

CHAPTER 1

SOLO

Kristofer Harris could not remember ever having been this happy — or this tired. He had pitched his own tent, cut his own wood, made his own fire, and cooked his own supper. He leaned back into the slight hollow of the small boulder near his fire. The unusually comfortable stone seemed to embrace him. Fatigue from the day's activities, a full stomach, the warmth of the fire — this was the ultimate birthday gift.

"Thirteen years old," Dad had proclaimed with a serious but proud smile. "Today you become a man."

The tent, the backpack, and the sleeping bag were more than he had expected. But the opportunity to solo — Kristofer still could hardly believe it. How had Dad known? Kristofer had not asked, afraid of the embarrassment if his Dad refused because he was too young or just a city boy.

When they lived in the city, he could go nowhere without his parents' permission, and then, only if another adult was present or if he phoned in every half hour. He had thought all that would change when they moved next door to the national forest last month. But his parents were more afraid of the forest than the city.

True, there were bears, mountain lions, and poisonous snakes. But Grandpa had told him how to avoid them and what to do if he crossed paths with one. And, of course, there were bogs with alligators and quicksand, and caves and dense thickets where you could vanish without a trace if you were foolish enough to enter them. Then there were the usual sightings of Bigfoot and ghost lights and UFO's. But the scariest (and silliest) of all was the local legend of a creature simply referred to as "The Beast" — a fire-breathing fiend with razor claws and dagger teeth. Indian lore warned of this monster's shape-shifting chicanery and its devilish appetite for children.

Kristofer chuckled to reassure himself. He knew the stories were just for fun. But in the night, in the forest, alone, it can be difficult to know what is real and what is not. Besides, Kristofer was not alone. His loyal friend, Gallant, a huge white German Shepherd, lay peacefully with his head in Kristofer's lap. Patting Gallant on the head, "You know, boy, I read this morning God and His angels are big campers too."

Gallant rolled his eyes and flattened his ears at the joke. "It wasn't that bad. And anyway, it's true. It says they encamp — Grandpa says that means they pitch their tents — all around us." He studied his silent friend and wondered if Gallant could be an angel in disguise.

Kristofer looked heavenward. The full moon climbed toward her throne atop the sky, her trail littered with a scattering of luminous jewels.

He sighed and smiled, "How can people call such a magnificent queen a 'man in the moon'?" Squinting at Her Majesty he estimated, "About 10:30."

Gallant watched with his eyes and his ears without lifting his head.

Kristofer checked his wrist watch, triumphantly removed it, and stuffed it in his pocket, "Who needs a watch with such an awesome timepiece overhead?"

Gallant whined his approval.

Kristofer turned his attention to his campfire burning low. He loved the dancing flames and the floating sparks. But the glowing coals held a special fascination. They always reminded him of Grandpa's stories of the Emberoks, the bright-eyed, seldom-if-ever-seen folk of the wilderness. Grandpa's stories were different, more like

eyewitness accounts than fairy tales. What endeared Grandpa's Emberoks to Kristofer was their love for animals and for the wonders of the wilderness. Kristofer and Grandpa's Emberoks were kindred spirits.

He admired the circle of stones containing the fire. "A job well done," Dad would say. Of the stones he had collected for the ring, three had aroused his curiosity from the moment he saw them. Each had an odd, thimble shape and was remarkably light for its size. Tomorrow he would break them open to see if they were hollow. Perhaps they were geodes with beautiful crystal linings.

In the middle of a yawn so big he closed his eyes to make room for it, Kristofer heard a familiar "who-who." With yawn-blurred vision, he made a quick search of the camp's perimeter and gasped at what he saw. Gallant's vigilant ears snapped to attention at his master's reaction. As Kristofer expected, he spotted the dark shape of a huge owl sitting on a low branch in a nearby tree. What stole his breath were the two radiant ember-like eyes peering out from behind the owl's head.

Kristofer rubbed the blur away just in time to see the owl fly to another branch. The eyes of its rider remained behind. Kristofer laughed at himself. They were only two bright stars peeking through the leaves.

The owl asked his question again, "Who-who?"

Kristofer smiled and answered, "You, that's who." He stood up, stretched, and said to Gallant, "Come on, boy, it's time for bed." Gallant stood obediently and kept watch as Kristofer doused the fire, making sure not a single, smoldering coal remained. He picked up his flashlight, but in the brightness of the full moon did not need it.

