

Chapter 6

Cedrik's Secret

The day had grown late and Annie and Cedrik had paused in their trek, stopping to rest at the base of a tall tree, its branches heavy with clusters of fragrant amber leaves. Hunger pangs had been building in both of them for the last hour, and they had agreed that it seemed an excellent time for a quick snack. Giles had baked fresh muffins before leaving for the Called Council, and Annie had made sure to pack a good selection when she was filling their knapsacks.

The taste of the freshly baked corn muffins, each bulging with tiny sweet blueberries, was buttery and rich, so good that Rosie tried desperately, but futilely, to urge Annie to eat faster. Still locked within Annie's mind, Rosie had come to realize that she experienced everything that Annie did, every taste, smell, and sight. To feel and experience fully but at the same time be unable to affect the surrounding world in the slightest way was becoming more and more irritating. Rosie had always had a fondness for cakes of all kinds and the way Annie ate, just a few nibbles at a time, was driving her crazy.

Cheerfully oblivious to Rosie's frustration, Annie continued to pick at her muffin at her own steady pace. Thinking it a good time to learn more about her new friend, she waited for Cedrik to swallow a particularly large chunk of muffin before asking "What's a tent-mate Cedrik?"

“Hmmm? Don’t you know?” Cedrik lowered the muffin he’d been about to bite into and turned to regard his new friend. “Oh, I guess not; you wouldn’t have them, would you? Well, it’s someone that lives in your tent with you. That’s all.”

“Ooooh. Well, that makes sense, I suppose. And you were Kur’s tent-mate.”

“Not were, am,” Cedrick corrected Annie sharply. “We’re going find him and get this all worked out. But yes, I’m his tent-mate. Ever since he was brought into the tribe we’ve been together. Danlin put him in with me from the first day.”

“So you found him? He wasn’t always part of your tribe?”

“Kur? No, we found him all right. Danlin was out in the Barrens when he ran across him. Kur was alive, but just barely. He was pretty sick. Nobody else was with him; he was all alone. We’ve never been able to figure out why he was even out there. He’s an arnvash, that much was obvious, but there’s no mention of him in any of our records. He speaks in a funny way too, as if he wasn’t raised among arnvashé.”

“Didn’t he talk about this stuff with you?” Annie asked. “Like you said, you **are** his tent-mate, after all.”

“He never wanted to talk about himself. Actually he didn’t talk about much of anything with anybody. Except me. He was just starting to open up a little when he was with me.”

Annie nodded. “Not very sociable I guess.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” Cedrik responded earnestly. “He wasn’t unfriendly or anything. I think he’s just a very private kind of person, you know what I mean? That’s why I was really glad when he began to talk to me about himself a little more. Maybe he started to open up when he realized that Danlin didn’t much care for me either.”

“Danlin doesn’t like you? Why not?” Annie asked, sounding surprised. “Did you do something to him?”

“No, nothing like that,” Cedrik answered with a sigh.

“He doesn’t like me because I’m not like the other arnvashé. Danlin sees things very simply. If you’re an arnvash and act in the way Danlin thinks an arnvash should act, then you’re golden. If you’re not an arnvash you’re probably okay as well. He wouldn’t expect **you** to act like an arnvash, for instance; he wouldn’t judge you like he would one of his own kind. He’d figure an owl would act like an owl, not an arnvash. That doesn’t mean he’d think you’re as good as an arnvash, but he’d try not to hold it against you and he wouldn’t dislike you or anything.”

“Well, that’s surely very nice of him,” Annie remarked in a sarcastic tone of voice.

“Don’t get annoyed about it,” Cedrik responded. “You asked me and I’m telling you. A lot of the arnvashé feel that way. Danlin’s just a little worse than most. Anyway, I was explaining why he has a problem with me. The bottom line is, if you’re an arnvash and don’t act like one, then to Danlin you’re pretty much dirt. He’s got real set views about how a good arnvash should behave, and if you don’t match them then he doesn’t take to you very well. To him, Kur and I are arnvash in body but not in spirit. We don’t measure up to his standards. So there you go. We’re failures to him, and Danlin doesn’t like failures.”

“Wow, he sounds like a real fun guy to be around,” Annie responded. “I mean, I get annoyed at Giles sometimes for fussing so much, but compared to Danlin he seems pretty good.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Cedrik agreed. “And Giles isn’t even your father by blood.”

Annie thought about that a bit, realizing that maybe she was luckier than she’d thought. She never really realized that not everyone had the same safe family life that she’d come to expect. She never knew what had happened to her real parents, but she’d never missed them. For as long as she could remember, Giles had been there, watching out for her and doing his best to raise her. “What about your father?” Annie inquired after a bit. “What’s he like?”

