

Chapter 1

Revision 3 - 1453 Words

Thunter looked up through the scraggle trees and noticed the sun had reached directly overhead, boasting in the sky. His stomach knotted with the realization. *"It's getting late. If I don't leave soon.."*

Light simmered down through the sparse leaves, scorching the wildgrass that struggled to survive on the dusty ground. The air carried a hint of dried rotting fruit, what was still around from the end of the season. His son laid on the ground, among the plants, visibly frustrated. *"He does almost have it down, though."*

"One more time."

The young boy stood up and looked at the wooden giants towering over him. He locked eyes on his next victim. It was a tall, gray, tree made of long, thin branches and slender leaves, twisting down towards the ground like messy, old hair.

He gripped his crude wooden stick and took a deep breath. His hands exploded to life, spinning his stick as he stepped barefoot through the dusty field, jabbing into the trunk. He tried to roll backwards away from the tree, but tripped over his own feet and stumbled to the ground, dropping his weapon.

Thunter stepped forward. "Alright-," he started to say, but a branch snapped behind him. He immediately turned towards the noise. A gathering of common raptors stared at him from the safety of their tree. The small scavenging birds watched for a moment before using their powerful back legs to pounce off through the branches in the other direction.

"Yeah, it's definitely time," he thought, *"We've been in one place for far too long."*

Thunter bent towards his son, extending his hand. "Alright. Good job for today, Dayzel. It's time to go."

Dayzel pounded his hand against the ground, meeting his father's eyes. "But I didn't get it yet. I NEED to get this or else I'm going to fail the Great Tests!"

"I know, Speedy, I know. But we should already be back *home* by now. None of this matters anyway if I don't get to the Borderlands."

The boy reached up to his father's hand, and Thunter pulled him to his feet, resting his hand on his shoulder. "There will be plenty of time to practice when I get back," he said.

Thunter double checked his waterskin, a traveler's most vital piece of equipment when the dry season rolled in. Running out of water was the quickest way to ensure your own death.

A leather strap ran across his dark, bare chest, crossing over the sprawling tattoos he earned through his life. Similarly, the golden-orange handle of his spear was carefully burned up and down, marked with symbols. Each represented a destination he had traveled to. He touched the mark that represented the Borderlands trading city. It wasn't the furthest place he had ever been, but it *was* one of the few places that forced him to cross through The Lowforest. He hung the spear from his old leather pantskin.

Dayzel leapt forward, grabbing his things, staring at his father as they began their walk back towards the village, "Do I at least get to go with you on your next trip- after we're all done making my spear?"

Thunter wasn't quite sure how to tell his son. Not even *he himself* should be going on these trips. He knew that on some level. But the risks he took for his family did have their payoff.

No one in the village besides himself was brave enough to travel through The Lowforest. No one in the village besides himself was experienced enough to survive for the weeks that were sometimes needed out on the path. Also, perhaps, no one in the village besides himself was that recklessly tempted by the potential rewards.

"We're getting there, Speedy, one step at a time," Thunter said.

His son looked to the ground, disappointed. Thunter took a deep breath. It was hard for him to remember that his trips were difficult for his son as well. That each time he left, there was a significant chance he wouldn't return. Even though he tried to downplay it in front of Dayzel, Thunter knew that his son was more aware of the reality of the situation than not.

He forced a smile and turned his head to the miniature warrior. "Do you really think you're ready?"

Dayzel nodded eagerly at his father.

"Are you sure?"

"Mhmm."

"Okay, then..."

Thunter shot his foot in front of his son's, and the boy went flying forwards. Dayzel stuck out his hands and successfully rolled forward. He landed on the ground and drew his stick. He smirked and charged back to his dad.

Thunter caught the stick in his hand and winced. He brought his son up to his side, catching him up to his pace.

"There it is, good recovery! What a roll! Which of the Great Tests was that?"

"To always stay alert when traveling," Dayzel recited.

"And why do we always stay alert when traveling?"

"Cause you never know what's out there and when it's going to get you."

"Exactly. Passing The Great Tests only prove one thing- you have the right to hold a real weapon in your hands- that you know everything in a safe setting. Then- we begin making that knowledge real through experience. You still need to prove you won't freeze up when the time comes."

Dayzel nodded back and stared down the path, eager to conquer the shadows.

"If... you can prove you have what it takes to carry your own weight, and defend the tribe... maybe... you can start coming with me on *some* of my trips."

He started to hop up and down as they walked.

"Or... maybe you'll enjoy making your weapon so much that you'll want to stay with Mom, and help her do it for everyone else in the village."

Dayzel furrowed his brow.

“Or, maybe, you won’t like going so far all the time. Maybe you’d rather join Ferisyn on her gathering routes to start.”

He kicked his feet into the ground, sending dust into the air.

“You just don’t know what you’ll be best at. And neither do I. Everyone in our tribe has their own specific role. And the biggest part of growing up is finding that role.”

The boy cocked his head, and then turned to his father. “Well, I think, if it was up to me, that when you do become my Dad, I should start coming on your trading routes with you.”

Thunter chuckled and raised his eyebrow, tickling the back of his son’s neck with his fingers. “You know how you feel about being away from the village during the night...”

Dayzel’s eyes widened, then quickly returned to their normal size.

“Well,” he said, “I’m still not sure that anyone should ever be away from the village at night.” He twisted his fingers, deep in thought. Thunter held his tongue and waited for what his son had to say.

Dayzel burst with energy, turning to face his father, “You should hear what the other kids say. That there are giant monsters that can eat you in half!” He threw his arms into the air to show how big they could get.

“Really now, monsters?”

“Yaha! Yeah!”

“Not animals- but monsters?” he asked, trying to figure out what exactly his son knew. There were just some things he didn’t want him worrying about until he needed to, and the longer he could distract him with the fear of animals, he would.

“Well...” his son moved his head back and forth. “The hunters do say it’s mostly animals. But there’s so many other things we don’t know! What about the lights? And voices? Wait- is it- can animals talk? Or, do you think spirits can eat you?”

“Well, unfortunately, both,” Thunter thought to himself, trying not to sink into the memories of things that didn’t matter anymore. He caught himself, and forced a laugh for the sake of his son. “I guess that’s just another reason to stay close to the village and Ferisyn, huh?”

Dayzel thought it over. As they traveled, the trees grew further and further apart, and began to shrink into shrubs. In the distance, the clay huts in the village started to rise into view, surrounded by the pale-yellow field of wildgrass.

Dayzel spun around and ran to his dad, stopping one pace away, looking directly up. “Well, I know your routes are dangerous... But, you’ll teach me, right? And... I’ll have my weapon, then. So I’ll be ready.”

“If only he knew.” Thunter pulled it together for the sake of his son, feigning a smile. “That sounds like a plan, buddy- let’s get home.” He patted his back.