of a cot and the other, a female, sat near the cot's head. Kur could now see that the pulsing golden glow came from a small lamp, held in one hand of the seated elvash. Her eyes were closed and her free hand lay lightly on the chest of a lifeling lying motionless on the cot beside her. As he watched, the glow quietly died away, and with a quiet sigh the elvash removed her hand and opened her eyes.

Seeing this, the standing elvash spoke. "What is his condition Merilei? Will he live?"

Merilei wearily rubbed her temples. *How to answer?* she wondered. Merilei glanced up from her patient to her questioner, an elderly elvash garbed in a deep blue robe, so dark as to be almost black.

“That’s a question I’ve been asked many times over the years and I never know quite how to respond,” admitted Merilei, brushing a strong hand across her forehead, trying to erase the fatigue that was etched so clearly upon her face. “Will he live? Are you asking me so simple a question as whether his body will recover, his injuries heal? Or are you asking whether, once healed will he really **live**, truly join and merge with the spirit of Liandra? Will he realize that by giving of himself, he enriches himself and all around him? If your question is meant in this second manner then I cannot answer, much as I might wish to. But if you are content with an answer to the first question, then I can say to you that the crisis is well past and he will heal.”

“Good news then,” responded Morenne with a wry smile. “I hardly realized I was posing such a philosophical query, my dear friend. Curing his physical hurts is all we can rightly hope for at this point. If his spirit craves enrichment, we can surely offer that at a later time.”

“Mmmm. His spirit may crave enrichment, but the whispers of the spirit are often drowned out by the clamoring of the flesh. Truly, ’tis hard to hear one’s spirit over the rumblings of an empty belly.” Merilei shook her head over the hard injustice of the world. “Tell me Morenne,” she continued, “have you found out anything else? Where he comes from or what happened?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” responded Morenne. “All I know is that he was found by one of our Watchers on the edge of the West Borders, close to the coast. Our guess is that his ship was wrecked, probably during a storm out at sea. When he was found he was tied to the broken remains of a ship’s mast, most likely an attempt to keep from being swept overboard during the storm. He must have drifted like that for some time and then washed up on shore. With

the dangerous reefs and the way the surf can pound, it's amazing that he was alive at all."

"Well, he wasn't alive by much, to that I'll certainly attest," responded Merilei. "I admit that I didn't think there was much I could do, even with the help of Kerin's Flame."

"I know," answered Morenne with a nod. "I'm aware of how much you've been using the Flame and dropped by because I was worried about you. I've been watching your progress, you know. When we brought him to you he was almost dead and now, just a few days later, he looks almost completely healed. 'To live is to give,' that's a Healer's creed, as I'm well aware. But I also need you here with us, Merilei, alive and well. If you share too much of your own y'rithkah ..."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Merilei, cutting off Morenne's words. "Please, credit me with just a little bit of sense. I'm not going to drain myself dry in the healing." She turned back to busy herself with her patient's bedding as Morenne watched with an equal mixture of amusement, affection and concern.

Won't drain yourself dry, eh? thought Morenne. *Now that's something I'm not too sure of at all. I've seen you at your calling, my dear girl, and never a more devoted Healer have I encountered. That's why I plan to keep a close watch over you. Because I think that if life were in the balance, you wouldn't hesitate to give of your own y'rithkah, even unto your death, if it would help save your patient.*

Morenne's concern was a valid one, for Merilei was one of the few true Grand Healers. Through a lifetime of study she had made herself intimately familiar with the virtues of every leaf, branch, and root found in Liandra, whether used in the form of a tea, powder, or poultice. Beyond this, as the Master Healer of the elvashé she had responsibility for the proper handling and use of Kerin's Flame.

When her patient had first been brought to her he had been on the verge of death. For five days now she had held

the Flame in one hand and placed the body of her patient, willing the powers within the Flame to share her life force with her patient and so bring healing and renewal.

The speed of the recovery had truly been miraculous. At first the effect had been internal, regenerating the shattered organs that had been on the brink of total collapse. The crushed bones regrew and reknit and the torn tissues gradually came together once more. The raw and bleeding skin with which the patient had arrived formed scabs which fell away cleanly, leaving behind an unblemished surface.