Cedrik turned his pale eyes upon Annie. "You mean you don't know?" he asked bitterly.

With a sinking heart Annie was suddenly sure what Cedrik was going to say next and wished she hadn't started the conversation.

“Danlin is my father,” he said, his voice filled with shame. Cedrik lowered his gaze from Annie to his lap, unable to meet her eyes.

“Danlin’s your father?!” Annie blurted out, too shocked to think about her words. “I can’t believe it.”

“Seems strange, doesn’t it? But it’s true nonetheless.” Mastering his embarrassment at the revelation, Cedrik took a bite of muffin and chewed meditatively, his thoughts turning inward.

Annie cocked her head and regarded Cedrik, not knowing what more to say. Her life with Giles had always been a happy one. Giles had a tendency to get cranky with her at times, in fact, most of the time, now that she thought about it, but that didn’t disguise the real affection between them. Annie knew in her heart, even when Giles started his ranting and raving, that he didn’t really mean anything serious by it. And Giles wasn’t even her natural father! *How could someone dislike his own son?* she asked herself.

“You know,” she began, resting her wing on Cedrik’s shoulder, “maybe you’re just not understanding him.” Cedrik cocked an eyebrow at Annie but said nothing. Annie sat down in front of him and continued.

“I mean, Giles is always carrying on about this and that, and I bet it would seem that he didn’t like me if you saw him doing it. But he doesn’t really mean it. He just likes to complain. I don’t think he’d be happy if he didn’t have something to complain about or to criticize.”

“You weren’t there Annie, so you can’t really know.” Cedrik popped the last of his muffin into his mouth. “Believe me,” he said indistinctly, his mouth still partly full of muffin, “I’d know the difference. Danlin is embarrassed by me and by Kur as well. If Kur had left Arnvash-home like he did and the Flame issue hadn’t ever come up, I’m sure Danlin wouldn’t have given it a second thought. He probably wouldn’t have even tried to look for him. Same as for me probably. He’d just be happy that I wasn’t around to upset him any more.”

“Well, that’s what you say, but I don’t believe it.”

“As you wish,” Cedrik responded. “It hardly matters now anyway, so let’s not argue about it. Say, did you pack any more of these muffins?”

“Yes I did and no, we’re not eating any more right now. We’re going to be traveling for a while and eating the whole lot of them in one go isn’t a very good idea.”

“I suppose not,” Cedrik said, looking wistfully at the few crumbs scattered on the forest floor. “Oh well.” Still seated on the ground, he wrapped his arms around his knees and watched as Annie continued to pick at her muffin.

Annie couldn’t help noticing the yearning in Cedrik’s eyes. “You haven’t had muffins much, have you?” she asked.

“This the first time in my life,” Cedrik answered, not taking his eyes off the piece Annie had before her. “The arnvashé don’t bake anything like them. They’re really good.”

Annie paused, looking from her muffin to Cedrik and back again. *Don’t do it!* Rosie cried inside Annie’s head. *Hurry up and finish it!* Oblivious to Rosie’s wishes, Annie made up her mind.

“Why don’t you finish mine,” she offered generously.

“What? You mean it? I don’t want to take more than my share, you know.”

“I know,” Annie assured him. “But I get these all the time and I’m kind of full anyway. You take the rest.” *NOOO!* Rosie cried silently. *Don’t give it away! You’ve hardly eaten any!*

“Well, if you’re certain,” Cedrik said, waiting for a final confirmation.

“I’m sure. Enjoy it.”

Aaarrgh! Rosie would have ground her teeth in frustration if she’d had any teeth with which to grind.

“Thank you Annie,” responded Cedrik politely. Picking up the remaining half muffin, he happily started munching. Annie looked on with approval, pleased to see Cedrik in

better spirits.

Gosh, Rosie thought to herself. It's nice to be generous and all but sheesh! That was a majorly good cake. Would have been nice to have eaten more than just a few bites. I hope this doesn't get to be a habit.

Unwilling to watch the last of the muffin disappearing into Cedrik's mouth, Rosie let her attention wander to the woods beyond their little clearing. Although she could only see what Annie had her eyes fixed upon, Rosie had learned that she didn't necessarily have to concentrate on the particular part of that scene occupying Annie's attention. Somehow she saw the same image but was able to direct her attention to whatever area within the view she chose to, so long as it was actually part of the scene coming through Annie's eyes. Thus, while Annie continued to concentrate on Cedrik, Rosie began to examine the surrounding shadows.