He crawled into his new red tent and looked out the back window. The warm lights of a homey house shone beyond the edge of the woods. He whispered, "Good night, Mom. Good night, Dad. Good night, Jeremy and Elise."

Poor Elise and Jeremy. He knew they would not have a good night, no matter how hard he wished it. They considered his birthday gift an insult to their maturity and a blatant example of parental favoritism. All morning Jeremy had swiped things belonging to Kristofer and taken them up into the treehouse. They had removed the rope ladder Kristofer always had to climb with his eyes closed to get to the solid safety of the twenty-foot perch. Kristofer had ignored him until Jeremy dashed away with his new compass. "Come and get your compass, big man. Big man not afraid of little tree." Elise's laugh had stung as much as Jeremy's taunt.

Kristofer's temper overcame his good judgment as he started up the tree with threats that scared half the heart out of Jeremy's taunting. He made it about ten feet before a slip of his right foot resulted in a foolish glance down. Dizziness and fear hurled him into a desperate embrace with the tree trunk where he clung like bark.

"Jeremy! Elise! Kristofer!" Grandpa's gravelly reprimand sliced through Kristofer's terror long enough for a glimpse at the disapproving concern on Grandpa's face. Grandpa's greatest desire was for peace on earth, and above all, in his family. Kristofer's regret managed to break through his fear with a feeble, but heartfelt, "Sorry, Grandpa."

The pitiful sight squashed what was left of Jeremy's taunts. He dropped the rope ladder. Elise climbed down and guided Kristofer's blind descent step by heart-pounding step. She returned his compass and other belongings with a curt, "Sorry," and disappeared back into the treehouse. Jeremy had made his point.

But that was before. After tonight both his brother and sister would have a new-found respect for him and they would be over their jealousy. He had already forgiven them. And one day, Kristofer knew, he would overcome his silly fear of heights, which had nothing to do with manhood, as well as learn to control his anger and his tongue, which, according to Dad, had everything to do with being a man.

Dad was Kristofer's hero, and Grandpa was Dad's hero which in Kristofer's mind made him a true superhero. But it was hard watching Grandpa grow old. Physically, he seemed feebler each day. He spent more and more time in his flower garden talking aloud in hushed tones as if in a conversation he did not want to be overheard while he weeded or watered or just sat. He often chuckled as if at some private joke or memory. If he laughed too loud he would cut it short and look to see if anyone had noticed. When they did, he would just excuse himself as a crazy old man. Kristofer feared there was more truth than jest in his Grandpa's words.

He continued his bedtime routine, "Good night, Grandpa. Good night, little Michelle," and to his friend curled at his side, "Good night, Gallant." He closed his eyes and thought, "Thank you, Father, for all the wonderful things you've made. Thank you for being with me on this great adventure. Thank you for Gallant. Amen."

What Kristofer did not know was that his adventure had not yet begun.

CHAPTER 2

SOMETHING'S WRONG

Kristofer lay in his new red tent with closed eyes trying to envision what made each noise he heard. The frogs in the nearby pond and the crickets all around began to herald the ascent of the full moon and her entourage of stars. Kristofer fancied a huge animal orchestra tuning up to perform its nocturnal symphony. Into his thoughts flew the great shape of his owl visitor. The bird glided silently to a perch in front of the large beastly band.

The owl stretched out its wings as if to conduct the animal players. Instead, it flew away. In its place stood a small man-like creature about half the size of the owl. He wore a hooded cape and held a small branch in one hand. He rapped sharply on the tree limb where he stood until every creature was silent. He slowly raised his arms until he stood on his tiptoes. In response, the music swelled to an enormous volume. His command over the deep bullfrog basses, the string-like cricket melodies, the high-pitched piping of the tree frogs, the crescendos of the cicadas, and the occasional solo of a nightingale was so complete, the whole ensemble seemed but a single instrument which he alone played.

The symphony began as a celebration of the joy of life. The music lifted Kristofer's spirit toward heaven's door with the promise of admitting him to a peace and joy and delight beyond any he had ever known. The caped maestro performed his miracle weaving of melodies and harmonies and tones, looking first to one side and then to the other. His eyes flashed like lightning bugs with white gold captured from the full moon above.

