

Chapter One

Emis threw the door open to his family's modest home and rushed towards his bedroom with a small bundle under his arm. He glanced at his mother, thick rags in her hands, her attention on taking bread out of the oven. Most of the village residents would not expect their First Warrior to spend much time in the kitchen, but baking served as her escape. And she may have had a slight addiction to food.

Emis liked his mother's bread, but he especially loved her sweet cakes. Especially when she made a sweet cake from the tangy fermented tonai cheese. It had always been Emis's absolute favorite food. If there had been a sweet tonai cake smell in the air, he would have lingered longer in the central living area of the house that separated the kitchen from the sleeping areas.

“I saw the weapons master,” Emis yelled back to her, disappearing into his bedroom “He said your sword handle is repaired.”

“Did you bring it with you?” Athalia called after him. She navigated the hot bread pan to the polished wooden countertop. Every piece of furniture was built with the wood that had been removed from the tree that contains their taiska. The family hand-picked and carried every stone that adorned the clay oven. Only the glass in the windows was imported from outside The Grove.

“I can’t carry that thing! Are you crazy!?” Emis emerged for a short time outside his door to make sure that his mother could see, not just hear, his protest to her ridiculous request.

Athalia snuffed out the oven’s red coals by placing a lid on top of the fire pan. She objected to Emis’s assessment of his strength. She glared at him from behind the oven. “I disagree.” Emis shrugged and retreated to his room. Athalia continued under her breath, “not that you actually tried, I’m sure.”

She shook her head. Her son always doubted himself and it frustrated her.

“OH!” Emis reappeared to complete his message delivery task. “He ALSO said that he has never seen anyone who wears out their grip so quickly and he said you should ‘stop it’.”

Athalia made a face, mocking the weapons master as she tidied the kitchen. Though she couldn’t disagree with him. She lived with her sword at her side, maybe she fidgeted with it too much? She’d have to keep an eye on that. Taking it for repair so often turned out to be inconvenient.

Her nose led her back to the golden-crust bread on the counter. Her finger tapped the top of it. She did a little dance when she heard that wonderfully hollow sound bounce back to her. Her mouth salivated. The unbearable urge to slice into it now and savor the warm bread, topped with softened butter, began to win over her self-control.

She snapped out of her love affair with the loaf of bread when scraping noises and human groaning filled the house. She wondered what Emis could possibly be doing in his room to cause such a ruckus. She crept towards the hallway and his open door - she wasn't known for her stealth, but she managed to get close enough to get a peek into his room.

Emis stood at the side of his bed, on which there sat a large wooden box that Athalia didn't recognize. He unwrapped the bundle that he brought home with him. It was a small knife, only eight inches long. The handle fit Emis' hand perfectly - custom-made for him this past summer. Athalia beamed with pride. He finally took it to be sharpened, a sign that he felt ready to use the blade.

Emis looked over the knife on both sides and then wrapped it back into the cloth. He loaded it into a large, already bulging, shoulder bag. Nothing could be left behind for this adventure. He crammed a block of cheese, 4 boiled eggs still in their shell, and half a loaf of bread on top of the books and other supplies. He strained to stretch the buckles around the bag, closing the top flap. He tied two blankets to the straps and stood back to observe his handiwork.

Athalia watched from the hallway outside his room. She stood with her arms crossed as if to conceal the unease in her heart and mask the shift in her emotions. Her

long curly hair swung across her back as she shifted her weight from one leg to the other. It didn't alleviate the crushing weight that grew in her chest. Was it her own anxiety or Emis's?

Her eyes snapped forward and her legs stilled when she saw movement outside Emis's bedroom window. Her hand immediately sought her missing sword. A reaction. A force of habit. Her very nature included constant unease and suspicion - but there was no need for protection within their village.

Emis saw it too and he rolled his eyes. He knew exactly who lurked outside and he'd rather not have the visit right now. Today was difficult enough without more reasons to not go.

A young boy's head sprang into view through the open window frame. His hazel eyes lit with excitement. "Hey, Emis! Look what I got this morning!" and up popped the boy's hand holding two rabbits swinging next to his grinning face.

Emis nodded without looking. He knew hunting was important, and most boys his age looked forward to it. But Emis didn't have the stomach for it. Or the heart.

"You wanna go swimming today? I have to take these home to Mother, but then I'm free all day!" Boons would swim into the fall and all winter if his mother let him. Other boys teased him about being part water rat, but not Emis. Emis didn't tease anyone. Boons' eyes went to the empty box on Emis's bed. If he had THAT in his bag, it could mean only one thing.

"Or are you doing weird stuff today?" Boons wrinkled his nose in disapproval. Most children in The Grove shunned magic. The Elders taught that magic brought danger

and peril and it's best left alone. Instead, they promoted connecting to the Etherflow and listening to your instincts.

Emis froze. His eye color shifted subtly from blue to gray - the only sign that his annoyance grew. Finally, a statement he couldn't ignore, "Magic is NOT weird Boons. You'll see, I'll show you one day. But no, I'm not practicing magic today. I'm preparing for my wildnight."

Boons' eyes widened. None of the village boys thought Emis would ever do his wildnight - what changed? He thought of asking Emis if he wasn't afraid of the dark anymore? Or if he stopped having nightmares? Or if he decided to start warrior training? He knew that deep down all the boys were scared of doing their wildnight, he sure had been. But Emis openly admitted the fear. Boons respected that.

Athalia took it all in, weighing her options. She feared Boons' next set of words. Boons was a good kid, but not exactly tactful. She stood tense with her jaw clenched and brow furrowed, though her eyes stayed the same deep blue no matter what her mood. Her maternal instinct pulled her two ways. *Emis has to learn to fight his own fights.* Protect Emis's now, or protect his future- why didn't they feel like the same acts to her? *But maybe not this one- Boons could destroy years of confidence-building with one stupid comment.*

She removed her apron, exposing her more imposing baldric and drill tunic, with dirt and sweat ground into the fibers from that morning's training battle. Boons knew her position as the First Warrior, but the garb always intimidated children.