But this seeming miracle hadn't come without a cost. Using Kerin's Flame was hazardous, deadly in fact, if the user wasn't both skillful and alert. Its full name, Kerin's Flame of Life, reflected both its power and the sacrifice required. It served as a bridge between the Healer and the patient, allowing the Healer's life force, what the elvashé called the y'rithkah, to flow from the stronger to the weaker. Used with care and precision, the process was beneficial. As long as the Healer could rest sufficiently he would rebuild his drained y'rithkah, leaving him ready to give of himself again when necessary.

The process was not always smooth however; the currents of life could move unpredictably as they flowed from one being into another. This was when all of a Grand Healer's training was called upon, to guide the flow and control it. A failure could very well prove fatal for both Healer and patient.

As Merilei and Morenne moved to leave the room, Kur slipped quickly from the window and melted into the surrounding shadows, his mind alight with a single idea. He'd never seen the Flame before today, but he now knew that when he left the elvashé, Kerin's Flame would leave with him as well!

A hunting hawk shrieked overhead, jerking Kur back to the present. He watched it glide silently past and then returned to his reverie. He remembered how he'd waited for the two elvashé to leave the room before stealing into the chamber, taking the Flame from the alcove into which Merilei had placed it. Then, moving as quickly as he dared, Kur had descended to the forest floor and scrambled under a nearby bush, listening intently.

A minute had ticked slowly by, and then two. Nothing moved in the darkness around him and the only sounds to be heard were the sighing of the wind through the branches high above and the thudding of his own heart within his chest. He'd done it! All that was left was to make his way out of the elvashé's domain and then he would be free to unlock the mysteries of his new prize. He wasn't exactly sure what to do with it but was confident that he could puzzle it out. After taking a few minutes more to steady his breathing, Kur began to move, stealthily stealing away from the towering cyrelyn tree and into the wood beyond.

Although the next morning had dawned bright and full of hope, the day that followed had brought nothing but deep disappointment. Try as he might, Kur couldn't get the lamp to do anything at all. It simply sat there, a seemingly useless piece of metal. Kur worked feverishly all day and night, but to no avail.

The next morning Kur attacked the problem again, but with no greater success. He was ultimately forced to the reluctant conclusion that its secrets lay beyond his capabilities. However Merilei managed to use the lamp remained hidden from him. *If can't use it, then maybe can sell it*, thought Kur.

But to whom? Certainly not to any elvash. Remembering how his own tribe had treated him after it had been discovered that he'd stolen some minor items, Kur couldn't imagine what would happen to him if the elvashé caught up with him. Who else could he go to? Most of the lifelings in Liandra were friendly with the elvashé. If they recognized the lamp as elvash property they'd almost

certainly turn both it and Kur over to them.

The main problem was that Kur wasn't a particularly clever lifeling. His usual approach was to act first and think later, if he remembered to. Never in his life had he been very good at planning ahead, and he now realized that his present lack of forethought might well cost him dearly.

He realized that by now it was certainly obvious to the elvashé that he'd been responsible for the theft, his departure and the lamp's disappearance having occurred in unison. Whether Kur discarded it now or not, the elvashé would still search for him regardless. Thus throwing it away would simply make a bad situation worse; he'd be a hunted fugitive with nothing to show for it. Kur would have to find someone living beyond the domain of the elvashé, someone who wasn't their ally. Such a person might well want to possess an elvash treasure, whether or not they could use it for personal gain.

A sharp command rang out from the clearing, once again jarring Kur out of his daydreaming. *Past done*, Kur thought to himself. *Time to think future*. With a trembling sigh, he pushed the pine boughs aside and walked fearfully forward, not knowing what fortunes might lay ahead.

Baron Stoor liked to think of himself as a swashbuckling adventurer and did his best to dress the part. Shiny black boots reached halfway up his legs, and his shirt was cut from gleaming white cambric, the sleeves puffed and billowy for most of their length and then drawn in tightly at the wrist. The loose collar was unbuttoned, displaying what Stoor considered to be his manly chest. A thick leather belt with a huge silver buckle held up his tightly fitting pants, the bottoms of which disappeared into his boot tops.

