

Chapter 5

A Pleasant Ramble

The sun had just reached its peak in the sky and slowly begun its descent toward evening when Stoor and his troop finally finished preparations for their march. Fifteen ferrets lounged at the main entrance to Stoor's fortress, where Stoor stood giving final instructions to Arlson, his Sergeant at Arms. Arlson had been in Stoor's service for many years and his father's before that, long enough that his fur had turned a silvery gray with age. Old he might have been, but Arlson was still formidable, and the numerous scars crisscrossing his body gave proof of a long and violent life. Stoor rightly considered him one of the few that could be counted on in his absence.

"All right Arlson, ye've got it straight then," said Stoor, addressing himself to the grizzled veteran. "Th' remainin' lads and you will hold th' place secure 'til we return. There's more'n enough food an' drink stored away t'keep ye all comfortably fed." Stoor looked up and down the walls of his fortress. "This place is a ripe enough plum and I know of more'n one lifeling that'd like t'be its master. So ye just sit tight and keep the place well buttoned up 'til I get back."

"All's clear, right enough," replied Arlson, folding his arms and nodding confidently. "Nothin'll happen here if'n I have anything to say about it, boss. I'll keep everythin' in line, inside an' out."

“Good. Well then, I’d say it’s time t’be goin’.” Stoor glanced up at the sky, noting the sun’s position. “We’ve got a few hours o’ light left t’us and we’d best make th’ most of ’em.” He turned to address his men. “Let’s go lads, packs on yer backs. The sooner we start, the sooner we finish.” Turning back to the fortress, he raised his voice to a shout. “Skruun, hurry up, will ye? We’re ready t’go. Ye don’t want us t’leave without ye, do ye?”

“Yesss, yesss,” answered Skruun, leisurely strolling through the front gate. “I was just finishing up a bit of business.”

A few moments later Kur came staggering through the same gate, a monstrous pack slung across his thin shoulders. He made his way over to the main body of ferrets as Skruun approached Stoor.

“I was goin’ t’comment that ye were travelin’ very lightly, with nothin’ on yer back but yer shirt,” said Stoor wryly, having noticed that Skruun alone carried no pack. “But I see ye found a solution t’th’ problem o’ carryin’ one.”

“Yesss, so I did,” agreed Skruun. “It seemed to me that if you were going to insist on taking that creature with us, I could at least get some good use out of him.”

“Very enterprisin’,” replied Stoor. “If he can manage t’carry fer two I’ve no problem with it. An’ even though ye disagree, I feel in me bones that he’ll prove t’be of more use than jest a beast o’ burden.”

“We shall see,” Skruun said sourly.

“Tell me Skruun, how is it ye know so much about th’ Flame?” asked Stoor as he and Skruun marched along at the head of the straggling column of ferrets. “Ye don’t have any elvash relatives I’m not aware of, do ye?”

Skruun looked over in annoyance. “No, I have no elvash relatives, my lord. I’m a pure-bred rat, as I’m sure you know. And as for how I know so much, well, I can only say it comes from a lifetime of careful study.”

“An’ it doesn’t hurt t’have sharp ears, neither, does it?” asked Stoor with a laugh. “Never know what ye might pick up by keeping ’em open, eh?”

“There is that, to be sure,” agreed Skruun with a plastic smile. “What you fail to appreciate, my lord, is how much one can learn simply by diligent research. You’ve seen my collection, I know. The wisdom of the ages lies in those notes. All one needs do is look and the information is there to be found.”

“Listen me friend. If it twere that easy, it’d be common knowledge how to diddle th’ Flame and get it t’work fer anybody,” reasoned Stoor. But far’s I know, there ain’t nobody that knows how t’do it, ceptin’ yerself. Not even th’ vashees.”

“True, true,” agreed Skruun with a self-satisfied smirk. “However, that’s not the fault of the books, but rather the mental limitations of those who read them. The information lies scattered across many volumes. No more than hints and whispers can be found in any one text. Only if one can pull all the clues together can the truth be uncovered.”

“And that’s what ye did. Put it all together,” stated Stoor.

“Exactly. Not an easy task, let me assure you,” replied Skruun, warming to the subject. Stoor’s flattery had unlocked Skruun’s tongue, as Stoor had known it would. “To begin with, the texts aren’t all written in the same language. Some have been translated to ratword but many are in their original form – just as written by their original author, be it arnvash, tortoise or whatever.”

“Tortoise? I didn’t know they went in fer writin’,” interjected Stoor.