Abruptly the music transformed to a dirge, so heavy and mournful, tears rolled down Kristofer's cheeks. The flashing brilliance of the small conductor's eyes dimmed and went dark. With their light gone, Kristofer realized the significance of the creature's flashing eyes.

"Emberoks!"

Kristofer jumped up remembering too late he was in a tent and a small one at that. The roof gave a little. One peg pulled up from the ground. As if scolding him, the tent rudely sat him back down on his new sleeping bag.

"Ouch!"

Kristofer sat stunned at both ends. He tried to rub away the pain from his backside as his ears rang so loudly he could hear nothing else. It took a moment for him to realize there was nothing but the ringing to hear. The forest had gone completely still at Kristofer's voice. Grabbing up his flashlight he called to Gallant. His usually loyal companion did not open an eye or prick an ear and Kristofer had no time to waste on coaxing.

"Lazy mutt."

With greater care, this time, he hurried out of the tent. A rustling of branches and fallen leaves, as if blown by a gusty wind, broke the silence. Out of the corners of his eyes, he saw shadows scatter like field mice. An eerie fear ran up his spine as he realized there was no wind tonight.

Rushing to the pond, Kristofer saw the very tree and the same branch from which the Emberok had made his music. On that limb, in the exact spot where the Emberok had stood, was a stump, a stunted limb with only a single bare branch pointing upward.

Scratching his head, Kristofer Harris turned and walked back to his camp wondering how he had imagined everything so much like it really was. "I must've seen that tree, and stump, and branch while gathering the firewood," he muttered.

Walking back into camp, again he felt something was wrong. Switching off his flashlight, he froze in the near total darkness. He searched the sky for the full moon or, rather, for the clouds which must be hiding it. He saw nothing but stars in a cloudless sky. He mentally checked his astronomy. A lunar eclipse? No, that was due next month, and would be only partial. A full moon sets with the rising sun. Perhaps he had slept and it was near dawn. He pulled his watch from his pocket. No, he had doused the fire only a half hour before. Had his watch stopped? He checked the stars. They agreed with his watch. He walked over to the fire ring. The fire was dead, but the stones were still warm. Still, something was wrong with the fire. No, not the fire, it was the fire ring. Several of the stones were missing — the light, thimble-shaped stones.

So many puzzles in one night were exhausting. Knowing morning's light often explains night's mysteries, Kristofer decided to get some rest if he could just make it to his sleeping bag before he fell asleep. Crawling into his tent, he lay down and as he slipped toward deep sleep, he reached over to stroke Gallant and let him know everything was all right.

Immediately he was wide awake. Gallant was gone. With a new energy that came from love for his closest friend, Kristofer grabbed his flashlight and darted out of the tent.

His search ceased before it began. Kristofer's light shone on six stones arranged in two rows of three in front of his tent door. He recognized the three smaller rocks by their shapes as the stones missing from his fire ring. One of the larger stones was the small boulder he had used as a back rest.

Wide-eyed and breathless, he watched as the stone surfaces changed to flowing garments and unfurled to reveal six humanoid creatures of various sizes cloaked in hooded capes. Six pairs of ember eyes glowed yellow at him with the light from his flashlight.

"Emberoks!" he whispered.

CHAPTER 3
DECEIVING APPEARANCES

“A man!” two astonished voices replied.

“See, I told you!” said another. “Men are not just in stories.” He reached out to touch Kristofer who instinctively drew back, “A real man.”

“A human, to be sure.” The strange creature having unfurled from the boulder Kristofer had rested against stepped forward and bowed. He stood at Kristofer’s height, but there the similarity ended. Like the others, he wore a dull cloak having the appearance of weathered rock. He sported a reddish brown, closely cropped beard with the faintest traces of gray. His furrowed brow spoke a deep wisdom or a heavy burden or both. His probing, penetrating eyes glowing yellow from the flashlight seemed to search every dark corner of Kristofer’s soul. Only the peace, the soothing calm of his voice, made his gaze bearable. “A man? Perhaps.”

Kristofer’s embarrassment frowned at the Emberok’s judgment. He liked these creatures better in Grandpa’s stories.

“We shall see. But he is the one.”