Trying, as always, to play the part of a well-bred nobleferret, Stoor spoke to Kur as if to an equal, his voice friendly and non-threatening.

“Me most sincere thanks fer sharin’ this with us,” said Stoor, continuing a conversation begun a few minutes earlier. “I’d like t’speak fer a bit with me counselor. Ye won’t mind waitin’ outside?” Stoor indicated the way with a wave of his hand and showed his sharp teeth in a wide smile as Kur withdrew. Once Kur had passed outside the room, the smile vanished as rapidly as drops of water on a hot skillet.

A robed rat, slightly stooped with age, stood partially hidden in the shadows behind Stoor. His whiskers drooped limply from a wrinkled snout and a twitch in his upper lip periodically uncovered one of his brownish teeth. This rat had been watching the conversation between Kur and Stoor with avid interest, his rheumy red eyes never losing sight of Kur and his package.

“Well Skruun, what d’ye think?” Stoor asked, turning to face the old rat. “Has he really got it?”

Skruun moved swiftly forward into the light. He may have been old, but he was far from frail.

“There can be no doubt,” Skruun answered, his naked tail lashing with suppressed excitement. “It is Kerin’s Flame.”

“Yer sure?” persisted Stoor. “No chance yer mistaken?”

“Of course I’m sure,” Skruun shot back with annoyance. “That halfwit, by unbelievably good fortune, has gotten hold of Kerin’s Flame itself. There’s no possibility of mistake.”

What a piece of luck, Skruun exulted gleefully to himself. To think of all this time I’ve been plotting how to best steal the Flame and this blundering fool brings it to me himself. Ah, the Dark Rat of Fortune must truly smile upon me. All I need do now is convince my doltish lord to help me complete the puzzle. And I know just what to say.

“Hmmm. Well, say that I believe ye,” said Stoor. Seeing Skruun’s brows draw together angrily, Stoor quickly

rephrased. “Sorry me friend, a poor choice o’ words. Course I believe ye.” Skruun’s face cleared. “But even if that’s so, what of it? Only the vashees can use th’ Flame, ain’t that right? I can’t see how it’s of much use t’us.”

“Ah, but that’s because you haven’t studied the ancient texts as I have,” Skruun replied with smug certainty. “Alone, the Flame is, as you say, of limited use. It was created by elvashé, attuned to them, and is unresponsive to other lifelings that try to use it directly. However, there are other approaches besides the direct ones, yesss?” Skruun lowered his voice and moved closer, coming almost nose-to-nose to Stoor.

“Just because it hasn’t responded to others doesn’t mean it can’t still be exploited,” Skruun whispered. “When it was made, the Flame was imbued with parts of the elvashé themselves, with their essence if you will. Indeed, the tales say that Kerin, the mightiest of the elvashé and the one that from the darkness brought forth the Flame, divided his soul in two and poured half into the lamp, keeping the remaining half for himself.”

“I suppose half a soul is better than none,” barked Stoor with laughter, stepping back a pace. Stoor knew that Skruun had very real talents in the magical arts but always grew impatient when the talk turned to “souls” and “spirits.” Stoor firmly believed in what he could see and touch. Sharp blades, gold coins, strong walls – these were his reality. Magic could certainly be used in amazing ways, but Stoor always remained skeptical of its use, half certain that its results were more illusion than fact. And as for the more mystical aspects like souls, well, Stoor was content to let others worry about those.

Skruun ignored Stoor’s outburst and moved close again. “The tales also hint that the power within the Flame can be harnessed, can be turned from its intended use,” Skruun continued. “Not easily, and not without pain. But it can be done. And once done, the power will be yours to command, my Lord.” *Oh, how it pains me to speak to him this way,* Skruun thought. *But the day will soon be here when*

he shall call me master.

“Ye know how t’do it then?” demanded Stoor, fixing Skruun with a piercing gaze. Power was something that Stoor never willingly turned down.