Athalia took a step into Emis's room. "You can probably fit your whole bed in that bag if you try," she teased Emis gently.

Knowing they weren't alone, and knowing Emis wouldn't go swimming that day, Boons scampered off into the woods without another word.

A sigh of relief escaped Athalia's lips as she sat on the bed. She could feel the heaviness in the room. Emis leaving for his wildnight was proving to be difficult on her. She realized it was probably even harder for him.

"I'm proud of you Emis. Always. There is no shame if you decide to wait a few more months."

Emis's expression flickered, his eyes narrowing. "You know I have to go now. I don't have a choice. It's not even about wildnighting. I just need to see why The Elder Grove is calling me. And why no one else can feel this other energy."

"We could go together. Forget wildnighting. You don't have to do this alone."

"I know." His left shoulder gave a little shrug and he looked away. Tears started to well up in his eyes and Athalia felt like she had failed to support him. She needed to protect him - but how could she do that when he wandered off on his own journey?

"Listen, I'm not saying you can't do this alone. I know that you can. I just want you to know that I would drop everything and go with you. I would be your sword and your shield - if you ask me to."

Athalia could sense his internal wrestling, the unique path he walked, and her heart ached for him. The one person she felt obligated to protect - and she couldn't shield him

from his own destiny. That broke her heart. She knew in her soul that his journey in life would be unique. Not just different from her own life, but possibly unique from all of their people, especially if his future included magic. The loneliness of it all overwhelmed her and she could only imagine how it felt to him.

She sat there, reached for his hand, and stared into his eyes. She wondered if he felt the pangs of sadness that accompanied her pride in him. Her little boy was evolving into some version of his adult self. She wanted to keep him to herself just a bit longer. Maybe another ten years. A smirk emerged on her face, and a tear in her eye. She knew how unrealistic that was.

Emis broke the silence with his most determined voice, "I will go alone."

"I understand." She watched as her son picked up his bag. She followed him out of his room and out of the house. She walked behind him, waiting- almost hoping - he would change his mind and turn to her, and say that wanted her to come along. She tried to bury the pangs of guilt that her thoughts triggered - she didn't want to hold him back, but she found letting go to be harder than she expected.

Emis turned and held her hand for a moment. He knew his mother would do anything for him. That alone gave him the courage to do this by himself.

"I'll be ok Mother." Emis said, reassuring himself as much as his mother. He turned and started walking down the path from their door. He didn't dare look back. Just in case his bravery waivered.

Navir came up from behind and enveloped his wife in a comforting embrace with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “I don’t get a goodbye, huh?” He scoffed in a playful way. The lack of response from Athalia made him second-guess the mood of the moment. Regaining composure, he added without the teasing tone, “So he’s really going this time?”

Athalia wouldn’t dare take her eyes off her son until the sight of him was lost to the forest and hills. “Yes. Something is stirring at The Elder Grove. It calls to him in ways I can’t imagine. I don’t like it.”

Navir almost questioned which part she didn’t like - that something unseen affected her son, or that he finally left for his wildnight. But he knew the answer was ‘both’.

Athalia’s lips pressed together and the tension rose into her chest. The pressure in her head increased, and her hands tingled as if she were about to go into battle.

Navir saw the change in her right away. He had fought many battles side by side with his wife. He knew Emis leaving would be hard for her, but her physical reaction caught him off guard.

“Curr!” Athalia broke the tension with a sudden idea.

They all heard Curr crashing through the forest until he appeared on the path-mid-way between Emis and Athalia. The dog’s size made the first impression for most people. Though his intelligence proved equally as impressive. He was sapient, as all predatory creatures were. But not all sapient creatures demonstrated the same level of intelligence as Curr did. He immediately noticed Emis walking away from his family. He

saw Athalia and Navir staying home. Curr didn't like it when his family split up. He preferred everyone in one place so that he could protect them more effectively. He stood at attention, waiting for orders.

Athalia shouted loud enough for Emis to hear, "Go with Emis. Protect!"

Curr's response was immediate, bounding away from the house, his muscles rippling and ears bouncing with every stride. *Good choice*. He would have chosen the boy as well.

Emis's voice floated back to them, "I'll be fine!" His voice curt and rising in pitch. Athalia smiled. She knew her son would be annoyed at having the dog accompany him, but she was pleased with her creative solution. Dogs were not forbidden on wildnight.

"I know!" Athalia sang out after him. "Curr will make sure of it!"

Athalia leaned back against Navir. Her heart felt like an apple in a cider press. As a warrior, she was trained to face every external threat with fierce resolve. But this... this felt different - harder. She was completely untrained for the vulnerability of a mother's love. She wished she could strike the invisible enemy down with her battle axe and be done with it. With a quiet sigh, she turned toward Navir and leaned in, resting her head against his chest, seeking solace in the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

Navir, understanding the depth of her emotions without a word spoken, wrapped his arms around her. Here, in his embrace, the indomitable warrior found a haven, allowing herself a rare moment of fragility. She drew strength from his silent support,

grateful for the bond they shared, where she could be both warrior and mother, fierce and tender.

“I understand his purpose is written in the stars, I truly do. But he’s not like us, Navir. So vulnerable in ways that I can’t fully comprehend.”

Navir squeezed her a little tighter. “You’ll be right there if he needs you...I have no doubt The Etherflow will bring you to him before any harm shall fall him.”

She stood enjoying the supportive embrace as she watched her son disappear into the woods.