The one for what? Kristofer’s mind raced for an answer. For some strange reason the thought that came to mind was “sacrifice.”

Aware of the boy’s discomfort, the Emberok smiled warmly and continued, “Kristofer Harris, Walker in the Light, do not be alarmed. We do no evil and wish no harm. My name is Sylvan. I beg your forgiveness for my companions’ surprise that you really do exist.” He paused patiently waiting for a response.

Kristofer’s mind whirled but he managed to stammer, “Sh-sh-sure.”

“Thank you. You honor us with your patient understanding. You see, several of my companions are not more than three or four centuries in age, and have spent all of their very young lives in the deep wild, so their only knowledge of humans is from stories and legends.

“Enough of that. We have more urgent matters to discuss. But first, the flame of fellowship, that our council may be held in light.

“Friends —” he invited the others to join him in a circle leaving a place for Kristofer. He turned toward a nearby tree and motioned. Silently, the huge owl from Kristofer’s vision flew to the gathering. A small Emberok, head bowed and eyes concealed under his hood, dismounted and joined them.

Each Emberok, reaching into his drab cloak, brought out a beautiful gem and placed it in the center of the circle. Sylvan motioned Kristofer forward. Awkwardly, Kristofer joined the others. As Sylvan opened his dull gray cloak, Kristofer’s light flashed over the dazzling, glittering, rich purple lining of Sylvan’s garment. It reminded Kristofer of the large amethyst geode on display at the museum.

Handing Kristofer one of his own treasures, Sylvan remarked, "My young master, learn the secret of the cloak:

A heart of gold oft resides
in a dull, ugly, skin.
But beware what beauty hides.
The most exquisite shell
May be rotten within."

At Sylvan's signal, Kristofer added his amethyst to the pile which included emeralds, rubies, sapphires and other precious stones. He stepped back to his place in the circle. The Emberoks began to speak in unison, almost singing.

Face to Face,
Eye to Eye,
Heart to Heart,

Spirit of Truth
Burn all masks away.
Purge our hearts
That we may
With single eye
Know Your way.

Face to Face,
Eye to Eye,
Heart to Heart.

The pile of stones began to glow and slowly dissolved into a bright, clear, white blaze as all the various colors merged. The Emberoks' eyes shone, no longer with a reflected light, but as if from an internal flame.

Sylvan turned to the small owl rider. "First, let us hear from our brother Glimmer the nature of our danger."

Glimmer raised his head for the first time since he had joined the others. No internal glow shone from his sad eyes, and the flame of fellowship was only dully reflected in them. Kristofer recognized him as the maestro of the animal orchestra.

"Master Kristofer, Revered Sylvan, brothers and" — swallowing hard, he managed the next word with only a whisper — "sisters, I shudder to recall the events of which I must now speak." Glimmer stood slump-shouldered before the circle of listeners, his eyes fixed once more on his shoes.

Glimmer's dull eyes disgusted Kristofer. What a pitiful excuse for an Emberok, he thought.

Sylvan placed his hand on Glimmer's shoulder and spoke softly. "Take heart, tender one. Let the flame of the True One burn away all the dark shadows from your tale. We all feel your loss, but it is only for a short time. Sapphronid will return to us and to you."

Glimmer looked into Sylvan's eyes and drank deeply from his leader's faith. The small Emberok's eyes grew bright once more. With a faint smile of hope, more in his eyes than on his lips still stretched tight with grief and pain, he turned and spoke to Kristofer.

"Forgive me, Master."

Kristofer nodded his pardon, relieved he no longer had to endure the Emberok's weakness.

As if in answer, Glimmer continued, "Thank you for your kindness. And please, do not think of Emberoks when you think of me. My faith is weak."

Kristofer felt a jab of shame and broke eye contact with the small Emberok as he began his story:

Sapphrond and I were to be wed tonight.

He paused and steeled himself to go on:

Last night we visited our favorite pond to enjoy a symphony from our friends there, much like the one you heard tonight. A beautiful mist rose off the pond just as the moon came out. Droplets hung ripe from leaves, branches, and grasses. As we rushed upstream filling our cloaks with the new jewels, we came upon the most horrible sight, one of our beautiful frogs tortured and mutilated and left to die. His once beautiful green coat hung in bloody shreds from a small bush and his body had been scorched.