Skruun nodded slowly, his thin lips curling into a wintry smile. *I have him, just as I knew I would. Now all I need do is lead him along, the strutting clown.* “It will be difficult, yes very difficult, but I have the knowledge. A good first step would be to slit that poor fool’s throat, yesss?”

“Skruun, ye surprise me,” responded Stoor, with a look of pompous superiority. “That’d hardly be polite, would it? He’s our guest. An’ it’d be wasteful. Ye just taught me some o’ th’ ancient learnin’ so now I’ll return th’ favor and teach ye somethin’ a’ life. If we kill our young friend out there, he’ll be of no further use t’us. But if we purchase his little treasure from him, we make a friend. More important, we gain a valuable resource. Resources should never be tossed aside while they’re still worth somethin’.”

Putting a welcoming smile on his face, Stoor walked out to where Kur was sitting, Skruun trailing behind disapprovingly. Kur looked up uncertainly, not knowing what to expect.

Stoor pulled out a chair and sat directly across from Kur. "Sorry t'keep ye waitin' fer so long," began Stoor, his voice calm and reassuring. "We needed t'discuss yer request. There's so many deceitful creatures about in the world today and one must be careful."

"I not deceive you lord, no, no," stuttered Kur. "This mine to sell, it is. Mine. I find it and come to sell it, fair and square, fair and square." His eyes darted back and forth from the soldiers to Stoor, and he licked his lips nervously as he spoke.

"Course it is," agreed Stoor, certain that Kur was lying. "And anyway, how ye mighta' come by it ain't really none o' my business, is it now?" Stoor's expression grew sad and he shook his head mournfully. "Unfortunately, much as I might wish it otherwise, it seems that yer trinket really isn't o' much use t'us. It only works fer th' elvashé; with us it'd only be a pretty bauble."

Kur's face fell. He'd been afraid of something like this. His hope was that it was just his own ignorance that had kept the Flame from operating. If it only worked for the elvashé then he had nothing.

"However," continued Stoor, "I'm still willin' t'buy it." At this, Kur's head jerked up, his hope suddenly alive again.

"I can't give ye much, o' course, given th' circumstances. But it turns out that me friend here has made a special study o' the elvashé," Stoor said, motioning toward Skruun. "He'd like to add it t'his collection, as a curiosity. Since I owe him a couple o' favors, and seein' how he's been low o' funds lately, I've agreed t'buy it fer him. That is, assumin' yer price is reasonable."

"Oh, very reasonable, very, very, lord!" stammered Kur. "Whatever you say is fine, very fine, I sure."

"Well then," Stoor replied, his face genial. "How's about

four silvers? That sounds good, don't it?"

"Good, yes lord, but six maybe more good," countered Kur, greed making his tongue bold. "It worth six I think, yes, six, don't you think?"

Stoor raised an eyebrow. "Let's say five, shall we? Certainly a better price then ye'd get from the vashees, eh?"

Kur winced at this veiled threat and nodded his head rapidly. "Five very fine, very fine, I sure."

Stoor reached down to his belt and unhooked a small sack. Opening it, he counted out five thin silver coins into Kur's waiting hand. Immediately upon the fifth coin hitting his palm, Kur snapped his fingers shut over the money and thrust it deep within the recesses of his tattered jacket. Kur then handed over the Flame. "Kur goes now I think," he said, lowering his eyes and starting to edge backwards. Now that he'd gotten what he'd come for, Kur was anxious to be far from the rough looking soldiers and Skruun's baleful glare.

"In a moment, if ye still wish," said Stoor in a friendly manner, giving Kur a warm smile. "Ye strike me as a clever sort, someone what knows how t'take care o' hisself." Kur cocked his head as he regarded Stoor. Clever? That was the first time Kur could recall anyone complimenting him. Pleased with the flattery, he listened on.

"I can always use clever fellas," continued Stoor. "Someone that knows more than just how t'use a knife or a pike. Someone with real brains."

Kur's eyes were fixed on Stoor, unable to believe fortune was finally smiling upon him. He didn't know what he'd done to impress Stoor, but whatever it was, Kur was glad he'd done it.