“That’s because you never bothered to find out,” continued Skruun in a smug tone. “The forest tortoises are unmatched as chroniclers. They take a refreshingly long term view of our narrow little world. Wonderful writers, although they sometimes take a bit long to get to the point.”

“Alas fer me, but I can barely read even ferretword,

much less anythin' else," sighed Stoor. "Never seen th' need t'learn. After all, neither me grandpappy nor me father could read at all, but that didn't stop neither of 'em bein' th' top ferret around. And there's really no need fer me t'know how, not when I've got a smart feller like yerself t'do the readin' an' writin' for me, eh?"

"Yes, my lord. I live to serve." Skruun placed his paw at his forehead and gave a half bow, smiling in an obviously artificial manner as he did so. The gesture, placement of paw to forehead, occurred universally throughout Liandra as a sign of respect and submission.

Stoor labored under no illusions about Skruun, though. The expression on Skruun's face, along with the poorly executed bow, told him quite well that Skruun didn't consider himself in any way Stoor's inferior. Indeed, Stoor rightly suspected that Skruun considered himself to be above all other creatures. Nonetheless, he felt no concern about it. Skruun had always been independent, acerbic, and condescending. But Stoor was a shrewd ferret. He knew Skruun's worth and therefore tolerated his behavior. Sometimes, when Skruun had proven more than usually abrasive, Stoor had considered terminating their relationship permanently, but somehow Skruun never quite pushed him too far. Skruun could always tell when Stoor's patience had reached its limit and would quickly back off.

"Glad t'hear it," responded Stoor, giving his wizard an amused smile. "So how's about servin' then and tellin' me jest how ye found out about how t'adjust th' Flame, eh? Somethin' even the vashees don't know."

"The elvashé don't know how because they're narrow-minded," said Skruun with disdain. "They're competent enough in their own studies, but they're ignorant in everything else. They're a bit like the arnvashé in that way."

"Now yer not goin' t'tell me the arnies study all this kind o' stuff too, are ye?" demanded Stoor in disbelief. "I know th' arnies and if there's one thing they're not, it's bookish. Fightin' and huntin' and trackin' they're right good at, but I've never met any that had much use fer

book learnin'."

"And you're right, of course. They don't," agreed Skruun.

"I was merely drawing a parallel between the two tribes, yesss? I didn't mean they're precisely the same. The arn-vashé are very clannish, they keep to themselves, yesss?"

Stoor nodded.

"In just the same way the elvashé are quite clannish in their studies," continued Skruun. "It doesn't occur to them to consult the libraries of the forest hares or the tortoises. Their own records cover so much that they become arrogant in their knowledge, ignoring the studies of others."

"But they're wrong, is that whatchyer sayin'?" asked Stoor.

"Precisely so," answered Skruun. "Back when Kerin forged the Flame, the lifelings of the Liandra weren't so separate. Much more mixing occurred between the races and more sharing of knowledge took place. The forest hares and the tortoises were among those that helped Kerin during his labors and they observed much. After the Flame had been forged, their help was no longer needed, and they returned to their homes. There, they related all they had seen to their tribes. They told how Kerin had worked the miracle and how the Flame drew its power."

"So they must both still know about the Flame too, is that it?" asked Stoor.

"No, that's not it at all," replied Skruun dismissively. "The elvashé offered the power of the Flame to all. Furthermore, writing didn't exist at that time. All of the records were verbal, repeated from master to apprentice for years on end. Only after the elvashé had invented writing could any of this be recorded. Many of the written records haven't survived untouched. Fires, floods, and accidents all combined to scatter and diminish the written record. Much of the information is now distorted in form and in the original language of the lifelings that wrote it down."

"Sounds kinda tough t'figure out," observed Stoor.

"Quite," agreed Skruun drily. "As I've said, I can read

all of the major languages, and I've been gathering such records for my entire life. Only one such as myself could weave all the threads of knowledge together into a complete fabric of truth."

It's so hilarious when he starts talking like this, Stoor thought to himself. *I've never seen anyone else who can get so impressed over their own self like he can.*

"So you see," continued Skruun, oblivious to Stoor's thoughts, "it wasn't luck that allowed me to see how the Flame could be manipulated to our advantage. It was insight and planning, careful preparation and attention to detail. It almost seems that the Flame came to us not by chance, but by fate."

"Not t'burst yer bubble or nuthin', but aren't ye gettin' a bit ahead o' yerself?" interrupted Stoor. "Ye jest said that nobody really knows if'n th' Flame can be turned away from th' vashees. It's never been tried. So ye can't be sure yer plan'll work, can ye?"