Realizing how quiet it was, I glanced around and noticed many small animals watching us. As Sapphrond began to weep, I stood to ask our friends about this crime. They all scattered and hid as if they feared us. Friends, you can understand how this deepened our sadness and confusion. We did what we could and moved on. We found more animals in the same condition, though the victims became larger the farther upstream we traveled. Such cruelty, I have never seen. I have never heard of such, even attributed to humans.

He glanced at Kristofer who shifted his feet, bearing the shame and the guilt of his race. "I mean no insult, Master." Glimmer continued:

While comforting a large porcupine, stripped and charred like the rest, we heard a snarl of anger, then a shriek of pain, and finally a growling scream of fear and grief as a great bear rushed madly past us downstream. The smell of burnt hair and flesh as she passed almost made us sick.

Silently, we crept to a clearing ahead and saw, stooping over a young bear cub, an Emberok larger than a man. With razor sharp fingernails, almost claws, he skinned that young bear as easily as removing a cloak. It screamed.

A flurry of denials came from the Emberok audience. Sylvan's raised hand produced silence and Glimmer continued:

A flame, a dark flame came from the Emberok's mouth and burned the cub which managed only a whimper before it passed —

Glimmer paused unable to finish.

Again protests came from all the Emberoks. Sylvan's hand again silenced all but one taller Emberok who continued to mumble angrily under his breath, "To think we must stand here and listen to such lies and rubbish. He is obviously demented. The very idea that an Emberok —"

Sylvan placed his finger to the mumblers' lips and a reassuring hand on Glimmer's shoulder. The small Emberok proceeded:

Sapphrond wept silently and my tears almost blinded me, but we dared not make a sound. The evil Emberok removed its cape, which appeared ebony within. Looking all about as if to make sure no one was watching, it turned its cape inside out and before our eyes transformed with a single spin into —

the light in Glimmer's eyes dimmed and almost went out as he said the word:

a Seraph.

Disgust, almost loathing, for this Emberok's pitiful condition, swept Kristofer. It was like looking at road kill. For a moment he thought he would be sick. All the Emberoks gasped at the name Glimmer spoke except Sylvan and the mumblers who started up again, "Of course, of course. I knew it was no Emberok. And I am so pleased, Brother Glimmer —"

This time, he hushed at Sylvan's signal, but continued to smile nodding his relief. Sylvan spoke, "Yes, brothers and sisters, Seraph is here. None shall be compelled to join the task before us. But before you decide, please hear all the reports."

Every Emberok nodded solemnly. Kristofer leaned toward Sylvan and whispered, "What's a Seraph?" Sylvan held his finger to his lips as Glimmer continued:

In his natural form, he sensed us nearby. He turned and looked in our direction, stretched out his leathery wings and laughed a quiet, hideous laugh. His eyes, those black pools that seem to devour light, met Sapphron's and began to drain her beautiful eyes of all their light and life. She could not look away from him and I could not look away from her.

The ground trembled. A growl of hate came upon us from behind. I looked up in time to see the mother bear leap toward us. "Cover!" I cried out to my love as I wrapped in my cloak. I saw her move her arms up and around to pull her cloak over her head, but under Seraph's spell, she was too slow. The bear hit her hard with a huge paw, the sharp claws tearing deep gashes into my love's partially hardened cloak. I was bowled over and saw nothing more.

The rest of the story was told me by a fox who escaped Seraph's notice, perhaps because that old dragon was so delighted with his Emberok prey. The bear knocked Sapphron to the very feet of Seraph, but she had enough wits to complete her covering. Seraph, angry that he could not get to the soft Emberok flesh within the rock, blasted and charred the stone in which she lay. He flew to the mountain lake and dropped her into the deepest part. There my bride lies on this, our wedding night.

A tear of light escaped the small Emberok's eye. Kristofer felt his face warm with shame for having been so quick to judge this poor creature.

Glimmer finished his story:

When Seraph returned, he had a faithful servant in the mother bear who is mad with pain and grief and rage toward all Emberoks. Her loyalty belongs to the beast, who hates them even more than she does. She does not perceive it as her true enemy. The fox told the story to the animals of the forest who once again trust the Emberoks, at least the ones they know.