Stoor continued to weave his verbal web of seduction. "I'd like fer ye t'stay here, in me service, if yer willin'. I can always find use fer someone like yerself. What d'ye say? Ye'll have food an' clothin' supplied as needed. How much more ye earn and how high ye rise is entirely up t'you. Seems a sight better'n what yer doin' now, don't ye think?"

Stoor now had Kur fully in his grasp. Kur knew Stoor to be one of the wealthier lifelings in the Great Woods. And here he was, offering Kur a position in his household. Who knew where this might lead?

“This Kur can do, yes, yes, good idea it is,” agreed Kur. “Kur help, Kur help muchly.”

“Indeed ye will,” chuckled Stoor, clapping his hands. In a few seconds a heavysset ferret slouched into the room and gave a passable excuse for a salute. “Yeah boss? Ya need sumpin’?”

“Duurl, take this fine lad with ye and find him some decent coverings,” replied Stoor. “His name is Kur and he’ll be one o’ us from now on. Bunk him with yer troop.” So saying, Stoor gave a small wave of dismissal and Kur, seeing that his further presence was neither needed nor desired, obediently turned and followed Duurl out of the room.

“Ye see Skruun?” said Stoor, turning to face his dark-robed wizard. “Fer th’ small expense o’ five silvers we have both th’ Flame and a new recruit. If we decide t’dispose o’ him later, we can always recover th’ money. And in the meantime, ye’d be surprised at what someone like that can pick up by keepin’ his ears open. Many in the Great Wood guard their tongues around our kind, sad t’say. That specimen what just left, pitiful though he might be, is still one o’ th’ arnies. There’re some that’ll speak freely t’him who wouldn’t give us th’ time o’ day.”

Stoor went over to a nearby table on which rested a large bottle and several glasses. Picking up bottle and glass, he poured out a large measure of crimson liquid, swirled it around, and then slurped it down in a long gulp. After a couple of seconds he belched loudly and then, a moment later, gave forth a belch so momentous that drops of wine flew from his glass to the floor. "Ah!" he exclaimed, licking his lips contentedly. "A fine vintage, fine indeed."

Skruun cast his eyes heavenward but remained silent.

Walking over to the fireplace, Stoor poured himself some more wine, took another huge swallow, and watched the dancing wisps of fire as they pirouetted up and around the logs. "All right Skruun," he said after a moment. "So tell me, how long'll it be before ye can fix up th' Flame fer me?"

"My lord, I will be happy to start immediately."

Stoor smiled broadly at Skruun's words.

"There is, though, a tiny complication," Skruun continued.

Stoor's smile fell. "Why is it I was afraid of somethin' like this?" he asked. "Nothin's ever simple with ye, did ye know that?"

"My lord, I do my best," Skruun replied, spreading his paws wide. "But no lifeling can alter the Flame without the needed tools, tools we do not yet possess."

"Really. An' how much will these tools cost me?"

"In money, nothing. However, it will involve some travel ..."

Stoor sighed heavily. "All right Skruun. Let me have it. Th' whole story. Tell me why we need t'travel."

"Because I believe the Flame can be made to respond to others besides the elvashé. But to do so we need the Morning Crystal."

"This is gettin' complicated," responded Stoor in irritation, waving his glass so that even more wine slopped out. "The Flame isn't enough by itself; we need some crystal too?"

"Oh yesss. Without the Crystal we won't even be able

to get started.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a problem, ain’t it?” queried Stoor. “I ain’t never even heard o’ this Crystal. Since I only have the Flame, and no Crystal, it looks like we’re stuck.”

“Not for too long, I assure you,” purred Skruun. “A visit to Gorbesh Longtooth should prove most efficacious.”

“Longtooth?” asked Stoor in puzzlement. “Why would that old goat help us? He’d sooner slit our weasands than do us a favor.”

“Because he and his tribe of rats possess the Morning Crystal,” answered Skruun. “If we are to turn the power of the Flame to our advantage, we must take it for our own. Thus, we must visit Longtooth.”

“We hafta do that.”