"It will work, never fear. It's all clear to me," answered Skruun with deep confidence, dismissing Stoor's doubts with a wave of his hand. "It's all just a matter of time."

"And then I'll have Kerin's Flame what'll work jest fer me," Stoor cut in, rubbing his paws together with delight. "Won't that be a fine thing, now? Even if the vashees could get it back from me, it wouldn't work fer them anymore. Jest fer me, eh Skruun?"

"If all goes as I've planned, it will definitely work for you, my lord," replied Skruun. *However you may well not enjoy the way in which I choose to make it work,* Skruun thought to himself with suppressed glee. *Yesss, I think you'll be most surprised.*

Thistledown hummed quietly to herself as she bounded gracefully through the vegetation, looking for succulent greens to add to her evening salad. Her willow basket already contained purslane, dandelion greens and young fiddlehead ferns, perfect salad ingredients. Just a few more and she'd be ready to return home.

I'm sure I remember seeing a patch of trefoil around here somewhere, she thought to herself as she peered around. *That will make a lovely addition. Wait, what's that noise?* Her head jerked up as she listened more closely, her long velvety ears swiveling forward to better amplify the sound. Most lifelings would have detected nothing unusual, but Thistledown's hearing surpassed most everyone in the forest. In addition to the normal forest noises, she could clearly distinguish something else, something that boded ill.

That sounds like trouble, she thought in alarm. *Better hide.* Looking around, she spotted a dense shrub of bramble-thorns and quickly scurried under it. Only a few moments were needed, and soon she found herself safely nestled within the shadowed center of the brambly sanctuary.

The sounds grew steadily louder and gradually resolved themselves into the tramping of many feet. Harsh voices could be heard, indistinct at first, though they became clear as they drew nearer.

"Nice day fer a hike, eh mate?" a high pitched voice asked.

"It'd be better if'n I didn't have ta carry all this weight on me back," answered another voice, this one coarse and guttural. "Keeps snaggin' on bushes too. And all this walkin' is makin' me hungry. Don' know why we can't stop an' try an' hunt up a rabbit or sumpin'."

Thistledown shivered at these words. One of the marchers came into view for an instant and the sight confirmed what she'd already deduced from their voices. Ferrets! More than she'd ever seen together at one time. A pressure in her chest made her realize that she'd been holding her

breath from anxiety, and she carefully let it out and tried to breathe more regularly. From what she'd just heard, Thistledown felt sure the ferrets wouldn't hesitate to kill her on sight.

Feeling very insecure, she huddled down even further. She could no longer see the ferrets from her new position, but by the same token they would be less likely to see her. Her ears quivered slightly as she strained to hear what they were saying to each other.

"Say, Baron Stoor, mebbe we should stop here fer a while," yelled out a new voice.

Thistledown's heart sank. *Please say no, please say no*, she willed.

Profound relief flooded her as she heard the response. "Ye're jokin', right? We've hardly been movin' at all. In a coupla hours more, then we'll stop. It'll do yer legs good t'get some exercise."

That's right, you tell him. Keep on marching, clear out of the Forest, she thought to herself in relief.

The ferret who'd spoken grumbled quietly to himself, but not quietly enough that Thistledown couldn't hear. "Jokin' huh? Try carryin' a pack like mine and see what kind of a joke it is. Must be nice ta be da boss. All dis just because of some stupid vashee lamp. Don't make no sense ta me."

"Are ya too dainty fer a march?" sniggered another. "Too bad ya don't have a pet arnie like Skruun does ta help carry yer load."

"Too bad ya don't clean yerself more often," the first ferret shot back. "Den I wouldn't hafta plug up my nose when I'm wit ya. Maybe I'll hafta toss ya off da bridge when we get dere. Da river'll clean ya up a bit. Course it'll foul da river somethin' awful, won't it?"

"Quiet down, ye lugs!" Stoor's voice came floating back to Thistledown. "We're tryin' t'move quietlike, ye know."

Thistledown strained to hear more but the ferrets had moved out of earshot. Thanking her lucky stars, she continued to listen as the troop marched onward at a good

pace. Within a few minutes, all sounds of them had disappeared. Thistledown waited a few more minutes, just to be sure, and then emerged cautiously from the brambles. *A lamp!* she thought to herself. *That could be the one that was stolen! And an arnvash too. That's what Crookear said we were to be on the lookout for. Salad can wait – I'd better report this.* Her mind made up, Thistledown gave a quick bound and quickly disappeared into the surrounding forest.