As she did so, a darker shadow within a shadow twitched slightly, drawing her notice. *What's that?* she wondered, concentrating on the area. Another twitch, and suddenly the indistinct shadow snapped into focus. *A cat!* she realized. It lay hunched next to a small log, almost completely obscured by shadows. *I wonder what a cat's doing out in the woods? I sure haven't seen any people here yet who'd own one.* The dark shape twitched again and slowly lowered itself closer to the ground. *It's looking at us,* Rosie thought with excitement. A slight ray of sunshine had cut through the surrounding leaves and struck against the creature's eyes, making them glow with a greenish-golden light.

As she looked more closely Rosie noticed tufts of hair coming from the tips of the cat's ears. *Now where have I seen a cat like that before? Oh yeah, I remember now. I saw one of those in my nature book. Waaait a second! That's not a house cat at all; it's a bobcat!!*

Like a thunderclap, the realization burst upon her. They were being stalked by a bobcat, and if Annie or Cedrik didn't do something one of them was shortly going to be that bobcat's dinner. *Oh my gosh. Annie! Listen to me Annie!* Rosie silently implored, trying to get Annie's attention. Nothing. She pulled her attention away from the bobcat, unwilling to watch. *Look up!!!* her mind screamed. Still nothing. *Maybe if I concentrate, put all my attention*

on that spot. Desperate now, Rosie forced herself to stare at the danger, in spite of the sick feeling it gave her. The animal crouched still lower and Rosie could see it tensing its muscles for its deadly spring. Harder and harder she concentrated, until she felt she could burn a hole through the feline with the intensity of her gaze. And finally, it seemed to work. She could feel Annie's head move up slightly, the focus of her gaze swinging over toward the shadowed predator. *See it Annie!* she begged.

Too late. Like an arrow released from a bow, the bobcat leapt, uncoiling itself in a stunningly quick spring. Seeing the speed of the attack and sure that Annie hadn't even noticed it yet, Rosie gave way to despair. She knew Annie had no chance and watched helplessly with bleak resignation, waiting for death to arrive. Even if Rosie hadn't been trapped within Annie's body, she wouldn't have moved. Fear and shock at the bobcat's lightning attack would have frozen her to the spot, making an easy target for the lithe predator. Rosie watched with a fascinated horror as death approached.

Rosie despaired because she was still thinking like a human. Even a trained athlete wouldn't be able to transition from rest to motion quickly enough to evade the oncoming attack. Realizing this, she quailed with fear, hope dead within her.

But what Rosie had forgotten was that she **wasn't** tied to a human body anymore. This was Annie's body she shared, a Liandran Pygmy Owl, whose lightning reflexes and near instantaneous reaction times had been bred into her through thousands of generations of owls. Countless dangers lurked in the forest for smaller birds, and they compensated for their lesser size with heightened speed and agility.

As Rosie watched helplessly, the image of the bobcat grew larger and larger in her view, its needle-fanged mouth opening wide, its eyes burning with a malevolent fire. Then, to Rosie's complete amazement, the bobcat slid off to the right and out of her view as Annie's wings exploded into

furious action, throwing her to the left with amazing speed. Annie hadn't even needed to consciously acknowledge the danger – instinct had kicked in before any rational thought had even taken place.

I can't believe it, Rosie thought, her despair changing to elation. *We're going to make it!*

Her joy proved premature. It was still true that Annie had to work against the handicap of starting from rest. Blazingly fast as she was, the cat still had a frighteningly large head start. Seeing its prey escaping, the bobcat snapped out its paw with horrifying agility, smashing Annie to the ground and stunning her momentarily.

Fortunately for Annie, in the excitement of swatting her from the air, the bobcat had forgotten about the surrounding trees. With a dull thud, it collided headfirst with the small sapling in front of which Annie had been resting. For an instant it sprawled stunned at the foot of the small tree. Quickly recovering, it got back to its feet, ready to finish the job.

It spun around, its body already tensing for a second spring. But instead of springing, it froze. In front of the fearsome cat, rather than the helpless bird it expected, stood a grim arnvas, a brightly glittering blade held tight in his hand. For an instant both stood poised, their eyes locked. Then, with a wild cry, Cedrik leapt at the cat, the glittering point of his steel whirling toward's the beast's face.

Taken aback by this unexpected challenge, the bobcat moved to its left with nimble steps. Out of Cedrik's reach for the moment, it paused to regard its attacker, perhaps wondering whether a fight might not be to its advantage after all.

It wasn't given a chance to decide. Cedrik leapt forward and slashed down hard on its flank. Giving a howl of dismay, the bobcat fled the clearing, moving as fast as its legs would carry it, a ribbon of bright crimson staining the ground behind it.

Cedrik, panting heavily, stared in the direction of the

now vanished bobcat. Then, slowly, the light of battle dimmed from his eyes and his arm, still clutching his knife in front of him, lowered slowly to his side. He turned back towards Annie, who sat motionless on the ground, regarding him with wonder.