“Yes, my lord,” Skruun agreed.

Stoor flopped down in a thickly cushioned chair, tossed his empty glass into the fireplace, and began to gulp directly from the bottle. Several swallows later he lowered the bottle and wiped his sleeve across his lips, leaving a red stain across the white fabric. “Listen me friend,” he began, looking meaningfully toward Skruun. “It’s late and I’m mighty tired. Could ye do me a great favor and make a long story short for a long sufferin’ ferret?” As Skruun opened his mouth Stoor interrupted. “An’,” he said, holding up a warning finger, “make it simple.”

Skruun’s eyebrows knit together in annoyance at the interruption. “Very good, my Lord,” Skruun replied. “A bit of history is necessary. When Kerin forged the Flame, he needed a means of focusing the powers of the earth. For this he used the Morning Crystal, so called because ...” Skruun cut himself short upon noticing Stoor’s glare. “Ah, yesss, no matter why it is called that,” he continued. “We shall keep it ‘simple.’ What’s important is that he needed the Crystal to imbue the Flame with its power. We can’t alter the Flame without the Crystal to help, just as it couldn’t have been made originally without it.”

“And Longtooth has it,” interrupted Stoor. “How?”

“I was getting to that,” replied Skruun. “The Crystal

has been in the possession of Longtooth's forebearers for as long as far back as their records stretch. They have no idea of its true potential, of course. They use it as a talisman, an object that they pray to before battle for aid in the fight."

"Fascinatin'. And ye know all this because ...?" questioned Stoor.

"Because I was part of Longtooth's tribe for many years, as you well know," answered Skruun. "Delank, my old master, had spoken to me of Longtooth and how his library contained some of the oldest writings in the Woods. Delank was a master wizard and knew many of the Woods' secrets. For this reason I apprenticed myself to him at an early age. He also told me of the Crystal and how Longtooth used it. But even Delank didn't realize its true significance. He never succeeded in translating the most important ancient texts, something that I, his student, accomplished."

"Perhaps he's figured out what it does by now," suggested Stoor. "He's had a while t'work on th' problem."

"Ah. Possibly he could have, but unfortunately Delank met with an untimely death just before I chose to join Longtooth's tribe."

"Really?" responded Stoor, cocking his head towards Skruun. "Accidental?"

"Quite," answered Skruun with a thin smile.

"That's me boy," chuckled Stoor. "So how'd ye manage t'figure out what these old books had written in 'em if it weren't written down plain?"

"With a great deal of effort," answered Skruun drily, sidestepping the question. "As I was saying, remembering what I'd been told by Delank, I made my way to Longtooth. It was a simple matter to persuade him to accept me into his tribe. My knowledge was deep and Longtooth was anxious to profit from it."

"And did he?" questioned Stoor.

"Oh yesss, certainly. I helped him many times. Just enough to keep his interest strong. Though there were

some who mistrusted me there and would have wished me gone before I'd finished my work."

"Insightful lads, eh?" observed Stoor with a malicious grin.

"Indeed," replied Skruun acidly. "But as I said, their suspicions couldn't sway Longtooth as long as I provided him with good service. I stayed long enough to learn all that I needed. Much of this knowledge regarded the Crystal. Of course, much remained a mystery, even with Longtooth's texts to help. The remaining pieces of the puzzle came together bit by bit, however, over time."

"Well, seein' as you say Longtooth considers this doohickie a good luck charm fer his tribe, it's not likely he'll be happy about givin' it up," mused Stoor.

"I would have to agree. Thus I suggest we gather your ferrets together, proceed to Longtooth's encampment and take it from him," finished Skruun.

Stoor fixed Skruun with a stern look. "Listen Skruun, me lad. Longtooth and his rats ain't pushovers, as I'm sure ye know. We'd be attackin' him on his homeground. I don't mind spendin' th' lives of me ferrets when there's a reward worth th' loss, but I ain't convinced this is a worthwhile venture."

Skruun kept his expression bland. *Worthwhile?* he thought. *Not to you perhaps. But to me it's the key to power beyond your poor imagination, my dear Stoor. Power that I mean to have for my own.*

"I think you fail to appreciate the power of the Flame, my lord," countered Skruun, masking his true thoughts. "Think of what it could mean. Any of your troops, wounded even to the point of death, could be brought back to health, ready to fight again. It would be like having an unkillable army."

Stoor put the bottle to his lips, upended it, and then pulled it away and gazed at it sadly as he realized that no more wine remained. Getting up from his chair, he moodily flipped it toward the fireplace. It missed by a couple of feet and shattered against the stone surround. He

turned to regard Skruun. "Is that so? Then why haven't the vashees used it like that?"

"Because they're fools, as you must surely know," answered Skruun. "They have no thoughts of conquest; they're content to simply sit in their trees and rot. With them it is a simple instrument of healing. With you it will be a weapon of death and total domination."

"Mmm. Sounds interestin' when you put it like that," admitted Stoor. "But Longtooth's still th' problem. Nice as it might be havin' the Flame workin' fer me, it's not worth the pains it'd take t'get th' Crystal."

"Ordinarily I might agree, my lord," conceded Skruun. "In this case, however, we would not be required to make a frontal assault. You see, the rats have their own passwords and I know them. I was in their tribe for years, remember? I believe I can arrange it so that the battle, if there is any, will be quite one-sided."

"Hmmm. Yer sure o' this?" insisted Stoor.

"Quite sure. After all, I'll be there with you. You don't think I'd suggest a course of action if I wasn't sure of its success, do you? I would be just as much at risk as everyone else there."

"Ah, now there's somethin' I'll certainly agree with," said Stoor. "If there's one thing I know yer truly concerned about, it's yer own hide," Stoor said jovially, coming over and slapping Skruun on the back. Skruun pitched forward from the friendly blow, biting back a curse and contenting himself with a quick glare.

Stoor walked back to the the logs smoldering in the fireplace and jabbed at them with a poker, causing a quick gush of sparks that re-ignited a small flame. "Well, seeing as the vashees will be lookin' fer th' Flame, it makes sense t'move quick. I say we leave tomorra and aim straight fer Longtooth. Hopefully we'll be back here in jest a few days. Preparations can wait fer tomorra though. Fer now, I'm off t'bed."

Duurl led Kur down a wide stone corridor and into a low ceilinged room that served as the sleeping quarters for most of Stoor's troops. In contrast with the open and spacious area in which Stoor had received Kur, this small room felt tight and confined. Three bored-looking ferrets squatted in a circle on the hard-packed dirt floor, playing dice. They looked up briefly as Duurl and Kur entered before resuming their game.

"Here it is," grunted Duurl. "Yer new home. This'll be yer bunk," he continued, pointing to a cot near the wall. "It used to be Werdla's but he got hisself killt t'other day. So now it's yer's. I'll dig out some duds fer ya tomorrer. Dinner's when the bell rings." Showing himself to be a ferret of few words, Duurl then turned on his heel and exited, his footsteps quickly dying away.

"So, lookee here mates. A new recruit. Looks kinda sickly, doncha tink Lergo?" The speaker, a heavyset ferret with a black patch over one eye, elbowed the scrawny ferret squatting to his left.

"Yeah, he sure do Grooch," Lergo agreed, nodding his head and grinning vacantly. "Sickest lookin' ferret I've ever set eyeball on."

"Har, yer both wrong," chimed in the third ferret, his voice deep and raspy. "He don't look like dat cause'n he's sick, he looks dat way cause'n he ain't a ferret at all."

Grooch gave a gap-toothed grin. "I b'lieve ya might be right Kruug. No ferret could look dat ugly. Not even you."

The three had by this time gotten up and strolled over to Kur, surrounding him. "Kruug tink ya ain't no ferret," announced Grooch to Kur. "Whatcha hafta say ta dat?"

"I not ferret, I arnvash," answered Kur, aware that the ferrets were making sport of him. "Baron Stoor ask me join him."

"Oh, ho," exclaimed Grooch. "Izzat so? Baron Stoor asked ya, did he? Ya must be mighty important."

Kur shifted his eyes nervously from ferret to ferret. "I no important," Kur responded. "No make trouble."

"Ahh, now dat's good," replied Grooch, winking at his

cronies. "I don't like fellers what make trouble. But I see we ain't been properly introduced yet. Can't have ya tinkin' we're uncivilized an' all. Dis here's Lergo," he said, jerking his thumb toward the thin ferret to his right. "An' dis is Kruug," he continued, indicating the fat ferret to his left. And me, I'm Grooch. I'm in charge down here. I answer to Duurl, an' Stoor o' course, but dat's it."

"Maybe not for long, eh Grooch?" interjected Kruug, his voice low and coarse. Several seasons previously Kruug had been unfortunate enough to take an arrow in the throat, but the wound had just been a grazing one and he'd recovered. The damage to his voice had been permanent though, with the result that he always sounded like he had a bad cold.

Grooch nodded at Kruug. "Maybe not," he answered. "Ya never know, do ya?" Grooch looked thoughtful, picturing the day he might move up another notch in Stoor's ranks. "But dat's fer da future," he continued, shaking off the daydreams. "Now ya know us. Who're you?"

"My name Kur," answered Kur.

"Well Kur, listen up. I know Baron Stoor does crazy tings sometimes. So I'm not gonna argue when he puts a stinkin' arnie in wit us. Can't say as I'd ever do it myself but he's da big boss so if he says do it den dat's dat. But I'm tellin ya right now dat ya'll listen ta what I say an jump when I tell ya to. Got it?"

"Yes. I understanding good," nodded Kur. "Grooch in charge. Kur listens to what Grooch say." Kur nodded his head rapidly, smiling obediently.

"Well, dat's fine den," replied Grooch, his manner softening. "Just hafta keep a good sense o' order in da troops, eh? Long as ya keep in mind who's boss around here it'll all go smooth."

"Yeah, yeah – smooth, hee, hee" Lergo tittered. "Don' wanna end up like Werdla, do ya?"

"Why? What happened Werdla?" asked Kur timidly.

"Ah, a sad story," answered Grooch with mock sincerity. "Poor Werdla thought he knew better'n me how ta run

tings. Thought he'd push me ta da side an' take over. But you know what?" he asked, thrusting his bristly face close to Kur's. His one eye glittered and his breath carried the stink of rotted meat.

Kur shook his head, afraid to speak.

Grooch held his stare with Kur for a moment longer and then shoved Kur to the ground, laughing uproariously. "It's hard ta take over when dere's a knife in yer guts!" he exclaimed. Lergo and Kruug joined in with whoops of laughter, slapping each other on the back as Kur smiled weakly.

"Dat's a good one boss," laughed Kruug. "Hard ta do much at all dat way!"

"A sad accident," giggled Lergo. "Can't imagine how he got his own knife all stuck up in him like dat. Always said he was clumsy."

"Like I said, real sad," continued Grooch, with a grave look on his face. "An' he was my own brudder too. At least I got ta say g'bye before da end." Grooch wiped away an imaginary tear.

"Say g'bye an' help him on his way," rasped Kruug to Kur, drawing a finger across his throat to indicate the manner of Grooch's assistance.

Kur's weak smile slowly slipped away as he listened. What kind of group was this? Where was the respect for your comrades or the discipline he'd seen so clearly displayed by the arnvashé? Kur had hated the regimented way the arnvashé ran their lives when he'd been with them, but now he was beginning to feel positively homesick for it.

"Awright, now dat dat's outta da way, let's proceed ta more interestin' activities. Tell me Kur, have ya ever rolled da knucklebones before?" asked Grooch. "Good honest game."

"Knucklebones?" repeated Kur, his face the picture of ignorance.

"Ah," replied Grooch with a mercenary glint in his eye. "I see ya haven't. Well, it'll be my pleasure ta teach ya."

C'mon wit me." Grooch led Kur over to the side of the room where the three ferrets had been sitting, giving a surreptitious wink to Kruug as he went. There was nobody in Stoor's stronghold that threw the bones better than Grooch. Stoor's silver wouldn't likely stay in Kur's money pouch much longer.